

Letter to the Editor

Dear Brother Editor

Chris Bull's contribution to the poverty debate (*Religious poverty: a Historical View*, Chris Bull, "Lasallians" October 2007), hit the nail on the head, for it showed that folk as far back as William of Ockham's days were debating the same things as our magazine is these days. Yes, it is a problem. It's Primary School mathematics that persons with a family have less cash for themselves than celibates, since they have to share their goods with several others. The family-less do share also if they live with other family-less companions, as seems the pattern of religious institutes. A religious community's common cash, used on one house, for example, instead of on a house for each member, will leave quite a bit of surplus money for "good works".

Well, yes, let's face it: a lot does go on "good works", but that still leaves more ready cash per individual brother, salary etc being equal, than family persons who share their one wage with a crowd. But the buildings etc "don't belong to us", as Chris Bull quotes St. Francis as saying. What about living poor though, which some correspondents say we don't do? That depends on the individual as far as ready cash is concerned, and the amount of ready cash depends on how much is in the kitty, and whether some authority or community discussion decides enough is enough. Brothers are pretty well catered for in England, much better than brothers in the Sudan, but less well than brothers in the States, but that's a mere accident of Geography, and each one in each place will judge whether he's going over the top or not.

I've kept religion out of this text so far, but one supposes that religious are reasonably good Catholics and will try to keep their promise not to live it up. Now Father LaBelle OP in another article in last month's magazine, tells of a meeting to which all Catholics were invited, but the vast majority of those

who did attend were members of religious orders, because they could afford to travel. Perhaps each religious at Father LaBelle's meeting could have covered the expenses of one lay-person. Anyway, one of the by-products of not having a family, one supposes, is that cash is in the religious coffers precisely for "emergencies" like unscheduled meetings. If a brother goes off every evening to the Ritz for dinner as consolation for not having a family, perhaps he should seek a dispensation from his brotherhood, and learn what real life is like, but yes, cash is reasonably available for some things which a married person would not consider buying. But the big issue, like it or leave it as an argument, is that none of that stuff belongs to a brother and he has no right to property and no kids to leave it to even if he had property. Mathematics again, sorry, so why all this fuss over possession or use etc?

Poverty, in the religious-vow sense, is to free the Christian for what really counts. Some people decide that this is best achieved in an institute, others by marrying. In judging what counts, there will be varied opinions, and if a brother does something, cashwise, generally considered a bit much for a so-called religious, he's likely to get slated not only by his lay-observers but also by the powers-that-be in his community. In case you didn't know, the powers-that-be nowadays is community consensus, and each member has a right to know the others' finances: the money is not theirs, they only use it.

All of which reminds me that in our "Lasallians" correspondence on poverty we have avoided what Chris Bull says of debates in Ockham's day: "The dispute as usual, became very intellectual, each side trying to score points over the other". Yes, it is a little difficult to comment satisfactorily on religious poverty so the best bet might be to try following St. Augustine's "Love, and act accordingly".

James Connolly