

EVANGELICAL POVERTY: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

By PHILIP SHELDRAKE

RECENTLY I WAS in conversation with an experienced priest whose parish is used regularly as a placement of seminarians. He commented that as he grew older he realized that he knew less and less rather than more and more. Certainty was the privilege of youth, agnosticism increased in proportion to experience! This conversation rang all kinds of bells as I remembered my own certainties about religious life when I was still a student. Without wishing to belittle my efforts and those of my companions to grasp the meaning of our commitment, there was a certain naivety in our neat definitions, our confuting of others by the logical strength as well as the passion of our arguments, even in the judgments passed on some of the brethren who, we felt, did not match up to our ideals. If my memory does not deceive me, the vow of poverty was a subject about which we tussled a great deal. If our knowledge of history had been better developed this would not have surprised us for the poverty of religious has been the cause of more debate than anything else in communities since time immemorial. The decline of poverty has also been a significant impetus behind many of the reforms of religious life.

Our earlier certainty about the meaning of a commitment to poverty, or at least our belief that certainty was possible, was based on a sense that poverty involved not merely attitudes but also definable structures. Equally we had inherited from our initial formation a feeling that poverty, like the other vows, was somehow a static reality, a 'given' from the very start, rather than something to be appropriated gradually and, at all times, imperfectly. I remember a friend in another Order telling me the story of a

fellow-novice who turned up at the monastery with a substantial collection of books. After several months my friend, concerned at this private library in his companion's cell, mentioned this to the novice-master. The latter made the point that if he insisted that novices got rid of everything at the start, whether they were ready to do this or not, the likelihood was that they would compensate for the trauma in later years by accumulating things as a way of recovering lost identity. Eventually, the novice-master suggested, people would learn to be free from possessions because they would discover that they no longer needed them. An enlightened attitude at the time which many of us would have found it difficult to share. Experience, I suppose, has taught me to be more cautious about easy definitions. Religious, like all Christians, are faced with a complexity of values that must be balanced if the gospel is to be lived in its fulness and not partially. Neat definitions inevitably tend to exclude rather than to be inclusive.

The 'faith history' of the apostles in the gospels seems to me to be an excellent image of our attempts to come to grips with the meaning of discipleship in general and that expression of it which we call 'religious life'. The apostles were notably slow to understand both Jesus and his teaching and their response was an inevitable mixture of success and failure. Their failure to remain with Jesus during the Passion underlines not only the fragility of their faith and trust but also their failure to appreciate that the Messiah must suffer and that any disciple must share in the cross. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24) were still plagued by such misunderstandings: 'We had hoped . . .' Perhaps the best image of enlightenment and blindness in Jesus's disciples is provided by Peter's confession of faith which is immediately followed by a failure to grasp Jesus's prediction of the Passion (Mark 8,27-33 and parallels). Honest reflection on the slow progress of the apostles should provide us with a salutary corrective to any temptation to canonise as definitive our tentative efforts to understand the mystery of discipleship.

If a certain healthy agnosticism about the precise nature of the vows arises partly from increasing experience, another factor in recent years has been the questions posed about religious life in general by the changes in the Church since Vatican II. The tendency to make definitive statements is the product of a stable and changeless environment. It might be helpful at this point, therefore, to attempt a brief description of the context for the

present crisis through which religious life is passing.

A crossroads

If religious life is at a crossroads this is because the Church as a whole and the world in which it exists is at one as well. Traditional institutions, social, political and economic, are under pressure. It has been suggested that we have reached a kind of 'break-point in history' similar to the Renaissance, Reformation, or the Industrial Revolution. Institutions created in one world are straining to deal with a situation that is, like it or not, impervious to the answers of the past and which presents an apparently overwhelming number of new questions. Religious life, like everything else, must adapt or die. History, in this respect, is encouraging for at many similar points in the past, though not without struggle and pain, new forms of religious life emerged to meet the new challenges. Some older communities survived too, but not without cost and radical adaptation. Others simply died out.

Some of the inherited characteristics of religious life that are now questionable may be summarised as follows. Communities in recent centuries have tended to reflect unquestioningly the assumptions of a stable european society. So, for example, in Britain and the United States they helped to educate catholic 'outsiders' into a white, protestant, anglo-saxon culture. The Church and consequently religious life have been predominantly european in mentality, existing within and mirroring a model of effortless western cultural superiority. Religious communities were often founded, or adapted, to provide otherwise non-existent social services. Over six hundred new roman catholic congregations were founded in the nineteenth century alone—many of them associated with specific works. Not surprisingly, 'vocation' and 'work' often came to be seen as identical. Finally, religious life existed within a Church that viewed holiness as stratified into higher and lower forms. For many, therefore, religious life seemed the most natural context for more than averagely committed Christians to work out their vocation. Linked with a work-orientated attitude, this gave rise to an inflation of numbers and an assumption that big was beautiful.

Religious life becomes a sign of God's loving concern precisely through confronting directly the issues of the day. The present conflict is caused partly, it seems to me, by religious communities, structured within particular cultural presuppositions, being forced

to face quite new social conditions. We are having to come to terms with a post-colonial world. In 1945 fifty per cent of people were colonized. In 1977 only one per cent were in a direct way. And yet the present world, as we have heard so often in recent years, is still divided into 'North' and 'South' with a consequent conflict of economic needs and ambitions. Even in the so-called industrial or 'developed' world there is now serious economic and social disruption caused by the decline of traditional industries and communities and the advance of new technologies. There has been a tremendous change in the status, education and self-confidence of women in what has been an unquestionably male-dominated world and Church. It seems fair to say that there is no longer a 'moral consensus', at least in the West, nor the traditional community supports for it. Marriage and family life are therefore in crisis. There is a consciousness of potential ecological disaster and of the desperate need to conserve resources. Finally, there is the profound threat of nuclear catastrophe and this has given birth to a deep fear and even sense of hopelessness among many people—especially the young.

Apart from these (and no doubt other) world-wide phenomena which cannot but influence the way the Church, and religious life within it, understands itself, two significant shifts within the Church have taken place over the last twenty years which further challenge the identity of religious life. Firstly there has been a move away from the Church as a 'perfect society', complete in itself, unchanging and separate from the world in which it exists. Secondly, and linked to it, the idea of a hierarchy of perfection within the Church has largely given way to an understanding of holiness as a universal call. The spiritual roots of 'vocation' are not to be found essentially in ordination or vows but in baptism. 'Perfection', therefore, is not the prerogative of priests or religious. The very notion of an abundance or shortage of vocations in the traditional sense is therefore questionable. We are now coming to appreciate that the majority of vocations are not and *never* have been to religious life. So we have a situation of flux which produces uncertainties about what religious should be or do. The definitive and exclusive language about the vows no longer seems adequate to cope with a reality that is continually shifting and whose present direction is not certain.

Weakness of traditional concepts

In the context of continuous change in world and Church, I would like to focus more narrowly on the understanding of the vow of poverty and specifically on the weakness of some aspects of the traditional approach. Firstly, the vows were conceived as 'things', static realities that could be neatly defined especially in terms of *actions*. Because they were associated with definitions, the vows were also treated in terms of distinctions—if 'this' was chastity, 'that' was poverty. And most importantly, the language of 'things' provided clear horizons (the 'perfection' of poverty for example) which suggested that the vow could actually be *fulfilled* in some complete sense or alternatively 'broken'. We are now more aware that it is impossible to reduce poverty to a set of universal or *a priori* external actions which are established once and for all and against which every concrete expression must be measured. Poverty is far more about basic values and will find various expressions in response to a concrete call in a particular world and culture.

One danger in suggesting that poverty is 'this' is precisely that in a concrete situation the 'this' may be either too much or too little. Another danger is a 'how far can you go?' mentality—a minimalism or formalism that is the death-knell of a living relationship with Christ. To reduce poverty to certain actions or omissions is close to what I would maintain is the most dangerous spirituality of all, that of *possession*. The moment that we feel we have arrived, are complete, or indeed that there is, potentially, a moment when such will be the case (when we change from movement to maintenance) we are furthest from God. Holiness has a great deal to do with the realization of imperfection and even failure and thus of the need for continual conversion. Many religious in the past, dogged by the super-ego of 'perfect poverty' and so on, could not afford to admit to failure. Poverty as a dimension of holiness is a *process*—one way of expressing the movement of conversion towards God.

A fairly common view of the vows, and specifically of poverty, was an ascetical one—the *rejection of use*, a sacrifice of normal human tendencies. Certainly sacrifice has an inherent christian value and yet we must remember that our relationship with God, as Jesus made abundantly clear on innumerable occasions, does not consist in offering sacrifices. Rather it is a process of allowing ourselves to be drawn into the basic sacrifice of Christ. Often the

ascetical view of the vows led to a substitution of *sacrifices* for Christ's sacrifice. The ascetical view was often also characterised by a rejection of materiality with dehumanising and depersonalising consequences. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the traditional approach to poverty came to be seen by some religious as a particularly unattractive expression of a rather tyrannical model of religious community. Sadly, in some communities, the possession of anything personal is still rejected. For example, the novice is asked to destroy family photos before profession. This attitude may be reinforced by a total absence (officially) of personal expression in the individual's room. In these cases, the result can sometimes be an unhealthy carelessness about one's own person—dress, body and even personal hygiene. Hardly surprising that the need to express oneself as an individual, which cannot be repressed forever, sometimes leads to surreptitious accumulation of community goods, a possessiveness on many levels, or a declaration of independence through eccentricity. I have even encountered one religious whose kleptomania was partly rooted in a sense of 'being made nothing' through being allowed nothing.

The rejection of materiality, finally, frequently reduced evangelical poverty to a means by which individual religious and whole communities were 'freed' from contact with financial worries so that they might work and pray more efficiently. This leads, more often than not, to a lack of responsibility on an individual and communal level with regard to material goods (they can always be replaced from the bottomless pit of the 'common fund') or to expense and expenses in general.

What then can be said positively about the vow of poverty? I would like to suggest several perspectives from which to view the question in a contemporary context.

Poverty and life-style

It should be clear by now that I do not feel that it is possible to associate the vow of poverty simply with this or that specific action, or to say that all religious ought to have the same clearly defined level of material possessions. We cannot substitute external actions for deeper inner conversion. However I also believe that we do need to develop a spirituality of life-style for otherwise the danger would be an empty interiority or spiritualisation of poverty. The call to discipleship and conversion involves a struggle to respond with a radical and absolute 'yes'. In this context, poverty describes

a stance before God and before the world. It is first of all an attitude, but the test of our attitudes is always how they are expressed. The response of 'yes' to God is made concrete in external action but the external focus of poverty will necessarily vary from individual to individual, group to group and context to context. In the end, action or non-action is validated by its relationship to our fundamental stance before God. Negatively, certain elements of life-style or certain actions may reflect an inner refusal to say 'yes' wholeheartedly—or a search for compensations. Understood as a sign to the wider world, poverty reminds us of the unfortunate division between preached and lived values and of the need to bridge the gap.

Discipleship

Our understanding of poverty must have as its context the very nature of discipleship. Poverty, in fact, is one way of understanding what it is to follow Christ in general rather than being simply one element of that following, distinct from the others. Thus to speak of the commitment to Christ as 'poverty' or 'chastity' is simply to adopt a particular vantage point in order to view it with greater clarity.

Discipleship involves our becoming engaged in the irreconcilable conflict between God and Mammon (Mt 6,24) which is the central element of the gospel as expounded in the Sermon on the Mount. No one can serve two masters, can respond adequately to God with a divided heart. Intimacy with and response to God is thus linked inextricably with a repudiation of Mammon. In the traditional literature of christian spirituality and religious life, both the repudiation and the undivided response are conveyed by the word 'poverty'. It is interesting that Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* uses the word to express the total spirituality of Jesus. The vow of poverty, therefore, is a commitment to choose Jesus and to struggle to make his attitudes our own.

Poverty, as a way of describing the call to follow Jesus, is not limited to a rejection of wealth. Mammon is more than money or material possessions. Rather it expresses a subtle inner attitude that seeks *to be, by acquiring and possessing*. Poverty then expresses the freedom, inner and outward, that is necessary for us to escape from a self-centredness (the search for security or success) that undermines the validity of our prayer and action. It is nothing less than Jesus's characteristic response to God and the world:

humility, rejection of power (except that of love), obedience to God's will, the acceptance of failure. As a search for freedom, poverty involves shaping spirituality in terms of the three-act drama of the temptations of Jesus (Mt 4,1-11 for example).

The 'poverty of Jesus' reaches its climax in the Passion and so the vow is also a spirituality of the cross: a self-emptying or self-forgetfulness in love, an acceptance of human failure. In recognizing this, we enter into Jesus's preferential option for failure in his own life and, through this, his identification with the needy and the failures of this world.

Reordering of relationships

Jesus entered a fabric of human relationships that was radically disordered. Our discipleship too must be understood in terms of relationships. Poverty, as a way of understanding and expressing discipleship, is not some kind of personal choice in isolation from community, nor is communal poverty isolated from the wider world within which the community is called to be a sign. The poverty of religious, whether individual or communal, is therefore part of the search for a reordering of human relationships of which religious life as such is a symbolic expression.

The traditional three vows are different ways of expressing the 'sharing all one is' that is inherent to discipleship. This 'sharing all one is' may be said to be both trinitarian and christological. The mystery of God in Trinity is precisely one of perfect reciprocity, of equality of relationship (Jn 17,10). The human Jesus was poor principally because his relationships reflected this divine reciprocity. The reciprocity within God and expressed by the Jesus of history has surely to be given concrete expression within all human relationships. Christian communities of all kinds should become settings for expressing something radical about human relationships lived in reciprocity.

If all Christians are called by the gospel to a radical sharing of all that they have, are and hope to be, then the purpose of this sharing is that all people without exception should be free to become what God made them to be. The profound disorder at the root of specific injustices is that some people's way of becoming somebody is dependent on others remaining nobody. Society continues to use possessions as a way of judging the success or failure of individuals or groups. Self-preservation and possession of things remain idols that are hard to overthrow.

We need to avoid the mistake of glorifying material poverty as, in itself, more 'Christ-like'. There is a pathology of material poverty that is fundamentally dehumanising. There is nothing beautiful about lives that are stunted and deformed. Romanticization of the poor and of poverty is blasphemy. It is certainly possible to discover the presence of simplicity and trust among the poor but this is not automatic. One of the worst things about being really poor is that you cease to hope, you simply fear because you exist on the brink of annihilation. The deprived are not often dynamic or full of living hopes and dreams. More often there are apathy and inertia. If society says that you are on the refuse-tip it is easy to forget that there is anything else. Hope dies.

The call to Christians to contribute to a radical reordering of human relationships certainly involves giving up the 'more', the superfluities, precisely in order that enforced and dehumanising poverty may be eliminated. However we must be careful not to universalise, invalidly, a literal observance of Jesus's injunction to the young man who sought to know what one thing or more he needed to inherit eternal life (Mk 10 and parallels). On one level we cannot *reduce* the vow of poverty simply to sharing in the insecurity of the materially poor. On another level we cannot insist, without due regard to context, that any particular degree of material poverty expresses the vow.

Moving to the margins

If the vow of poverty is to be understood in the context of discipleship in general, it is nevertheless true that religious life involves an element of abnormality. The vows demand that the radicality of discipleship be extended into areas beyond the normal. They require religious to live on the edges, in the desert—to go where no one else is. Yet this abnormality exists in order to highlight what is characteristic of any following of Christ.

In other words, religious life in its origins and deepest meaning is prophetic. It existed initially on the geographical as well as theoretical margins of society. However, there was soon a tendency to move back into the centre and into security. Each new generation of religious reformers try to move back to the margins of their day. Living at the centre leads to a certain aping of accepted social values. Many religious communities, who were founded on the margins, are now firmly seated at the centre of social respectability in both their works and life-style. For example they help to provide

privileged access to higher education or the professions for certain limited socio-economic groups. Their communities too have benefited from a privileged society and belong to the comfortably-off, the secure, the educated and thus to the powerful of the earth. We often hide from this but we need to own it and the fact that we have an investment in maintaining the *status quo*. To live on the margins reminds us that we exist for people. To move to the centre tempts us to work for structures and institutions. On the margins we are forced to lean more heavily on the vows as fundamental attitudes, at the centre we can rely more on influence and power.

As prophetic, religious life is meant to attack the idols of the day. Kenneth Leech describes the classical old testament prophecy as an attack on the 'idolatry' of oppression, fornication and rebellion which are, Leech suggests, the anti-vows. Anti-poverty is the commitment to the idolatry of wealth and power with its necessary consequence of inequality, and the vow of poverty expresses a fundamental rejection of this.¹

Poverty—a spirituality of dying

Finally, I would like to suggest that an element in any re-reading of poverty in contemporary religious life must, on the communal level especially, involve a spirituality of dying. We are at present caught in the immediately post-imperial era of religious life. We no longer have a monopoly on committed christian life, on holiness, on service. But we have still to come to terms with the implications of this fact. Our role is precisely to decrease so that the legitimate life and roles of the vast number of Christians may find proper expression. In the past religious did not so much act as symbols of the universal call of Christians as become replacements for it!

Religious should know how to be poor by knowing how to die. It is said of Ignatius Loyola, when asked what he would do if the Society of Jesus were suppressed, that he replied that he would have to spend some minutes in prayer but would then accept it. Are most religious as free with regard to their Order's survival? Or do most believe that they have a God-given right to exist? It is a sobering fact that the Middle Ages saw a phenomenal growth in the number of religious orders and individual monasteries. Yet only a small proportion survived the Reformation and some that did died out over the next two hundred years. All religious may have to face the fact that their particular group has served its

purpose. Many run away from the possibility. Others are tempted to leaving the sinking ship. It is a painful experience and no one should try to cheapen the anguish.

Part of the problem is that we have such a negative view of death and dying. The seed must fall into the ground and die in order to rise again to a new and greater life. The trouble is that instinctively we think more about the sad demise of the seed. Do religious groups see themselves as the seeds of new growth or only as the stunted and withering dutch elms affected by terminal disease? By a positive approach to dying I mean first of all accepting it—not reluctantly but wholeheartedly. There is a fundamental difference between a religious community that gracelessly refuses, even in death, to do anything other than it has always done, and one that discovers a true freedom to respond radically to the signs of the times even in its dying.

There are other kinds of dying which are an expression of a communal poverty of spirit. There is the passing of familiar ways of living, or of individual great houses and works that act as spiritual and human millstones around an Order's neck—as well as being unhelpful reminders of former glories we can only regret. Half-empty convents are merely encouragements either to nostalgia or despair. To be rid of them can be a very freeing experience. And symbolic too, for too often houses associated with large institutions become 'for their own sake' and an expression of spiritual (as well as material) wealth.

To move out of decaying or socially questionable institutions also means a departure from institutional community. Big is no longer best. Reliance on servants (or staff, as religious prefer to call them nowadays!) has to be replaced by genuine contribution from all the members. The size of buildings and the number of bodies in them were symbolic of a much deeper attitude that came pretty close to pride. Religious, by virtue of their communal commitment to poverty, have to learn how to be small and even insignificant in every sense. A difficult move for groups used to the status and power of size and success. To die to an imperial vision of their way of life is perhaps one of the greatest challenges to religious today within the context of the vow of poverty.

NOTE

¹ Kenneth Leech: *The Social God* (London, 1981), chapter 8 *passim*.