

# WITNESS AND INVOLVEMENT

By THOMAS E. CLARKE

**W**HEN I THINK of the poverty of religious today, I think instinctively of two well-known christian women (neither of them 'religious') who have, in quite different ways, dedicated their lives to the service of the poor. One is Dorothy Day, founder and, for about forty years, leader of the Catholic Worker movement. The other is Barbara Ward (Lady Jackson), world-famous economist and writer. However similar in many respects, these two figures present, for purposes of the present reflection, a relevant contrast.

What is characteristic of Dorothy Day's service of the poor? I think we may describe this way as one of personal involvement with poverty and with the poor in the ordinary material sense. For years she has lived with the poor, on the Bowery, in Chinatown and elsewhere, offering hospitality, food, shelter, clothing to whoever has come. Her extensive travels have usually been by bus. Her dress has been that of a poor woman. She has been in jail and has personally experienced the degradation of womanhood that often occurs in such places. With due respect to her talents as speaker and writer, it seems safe to say that the enormous influence she has exerted in drawing others to serve the poor has been exercised primarily by way of personal involvement, through the witness of literal poverty.

In contrast, Barbara Ward's witness to the need of concern for the poor has been expressed, at least in its social impact, primarily through professionalism. Through her services as economic consultant in under-developed countries, and especially through the eloquent and challenging exposure in her lectures and writings of the increasing gap between rich and poor nations, she has sought to stir the public conscience to deal effectively with this massive injustice of the contemporary world. The expertise of persons and organizations, the material resources of whole nations, the economic and political processes of a growingly complex world – these have been the target of her dedicated concern.

I have selected these two women, not because they are not reli-

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gious (though there is food for thought in this fact) but largely because of their fame. For Dorothy Day I could have substituted, perhaps, Mother Teresa in India; for Barbara Ward, one of a growing number of religious women who have taken posts in government or other secular agencies working on behalf of the poor. But it is the contrast itself that concerns me most. It gives rise to the question: to what extent can the poverty of religious men and women be separated from personal presence to the literally poor, from personal experience of material privation? Is it possible and even necessary, within an affluent society, to reconceptualize the gospel counsel of poverty in such a way that such direct involvement and experience are no longer considered essential? Should we religious simply acquiesce in a situation which is very real for a good many religious today, namely, a material existence which economically and sociologically belongs to the middle class and even to the upper middle class? If the members of a particular religious community live in expensive houses (I have seen parish convents for fifteen or twenty sisters built at the cost of two or three hundred thousand dollars), sit down to comfortable meals prepared and served by hired servants, have available the best of medical and psychiatric care, are put in private hospital rooms when sick, and have their needs in clothing and recreation taken care of according to the standards of a middle-class existence, is such a life in basic continuity with the life of gospel poverty as lived by religious down the centuries? If so, how is the rationale of gospel poverty to be described theologically? Should one speak of a spiritual poverty according to a concept so broad that a religious giving of his time and talents generously and in a professional way is following the counsel of poverty, even though his style of material existence is quite comfortable? Many today are inclined to think so. Others, despairing of the possibility of combining effective professional service of the poor with a full sharing of the condition of the poor, are suggesting that we stop using the term poverty to describe a life which is not itself poor in the ordinary sense, and which is actually intended to reduce and even eliminate the poverty of other men. Some few religious, perhaps, such as Mother Teresa, will be called to literal poverty; but the great majority of us must renounce any romantic conception of being poor with the poor Christ, recognize the very real abnegation demanded by professionalism and availability, and accept the security and comfort normally required by people of the professional class. It is not in poverty, many feel, but in consecrated celibacy,

or in commitment to community, that the centre of the religious life must be sought.

I am not sure whether my answer to this dilemma is a good one. In any case I do not envisage it as *the* answer, and probably we cannot look for any definitive answer, even in that relative sense in which christian mystery admits of such. Perhaps I can help myself and others to seek an answer by first asking the question: How do we go about seeking an answer? Practically every treatment which I have seen of the contemporary problem of religious poverty is concerned exclusively with the content of question and answer, not with the hermeneutical problem involved. Perhaps we need to look into the assumptions of the various views put forth, and see whether such assumptions are not leading us on a wild goose chase. And then we might ask positively how we ought to go about identifying the counsel of poverty in our own day. Only then may it be possible to sketch, in a very tentative manner, its principal features, and to distinguish what is historically conditioned from what is enduring.

One of the hidden assumptions we have to question is that the counsel of poverty is a clearly delineated essence, established once for all, against which each concrete verification must be measured. This making of a thing out of an attitude, of a complexus of relationships, of a human situation, needs to be challenged. There is, in fact, no such *thing* as a counsel of christian poverty. Poverty is not a thing, a substance, which can be analyzed or dissected or put through a filter to separate cultural sediment from pure gospel essence. There is only God and his Christ, on the one hand, and ourselves on the other. There are our relationships, our attitudes, our situation. These are quite varied, even among christians, and even among those who have been called 'religious'. These relationships, attitudes, and situations include among their many elements the material world and man's relationship to it. But the poverty to which some christians are called is not a codified essence with particular forms hanging on it like baubles on a christmas tree. It is historically identifiable, but not abstractly definable. It is capable only of partially adequate conceptualization. Only existentially, through discernment, can it be judged whether a particular form of life is in basic continuity with the historic reality of the counsel of gospel poverty.

A second working assumption which must be questioned is that the meaning of the poverty of religious can be understood in isola-

tion from other aspects of their life. When mere juxtaposition, instead of a dynamic organic interaction, is characteristic of our approach to the different facets of the one life of the counsels, an inevitable impoverishment and even distortion results. It may be necessary, for purposes of analysis, to make partial and tentative precisions in dealing with a mystery whose rational understanding involves complexity. But one cannot speak of poverty with even a minimal adequacy without relating it to community, to celibacy and obedience, to the element of consecration to God, to apostolic witness and service.

A third assumption, or at least tendency, has been to deal with the life and holiness of religious as if it were qualitatively different, precisely as a life, from that of other baptized christians; as if the radical character of the gospel message were addressed only to some christians, and not to all. Fortunately, we are moving away from this tendency today. The *situation* of religious, from both a simply human and from a distinctively christian point of view, does differ qualitatively, I would say, from that of the married christian: the free renunciation of marriage and parenthood is a basic option which reaches down to the roots of personality and thus radically specifies his life-situation. But the *life* of the religious remains the same life as that of other christians: faith, hope and love. While we cannot here go into the difficult question of commandment and counsel, the framework of our reflection on the poverty of religious is the call of all men to live in the spirit of the counsels.

Having excluded certain misleading assumptions, it may now be possible in a more positive way to indicate the road we are to travel in judging what forms, practices and attitudes are today compatible with (that is, in basic historical continuity with) the counsel of poverty as lived by religious. I would here suggest two words as pointing to the necessary methodology: discernment and congruity. By discernment I mean a judgment which, while dependent on empirical data drawn from history and from contemporary human life, as well as on rational analysis, is ultimately intuitive, a gift from the Spirit which is at the same time a call. This discernment of the call of the Spirit here and now will include as a primary ingredient a certain sense of congruity. The compatibility or the opposite of certain forms with the total reality and meaning of the life of the counsels lived in ecclesial community, will be judged in terms of a certain feeling for what fits, for what is appropriate and compatible, from the viewpoint of psychology, sociology, economics, culture,

and especially, of course, faith.

Perhaps I can illustrate this rather abstract guideline with the help of history. At certain periods in the life of the Church, the Spirit moved certain people, who were often saints, to innovate and adapt. Ignatius Loyola in his desire of having religious priests not bound to choir, Francis de Sales and Vincent de Paul in their vision of apostolic religious women free to leave the cloister to serve the neighbour, are some notable examples. Until these saints raised their challenging questions, certain assumptions regarding the concrete identity of the life of the counsels were taken for granted. The raising of the questions provoked opposition, some of it rather effective, at least for a time. Ultimately the Spirit moved the Church to see that the form of life to which these saints and their followers were called was in basic continuity with the life of the counsels as lived for centuries in the Church. A true development of understanding had been achieved. It was now clearly seen, as it had not been previously, that, for example, ecclesial community of the counsels was quite compatible with a life outside the narrow confines of the cloister for dedicated christian women.

More than one reader may by now have given up finding anything in this article which will help him to understand the poverty of religious better. But, unless we understand the question we are asking, and have some idea of how an answer is to be sought, we will continue to go round and round, saying some valuable things, without doubt, but never arriving at satisfactory answers to our urgent practical questions regarding poverty. And what I have said is a long preliminary to what I now propose to do: namely, re-examine in outline the elements traditionally associated with poverty, to see, if possible, which elements are so important for it that to eliminate them would create a life-form in discontinuity with the historical reality of religious life. For the theologian, the challenge here is so to organize the aspects of poverty, as well as the relationship of poverty to other aspects of the religious life, that a certain harmony or congruity appears, and one can see how there is mutual interdependence and support among all the elements. This is a theological task which proceeds not primarily by deduction or induction or rational analysis of concepts, but by a kind of quasi-aesthetic sense able to relate the multiple dimensions of a single organic reality.

Before trying to identify poverty in its basic elements and to relate these elements among themselves, I must first try to do the same for

the religious life in general. I do this with a minimum of embellishment and without argumentation. Most of the conceptions are familiar to the reader from recent discussions. I conceive the religious life, then, as:

1) An embodiment of christian faith, hope and love. (In this it does not differ from the life of other christians);

2) expressed in a basic life-option and life-situation aimed at portraying dramatically the exigencies of christian discipleship, the mystery of the cross and resurrection, the primacy of the kingdom of heaven, of grace, of God and of the transcendence of human destiny;

3) this dramatization of the gospel message is for the sake of the salvation of all men;

4) and takes place within a community of faith, that is, a community not founded on blood (the family) or on merely natural affinity or friendship or functional utility (the typical secular organization), but only on faith and hope in the power of God to bring life through death;

5) simultaneously, this life-option and life-situation represents a special consecration to God and to Jesus Christ, who, through contemplative prayer, is apprehended as loving and beloved:

6) this dramatic consecration and embodiment of christian faith, hope and love, considered as a basic life-situation, is integral in character: that is, it includes the special consecration of human freedom through obedience, in which the life-long sharing of a decision with the community is the vehicle of radical and total obedience to God; the special consecration of human affection, in which the life-long mutual love for the members of the community assumes a primacy over other particular loves and excludes specifically marital and parental love; and the special consecration of the body as vehicle of man's presence in and to the world, exercised in work and the use of material goods.

In this brief description, the following elements are considered to be constants in the religious life as it has achieved historical identification down the centuries: *poverty, chastity, obedience* (not here carefully analysed); *community* (to be distinguished from the purely canonical conception of 'common life'); a special *consecration* to God, together with *contemplative union* with him; *apostolic witness and service of some kind*. Ideally, it should now be shown how these elements are related among themselves, how they interact and mutually condi-

tion one another. We leave aside an analysis, though it will be partially suggested in our examination of poverty.

Few would deny that poverty has something directly to do with material goods, with having them or not having them, for use and enjoyment and ownership. Today many are inclined to extend the concept to include work, at least work in which the world of matter is involved, and especially in its laborious aspect. There is also an inclination so to broaden the concept of poverty that it stands for a basic attitude touching the whole gamut of life, and especially relations with other human beings. In this broadest sense poverty is the equivalent of availability, of radical detachment. I have no essential objection to this less proper use of the term, provided it is conscious, and provided it does not cloak a desire to escape from the stubborn problems regarding poverty in its more proper sense.

The person who vows religious poverty commits (or rather re-consecrates) himself to use and enjoy material goods in a rational and holy way. But he does more. This something more is what concerns us here. One of its elements is relatively easy to identify. He is entering into a covenant with God and man to share material existence with the members of a particular ecclesial community. This sharing does not necessarily mean that his food, clothing, lodging, medical care or circumstances of burial are exactly the same as those of every other member of the community. It means rather that his *decisions* concerning the use and enjoyment of material goods will be decisions basically *shared* with the community. This aspect of religious poverty, by which it includes shared decision regarding the use and enjoyment of material goods, points to the partial coincidence of poverty and obedience. This is one good example of the importance of relating the counsels organically, not by mere juxtaposition. The commitment to poverty within religious community includes also a commitment to consult to a special degree the true welfare of the community and of its members.

But sharing material goods, and the decisions regarding them, with a community does not sufficiently specify the gospel counsel of poverty. Who would say (to take an absurd example) that a community totally sharing a material existence possible only for the very rich would be leading a life of the counsels? On the basis of history, one cannot escape the conclusion that material privation in some form belongs to the very core of this form of christian life. To some degree, fellow religious are called to enrich one another in community not only by sharing the use and enjoyment of material

goods, but also by sharing hardship and privation. Though the point cannot be developed here, it seems beyond question that, to be fully of one mind and heart in the spirit of the gospel, fellow religious need to share not only their material goods but their material privation. This remains true even though, apart from the mystery of Christ, material privation tears men apart. Provided the other conditions for genuine gospel community are realized – namely, faith and hope, a real contemplative effort, a genuine living of the other two counsels and compassion for the poor – the sharing of material privation is a most powerful factor in the realization of fraternal charity. A community which is habitually comfortable in material resources is in a weak position to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

On the basis, once again, of the historical verification of this counsel, presence to the poor through service of the poor and through some participation in the lot of the poor would appear to be characteristic of religious poverty. I am not here suggesting that physical presence to the literally poor is necessarily a primary motivation in the life of an individual or a community called to follow the gospel counsels. What does seem to be found universally, however, is a special sensitivity toward those who lack the good things of this life, and a tendency, at least, to help them, and to shape the conditions of one's own material existence so that there is congruity between the way the religious lives and the way the poor must live.

It is this note of congruity which provides the answer to the obvious objections that can be raised against my insistence on the experience of material privation and participation in the privations of the poor as necessary for religious poverty. Because poverty is organically joined, within the one human and christian life, with many other factors, the concrete shape it will take will depend on how the many factors are to come together as an integral life of the counsels. Total identity in food, clothing, lodging, etc. with the most destitute does not represent the ideal of religious poverty. But where the hunger to be of service to the poor, and the desire to share their privation in forms that are appropriate, is no longer found within a religious community, it is hard to see how it can any longer be a community of the gospel counsels.

The result of our analysis so far has yielded this much: religious poverty is a total sharing of goods and privation with a community of the counsels, carrying with it a strong tendency to serve the materially poor and to share appropriately in their condition. The con-

crete forms in which these two basic elements will be verified will depend on many circumstances: health, culture, nature of apostolic work, etc. A true discernment will recognize the difference between a legitimate (and always somewhat reluctant) accommodation to circumstance, and an acquiescence in a bland middle-class existence. For this discernment to be possible, however, two other facets of the life of the counsels must be brought to bear on poverty. I speak now of consecration and contemplation, and wish to deal with them not as two entities, but rather as two aspects of a deep personal relationship to God and to Jesus Christ.

What gives the counsel of poverty its life and power is the fact that it is the expression, in the life of an individual and community, of a profound surrender to God in Christ. This surrender has its origin in a true conversion, stemming from a revelatory experience of God in Christ. Faith, hope and love are the special terms used to designate what is primary in the response of one who has really encountered Christ. But, because the revelation has been given within the paschal mystery of life, death and resurrection, christian faith, hope and love, in contrast to a paradisiac verification of these virtues, will be characterized by a certain kenotic or sacrificial quality. To know God in Jesus Christ is to be drawn into the mystery of redemptive suffering; it is to take on a certain affinity with 'Jesus who was put to death for our sins and raised to life to justify us'.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, some of the men and women who have had such a revelatory experience of Jesus Christ have felt impelled to respond in a distinctive way: irrevocably (hence by perpetual vow), and totally (hence by letting the paschal mystery shape not only their attitudes but the basic form of their lives). In the area of material goods, this means that their hearts have been captured beyond recall by Jesus who, 'was rich, but became poor for your sake, to make you rich out of his poverty'.<sup>2</sup> The revelatory moment, the privileged time of beginnings of this relationship with Jesus, is confirmed and re-enacted in the lives of religious by the element of prayer and contemplation. Love must remember, or else it will die. The consecration made once for all must be constantly renewed. The element of congruity on which we have placed so much emphasis requires that poverty, to be real and flourishing, needs to feed and to be fed by the contemplative, consecrated relationship of faith, hope and love directed toward God in Christ Jesus.

<sup>1</sup> Rom 4, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Cor 8, 9.

Have we said anything in this article pertinent to our original question? Are we not far from the original models found in Dorothy Day and Barbara Ward? I think that we have been saying, and perhaps showing, that while no strict demonstration is possible for the thesis that a comfortable middle-class existence is incompatible with the life of gospel poverty, a discerning sense of congruity, attentive to the historical reality of this form of christian life, will move always in the direction of a genuine experience of material privation and sharing the lot of the poor. Professional service of the poor and of humanity without this dynamism toward a simple and frugal existence lacks the vigour without which the life of the counsels is a salt without savour. I have tried to call attention to the need of considering all the elements which make up the religious life not in mere juxtaposition, but as they mutually affect one another within an integral life of the counsels. It would be a mistake, to be sure, to impose on all religious a narrow or univocal model for their material existence. One can also understand that much of the bourgeois spirit present among some contemporary religious, especially those moving into more secular life-styles, is a reaction against certain constricting forms of poverty formerly accepted as absolute. Still, at the point at which such a reaction would bring into the life of religious men and women a loss of the value and necessity of material privation, something primary would have perished, and religious life would indeed be imperilled. There is a temptation among religious today to throw up their hands in despair, and say that we do not know what poverty, means, or that the word has lost its meaning, or that the reality itself of this counsel as lived in the past cannot speak to our contemporary world. That may well be. But before coming to such conclusions, might it not be well for the individual or community involved first to remove from the scene the clearly unnecessary forms of middle-class comfort, and even to take a few bold steps in experiencing how poor people live? It may then happen that the grace of God, working within the actual experience of poverty, might suggest that there are alternative options to settling down to a comfortable middle-class existence.