

THE SPIRITUALITY OF OUR SOCIETY
ACCORDING TO THE CHARISM OF OUR FOUNDER

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By the spirituality, of a Community I mean the sum total of the fundamental values given by the Founder as the special basis and feature of his foundation. I say fundamental values, not their practical applications and their consequences. In this study, therefore, we will speak exclusively of these values, abstracting from the applications and inferences made by St. Gaspar himself and by others after him. These latter will form the object of other studies and researches.

These values, precisely because they are fundamental, are "a-historical" that is, they are for all times and not subject to changes dictated by various historical circumstances (thus differing from their application), and they are "irrenunciabile" because they pertain to the very nature of the Society and our profound identity as Missionaries of the Most Precious Blood. Without any difficulty these values are reducible to the following four, to which all the others can be reduced:

- 1) The paramount value of the Rules;
- 2) the centripetal force of the Bond of Charity;
- 3) our sanctification for the apostolate and by means of the apostolate;
- 4) under the banner of the Blood of Christ.

St. Gaspar offers these four principles in the *Introduction* to his "Rule" and in the "First Title - Concerning the Purpose Proposed for the Society." These texts will be referred to only in their most general and fundamental expressions.

I - THE PARAMOUNT VALUE OF THE RULES (Cf. Introduction to the "Rule")

It might seem strange that a systematic exposition of the spirituality of the Society should begin by our speaking about the Rule, for its importance is often presented as being that of a simple external means, and does not give the impression of possessing those basic, a-historical and irrenunciabile qualities which should form our spirituality. Be that as it may, allow me to make some preliminary observations which will perhaps prepare the ground for what is presented in this the first part.

First of all, it should be pointed out that our Founder introduces his "Rule" by indicating very clearly and positively its value; in his judgment it is to mold the very life and development of the Society even in the future, "for they [rules] take care of the present as well as the future situations and needs of the members." (1)

In the second place, if we go looking for the charism of our Founder where else will we find it if not in his Rule. It was in the Rule that he intended to enshrine his charism in its most authentic expression, in order to pass it on to all the generations of his spiritual sons. It is useless to look for it elsewhere, as, for example, in some isolated statement in his writings, in some practical experience or episode in his life, often dramatized by his biographers for literary reasons, or in some secondary activity in which he was engaged. From these instances we might discover some personal charisms of Gaspar del Bufalo, but not his charism as Founder of our Society. As Founder he has poured himself completely into the Rule. This will become more evident from what will follow. Therefore there is an interior attitude toward the Rule which is not to be confused with respect for its value as a means, but corresponds to its "charismatic" value. Such an interior attitude is certainly not a secondary or accidental mark of our spirituality, but a fundamental and irrenunciabile one.

In the third place, our attitude towards the Rule, besides being fundamental, is also an outstanding, characteristic feature of the Society to the extent, as will be seen later, that it has its source not in extrinsic values or obligations, but solely in the *freedom* exercised in the bond of charity.

Finally, by treating the value of the Rule before the other three characteristics, it is not meant that this one is more important than the others; furthermore, the order I have chosen to follow in this treatment does not at all mean to establish any kind of precedence or hierarchy of values; that is, of greater or less importance and efficacy of anyone of the characteristics in respect to the others. All four are equally fundamental and, therefore, intimately connected with each other to form one single whole, one sole spirituality just like the surfaces of a quadrangular prism go to make up one geometric figure. With these preliminary observations out of the way we can go on with the discussion.

a) St. Gaspar's plan was to gather secular clergy in Mission Houses “*to renew in them a sense of dignity and responsibility, a spirit of study and holiness,*” (2) and then to launch them into the apostolate of preaching missions and retreats. His purpose was to bring about the religious and moral renewal of the Italian people, who had been thrown into complete disorder by the Napoleonic storm. Pius VII heartily approved of the plan and granted the first houses to the new Society. The plan was truly an ingenious one for two reasons.

First, it offered a speedy solution to great evils which then plagued the Church: that is, the relaxing of discipline among the clergy and the religious decline of the people. Second, it proposed to accomplish this double objective solely by relying on priest volunteers and on the virtue of such a group. Actually, Gaspar intended to organize a Society of priests, apostolic in character, and not a religious community based on the three traditional vows.

Precisely because of the absence of that element (the vows) which religious communities consider a firm foundation and a dependable cohesive force, it was doubly necessary to fortify the new apostolic brotherhood with rules adapted to the purpose for which it was organized. As a matter of fact, the Founder saw very well from the very start that if a Society conceived along

such lines would be lacking the protection of rules which would not be clear and in keeping with the plan he had worked out, it would fail the hopes of the Church and the expectations of good people, and would disintegrate before it even got a good start. Which is exactly what he says in the preface to his Rule: "*Sine legum, praesidio quae institutioni nostrae optime respondeant, conceptam sui expectationem vix dum oborta praecideret Congregatio.*" (3)

I said that he was occupied with that problem *from the very beginning*; for in preparation for the opening of the House at Giano, our Saint had already attended to drawing up some rather clear cut rules, and as soon as the Missionaries joined him there he introduced their exact observance. In a letter which he wrote August 13, 1815, to Monsignor Cristaldi to inform him of the arrival of Bonanni and the first confreres a day or so before, we read: "Our welcome to Giano was truly a solemn one. A group of the clergy. . . and all the people gave evidence of their special rejoicing. Immediately the 'Te Deum' was intoned. . . On the following morning the exact observance of the Rules went immediately into effect; what those Rules are you already will know." (4) Therefore, not even for a day was our Society without the protection of its rules; in fact, before it officially came into being on August 15, 1815, the Rules, by the will of the Founder, were already in force like arms extended to welcome the new Society and assure its vitality and development in the bosom of the Church.

b) What kind of Rules are we talking about? St. Gaspar required of his Missionaries only the mode of life *common to all secular priests* as set down in the universal legislation of the

Church. This is a *basic fact* to be borne in mind when speaking of our Constitutions: "They will order their lives according to what is prescribed in the sacred Canons." (5) Nevertheless, this general principle was complemented by a few special norms demanded by their special calling to a common and apostolic life (Venerable Merlini, who describes the origin and development of our Rules, and from whom we get this interesting bird's eye view account). (6) These norms were studied by our Saint together with Monsignor Albertini and Monsignor Cristaldi, and until 1820 they formed the life style of the Missionaries at Giano, the only house of the Society. In the first months of that year St. Gaspar dictated to Father Francesco Pierantoni some more fully developed Regulations (*Regolamenti*) which were derived from the very first nucleus. These he had printed in two large sheets entitled *Regulations for Establishing Mission Houses* and *Spiritual Guide for the Missionaries*. He then called the famous *First Congressus of the Society* at Pievetorina, June 7, 1820. In this meeting he defined more accurately and expanded the regulations printed on the above-mentioned two sheets. In 1821 he commissioned Fathers Biagio Valentini and Giovanni Merlini to extract from these printed materials and manuscripts an orderly and organic body of Rules. After having examined it, retouched and corrected it, he had it printed the following year under the title: *A Summary (Transunto) of all that Regards the Pious Society of the Mission and Retreat Houses under the Title of the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (Fabriano 1822).

This "Summary" with its forty-five articles was in force during the lifetime of our Saint, even up to the approval of the definitive Rule in 1841. It offered substantially sound norms, but they were still somewhat vague and deficient. The Founder continued to correct these defects, and to expatiate and perfect these norms by means of Circulars, little by little, as occasions presented themselves, as he used to say to his Missionaries: "Like a painting which is first sketched, then outlined, afterwards perfected, finally idealized, even so it is the case with our Society

which now finds itself enjoying such success (it was in 1826) and we will see it perfected and ennobled still more for the greater glory of God whom alone we serve.” (7)

Let us now listen to the Venerable Merlini as he continues to describe the various steps in the formation of the Rule. He thus testifies at the Beatification Process of St. Gaspar:

At the same time he (Gaspar) continued to think about forming a Rule, complete in every respect, and many times he talked about it. However, as a matter of fact, nothing was finalized and he used to say that it was not the time as yet, because God had still not inspired it. In this way matters went on until 1835. Then one day we happened to be together in Albano (it was in the month of July). (8) He called me in to say that before he died he wanted to dictate the Rule for canonical approbation. Immediately I sat down and began to write, and on other occasions I wrote at his dictation several pages. Then, he told me to arrange the material in an orderly manner, separating, as much as possible, the material that belonged to the Rule from that which belonged to the Praxis. When this was done I re-read it to him and he then told me to have it put into good Latin by our confrere, Missionary Father Cristoforo Frioli (*who then happened to be at Albano*). (9)

“Afterwards, with much thought and prayer” he continued to elaborate on it and perfect it until his death. “When I was called to Rome on the day before he died,” continues Merlini, “I asked him about another point that seemed to remain somewhat unsettled, and he replied.. ‘Abide by what has been decided’.” (10)

From this outline, hasty and sketchy though it be, we can have a good idea of what the Rule meant to Gaspar. It is not a superficial piece of work done on the spur of the moment by an incompetent individual; nor is it an abstract study worked out by a jurist at his desk; nor is it a painstaking mosaic put together by a diligent compiler, incorporating in an orderly fashion materials from various sources. Rather it is the holy obsession that goaded him on his whole life long; it is the mirror of all his ideals, the fruit of continuous prayer, of personal experience and the counsels of holy and wise men: “After having consulted men who are easily the most outstanding for holiness of life, wealth of learning and for their practicality.” (11) In one word it was the expression of the will of God, for, just as he was not ready to put the finishing touches to the Rule until in the fervor of his spirit he clearly saw “that God had inspired it” (as we are told by

Merlini), so from the very beginning of the Society he had been guided by the hand of God in its step by step formulation. As a matter of fact, Merlini himself guarantees that the Rule in its final and definitive draft "except for some accidental modifications and additions, was substantially the same as the one we already had in practice." (12) That explains why St. Gaspar wrote as follows to Betti, who would not approve one of his directives concerning the dress of the lay brothers: "God and his glory is my sole motive; and I assure you that if I possibly could agree with your suggestions, I would not hesitate a moment, both because I am inclined that way by nature and for religious motives. But I tell you once and for all that I cannot." (13) One can sense that courageous resoluteness of a man who is conscious of his charism as a Founder, and of his duty to pass it on to the Society just as God wanted it.

c) At this point it is in place to recall how dear to St. Gaspar's heart was the observance of the Rules which he continued to offer to his Missionaries as these Rules were being perfected step by step. Gaspar was a practical, realistic person, with both feet on the ground, and he understood very well that even the most beautiful and perfect Rules would be useless unless they were put into constant and faithful practice. He was not interested in composing beautiful pieces of writing, in spiritual rhetoric, in more or less brilliant reflections, which afterwards always remain in the realm of the clouds and dreamland. What he wanted to offer most of all was a practical mode of life.

His letters and the testimonies of the Beatification Process are an inexhaustible source of sayings and deeds which clearly demonstrate his intentions. Father Domenico Silvestri says,

He showed his courage by his observance of the Rule, which he wanted the rest to do also. He saw to it, and had the respective superiors see to its observance . . . Here is what he wrote to me once about this matter: 'Be zealous there where you are for the most exact observance . . . Make sure that the community is what it is supposed to be; the devil will take care of creating disorder and confusion. Once we cease insisting on our own will, everything will be in order.' In another letter he expressed himself in a similar vein: 'You

did very well to refuse both invitations of the official (the Pelegrini family in Sonnino) ... Stand fast by the Rule; whether that causes resentment or not, does not matter. Be a German in firmness in keeping the Rules. (14)

Any abuse, change or novelty, even the slightest, which might be introduced in the houses or in giving missions, says Father Beniamino Romani, "did not escape correction and remedial action." (15) Once he wrote peremptorily to Father Mattia Cardillo: "No one has the authority to change the Rule, no matter what position he occupies." (16) To Father Giovanni Pedini he wrote: "I want our Mission Houses to be so many Carthusian establishments." (17) He told someone to tell Father Beniamino Romani: "For us the rule is to abide by the Rule." (18) Father Luigi Mosconi was informed: "Either keep the Rule or go home; no nonsense, no fancy excuses, no grumbling will be tolerated." (19) The same alternatives are expressed in the conclusion of the Rule: "Let no one be ashamed to observe the Rules, because the sacrifice of one's own will redounds to the glory of God, to the welfare of the Society and to one's own spiritual profit. Whoever feels otherwise about this matter, let him, in God's name, seek another way of life." (20)

Evidently our Founder was willing to lose any member, no matter how outstanding, rather than infringe on the Rule, in spite of the then small number of his Missionaries. "He is a good plant," he used to say, "but not meant for our garden." (21)

Such firmness and intransigence is surprising in a person who otherwise was so flexible. The documents of the beatification process and his letters testify abundantly' to that. They show him anxious to hear and follow the advice of his confreres, open in every circumstance to dialogue, averse to decide matters on his own, (22) inclined as he was to follow the impulses of the heart. "Although I seem to be severe," he wrote to Father Betti, "I have a heart that melts like wax." (23) To the same Missionary he wrote again: "The older I become, the better I am able to understand human weakness, and I see that charity has' to be stretched as much as possible and as far as possible." (24) He was ever ready to give in, in order to comply with the wishes of oth-

ers, even at the cost of acquiring the reputation- of being fickle and irresolute. Thus, for example, in order to satisfy Father Betti, he completely abandoned a plan he had all worked out for the apostolate and for governing the Society, and he wrote to Father Betti: “It was all ready, but I am willing to receive letters accusing me of instability (!!!) rather than not to concur with your wishes.” (25)

All of which goes to reassure us that his resoluteness in regard to the Rule was no fanaticism or unreasonable hardheadedness, but the result of a profound conviction that the Rule was of God, and that the observance of it meant four things, Firstly, it was the *sine qua non* condition for the very existence of the Society, as he states in the Conclusion to the Rule: "Infractions of these rules would mean that the Congregation could not long hold together, but would completely fall apart." (26) Secondly, it was a sure safeguard of the authentic spirit of his Society, as he says in the same conclusion to the Rule: "... or it certainly would deviate from its original design." (27) Third, the exact observance of the Rule was the only efficacious pedagogical means for the on-going formation of his Missionaries for “acquiring and increasing their spirit, zeal and skill in promoting, defending and maintaining the good to be done” (28) “the task of a Missionary is a noble one and therefore demands sanctity and learning. Our Rule, if well observed, furnishes the means to that end.” (29) Fourthly, for the members of the Society it is “the guide to heaven” because “the exact observance of the Rules leads us by the hand, so to speak, to acquire the wonderful spirit of God.” (30) The Rules are conducive to living the Gospel in a perfect way because “they do nothing else but offer a spiritual Guide, capable of recalling us to the practical execution of the obligations we assumed at the foot of the altar.” (31)

His last Circular Letter, written for the occasion of the annual retreat and sent out a few weeks before his death, can be considered *his spiritual last will and testament*. In it St. Gaspar makes an

impassioned plea for the Rule in relation to the mystical vineyard of the Song of Songs (1: 6 and 2: 12), to which he compares our Society :

The vineyard, however, has its hedge, so that the foxes may not stealthily creep it to destroy the the vineyard. Behold - by the way of comparison - the Rule, which prescribes retirement, silence, circumspection with outsiders, prudence in our dealings, and a virtuous industry at work. For the cultivation of a vineyard, moreover, there is need of skill, toil, vigilance, fruitful showers. For the cultivation of our Community there is need of special graces to be sought in prayer, of real effort in doing good, of system, of vigilance in harvesting the desired fruit. And in admirable agreement with all this are our regulations and Rule, which cannot be too highly recommended. Finally, there is our activity in promoting whatever furthers the glory of the Lord, and in seeking the permanence of our endeavors by means of Associations which the Community proposes, the means it points out, the practices it offers.” (32)

To achieve all this, concludes our Saint, *“He who lives by the Rule, lives for God.”*

d) I think that from all that has been said thus far a clear message comes through, and it constitutes the first fundamental characteristic of our spirituality, coming so directly from our Founder, namely: “For us the rule is to abide by the Rule.” (33) to use the very words of our Founder. This is not a matter of naiveté, of worthless, out-dated, superfluous rhetoric. Nor is it a question of something so obvious or self-evident as the discovery of the umbrella or Columbus' egg. By this Gasparian formula I mean to emphasize above all the fact that to remain faithful to the charism of our Founder it is necessary to stay with the Rule and abide by the Rule; under no circumstances can one abstract from it, and it is for that reason that I have spoken of the “paramount value of the Rule.” To desire to choose one's own private way for realizing or developing this charism, outside the framework of the Rule, or worse, contrary to it, is a dangerous and alienating illusion.

It was a good thing and a duty to bring the Rule, namely, the Constitutions and Statutes, up to date according to the needs of the times and the directions of the Council. It was good and a duty to modernize it, to eliminate the encrustations which today have become useless, to check on

the traditions and to retain only the healthy and vital elements. However, once this work is done, it is also a good thing and a duty for all of us finally, with good will and joy, with confidence in God, in Our confreres and in the future of our Society, to buckle down to the task of observing the the Normative Texts. In them there still shines forth, suitably expressed, the spirituality of our Founder in its basic and characteristic notes. This observance, too, is something good and a duty which cannot ignore. Of what avail would be all that work, done on the local, provincial and Society levels, if afterwards we would let ourselves be led by an inferiority complex in regard to the observance of the Normative Texts, as if it were a disgrace in our day to observe and see to the observance of the Rule, and to perform, according to the Rule, the functions entrusted to each one for the service and support of the Community?

“For us the rule is to abide by the Rule.” Do you not think that it is about time to set aside these continual discussions, to be done with always hypothesizing new changes under the illusion that these can somehow improve our condition, like the sick man in Manzoni’s famous novel? Do you not think that we have had enough of starting all over again, of “rediscovering” our Society, as, unfortunately, has been said and is still being said, thus making a Constituent Assembly out of every Assembly? This sort of procedure keeps us in a continuous state of uncertainty, deprives the Rules of their force, introduces the idea that they are not obligatory, uproots their observance, and sanctions personal arbitrariness. All this is diametrically opposed to what our Founder wished, opposed to his spirit, to his charisma: "For us the rule is to abide by the Rule."

My dearest confreres, please do not misunderstand me. I have been harping on the necessity of honoring the Rule by observing it, and in the manner proper to our Society, which will be brought out in the next part. However, that does not at all exclude the possibility of updating, if and when a real state of affairs demands this. Nobody wishes to deny the necessity and oppor-

tuneness, as Vatican II desires, (34) of adapting every so often our mode of life to the reasonable demands of the times and social conditions. However, this renewal implies a "continual return to the source of all Christian living, and to the original spirit" of the Society, which insures our essential identity and our fidelity to the principles that go to make up our spiritual personality. Such ordered and timely adjustment and updating was always carried out by us from the very beginning of our Society.

This point should never be lost sight of. Suffice it to recall how Merlini, a few years after the death of our Founder, considering the demands of the circumstances, began to make exceptions to norms forbidding us to accept parishes, which norms certainly seemed very categorical and strict. (35) Such a process of adaptation and updating must necessarily continue, because that is the law of every living organism. What must be avoided is the mania to leave everything open to perpetual discussion, and to be continuously experimenting with one new theory after another. Such a procedure would obstruct that natural and normal growth that a living organism should have. It would rather result in something like the irregular, chaotic and pathological development of a tumor, and that is not a sign of life but a prelude to death.

"For us the rule is to abide by the Rule." This statement sounds like a self-evident truth, and yet it is so difficult to really understand it and put it into practice! During the lifetime of our Founder, in a controversy about this principle with some who wished to remain in the Society but were opposing the Rules of our Saint, the Venerable Merlini gives us the authentic interpretation of that formula:

Everyone must conform to the Rule and to the practice of virtuous obedience, and not adapt his obedience and the Rule to himself, like having a suit of clothes made to one's own liking...; and I conclude that he who wishes to live according to the Rule. . . should certainly remain in the Society and store up treasures for heaven, in conformity with his vocation. On the other hand, whoever does not wish to live according to the Rule, let him find another way of life more agreeable to him and not remain to disturb the others." (36)

The virtuous observance of the Rule is of such importance for our Founder and for his most faithful interpreter as to be the condition for belonging to the Society, without it being possible to imagine a third way, especially since, as the same Venerable Merlini points out, "neither the vow nor obedience keep" the individual in the Society. With these words we are introduced to the second characteristic of our spirituality, which serves to explain and helps us to go more deeply into what we have already said,

II - 'THE CENTRIPETAL FORCE OF THE BOND OF CHARITY (Rule, Article. 4)

For St. Gaspar, therefore, fidelity to the Rule and fidelity to the Society, adherence to the Rule and adherence to the Society are one and the same thing. However, from where does this fidelity, this clinging to the Rule and to the Society draw its life and vigor? In the religious orders and congregations these come from the religious profession and from the vows. In our Society, destined for the secular clergy, St. Gaspar wanted a pattern of common life without those bonds of cohesion which were so firm and had withstood the test of centuries. What else was there that could give vigor and life to the Rules, perseverance to the members and, in a word, stability to the new Society? Our Founder appealed to a cohesive force more powerful than any juridical bond, and which is the heart and essence of any moral bond, namely, the force of charity, which St. Paul calls "*the bond of perfection*" (Col, 3: 14).

It is worth our while to pause a moment and reflect on this biblical text to which our Founder clearly alludes, The Apostle is presenting to the Colossians a rich ensemble of virtues to practice: mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, mutual forbearance and forgiveness; but all these virtues are to be united in one cluster, all held and bound together by charity, which makes of it all one perfect whole. (37) The same holds true of the rich and varied complex of values offered by the Rule by our Saint. Among them are values in the sphere of the common life and in

the continuous advancement in the fields of the spiritual life, learning and missionary activity; values in the field of the itinerant apostolate as well as in that of the local apostolate with, all their magnificent and surprising ramifications; values in the sphere of a wise, benign and dialogue-type of government exercised in a wise and kind way after having talked things over with those concerned, be that of the local community level as well as on the general level of the Society. All of this had to be held well together in one cluster, tightly fastened and secured by the bond of charity. This bond, then, is the root-value which gives consistency to all the other values of the Rule around which the followers of St. Gaspar are united. It is, therefore *the* powerful bond which unites all these men of good will with one another.

In this connection our Founder uses another comparison which also comes from St. Paul. We are in the Society, he tells us, to form "a dam to stem the tide of impiety of the world." (38) To construct a dike or dam against the furies of the floods, it is necessary that the stones be tightly joined to each other by cement, so as to form a solid block. Thus, for us this powerful cohesive agent is "the bond of charity," namely: "the dedicated and supernatural affection we should have towards our Community and our confreres . . . should be such that we too may have stamped on our hearts the saying of the great Xavier: 'May my right hand be forgotten should I forget you, O Society of Jesus' (Society of the Most Precious Blood)." (39) This quote from St. Francis was very dear to St. Gaspar, and he never tired of repeating it towards the end of his life. From all these expressions of his it can be seen that for him the primary object of such a "dedicated and supernatural affection," which forms the bond of charity, is the Society itself with all that it implies, namely: the Rule which gives it its structure and physiognomy, the works of the apostolate which make it vital and dynamic, the spiritual vigor which maintains its zeal and identity, and then, the individuals who form the living stones of the structure.

b) To appreciate the true meaning of this supernatural bond, it is well to point out that here is meant charity in its full meaning of love for God and for our neighbor, as taught by our Lord and always taken for granted by St. Paul. Above all, it means love for Christ. St. Gaspar says: "Are we men of the spirit? Do we possess that love of God which qualifies us to enter the Sanctuary (namely, the Society) to be teachers of the people and sanctifiers of their souls?" (40) The love for Jesus Christ is at the same time the irresistible incentive which impels us to consecrate our life in the apostolic Society, such as ours, renouncing "the excessive attachment to our opinions, views and desires" which are such a hindrance in our apostolic career, and this (love for Jesus) should be the only bond by which the Missionary should feel himself bound. St. Gaspar continues:

The Apostle therefore said: 'I . . . a prisoner for Christ' which is equivalent to saying: I desire to be bound solely by love for Jesus; and if we reflect on the manner in which the Most High manifests his divine will (respect for the Rule and obedience), this heavenly love will force us to cry out: 'Who will separate us from the love of Christ?' Every other bond is now severed, and the will of the Lord alone triumphs!"(41)

In turn, this bond of love for our Lord becomes the bond of peace which gently and firmly unites in the heart of Christ himself the hearts of all those who are inspired by the same vocation and are received into our spiritual family! In another Circular St. Gaspar writes: "Let us pray for one another, in order that in holy concord and unity of spirit, strongly united 'in the bond of peace' in the Heart of Jesus Crucified, we may be able to reach the blessed goal of paradise." (42)

For St. Gaspar it is always the love for Christ which constitutes the fountain from which flows the love for the brethren, and creates the environment necessary for fraternal love to flourish and expand; and the divine Heart is the most favorable place for the meeting of these two loves. This is a thought that surfaces in countless ways in his writings. An example of this is his fifth Retreat Circular, where he says that the Heart of Christ is the mystical "wine cellar" of

which the Song of Songs speaks: “Since the King of Glory has brought us here into this wine cellar, let us in time establish here our sweet abode, and let us reinforce the foundations of the holy city of God by the bonds of charity.” (43) In another Circular he writes: “May humility (the virtue which has a very special place in the apostolic spirituality of our Saint) strengthen our charity and encourage the union of our hearts in the adorable Heart of Jesus Christ.” (44)

One could go on quoting at length from his letters and from the testimonies of the Beatification Process. However, the quotations already furnished are more than enough to make his thought clear for us. His idea was a comprehensive one which he wished to have chiseled into the spirit of each one of his members by means of the text of St. John, a text so full of light and mystery, and which he introduced into the ritual for the blessing of the food at mealtime: “God is charity, and he who abides in charity abides in God, and God in him” (I Jn.4: 16). Like the solemn tolling of a bell, these words incessantly reminded us each noon and evening of the beauty and joyfulness of our vocation. (45)

c) The charity which constitutes the bond of our Society, is qualified in the text of the Rule by the word, “*libera*” (free): “Not by the bonds of any vows, *but only by those of free charity.*” (46) What value is to be given to this adjective, *free*? Does it perhaps mean that the members are free from the obligation of persevering in the Society, so that they can come and go as they please? Most certainly not! Our Saint warns us about the dangers of carelessness in this matter. One has only to read the letters to his Missionaries to appreciate the sacred and supernatural conception he had of a vocation to our Society; when that vocation is certain, one would be going against the will of God not to persevere in the path undertaken, even if it cost a person sacrifice. Furthermore, when a person entered the proving period (probandate) he was vested with a cincture (a practice that, no doubt, came from the Founder himself); the old rite of this investiture required from the candidate a clear pledge of good will. And in the rite of the imposition of the Missionary

Crucifix, a rite also going back to St. Gaspar, there was clearly expressed the consecration of one's life to God and to the Society: "Remember that God chose you by a special calling of his that you might live no longer for yourself, but for him who chose you and for the Society to which you have given your name. . . Therefore be faithful unto death." (47)

To emphasize strongly this pledge of loyalty and religious fidelity, he set it down as a rule that if anyone left the Society, whether because he was dismissed, or whether he "deserted camp," he could never hope to be readmitted: "*Reditu in perpetuum prohibetur*" (48)

Could the "*free charity*" possibly mean a certain permissiveness with regard to the norms of life which the Society offered? That must be unequivocally excluded. We have seen with what firmness and intransigence our Founder required from everyone, "no matter what position he may occupy," the most scrupulous observance, and he stipulated as a condition for persevering in one's vocation, there being no middle course, the observance of the Rule. This idea he emphasizes on every possible occasion, as if he were afraid that he was not well enough understood. He understood well enough our natural tendency to compromise. "Let no one flatter himself," he says in the article just cited, let no one labor under the illusion that "even though he observes the rules poorly. . . he can still remain in the Society." In the relative Praxis he expressly advises those who do not love the observance of the Rule, who lead a careless life, who would like to introduce novelties or something contrary to our Rules, or who is a bother to the local community or to the Society, to leave on his own accord without waiting for the degree of expulsion: "The Society should not tolerate those who are a drawback to it."(49)

This "free charity," could it perhaps be interpreted in the sense that, since we do not have the religious vows, we remain free from the obligation of following the Evangelical Counsels which are the object of those vows? This type of freedom is also totally contrary to the thought of our Founder. He never tires exhorting his Missionaries to the highest perfection and to the exer-

cise of the virtues which correspond to the religious vows. For instance, in regard to striving for a *very* great purity of life: "Everyone should live as an angel in the flesh, and be an example of good works to the rest." (50) In regard to the spirit of poverty, he warns: "Let them not set their heart on riches, and let them shun the horrible strong desire for hoarding." (51) As far as obedience is concerned: "It is the keystone and foundation of all order." (52) A characteristic saying of his was: "The Missionary should be a Carthusian in the mission house, and an Apostle out in the vineyard of the Lord." (53) Well known is also the proverb handed down by him to our old Fathers: "The others take the vows, but we should observe them for virtue's sake." This maxim our Saint included in the text of the Rule when he speaks of the formation of those in special formation (the *Probandi*): "They are to give convincing proof that in the future they will voluntarily (namely, without the pressure of the juridical vows) do whatever the Society would have a right to require of them if there were the vows." (54)

It is refreshing, in this connection, to read in the beatification process of the Saint a precious testimony which assures us how these words did not remain a dead letter. The witness is Monsignor Giuseppe Angelini, who spoke these words twenty-six years after the death of our Founder:

I was edified by my stay with them (namely, with our Missionaries) during the holy Retreat at Albano. I found them superior in perfection to many other religious; I saw in them reflected the virtues of which St. Gregory speaks: unselfishness, zeal, low opinion of themselves, respect for bishops, apostolic life, moderate and frugal in their eating, and the poverty of their rooms and furnishings was such that one found only what was absolutely necessary." (55)

d) Why, then, did St. Gaspar add the adjective, "free?" Simply to remind us that that is the nature of charity. For love by its very nature is free and voluntary. True genuine love excludes all selfishness and ulterior interests. If it is a love that proceeds from God and is inspired in the heart by the Holy Spirit, it cannot but be free in the deepest and widest sense of the word, for, as St.

Paul says: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17). In Romans 6:1.15.22, the same Apostle says more about freedom for the service of God and for the service of the brethren. (56)

By this expression, therefore, our Founder wished to say:

a) Nothing constrains us to remain in the Society and to persevere in our vocation except our free, personal, spontaneous, voluntary choice; a choice dictated by the love of God and of our brethren, and renewed day by day (one might even say moment by moment) with acts of joyful and sacrificial love.

b) It is only this free, personal "voluntariness" which, day by day, brings it about that we really embrace the Society, the sum total of the ideals and values which give it life, as well as the prescriptions and structures which join it firmly together; thus the observance of the Rules, loved and freely offered, assures us ever more of perseverance in our vocation.

c) It is only this free and personal resolve which caused us to choose a life of priestly perfection and the following of Christ along the way of the Evangelical Counsels, within the framework, however, of our Rules and not in a manner extraneous to the charism of our Society. How precious is this freedom which, in its daily exercise, witnesses to our love for God and the brethren! How deep and vital must this love be within us, so that we may never need any other help or support outside of Our own freedom, to be the unbreakable bond in our personal life, in our life in the Society, and in our apostolic activity! For that reason St. Gaspar used to ask these disturbing questions: "Do we possess that love of God which qualifies us to enter the Sanctuary?" (57) "Why are we in our Society?" (58)

e) I think that it is urgent for the survival of our Society to rediscover the true Gasparian meaning of the "*bond of free charity.*" In that discovery we will find the solution to all the tormenting problems which are afflicting our renewal efforts. I mention three in particular:

1) The seeming conflict between personal freedom and law. The bond of charity leads us to love everything that the Normative Texts offer us; not merely to tolerate it resignedly, submissively, just to avoid trouble, out of sluggish apathy. No, but to really love it, in such a way as to make it a part of ourselves, so that we can truly say: these norms of life are not being imposed on me from without, they are not an hostile attack upon my personality. No, it is I myself who am choosing them and imposing them on myself, and I consider it my joy and my boast to be thus bound, for it is my heart which, day by day, tightens this bond ever tighter. If my bond in regard to the laws is really my own freedom, where is there any longer any conflict between them? It is a situation in which one can exclaim in the words of Psalm 84: 11: "Justitia et Pax osculatae sunt -- Justice and Peace shall kiss."

2) Another problem which is discussed so much today, is that of spontaneity. The free and joyful giving of oneself to the Society and to the brethren gives the genuine character of spontaneity to everything that in charity the Rule and the authorities ask of us, and in charity finds justification. It is a spontaneity worthy of a human being and of a Christian, especially of a person called to a special perfection of Christian life. Spontaneity has nothing in common with impulsiveness, caprice, sentimentality, and emotionalism; rather, it is a free, conscious and responsible choice. It is fidelity and consistency in regard to a choice made, and a sense of duty to defend that choice precisely against the assaults of impulsiveness, caprice, sentimentality and emotionalism. St. Gaspar pointed out to those who even in his day were agitating this problem, although a little more timidly than today: "It is not the walls of the combination of companions that make us better, but the victory over self-love." (59) "The root of our ills is within ourselves, my dearly beloved, and not in the walls, or in the climes in which we happen to be." (60)

3] The third problem which disturbs us so much today is the relaxation of our life-style that has crept in especially in these last years. We all have a share in the responsibility, and I in the

first place. With the praiseworthy intention of counteracting a certain external and mechanical, stereotyped and formalistic observance, fetishism to a certain extent, which could easily creep into the observance in the past, we have gone too far in the opposite direction. Come! Let us admit it in a brotherly spirit! If we stir up in ourselves that genuine bond of charity as intended by St. Gaspar, we will certainly regain the right balance.

We have seen that for Our Founder charity is not vain romanticism, nor a Trojan Horse, which in its spacious belly brings in all sorts of abuses; nor is it a merry, convivial camaraderie of a broadly permissive type, but it is something extremely serious, carrying with it obligations, and much more sacred than any bond of the vows, because it is the bond of perfection. It follows from all this that every manner of living or being deliberately contrary or systematically alien to the style of life handed on to us by the Founder and presented to us by Our Normative Texts is a violation of the bond of charity; it cannot be considered a personal affair, but it is an attack upon the fraternal love which binds us together; it is infidelity to the love of Christ who has called us to live together.

To summarize this second characteristic of our spirituality, which completes the first one and removes all ambiguity from it, we will say: "For us the rule is to abide by the Rule, because we are joined to the Society and to one another by the bond of free charity."

Such a bond, however, in the mind of our Founder, does not have a mere static and constitutive function, in so far as it unites us, but it also, and above all, has a dynamic action. In his writing, *A General Idea of the Society*, which our Saint presented to Leo XII, the bond which unites the members of the Society is called "the bond of unity for the ministry," by means of which "we activate ourselves for the apostolate which is so necessary for the glory of God." (61) He calls it that because we are united by the bond of charity, in so far as we all together, by means of the

apostolate, “must build a dam against the torrent of vice, and be a wall of defense for the House of the Lord.” (62)

1. *Regula*, p.8

2, *Scr. del F.* XII (Regolamenti) - Idea dell’ Opera a Leone XII, f. 48 (cfr. *Relaz. St.* p. 41).

3. *Regula*, - Prefazione, p. 7.

4. *Scr. del F.* XI "Cristaldi" p. IS,

5. *Regula*, art, 1 (cfr. artl 2 e 7).

6. Per i riferimenti e le citazioni del seguente tratto. cfr. *Lett.* Vol. II-I, nota a V. 96 e s.

7. *Es. Cir.* I, (1826), p. 9

8. Cfr. *Pr. Ord. Alb.* III, p. 1343 (Merlini) e Vol. d’Arch. “Congressi della Casa di Albano,” 25 Luglio 1835

9. Cfr. Vol. d’Arch. "Congressi della Casa di Albano," anno 1835.

10. *Pr. Ord. A/b.* II, ff. 946 tg - 947 tg (Merlini).

11. *Regula*. - Introduzione, p. 7.

12. *Pr. Ord. Alb.* II, f. 947 tg. (Merlini).

13. *Lett.* Vol. II-I, p. 144.

14. *Pr. Ord. A/b.* V, f. 2521 (D. Dom Silvestri).

15. *Pro Ord. A/b.* I, f. 537 tg (D. Ben. Romani).

16. *Scr. del F.*, vol. XVI (I Processicoli) ~asc. XV, f. 88.

17. *Pro Ord. Alb.* IV, f. 1905 e tg (D. Giov. Pedini).

18. *Pro Ord. Alb.* III, f. 1555 (D. Ben. Romani)..

19. *Scr. del F.*, vol. VI f. 343 (D. Orazio Bracaglia).

20. *Regula* - *Conclusio*, p. 86.
21. Cfr. *Lett.* vol. 11-12, nota a pag. 116.
22. Cfr. per es., 1a *Lett.* n. 209, scritta al Betti, in *Lett.* vol. II-I. pp. 34-36.
23. *Lett.* Vol. II -I, p. 50 n. 6 al Betti, riguardo alia riammissione di D. Pietro Pellegrini.
24. *Ibid.*} p. 40 al medesimo sullo stesso argomento.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 112 al medesimo,
26. *Regula* - *Conclusio*, p. 85. 27. *Ibid.*
28. *Scr. del F.* XII (Regolamenti) f. 20. Introduzione al "Direttorio per le Case di Probazione."
29. *Lt"tt.* Vol. II-2, p. 276 (a D. Dom. Silvestri).
30. *Es. Cir.* III, (1829), p. 19 e *ibid.* Metodo, p. 7 n. 1,
31. *Ibid.* II, p. 14.
32. *Es. Cir* XI (1837) p. 52-53.
33. Cfr. sopra, nota 18.
34. Cfr. *Decreta Perfectae caritatis*, n. 2.
- 35, Cf r, *Relaz. St.* p. 26, n. 23.
- 36, Merlini: Storia de]la Congregazione del Preziosissimo Sangue, specialmente della prima Casa di S. Felice di Giano, p. 26: in *Cart. d'Arch.* "Giano e Fosco."
37. Cfr, Prato *Teologia di S, Paolo*, Vol. II, Torino 1928, p. 323 e ,
38. *Es. Cir.* XI (1837), p. 51. 39. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
40. *Ibid.* II (1827) p. 15.
41. *Ibid.* III (1829) p. 20. St. Gaspar contrasts the bond of love for Christ to any other bond that could be an obstacle to "our apostolic activity," as, for example, an undue attachment to one's own opinions, etc.
42. *Ibid.* IV (1830) p. 29. 43. *Ibid.*. V (1831) p. 33.

44. *Ibid.* VII (1833) p. 39.
45. *Manuale Precum C.PP.S.* - Benedictio mensae.
46. *Regula*, art. 4.
47. *Rituale C.PP.S.*.
48. *Regula*, art. 52, p. 60.
49. *Regula*, art. 52 et *Pro Praxi*, p. 60-61. SO. *Ibid.* art. 9, et *Pro Praxi*, p. 15.
51. *Ibid.* art. 23, et *Pro Praxi*, p. 28.
52. *Ibid.* art. 8, p. 14.
53. *Es. Ci.*, I (1826), p. 13: "sit Apostolus in Ministeriis, Contemplativus domi" (cfr. *Ibid.* X, p. 48). 54. *Regula*, art. 45, p. 53.
55. Pro Apost. Rom. Vol. II p. 952 e tg;, Sessione 122, del 12-11-1863. 56. Cfr. Sohelcle, *Secondo Lettera ai Corinti* - Roma Citta Nuova Ed. 1968, p. 72.
57. *Es. Cir.* II (1827), p. 15.
58. *Ibid.* XI (1837), p. 51. *i'Why are 'Zve in our Societ!'.),r To be united by tiLe b01M of charity in order to stem the ittpiety of ottr age. . ."*
59. *Es. Circ.* I (1826), p. 11.
60. *Ibid.* II (1827), p. 16.

61. *Scr. del F.*, vol XII (Regolamenti) , p. 49 - cfr. *Relaz. St.*, p. 42.

62. *Es. Cir.* VI (1832). p. 35.

[The remainder of D. Luigi's work is found in: The Spirituality of our Society, tr. Pol-
lack & Volk, 1976]