

# THE FIRST COMPANIONS: “MASTERS OF PARIS” - “POOR PRIESTS OF CHRIST”

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## Introduction

**27, September 1540** saw the light of the day when Pope Paul III approved the ‘*compagnia de Jesu*’ – the new religious order, the Society of Jesus - with his Bull “*Regimini Militantis Ecclesiae*”. This official document of the Church approving the Society of Jesus has its own history. After ‘the Deliberation of the First Companions’, the discernment process done in 1539, the Companions expressed their desire to the Pope to become a religious order through a document called *Cum ex Plurimum*. In this document, besides describing their “Way of Proceeding”, they expressed their desire to be known as “**Masters of Paris**” and “**Poor Priests of Christ**” because that is the twin title under which they were ordained priests

in Venice on September 24, 1537. Since their arrival in Rome their life and ministry bore witness to these titles, the Pope kept these titles in his Bull and that was the way he starts to address them in that papal document:

## ***Paul***

*To his beloved sons,*

*Ignatius de Loyola, Pierre Favre, Diego Laynez, Claude Jay, Paschase Broet, Francisco Xavier, Alfonso Salmeron, Simao Rodrigues, Jean Codure, Nicolas de Bobadilla,*

***Masters of Paris***, *from the dioceses respectively of Pamplona, Geneva, Siguenza, Toledo, Vizeu, Embrun, and Palencia.*

*Since from the words of many we have often gathered, that you, of your own free choice,*

***Poor Priests of Christ***, *from various parts of the world have joined together into one body,*

*And with the Holy Spirit, as we believe, impelling you, have conspired together in this one desire, that, having abandoned the snares of this world, you would dedicate your lives*

*to the perpetual service of our Lord Jesus Christ and of his vicar on earth;*

In the following pages we shall try to understand the true meaning of this twin title in their historical background and also how the Society of Jesus has been making efforts to unfold her life after the example of the First Companions down the centuries.

## Historical Background

As we want to understand the meaning of the phrase: “Masters of Paris” – “Poor Priests of Christ”, it will be very

helpful to have some knowledge of the historical background of the times of the First Companions. It was “a world of too many priests and too little ministry, the choice to be poor priests of Christ was not a light one.” [1] Just being a priest was enough for a certain regular income as each priest was attached to a parish which had a fixed source of income, called ‘*benefice*’, and it was the sign of the legitimate concern of the Church for its pastors. But unfortunately the benefice system eventually fell prey to greed. There were priests who were well off and could employ “clerics of lesser talent, uneducated, and, if ordained, barely able to read the Latin of the Mass or the breviary... People came to think of priesthood in terms of *officium*, a duty to perform, ‘something to be done’, and sharply distinguished it from *diakonia*, ministry, ‘something done to meet a need of the people... An environment had developed in which one man could hold many benefices and do nothing and other men would be in charge of ministries for which they had neither talent nor training.” [2] In a word, most of the clergy were very poor in learning and very greedy in getting the benefice.

It was the heyday of the Italian Renaissance. And the future Pope Paul III, Alessandro Farnese, being of a noble Farnese family, was extremely well educated and he was promoted to different ecclesiastical offices at a very early age. For example at age 23, Pope Innocent VIII named him apostolic secretary and notary; at age 25 Pope Alexander VI made him a cardinal. In 1509 he was offered the diocese of Parma though he, unordained and unmarried, had fathered three sons and one daughter. All these are signs of the disease of simony. However, once Alessandro Farnese was ordained priest on June 16, 1509 his life took a new turn. Within a few months he was ordained bishop and started the process of ‘reform of the clergy’. Once he was elected Pope Paul III in

1534, he started with all earnestness the process of reform. “Farnese, therefore, has become part of the reform movement even before Ignatius. Henceforth his moral conduct is without reproach, although he still lives after the manner of the Churchmen of the Renaissance. This is the man who will make the decision about the existence of the Society of Jesus. This is the man to whom, with all his faults, that Society relates with enthusiasm and love.” [3].

And at this historical time the Lord of history sends his “ten reformed priests” to the eternal city of Rome and Pope Paul III was extremely happy to receive them. This particular title ‘Reformed Priests’ was given by people who indeed experienced the wonderful service of the members of “Compagnia Gesu”, [meaning the members of the Association of Jesus] while they were doing priestly ministries in and around Venice in 1537. When they were ordained priests in Venice they were not ordained under the title of reformed priests but under double titles: ‘Masters of Paris’ – ‘Poor Priests of Christ’.

### Titles for Ordination

Let us find out why Ignatius and his Companions wanted to be ordained under this double title. In the traditions of the Church, a priest was ordained under a title (*sub titulo*): either under the title of a diocese and that implies the diocese was expected to look after that pastor or under the title of voluntary poverty, meaning by which the religious congregation was expected to look after him like the Mendicant orders existing at that time. Also there was a tradition of being ordained under the title of ‘sufficient learning’, meaning that he had sufficient learning to hold a teaching office to which a benefice was attached. One may recall the plan of Francis Xavier while he was teaching at Sorbonne University of Paris: he had a plan

of returning to Pamplona diocese and to occupy a chair of professorship there with a large benefice.

### “Masters of Paris”

While the ordination document terms them as “clerics” and the document granting them faculties mentions them as “priests”, what could have been the reason for their desire to be known as “Masters of Paris”? Was it because they had deliberately set aside academic careers for a more pastoral ministry? Dr Pedro Ortiz, who knew the First Companions in Paris, now being the Agent of Charles V at Rome, introduced them as masters from his university. Could this be the reason? Also when the governor of Rome cleared them of the charge of heresy, he had called them “Masters of Paris”. For the first companions, the title meant that they were priests without theological blemish and with the best education possible. Besides, in the words of J.F. Conwell, “The personal lives of the companions flow from interior qualities on which their competence is based, the humility and generosity of priests *freely* choosing under the Spirit to be poor men of Christ, an indication of the shape their priesthood has already assumed for them, marking them as a breed apart. The academic degrees are not simply signs of competence: they are attached to persons who are Christian to the core with qualifications that are much more profound than the degrees themselves. The word that these men, from these places, with these degrees are priests who have freely embraced poverty for the love of Christ, priests who have chosen a countercultural way of life. They have abandoned the snares of the world, rejecting paths of glory, paths of riches and of fame, and have opted to join the poor of Christ who down the ages have been poor with Christ for the sake of the Gospel.” [4] According to the then tradition of the Church since they were ordained

priests “under the title of sufficient learning”, they had the right to receive a benefice for their teaching. But they wanted to be “Poor Priests of Christ” and hence renounced this right. Later on Ignatius in his Constitutions will include this “special graced challenge” which was against the greed of the clericsof that time.

### “Poor Priests of Christ”

“Poor Priest of Christ” is the second title under which the First Companions wanted to be known when they introduced themselves to Pope Paul III. What is the message of grace and challenge this title wants to convey to us? Historically, at the beginning of Christianity, the title “Poor of Christ” was given to the involuntary poor, the indigent who had no money or property, who depended upon others for their sustenance, who were cared for by the church. In course of history, the term was used for all the poor, the sick, the wretched, the lepers, etc. – the *anawim* of the Old Testament. “The fact that *servitio* [service] appears along with *pauperes Christi sacerdotes* in the first draft intimates that *pauperes Christi* applies as a technical term to the companions. It contains the idea of service of Christ through renunciation, and is linked with the adage of St Jerome, ‘naked, follow the naked Christ’. This is certainly what the companions had in mind to do.” [5].

To the title ‘Poor of Christ’ the First Companions added the word Poor **Priests** of Christ. While Francis of Assisi clearly chose poverty as an integral part of his following Christ, he did not want to be a priest. Is it because he felt that being a priest was somehow or other less helpful for a religious to identify himself with Christ the poor on account of the then existing malaise of benefice? May be. “However, Ignatius also chose poverty first, but once he chose the priesthood, he not only

did not reject poverty but even embraced it as an instrument for the priesthood. His companions also chose to be poor with Christ poor, and they chose to be priests, and they chose to live the kind of poverty that would validate their priesthood. Whatever, then, may be said about the title, *pauperes Christi*, the companions clearly wanted to be *pauperessacerdotes* [poor priests]... The deeper motivations behind their choice of a radical personal and community poverty are not hard to find: to be like Jesus and to imitate the apostles".[6] It is important to note that already at Montmartre on 15 August 1534 the first companions made a vow of poverty as the fruit of making the Spiritual Exercises. As lay persons all of them wanted to be poor with Christ poor, etc. – the fruit of the Consideration of the Three Degrees of Humility. Only on June 24, 1537 they were ordained priests. Thus there was a journey from being “poor of Christ” to “poor priests of Christ”.

There has been a journey in the life of Ignatius and his companions to arrive at this title: “Poor Priests of Christ”. While Ignatius was in Spain, he came across a great hurdle for this ministry of holding spiritual conversations when he was told that he could not speak about ‘mortal sins and venial sins’ without doing theology. And he decided to go to Paris. There he comes across the ‘First companions’; he offered them the Spiritual Exercises and from the *Autobiography* we know that all of them decided unanimously to follow the poor Christ and hence made the famous “Montmartre Vows” in 1534. Even then they least desired to be priests. The Lord slowly led them to the decision of calling them to follow him as priests and to that call Peter Faver first responded and later on others. “Priesthood was a means to an end, an end he profoundly desired to attain, and as he saw it as a means to that end, he began to see the priesthood in an entirely different light. Priesthood was for ministry, not to enjoy privileges or

fulfill an office or receive an income, but to give to others gifts of God made available to the community of the Church.” [7]

In the Middle Ages, priesthood stood over against power, authority, empire. Keeping in mind the call of Jesus of Nazareth of the Spiritual Exercises to his apostles not to lord it over others but to serve others [Mk 10,42-45], the First Companions renounced the power of lording over the people of God, renounced the right to benefice and thus became poor priests of Christ. [8] “In renouncing benefices, the companions had renounced the care of souls attached to the benefices, i.e., jurisdictional authority over a particular flock. They had renounced greed and they had renounced power, but in doing so they had not renounced ministry. Just as they had renounced receiving money for their services, so also they had renounced the power to demand anything of anyone. They had not renounced the power to serve. Their power was wholly for the purpose of freeing people to serve God.

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In a paradoxical language, they were poor priests, *pauperessacerdotes*, little people who were powerful people, each one vulnerable, needy, with the power to bring life, who, like Jesus, “is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness” (Heb 5,2).” [9] Let us not forget the fact that the First Companions chose to serve God by helping souls already before they became priests. “They chose to be priests so that they could more freely, more fully, and more universally bring Christ into the lives of people.” [10]

Looking at the twin title: “Masters of Paris” – “Poor Priests of Christ”, together, we can boldly state that the two titles stand in paradox, the title of voluntary poverty rendering

that of sufficient knowledge inoperative in practice, taking away what the other grants, they were a paradox enfolded in their lives. They humbly accepted the acclamation of their competence and their right to sustenance, and they proclaimed loudly who they were and how they intended to live and how they understood priesthood for themselves. Like the two titles for ordination: 'sufficient knowledge' and 'voluntary poverty', the titles 'Masters of Paris' and 'Poor Priests of Christ' are paradoxical. In a way one can say that they belong to the 'Ignatian polarities' such as prayer and action, mysticism and service. "**Masters of Paris** provides the First Companions' external credentials, men of education and standing who might have the whole world at their feet. **Poor Priests of Christ** identifies their interior spirit and charism.... Fortune and power are open to them, but instead they set them aside. Secular priests without position or rank, without income of any kind, without a diocese or ecclesiastical entity of any sort to support them, they are in the full sense of the word mendicants, or simply put, beggars who depend on the charity of others for their sustenance. With Christ they take their place among the weak and vulnerable. They voluntarily and joyfully choose to be without any stipend in order to be with Christ poor and with Christ's poor." [11] This is what made the people perceive them to be "**Reformed Priests**".

Between 1540 and 1550

And Pope Paul III who started the reform of the clergy was indeed very happy to approve such a group as a new Religious Order. Once the 'Compagnie de Jesu' was recognized officially as a new Religious Order, the members continued their way of life as "Masters of Paris" – "Poor Priests of Christ". The following examples could confirm what we claim as true: to start with, the members in their Final Profession

must promise to give ‘special care for the instruction of children’. Secondly, though Francis Xavier, as Papal Delegate and King John’s Ambassador, had every right to stay at the Royal Governor’s Palace in Goa, he stayed at the ‘hospizio’ of the city of Goa. Also though he was a Master of Paris, he started teaching catechism to the little ones in Goa and along the Fishery Coasts of South India. Thirdly, following the direction of the Superior General Ignatius [“To the Fathers Sent to Trent” (15460 MHSI, vol 22)], the papal theologians were serving the sick in the hospitals of Trent and instructing small children during the free time. Thus their public work of lecturing at the council was to be balanced by acts of mercy which went unnoticed by the poor who received them. Fourthly, Peter Faber was going about the whole of Europe dialoguing with the non-catholic theologians in a very gentle and sweet manner without any sign of a ‘superiority complex’. Fifthly, though all the Ten discerned and decided that the churches belonging to the Society could have a fixed income for their maintenance, Ignatius after a long period of forty days of prayer and discernment decided to change that decision. Thus as poor priests of Christ the Society should have no fixed income for the maintenance of the churches. Sixthly, in the Formula of the Institute no. 1, it is stated that “Furthermore, he should carry out all these works (spiritual and corporal works of charity) altogether free of charge and without accepting any salary for the labor expended in all the aforementioned activities”. Thus what the First Companions lived out as “Masters of Paris” – “Poor Priests of Christ” is included in the Rule of Life of the Society.

Also as very few youngmen who wanted to enter the new religious order were of high learning, the Society decided to start founding “seminaries’ – places where the young men would be taught according to the ‘Parisian system

of learning'. Thus started the ministry of higher education. While maintaining the spirit of mobility, the Society started to get involved in founding colleges and universities. In these institutions the Society could form youngmen as "Masters of Paris". This brought in a new understanding of the vow of evangelical poverty. While the Professed will be "Poor Priests of Christ", implying that they will be depending on the alms of the people of God, the formation houses will have fixed revenues so that the scholastics will be entirely involved in their intellectual formation. Taking all these historical developments into consideration the Formula of the Institute of 1550 confirmed by Pope Julius III in 1550 with the bull *Exposcitdebitum* treats of the evangelical counsel of poverty and the importance of higher learning in the numbers 7 to 9.

Formula of the Institute no.7: "from experience we have learned that a life removed as far as possible from all infection of avarice and as like as possible to evangelical poverty is more gratifying, more undefiled, and more suitable for the edification of our neighbours. We likewise know that our Lord Jesus Christ will supply to his servants who are seeking only the kingdom of God what is necessary for food and clothing." Thus the spirit of "Poor Priests of Christ" is fostered and maintained in the Society. Formula of the Institute no. 8 deals with the need of starting the seminary for the training of young men to become "Masters of Paris": "... These students, moreover, should have such intellectual ability and moral character as to give solid hope that they will be suitable for the Society's functions after their studies are completed... after sufficient testing, they can be admitted into our Society." It is very interesting to note how Ignatius continued to maintain the spirit of the First Companions: 'Masters of Paris' – "poor Priests of Christ' in the Formula of the Institute no. 9: "... For

in all truth this Institute requires men who are thoroughly humble and prudent in Christ as well as conspicuous in the integrity of Christian life and learning.”

### In the Constitutions

Ignatius in writing the Constitutions kept always in mind the spirit of the First Companions: ‘Masters of Paris’ – ‘Poor Priests of Christ’. Part III dealing with the formation of the young scholastics in their life in the Spirit, speaks of the evangelical counsel of Poverty thus in [287] : “All should love poverty as a mother, and according to the measure of holy discretion all should, when occasions arise, feel some of its effects.” Also in [288] “All should strive to keep their intention right, not only in regard to their state of life but also in all particular details, in which they should aim always at serving and pleasing the Divine goodness for its own sake,... they should often be exhorted to seek God our Lord in all things,... loving him in all creatures and all creatures in him in conformity with his holy and divine will”.

Part IV of the Constitutions is devoted to the intellectual formation of the young men so as to become indeed the ‘Masters of Paris’. [307] goes like this: “The end steadfastly pursued by the Society is to aid its own members and their neighbor in attaining the ultimate end for which they are created...in addition to the example of one’s life, learning and skill in expounding it are required....” Moreover in [308] Ignatius explains how the need of opening colleges and universities arose and finally concludes thus: “We have thus found it a quite difficult matter to increase the numbers of this Society with such good and learned men, in view of the great labours and the great abnegation of self which are required in the Society. Therefore all of us, desiring to preserve and increase the Society for the greater glory and

service of God our Lord, have thought it wise to take another path, that of admitting young men whose good habits of life and talent give hope that they will become both virtuous and learned in order to labour in the vineyard of Christ our Lord.” It is very interesting to note how Ignatius continues to keep in mind the spirit of the double title alive in the Constitutions. E.g. [340]: “... while care must be taken that they do not through fervor in study grow cool in their love of true virtues and of religious life, still they will not at that time have much place for mortifications or for long prayers and meditations. For their devoting themselves to learning, which they acquire with a pure intention of serving God and which in a certain way requires the whole person, will be not less but rather more pleasing to God our Lord during this time of study.”

It is important to note how Ignatius is ready to wait for this particular spirit of the double title in the formation of the young men to be integrated before they are promoted to their final profession: Const. Part V: [518]: “When the subjects are found not to have enough learning, it is better that they wait until they have it. Similarly, those also ought to wait who have not obtained fully adequate testimony to their self-abnegation and religious virtues.”

## **In Our Times**

The Society down its history has been keeping in mind the spirit of this original grace: “Masters of Paris” – “Poor Priests of Christ” as she unfolded her life. It is true that there have been remarkable lapses in living out this special charism authentically. One can say that the Suppression of the Society was perceived by many ‘enemies of the Society’ as just punishment for the “intellectual arrogance and pride” of the great thinkers of the Society and scandalous

life of some avaricious Jesuit leaders. Even now the Society feels that it has not been living up to the ideal of being “Poor Priests of Christ”. Hence, through its General Congregations, especially its decrees on evangelical poverty, the Society has been inviting its members for a *metanoia*. In recent times from GC 31 onwards, there have been attempts to renew the spirit of poverty of the Jesuits. GC 31 decree 18; GC 32 decree 12, GC 34 decree 9 mention the Society’s awareness that the original charism of being “Poor Priests of Christ” has not been authentically lived out and the Lord’s clarion call to a greater conversion to the spirit of the First Companions. Also concern for the intellectual formation of the young members of the Society has been well expressed in the following decrees of the General Congregations: GC 31 d 9; GC 32 d6; GC 34 d 6 & d 16. In particular, the decree 6 of GC 34 titled “ The Jesuit Priest: Ministerial Priesthood and Jesuit Identity” recaptures the original spirit of the First Companions when it says: “Our first companions envisaged a universal, itinerant ministry of evangelization, teaching, works of charity, and poverty of life: an evangelical *imitatio apostolorum*, a radical pattern of apostolic discipleship, was to be the well spring for what they did as priests...Under the inspiration of the Spiritual Exercises, they wanted to be like Christ in giving freely of themselves to anyone in need; they wanted to be like him who came not to be served but to serve...” (no. 16). “In the conduct of their ministries, Ignatius wanted Jesuit priests to avoid ways of proceeding which the Spiritual Exercises present as contrary to the Gospel: riches and success, honours and recognition, power, pride, and prestige...Ignatius wanted them to ask for the grace to be truly poor in companionship with Christ, to be obedient in their mission, to be held in low esteem if God would be thus served, and to live as ‘priests of Christ freely poor.’” (no. 17)

The Complementary Norms to the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus bring out very clearly the modern guidelines to help the members to live up to the original spirit of the First Companions who always desired to be known as “Masters of Paris” – “Poor Priests of Christ”. Number 181 says: “The gratuity of ministries proper to our Institute is to be explained especially from its purpose, which is both inner freedom (refraining from seeking one’s own temporal advantage), outer freedom (independence from the bonds of undue obligation), and the edification of the neighbor that arises from this freedom and from the love of Christ and humankind.” And numbers 183 to 187 throw much light on the gratuity of ministries and the acceptance of stipend and honorarium.

Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, our former General, has given guidelines for different stages of formation, including Continuing Formation. In his letter on “The Formation of the Jesuit during the stage of Theology”, he says: “An intellectual formation that is both thorough and of high quality, specially in theology, is demanded by the very nature of the ordained ministry, by the requirements of the new evangelization to which the Lord calls his Church, and by the challenges of our present mission...Such a formation is an indispensable element of our charism and way of proceeding, for a Jesuit is called to exercise a learned ministry so that the Gospel really becomes the Good News, through theological reflection in a confused and troubled world”.

Our present general superior, Father Adolfo Nicolas, at the conclusion of the Year for Priests, in 2010, wrote to the whole Society concerning the Jesuit Priesthood. Besides sharing about the different models of Jesuit Priesthood mentioned in the “ex officio letters” he invites the members of

the whole Society to ask themselves the following questions: in what concrete ways, in whatever ministry to which we are sent, do we live as “reformed priests” [= ‘Masters of Paris’ - ‘Poor Priests of Christ’] implying: Poor and humble like Christ; Solid and deep in our reflection; Living and working in communion with our brother Jesuits and our collaborators; Open to universal mission, especially as expressed by the Holy Father; Ready to be sent to whatever service can help people follow Christ, while transforming this world into a world of love and justice? Fr Adolfo continues: “Some other questions might also help us examine our experience of priesthood. How does our way of understanding and living the priesthood – especially those of us ordained to the presbyterate – keep us from succumbing to temptations of clericalism, privilege, or power or social positions of preference? What are the ways in which we manifest joyful lives of simple service that imitate Jesus’ “washing of the feet”? How central, reverent, and transformative is the celebration of the Eucharist in our daily lives? Where do we need to grow? Where do we need to reform ourselves?”

## Conclusion

From what we have seen we can rightly conclude that the title “Reformed Priests” given by the people of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the First Companions was apt because the First Companions were indeed initiating a reform/renewal among the clergy of their time by their very life. How? By being “Masters of Paris” they were known for their orthodox teaching as well as their renunciation of all the privileges, power, name and fame which were duly claimed as part of being Clerics. In other words, they were fighting against the spirit of ‘Clericalism’. And this was possible for them because they were indeed experiencing a wonderful, ever deepening spirit of interior freedom, the fruit

of making the Spiritual Exercises. And we Jesuits of today are being invited by our First Companions to examine ourselves about our desire to be learned men, to hold degrees, etc. Are we able to hold together our being “Masters of Paris” and “Poor Priests of Christ”? Can the people recognize the Poor Priests of Christ in our being Masters of Paris? Can the world listen to us Jesuits, not just because we are of high learning [degrees, positions of leadership] but because of our being priests of poor Christ and of Christ for the poor? How far are we freed from the inordinate attachments: the values of the ‘Standard of Satan’ described in the Meditation on the Two Standards - avarice (to have more and more), name and fame, (honour) and pride and our comfort zones? These are the questions worth pondering over as we the members of the South Asian Assistancy, nay, the whole Society, have been involved in the process of spiritual renewal for restructuring the South Asian Assistancy as “a Universal Body for a Universal Mission for greater apostolic effectiveness”.

### References

1. Joseph F. Conwell, S.J. : *Impelling Spirit, Revisiting a Founding Experience: 1539 Ignatius of Loyola and His Companions* [Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997], page 65
2. *Ibid.* p 68
3. *Ibid.* p 36
4. *Ibid.* p 75
5. *Ibid.* p 57
6. *Ibid.* pp 58-59on
7. *Ibid.* pp 72-73

8 Note the words of Laynez: “It was not our intention from Paris on to start an official community but to dedicate ourselves in poverty [dedicarse en pobreza] to the service of God our Lord and to the profit of our neighbor, preaching and serving in hospitals, etc.”; and Simon: “they vowed besides that they would never accept anything for celebrating Mass, at the same time openly admitting that accepting a stipend for Masses or other liturgical ceremonies was quite legitimate. For themselves, however, in order to embrace poverty and evangelical perfection more closely, they wanted to rid themselves voluntarily even of legitimate things.” Conwell: page 62

9. *Ibid.* p 74

10. *Ibid.* p 75

11. *Ibid.* p 79