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“On the Eminent Dignity of the Poor in the Church”

A Sermon by Jacques Bénigne Bossuet

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION

BY

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Introduction

On 27 September 1627 Jacques Bénigne Bossuet was born in Dijon, France. At the age of eight he received tonsure, and at the age of thirteen he became a canon of the cathedral in Metz. In 1642 at the age of fifteen he came to Paris to study philosophy and theology while residing at the College of Navarre.¹ Even at this early age his intellectual brilliance and oratorical talents attracted the favorable attention of the ecclesiastical elite of Paris who were said to have predicted that he would become “one of the greatest lights of the Church.”²

The First Encounters with Vincent de Paul

During the Lent of 1652, as required of all those wishing to be ordained in the archdiocese of Paris, Bossuet came to Saint Lazare to make his ordination retreat at the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission.³ There he met the seventy-two year old Vincent de Paul who, according to one of his later biographers, immediately recognized Bossuet as a man with “a solidity of spirit, an uprightness of character, a purity of morals, a man of simplicity, candor, modesty, and humility.”⁴

¹The College of Navarre was one of the oldest colleges comprising the University of Paris. Founded by a testamentary bequest of Queen Jeanne de Navarre in 1304 it continued in existence until it was suppressed during the French Revolution.

²F. Lachat, *Oeuvres Complètes de Bossuet*, 14 vols. (Paris: 1862), 8:ii.

³In 1631 Jean-François de Gondi, the Archbishop of Paris, legislated that all clerics who wished to present themselves for ordination in the archdiocese were “obliged to present themselves fifteen days previously to be interrogated and gratuitously instructed in their obligations and the functions of their orders.” For more information see Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of Vincent de Paul*, trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M., 3 vols. (Brooklyn: 1987), 1:256-258.

⁴Abbé [Ulysse] Maynard, *Saint Vincent de Paul, sa vie, son temps, ses oeuvres, son influence*, cited by Lachat, *Bossuet*, 8:ii.



Jacques Bénigne Bossuet

Fifty years later at the close of his own distinguished career Bossuet, who was then the bishop of Meaux, wrote to Pope Clement XI supporting the beatification of Vincent de Paul. In this letter he fondly reminisced, "we first came to know the venerable priest Vincent de Paul in our youth. It was in his pious discourses and through his wise advice that we received the true and pure principles of Christian piety and ecclesiastical discipline. Even in our old age this a marvelous memory for us."⁵

Bossuet's Career in Metz

After his ordination in 1652 Bossuet traveled back to Metz where he took up his duties as a canon, and where he also became the archdeacon of the diocese.⁶ His position required frequent trips to Paris on business for the chapter. In 1654 he became a member of the famous "Tuesday Conferences" for ecclesiastics which had been held in Paris, at Saint Lazare, since 1633.⁷ Bossuet later testified that "After our ordination to the priesthood, we were associated with that Company of devout ecclesiastics who met every week to confer together, under his direction, on divine things. He was its founder and its soul. We heard him with the utmost eagerness, clearly recognizing that in him was realized the words of the Apostle: "If any man speak, let his words be as the words of God."⁸ During his time in Metz Bossuet would also be instrumental in the foundation of a conference of ecclesiastics in that city, writing to Vincent in Paris, informing him of the foundation, and asking him to be its superior.⁹

During September and October of 1657 Queen Anne of Austria and the royal court resided in Metz.¹⁰ During her time in the city she had been appalled at the condition of the Church there. Upon returning to Paris the queen asked Vincent de Paul to have his missionaries evangelize the parishes of the city. After Vincent explained that the rule of his

⁵Louis Abelly, *La Vie du Venerable serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul*, 3 vols. (Paris: 1891), 1:415.

⁶The position of archdeacon would be roughly equivalent to the modern post of vicar general.

⁷For more information on the Tuesday Conferences of Ecclesiastics see Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:256-257, 2:118-149.

⁸Abelly, *Vie*, 1:415.

⁹*Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), (hereinafter cited as *CED*), 7:155.

¹⁰Coste, *Life and Works*, 2:136-137.

congregation forbade giving missions in the cities, the queen then commanded that he arrange for the missions to be given instead by the ecclesiastics of the Tuesday Conferences.¹¹

It was Bossuet's formidable task to make all the arrangements for this city-wide evangelization. The resulting missions, which took place over the period of two-and-a-half months, were considered to be a great success. When they were over Bossuet wrote to Saint Vincent, "I cannot see these dear missionaries leave without bearing witness to the universal regret and marvelous edification they have left behind them. It is so great, sir, that you have every reason in the world to rejoice in Our Lord, and I would joyfully expound on the subject were it not that the results far too greatly exceed what I can say."¹²

At the beginning of 1659 Bossuet, at Saint Vincent's urging, returned to live in Paris in order to devote himself on a full-time basis to his ministry of preaching.

The Sermon at the House of Providence

One of the first public sermons that Bossuet delivered on his return to Paris was given at the request of Vincent in February 1659. The site of the sermon was the chapel of the House of Providence which was an asylum for fallen women and for young girls in danger of losing their virtue.¹³ This institution was administered by the Daughters of Providence who had been founded in 1630 by Marie de Lumague, Mademoiselle de Pollalion.¹⁴ She was one of the original Ladies of Charity of

¹¹From its very beginnings the traditions and the rule of the Congregation of the Mission specified that the community's specific mission was to evangelize the most abandoned of the rural poor, to the exclusion of any evangelistic efforts in the cities and diocesan sees. For example, in his letter of January 1632 to Urban VIII asking papal approval for the Congregation Vincent stated: "the priests of the said Congregation are sent . . . to the cities and towns and other places of the Kingdom of France . . . except those which have the title of Parlement or Bailiffship, where there is no lack of priests, either secular or regular, or other ecclesiastical ministers." See *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents. I Correspondence*, vol. 1 (1607-1639), newly translated, edited, and annotated from the 1920 edition of Pierre Coste, C.M., ed. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., trans. Helen Marie Law, D.C., John Marie Poole, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik, C.M., annotated John W. Carven, C.M., (Brooklyn: 1985); vol. 2 (January 1640-July 1646), eds. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., trans. Marie Poole, D.C., Esther Cavanagh, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik, C.M., annotated John W. Carven, C.M. (Brooklyn: 1989), 1: 142.

¹²*CED*, 7:157.

¹³The House of Providence was located near the great Benedictine convent of Val-de-Grâce.

¹⁴Marie de Lumague was the widow of François de Pollalion, a gentleman in ordinary of Louis XIII's household. She was among the number of those devout widows whom Saint Vincent put to work in the service of the poor. She was born in Paris, 29 November 1599, married at the age of eighteen and was widowed shortly afterwards. She made a vow of celibacy and placed herself under the direction of Saint Vincent. Together with Saint Louise and the other Ladies of Charity she visited the parish confraternities of Charity. See *CED*, 1:161. See also Hyacinthe Collin, *Vie de la Venerable Servante de Dieu Marie Lumague, veuve de M. Pollalion*, (Paris: 1744); Abbé L. Telliet, *Histoire de l'Union Chrétienne de Fontenay-le-Comte*, (Fontenay-le-Comte: 1898).

Hôtel-Dieu in Paris, and a close collaborator of both Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Vincent took an active interest in the development of this new religious community and helped to arrange for the formulation of its rule, its expansion, and its approval by the archbishop of Paris and the king.¹⁵

Mademoiselle de Pollalion died on 4 September 1657, and her death plunged her community into a crisis which it only barely survived, with the support of Vincent and the Ladies of Charity who had originally assisted in its foundation. All now agreed that the work of the community was too important to be abandoned. The necessary resources were donated that made the continuation of the community's work possible, even if on a temporarily reduced scale.¹⁶

Saint Vincent was present in the congregation as Bossuet preached, along with many of the Ladies of Charity whose generosity had made the continuation of the work of the Daughters of Providence possible.¹⁷ In a sense, this sermon could be said to have marked the refounding of the charitable works of the Daughters of Providence among the poor women of Paris whose abject poverty was a danger to the preservation of their virtue.

“On the Eminent Dignity of the Poor in the Church”

In its content Bossuet's sermon was a simple but powerful proclamation of the Church's traditional theology with respect to the preeminent role of poverty and of the poor in salvation history and in the Church. This was at a time when the absolutist French state and the emerging bourgeoisie were attempting to challenge and undermine this position by a policy of forced internment of the poor in what amounted to little more than a system of institutionalized apartheid.

This treatment of the poor reflected a pervasive attitude of misunderstanding, disdain, hostility, and fear, on the part of the French state and bourgeoisie in an age of unprecedented levels of systemic poverty and suffering for the great majority of the French people.¹⁸ Further-

¹⁵In 1652, under Vincent's inspiration, and with his assistance, Mademoiselle de Pollalion also founded the Daughters of Christian Union. For more information see Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:305-307.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 1:305-307.

¹⁷Included among these were the princess de Condé, the duchesses d'Orléans, d'Aiguillon, and de Vendôme, as well as Mesdames de Brenne and de Séguier.

¹⁸For more information see Edward R. Udovic, C.M. "Caritas Christi Urget Nos: The Urgent Challenges of Charity in Seventeenth Century France," *Vincentian Heritage* 12, n. 2 (October 1991): 85-104.

more, this poverty was a direct result of the political, economic, and foreign policies of the national government.¹⁹

In contrast, and in response to, the government's repressive attitude and punitive policies of "charitable" control of the poor, the French Church responded to the urgent needs of the poor not only by a strong restatement of its traditional theology of charity, but also by an impressive and wide-ranging institutional recommitment to the service of the poor. Thus, this was an age that saw the foundation of a large number of new forms of apostolic religious communities of men and women whose ministries concentrated exclusively on meeting the spiritual and temporal needs of the poor. In addition, there was a widespread renewal of the tradition of private charity among the laity.²⁰

At the heart of this revival of charity stood Bossuet's own mentor, Vincent de Paul. Bossuet's sermon represents a classic statement of the theology of the seventeenth century's charitable revival, and its spirit, tone, and content, is thoroughly Vincentian.

Bossuet as a preacher

Of the many reforms that Vincent de Paul labored incessantly to bring about in the French Church, one of the most important was the reform of preaching.²¹ Pierre Coste has described the contemporary state of preaching in this way:

Bad taste held undisputed sway: the pulpit resounded with incessant references of mythology; displays of secular learning; frequent employment of dry scholastic phraseology; flowery, over-emphatic, trivial and grotesque language, a laborious and subtle search of Sacred Scripture for the most unexpected symbolic interpretations; burlesque groupings of words and ideas; impudent satire; violent and contemptuous attacks on political adversaries and the partisans of the reformed religion.²²

Vincent "was pained to see the preaching of the gospel pursuing a course that rendered it fruitless."²³ For Vincent, preaching was above all "the art of winning souls."²⁴

¹⁹Catharina Lis, *Poverty & Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe*, (New Jersey: 1979), 117.

²⁰Paul Christophe, *Les Pauvres et la pauvreté: IIème partie, du XVIIe siècle à nos jours*, (Paris: 1987), 57-64.

²¹For further information on Saint Vincent and the reform of preaching see Coste, *Life and Works*, 2:197-225.

²²*Ibid.*, 2:197.

²³*Ibid.*, 2:214.

²⁴Joseph M. Connors, S.V.D., "The Vincentian Homiletic Tradition," *Vincentian Heritage* 4, n. 2 (March 1983), 38.

Vincent's "Little Method" of Preaching

In the light of the example of the style of preaching of Jesus in the gospels, under the influence of Pierre de Bérulle and most especially that of Francis de Sales, and on the basis of his own many years of evangelistic experience Vincent formulated his famous "little method" of preaching which became the basis for the reform of preaching which he spread not only throughout his own congregation, but also to the clergy of France through the means of the ordination retreats, the Tuesday Conferences, and the newly founded seminaries. As Joseph Connors has noted:

It is true to say that Vincent de Paul did as much as any man has ever done to bring to the pulpit a sense of apostolic sincerity, and directness. Due to him in his own day . . . countless preachers laid aside their practice of composing lofty literary essays for the pulpit and began to preach the Gospel with all their heart. Urged by Vincent they put their emphasis on moral instruction, suited to the needs of the people. . . . They kindled in their listeners the love of virtue, gave them clear notions of what virtue is, and pointed out the very specific means to be employed in acquiring it.²⁵

Bossuet's sermon at the House of Providence, and his subsequent distinguished and influential preaching career reveal that the basis of his own style of preaching was that of the "little method" learned so thoroughly, and so unmistakably from the mentor of his youth.²⁶

Before his death Vincent gave evidence of his approval of the style and content of Bossuet's preaching by inviting him to preach the ordination retreats held at Saint Lazare in April 1659 and May 1660. Such an invitation was one of the highest compliments that Vincent could pay to an ecclesiastic since he always chose, with the greatest of care, those who were to give the conferences of the ordination retreats.²⁷

Bossuet's Subsequent Career

Bossuet continued to preach before the most influential and distinguished audiences in Paris, including the royal chapel. In the period between 1659 and 1669 he established his reputation as the foremost preacher in France. On 8 September 1669 he was named by Louis XIV as the bishop of Condom, and in the following September he was paid

²⁵Ibid., 37-38.

²⁶For a complete account of Bossuet's preaching career see Lachat, *Bossuet*, 8:i-xix.

²⁷Coste, *Life and Works*, 2:153.

the even greater honor of being named by the king as tutor to the dauphin. According to the king Bossuet had been chosen, "from among all the bishops of the realm as having all the requisite qualities for the education of my son, merit, doctrine, wisdom, and a consummate experience."²⁸

Being a firm believer in the necessity of episcopal residence, Bossuet immediately resigned his bishopric in order to take the royal post. During his period of royal service there was little time for him to devote to his public ministry of preaching, although he was able to pursue an equally distinguished literary career.²⁹

In 1682, after the dauphin's marriage, the king appointed Bossuet as the bishop of Meaux. As a bishop of a diocese Bossuet regarded the ministry of preaching as central to the fulfillment of his episcopal duties. According to a priest of his diocese:

during the twenty two years of his episcopate he totally dedicated himself to the instruction of his people to whom he announced the word of God at every opportunity according to the great talents that he had received. He preached to his priests in the conferences of pastors that he frequently held in the cantons of his diocese. He preached at the synods of the diocese which he held every year, he preached in his seminary for the instruction of his seminarians, and in monasteries on behalf of the maintenance of regular discipline.³⁰

Bossuet conscientiously attended to the wide range of his official episcopal duties as envisioned by the decrees of the Council of Trent and the principles of the Catholic Reform in France. There is no doubt that Vincent de Paul would have been as approving of Bossuet's conduct as a bishop as he had been of his conduct as a preacher.

Bossuet's Final Years

Bossuet's later career was intimately connected with the key role that he played in all the great controversies which rocked French Catholicism in the second half of the seventeenth century. He used his considerable polemical skills and national influence both in the con-

²⁸Lachat, *Bossuet*, 8:xiv.

²⁹Three of Bossuet's most influential works, ostensibly for the instruction of the dauphin, were written and published during this period: *Traité de la connaissance de Dieu et de soi-même*, (1677), *Politique tirée de l'Écriture Sainte*, (1679), and *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, (1681). He also later wrote, *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes*, (1688).

³⁰Lachat, *Bossuet*, 8:xv.

tinuing fight against Jansenism, and in the famous struggle over Quietism with his able opponent Archbishop Fénelon.³¹ In the disruptive struggles between Louis XIV and the papacy Bossuet was a key figure in the compromise formulation of the famous Four Gallican Articles of 1682.³² Also, in 1691, Bossuet began a correspondence with the philosopher Leibnitz which tentatively explored the basis for a possible ecumenical dialogue between Catholicism and Protestantism. Bossuet died in Paris, at the age of seventy-six, on 12 April 1704.

**Text of the Sermon
for
Septuagesima Sunday**

The eminent dignity of the poor in the Church their rights, their prerogatives, and why the rich must honor their state in life, relieve their misery, and share their privileges with them.

“The last will be first, and the first will be last.” Matthew 20:16.

“He will give pardon to the poor and the indigent, and he will save the souls of the poor.” Psalm 71:23.

Although the Lord Jesus said that the first will be last and that the last will be first, this will not be fully accomplished until the general resurrection at the end of time. It is then that the just whom the world has despised will occupy the highest places in heaven, while the wicked and impious who have already had their rule over the earth will find themselves shamefully relegated to the farthest reaches of the darkness.

Yet this admirable reversal of the human condition has already begun in this life, and we are seeing the first signs of this in the Church. God himself, by virtue of his own laws and his will, has laid the foundations of this marvelous order by which the Church is governed. Like Jesus Christ its founder, the Church has come into the world in order to govern in a way that directly contradicts and reverses the order that the proud rulers of the present age have established there.

As I see it this contradiction and reversal is evident in three ways:

First, in the world the rich enjoy all the advantages of their wealth and power, while in the kingdom of Jesus Christ the preeminence belongs to the poor who are the first-born of the Church and her true

³¹For background information on these struggles and their influence on the history of French Catholicism see *The Church in the Age of Absolutism and Enlightenment*, ed. Hubert Jedin, (New York: 1981).

³²For more information on Bossuet's influence on the development of contemporary Gallicanism see Georges Aimé Martimort, *Le Gallicanisme de Bossuet*, (Paris: 1953).

children.

Secondly, in the world the poor are submissive to the rich, and it seems that the only reason that they are born is to be their servants. On the contrary, in the holy Church, the rich find that they can be admitted only on the condition that they themselves serve the poor.

Thirdly, the advantages and privileges of this world benefit only the powerful and the rich, while the poor have no claim on any part of these for their living. However, in the Church of Jesus Christ the advantages and blessings of the kingdom of heaven are reserved for the poor, and the rich have no right to share in these advantages and privileges, except through the poor.

Thus the words of the evangelist that I have chosen for my text are already accomplished in the present life. "The last will be first and the first will be last." Since the poor are the last in the world they are the first in the Church. The rich imagine that everything in the world belongs to them, and thus they trample the poor underfoot. Yet their only reason for being in the Church is in order to serve the poor. Since the graces of the New Testament belong by right to the poor, the rich can only receive them from their hands.

These are important and certain truths which you must understand, O rich of this age! You must respect the poor, which is to say that you must honor their poverty, relieve their needs, and share your privileges with them. With the help of God's grace, this is what I am going to explain to you now.

First Point

The learned and eloquent Saint John Chrysostom once proposed a beautiful image in order to explain to us the advantages of poverty over wealth. He speaks of two cities, one of which is composed only of the rich, and the other which has only the poor within its walls. He then examines the question of which of these two cities is the more powerful. If we were to ask most people to answer this question I do not doubt that they would say that it is the rich city that would certainly be the more powerful, but this great saint concludes to the contrary, that it is the city of the poor. He bases his opinion on this reasoning, that while the city of the rich would certainly have a great brilliance and splendor it would lack the strength which is provided by a firm foundation.³³

³³S.P.N. Joannis Chrysostomi, Archiepiscopi Constantinopolitani, Homilia XI: "De Divitiis et Paupertate," in *Patrologia Graecae Cursus completus*, J. P. Migne, ed., 161 vols. (Paris: diverse dates), 63:638-651.

An abundance of wealth is the enemy of work for it is incapable of restraining itself. Consequently, the rich are always caught up in the search for the delights which will, by virtue of their luxury, pride, and idleness, corrupt their spirits and weaken their strength. Thus, in the city of the rich the arts will be neglected and the earth will lie uncultivated. The hard work by which the human race is supported is entirely abandoned in this pompous city. This city has no need of any other enemies, for it will fall by itself ruined by its own opulence.

On the other hand in the other city, which is composed only of the hard working poor, there is a spirit of necessary industriousness which is by its nature fertile in inventiveness and the mother of all profitable arts. This spirit is sharpened by exigency and inspires the working poor to the exercise of a vigorous patience which achieves great works through great effort, with no sparing of their sweat. This is a summary of what was said by Saint John Chrysostom on the subject of these two different cities. He makes use of this comparison in order to show his own preference for poverty.

But in saying this we truly know that this distinction between these two cities is only a pleasant fable. Earthly cities, according to a merely human way of thinking, are a body politic which by their very nature require the poor to live side-by-side with the rich as their servants. Humanly speaking this city of the poor of Saint John Chrysostom can exist only as an idea. However, the rules of the earthly order are of no concern to the Savior who according to the heavenly order calls us to build a city which will truly be the city of the poor.

This city of the poor is the holy Church, and if you as Christians ask me why I call it the city of the poor, I will tell you the reason that I have for saying this: the Church has been built by divine plan, from its very beginnings, only for the poor. The poor are the true citizens of this blessed city, which is characterized in Scripture as the city of God.

Although this doctrine may appear to be extraordinary to you, and even though you may doubt that it is true, in order to convince you I ask you to note the difference between the image of the Synagogue that is found in the Old Testament, and the image of the Church that is found in the New Testament. In the Old Testament God promised the Synagogue temporal blessings for as the divine psalmist said, "all glorious is the king's daughter as she enters."³⁴

³⁴Psalm 45:15.

Isaac told his son Jacob, “may God give you the dew of the heavens, and of the fertility of the earth an abundance of grain and wine!”³⁵ In the Old Testament doesn’t God promise his servants to prolong their days, to enrich their families, to expand their flocks, and to bless their lands and their legacies? In light of these promises, Messieurs, it is easy to see that riches and abundance are the legacy of the Synagogue of the Old Testament, which consists of powerful men and of wealthy houses.

This is not true, however, of the Church of the New Testament. In the promises contained in the gospel God no longer speaks about the temporal possessions which attract coarse men or which amuse children. Instead, in their place, Jesus Christ has substituted suffering and the cross. It is through this marvelous change that the first have become last, and that the last have become first, because the rich who were the most important in the Synagogue of the Old Testament no longer have any rank in the Church. In the Church of the New Testament it is the poor and the indigent who are the true citizens.

God has his own reasons for acting in a different way between the Old and New Testaments and although they are too long to be discussed in detail here, a few words of explanation can be said in passing. In the Old Testament, since it was God’s will that he be seen to have a majestic appearance it was therefore appropriate that his spouse, the Synagogue, would also have all the signs of an exterior grandeur.

By contrast, in the New Testament God hid all of his power in the likeness of one who served. The Church, which is his mystical body, must be the image of his lowliness and faithfully reflect the character of his own voluntary abandonment. My brothers, isn’t this the reason why this same God humbled himself when he said, “I want my house to be full,” and then ordered his servants to search out and invite the poor to his banquet?³⁶ Note the instructions that he gave to his servants: “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor and the crippled, the blind, and the lame.”³⁷ These are the people who he wanted to come and fill his house. He didn’t want to see anyone there who was not weak, because he did not want to invite anyone who did not carry the same burden as he did, that is to say, the weakness of the cross.

³⁵Genesis 27:28.

³⁶Luke 14:23.

³⁷Ibid., 14:21.

Therefore the Church of Jesus Christ is truly the city of the poor. The rich, and I do not fear to say this because the truth must be told, the rich being of the world are marked as belonging to the world, and therefore their presence is only tolerated in the Church. It is the poor and the indigent who since they resemble the Son of God belong to the Church and are received there. This is the reason that the divine psalmist calls them, "the poor of God."³⁸ Why the poor of God? The psalmist calls them this because in the new covenant God was pleased to adopt the poor in spirit and give them a special prerogative.

Wasn't it their prerogative to be the people to whom the Savior was sent? As Jesus told us, "he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor."³⁹ Didn't he speak directly to the poor in the sermon on the mount, while condescending to speak to the rich only in order to strike down their pride? "Blessed are you poor, the reign of God is yours."⁴⁰ If heaven, which is the kingdom of God for all eternity, belongs to the poor then they must also have the highest places in the Church, which is the kingdom of God on earth.

As Saint Paul said, "Brothers, you are among those called. Consider your situation. Not many of you are wise, as the world accounts wisdom, not many are influential, and surely not many are well-born. . . . God. . . chose those whom the world considers absurd to shame the wise, he singled out the weak of this world to shame the strong."⁴¹ From these words it is easy to conclude that from the very beginning the Church of Jesus Christ was an assembly of the poor, and that if the rich were to be received there they first were required to dispose of their wealth by placing it at the feet of the apostles, so that they would enter the Church, which is the city of the poor, in true poverty. Thus it was the Holy Spirit who resolved to establish the eminent place of the poor in the Church at its very beginning.

My brothers, I would also like to establish the preeminence of the poor with other convincing reasons by which you will come to recognize that they are the true children of the Church, and that it was principally for their sakes that the spiritual city was built. This salutary doctrine is important for you to know and to learn from.

³⁸Psalm 72:2.

³⁹Luke 4:18.

⁴⁰Ibid., 6:20.

⁴¹1 Corinthians 1:26-28.

Messieurs, the Church teaches us that our heavenly Father has chosen the poor to be the citizens of his Church, and because they carry the most assured marks of his great favor they are indeed the most precious members of the Church.

I learned this excellent lesson from Saint James. When in his epistle Saint James says "Listen, dear brothers," he obviously has something very remarkable to propose to us. What soul is so hardened so as to refuse to listen to the words of such a great apostle who is honored in the epistles as the brother of our Lord? Now listen to what he has to say, for these are his own words: "Did not God choose those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom he promised to those who love him,"⁴² and as the apostle goes on to say, "yet you treated the poor man shamefully."⁴³ As you can see, in this reading, the apostle wants us to consider the eminent dignity of the poor and the prerogative of their vocation, which is what I have tried to explain to you. He says that God has specially chosen the poor to be rich in faith, and to be the heirs of his kingdom.

Isn't this what I have preached, my brothers, that the poor have been claimed with honor and given special preference by the Church? What else can we conclude from this except to agree with Saint James, that it is a deplorable blindness not to honor the poor whom God himself has honored with the grace of the preeminence that he has given to them in his Church? Thus my fellow Christians, give them your respect and honor their poverty.

Saint Paul gives us an example of this. When writing to the Romans about the alms that he was to carry to the faithful in Jerusalem, he spoke in these terms, "I beg of you brothers, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of the Spirit, join me in the struggle by your prayers to God on my behalf pray . . . that the offerings I bring to Jerusalem may be well received by the saints there."⁴⁴

My fellow Christians, who will not admire his honorable treatment of the poor! Notice that he does not say, "the alms that I give them," or "the assistance that I give them," but rather he says, "the offerings that I bring to them." He says something more, and I ask you to meditate on his words. "Join me in the struggle by your prayers to God on my behalf pray . . . that the offerings I bring to Jerusalem may be well received by

⁴²James 2:5.

⁴³Romans 15:30-31.

⁴⁴1 Corinthians 15:51.

the saints there." Why did the apostle speak in this way, and why did he take such great care to see that his alms would be accepted by those to whom he would bring them? The reason that he spoke in this way was because he was conscious of the eminent dignity of the poor.

A person can give for either of two motives: to gain someone's affection, or to relieve someone's needs. One can give out of feelings of respect or out of feelings of pity. The first of these gifts is considered to be a present, the other is considered to be an alms. In giving alms, a person doesn't ordinarily think that anything else is required beyond the gift of the alms themselves. However, a person does take greater care when giving someone a present. When we give a present we often give some indication of its worth and our feelings about the person we are giving it to by the manner and circumstances in which we give the gift. It was in this latter fashion that Saint Paul assisted the poor.

Saint Paul does not just regard the poor as unfortunates whom he must assist but he sees their misery and recognizes that they are the principal members of Jesus Christ and the first born of the Church. Because of this glorious dignity he sees them as persons to whom he must pay court, if I may use that expression. This is why he believed that it was not enough that the offering which he brought would relieve their needs, but it was also important that the manner of his service be pleasing to them. In order to obtain this grace he then asked everyone of the Church of Rome to pray for this intention. Thus Saint Paul seems to find his happiness in serving and pleasing the poor who are so numerous in the Church, "pray . . . that the offerings I bring to Jerusalem may be well received by the saints there."

Mesdames, practice these same apostolic sentiments in the care that you give in this house, and regard with respect the poor who live here. Meditate seriously on the charity of our Lord, for if the honors of this world put you above them, the image of Jesus Christ which they bear put them above you. In serving them you honor the mysterious conduct of divine providence which has given them the highest rank in the Church and the prerogative of being served by the rich who can only enter the Church through this service.

Second Point

There is a second truth that I am obliged to explain to you, and it follows logically from what I have already established, so that I will not have to spend much time proving it. Certainly, as it has already been said, Jesus did not promise his disciples anything other than the

afflictions of the cross, so therefore there is no need for riches in the Church. The splendor of riches have nothing in common with the profound humiliation of Jesus hanging upon the cross, as it is easy to see. So why search for riches, messieurs, for what good are they in his kingdom?

Are riches needed in order to erect splendid temples to God or in order to ornament his altars with gold and jewels? Can't you see that God is not pleased by these ornaments which he receives from the hands of those who use them to try to prove their own piety and faith? Far from requiring these great expenditures, don't you see that quite to the contrary, he asks for nothing other than that which is the most common and of the least earthly value for use in his worship? Thus he asks only for simple water by which to regenerate his children. Only a little wine and bread are needed to be consecrated in the mysteries which are the source of all graces. He has never received a more fitting worship than that which is offered to him from the depths of the dungeons. Humility and faith are the only ornaments needed to decorate his temples.

In ancient times under the old covenant God desired a splendid worship, but under the new covenant he desires a simplicity of worship in order to show the rich that he has no need of them, nor of their treasures, unless it is for the sake of the service of the poor. But note, Messieurs, that he says that he does have need of the poor, and he implores their assistance. "Now I am going to tell you a mystery." Jesus needs nothing, yet Jesus needs everything. Jesus needs nothing in terms of the fulfillment of his own power, but he needs everything in terms of the fulfillment of his compassion. "Now I am going to tell you a mystery."⁴⁵ Here is a great mystery, and it is the mystery of the New Testament.

This same mercy which required that Jesus, though innocent, take upon himself the weight of all human sins also obliged Jesus, who is the source of all blessings, to take upon himself the weight of all human needs. In the gospels we see that Jesus is hungry, that he is thirsty, that he groans under the weight of chains, that he cures the sick, and that he suffers from the extremes of the weather's heat and cold. Truly poor, he is the poorest of the poor because while the poor only carry the weight of their own poverty he bears the sufferings of all the poor. "It is only

⁴⁵Salviani Massiliensis, Presbyteri, "Adversus Avaritiam, Lib. IV," *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*. J. P. Migne, ed. (hereinafter cited as PL) 231 vols. (Paris: diverse dates), 38:232.

just that Christ is the one who suffers for all of the poor."⁴⁶ Thus, it is the pressing needs of the poor which cause him to relax his attitude towards the rich.

Jesus wanted to see in this Church only those who resembled him, that is to say, the poor, the indigent, the afflicted, and the miserable. But if the Church is composed only of the unfortunate, who will then be able to come to their aid? What will become of the poor in whom he suffers, and all of whose needs he feels? He could send his holy angels to help them, but it is more just that they be helped by those who are their equals. Come then into the Church, O rich! At last the door is open to you, but recognize that it is opened for you by the poor, and only on the condition that you serve them.

It is only for the love of his poor children that God permits the entrance of these strangers. See the miracle of poverty! The rich are aliens who are admitted into the Church, but it is their service to the poor which will give them their citizenship there. Their service will expiate the contagion that they have contracted by their contact with their riches. Consequently, O rich of this world, you who take so much pleasure in your superb worldly titles, in the Church of Jesus Christ you will only be the servants of the poor.

Do not take offense at this title, the patriarch Abraham embraced it, to his glory. He who had so many servants, and such a numerous family, nevertheless took upon himself the obligation of caring for the poor and their needs. Anytime that the poor approached his house he would go out to receive them. He would go to his flocks to pick out the most delicate and tender of lambs, and he himself would serve them at table.

As the eloquent Saint Peter Chrysologus said, "when the poor arrived Abraham no longer remembered that he was the master," and he acted in every way like a servant.⁴⁷ What was the source of his readiness to serve the poor? It was because the father of all believers foresaw the rank that the poor would one day have in the Church. He foresaw that Jesus Christ was in them. In the presence of the poor he forgot his own dignity, and thus he gave to the rich the example of how they also must fulfill their obligation to serve the poor.

⁴⁶Sancti Petri Chrysologi, Archiepiscopi Ravennatis, Sermo CXXI: "De Divite et Lazaro," PL 52:531.

⁴⁷Sancti Aurelii Augustini, Hipponensis Episcopi, Sermo CLXIV, PL 38:896-902.

But what is the nature of the service that we must give them? How are we to assist them? You have already seen the example of the patriarch Abraham, and now the admirable Saint Augustine will give you yet another lesson on this subject. "The service that you must give to the poor is to carry a part of the burden that they carry."⁴⁸ The apostle Paul also instructed the faithful to "carry each other's burdens."⁴⁹ The poor have their burden, and so do the rich. Who does not know that the poor are heavily burdened, when we ourselves can see them sweat and hear them groan? How can we fail to recognize that their shoulders are bearing the heavy weight of their desperate needs?

But what about the rich who come to their aid, and who seem not to be weighted down by any burdens in life? Know that the rich too have their burden to carry. Wouldn't you like to know what is the burden of the rich? The burden that the rich carry is their riches. Again, according to Saint Augustine, "the burden of the poor is not having what they need, while the burden of the rich is having more than they need."⁵⁰ Is it then a heavy burden to have more than one needs?

Ah, I know many worldly people who, in the secret of their hearts, desire just such a burden! But what will stop these inconsiderate desires? If the unjust prejudices of this century stop them from seeing the weight of their abundance, when they come to this country, to the world where it is harmful to be too rich, they will find themselves called to appear at the tribunal where they will have to render an account of how they have spent the riches that have been given to them. They will have to answer to the inexorable judge not only for what they have spent, but also for their stewardship of their riches. It is then, Messieurs, that they will recognize that their riches are a great weight, and they will vainly repent of not having disposed of this burden.

But we can anticipate this final hour of judgment, and in the time that remains to us we can practice the advice given us by Saint Paul. "Carry each other's burdens."⁵¹ If you are rich, then carry the burden of the poor and relieve their needs. Help them as they moan and carry the burden of their sufferings. But know that when you do this you are acting to ease your own burden, because when you give to the poor you lessen the weight of your own burden. When you help to carry the

⁴⁸Galatians 6:2.

⁴⁹Sancti Aurelii Augustini, Sermo CLXIV, PL 38:896-902.

⁵⁰Galatians 6:2.

⁵¹2 Corinthians, 8:14.

weight of the need that oppresses the poor, they in turn help to carry the burden of the abundance that you have shared. As Saint Paul said, share the weight of your burdens with each other “with equality as a result.”⁵²

My brothers, it is unjust that the poor should have to carry all of the burden, and that the weight of their miseries should rest completely on their own shoulders. If they complain, and if they murmur against divine providence, Lord permit me to say, that it is only just that they do so. For since we are all molded from the same substance there can't be much of a difference between us, for after all dust is dust. Why then do we see joy, favor, and affluence, on the side of the rich, while on the side of the poor there is sadness, despair, and great need, as well as scorn and servitude?

Why does one fortunate person live in such an abundance that all of his desires are satisfied while another person is not able to sustain his poor family, nor relieve the hunger that fills him? Could anyone imagine a possible justification for this strange inequality between equals, which is caused by the mismanagement of the treasures that God gives, if by some other means providence was not able to provide for the needs of the poor and restore equality between men?

It is for this reason, my fellow Christians, that God has established his Church where the rich are received, but only on the condition that they serve the poor. Where he ordains that abundance will take care of necessity, fulfilling the needs of the poor from the surplus of the opulent. Think about this, my brothers, if you do not carry the burden of the poor they will be your downfall. Without proper stewardship the weight of your riches will cause you to fall into the abyss. Instead, if you share with the poor the burden of their poverty, and take upon yourself part of their misery you will merit a share in their privileges.

Third Point

Without this sharing in the privileges of the poor there is no salvation for the rich, and it will be easy to convince you of this by continuing to insist upon these principles. Because if it is true, as I have

⁵²“The way to atone for the contagion that one contracts from riches is to treat the poor with compassion. By assisting them one comes to share in their privileges. Saint Paulinus said that the rich and powerful who accompanied Saint Melaniae to Nolana believed that they could be purified of the contagion of their riches if they were lucky enough to have him walk upon their expensive clothes leaving behind the dirt from his footsteps and from his own very poor clothes.” See S. Paulini Nolani, Epistola XXIX, “Ad Severum,” PL 61:312.

said, that the Church is the city of the poor and that in the Church the poor hold the highest places, and if it is principally for them that this blessed city has been built, it is very easy to conclude that the privileges of this city belong to them.

In all the kingdoms and in all the empires there are those people who are privileged, that is to say, those eminent persons who have extraordinary rights. All of these privileges are granted to those who by virtue of their birth are related to the person of the prince, or those who serve his person through their office. It is from the majesty and grandeur of the sovereign that the brightness which shines from his crown, in some way also shines upon those who approach it.

Since we learn from the epistles that the Church is a well ordered kingdom there can be no doubt, my brothers, that she also has her own privileged subjects. What is the source of their privileges if not their relationship with the prince, that is to say, with Jesus Christ? My fellow Christians, in order to be united with the Savior don't look for earthly riches and privileges in the holy Church. The crown of our monarch is a crown of thorns, the brilliance which shines from it are afflictions and sufferings. It is in the poor, and in those who suffer that the majesty of this spiritual kingdom resides. Jesus himself was poor and indigent; thus, it is proper that he associates with those who are like him, and that he gives his favors to those who share his lot.

There is nothing on earth that is more scorned than poverty, yet there is no condition which is more common. It is true that poverty is the "common" condition of the people, but the king of glory by embracing it himself has ennobled it in the kingdom, and thus he accords to the poor all the privileges of his empire. He promises the kingdom to the poor, consolation to those who mourn, food to those who are hungry, and eternal joy to those who suffer.

If all of these rights, if all of these graces, if all of the privileges of the gospel belong to the poor of Jesus Christ, O rich, what remains for you, and what share will you have in the kingdom? Jesus does not speak of you in the gospel except to attack your pride, "Woe to you rich."⁵³ Who would not tremble at hearing this sentence? Who would not be filled with terror? Against this terrible curse, here is your only hope. It is true that the privileges of the kingdom are given to the poor, but you can obtain them from their hands. This is why the Holy Spirit is sent to you, to obtain the graces of heaven. Do you want your iniquities to be

⁵³Luke 6:24.

pardoned? "Atone for your sins by good deeds, and for your misdeeds by kindness to the poor."⁵⁴ Do you ask God for mercy? Search for it from the hands of the poor, by practicing blessed mercy towards them. "Blessed are those who are merciful."⁵⁵

Finally, as Jesus said, if you want to enter through the doors of heaven, they will be opened to you provided that it is the poor who introduce you. He said, "make friends for yourselves through your use of this world's goods, so that when they fail you, a lasting reception will be yours."⁵⁶ Thus the grace, the mercy, the forgiveness of the sins of the kingdom is in their hands, and the rich cannot enter if the poor do not receive them there.

Therefore, O poor, you are rich! But, O rich, you are poor! If you keep your riches for yourself you will be forever deprived of the possessions of the New Testament, and all that will remain as your heritage will be this terrible sentence, "cursed are you rich, because you have received your consolation!"⁵⁷ In order to avoid this blow, in order for you to be happily preserved from this inevitable curse, throw yourself under the wing of poverty, enter into commerce with the poor, give and you will receive, give earthly goods and receive spiritual blessings, share part of the miseries of the afflicted, and God will give you a part of their privileges.

This is what I have to say to you concerning the advantages of poverty and the necessity of helping to relieve it. After this there is nothing more for me to do than to proclaim together with the prophet, "happy is the one who has regard for the lowly and the poor."⁵⁸ My fellow Christians, it is not enough to look at the poor with eyes of flesh, it is also necessary to consider them with eyes of understanding. "Happy is the one who has regard." Those who regard the poor with corporal eyes see nothing but their lowliness, and they scorn what they see. Those who open their interior eyes, that is to say the eyes of their intelligence guided by faith, will see Jesus Christ in them. They will see in the poor the reflection of his poverty. They will see the citizens of his kingdom, the heirs of his promises, the distributors of his graces, the true children of his Church, and the first members of his mystical body.

⁵⁴Daniel 4:24.

⁵⁵Matthew 5:7.

⁵⁶Luke 16:9.

⁵⁷Ibid., 6:24.

⁵⁸Psalms 41:1.

This is what urges us to assist them with our charity. But again, it is not enough just to assist them in their needs. Those who only assist the poor in this way do not understand the poor. Those who distribute alms either because they are constrained by their pressing pleas, or because they are touched by some natural compassion, do relieve the misery of the poor, but they do not understand the poor. The one who truly understands the mystery of charity considers the poor as the most privileged children of the Church, and honors them because of this status. This person believes himself obliged to serve them knowing that he can only share in the blessings of the gospel by the means of charity and by a true friendship with the poor.

My brothers, open your eyes and look at this house of the indigent and understand the poor that you see here. If I were to ask you for alms for only one person there would be many great and important reasons that would move your hearts to this act of charity. But now I am raising my voice on behalf of this entire house, and also for a house which cares for a number of poor girls who are entirely abandoned. Is it necessary to tell you of the moral peril of these girls because of their poverty, which is the stumbling block over which their modesty is lost? What purpose do these words serve if they don't touch you?

Enter into this house, become aware of its needs, and if you are not touched by the extreme poverty to which it is reduced, I don't know my brothers what will be able to make you pay attention. It is true, these pious ladies have opened their eyes to this house. They have understood the poor, and because they know their dignity they are honored to serve them. Because they are Christians they believe that they are obliged to assist them. Because they know the weight of their selfish riches they hand over to the poor a part of their burdens, and in sharing their temporal blessings they receive in exchange spiritual graces.