

ZEAL FOR POVERTY

A COMMENT ON RECENT PAPAL TEACHING

By HUGH KAY

IN THE SOCIAL THOUGHT of the modern popes there is a recurring zest for the theme of poverty which has nothing to do with a sense of guilt or the pursuit of austerity as an end in itself. In his letters and sermons in Milan, the present pope, then archbishop Montini, repeatedly spoke of poverty as the role of Christ and the first blessing of the kingdom. For priests, this poverty was to be something more than the spirit of detachment, and was to imply a measure of indigence. This would act as a sign of the primacy of the spirit and should take the form of a readiness to use the material means required for the priestly task, and no more. Indigence was not a good in itself.¹ Admittedly, prosperity could reduce energy, enfeeble minds and standardize mass-man to the point where he lost his originality and power of decision. On the other hand, abundance made man 'more inclined to spend, to use his money on others, and to take (creative) risks'. It could serve to reduce or obliterate class war. It paved the way for a system of social assistance whose aim was not that the poor should stay poor and dependent, but that 'they should be raised from indigence and become self-supporting'.² But, if indigence was in itself undesirable, the spirit of evangelical poverty was something very different. This was primarily a spirit of inner freedom making man 'more sensitive to the human aspects of economic questions' (the social as well as the economic implications of welfare state legislation, for instance, and the management of nationalized industries). The spirit of poverty should enable man to 'apply to wealth the severe standards of judgment required', so that goods might be used 'in justice and equity for the common good' and 'distributed with more foresight'. Labour and technology were to be keenly interested in producing 'bread sacred for table and altar'.³ Above all, in the mind of Paul VI, evangelical poverty is 'the realisation of man's insufficiency and of his consequent need of God'. It denies the capacity of money to

¹ St Augustine: *Sermo* L, iii iv, PL 38, 327-8.

² *The Mind of Pope Paul on the Church and the World*, ed. James Walsh, S.J. (London, 1964), p 195 ff.

³ *Paths of the Church: the Encyclical Ecclesiam Suam* (St Paul Editions, 1963), 54-56.

satisfy the heart of man and calls for a prosperity at all times controlled by the prior demands of the spirit and the needs of the common good. Thus no question can ever be purely economic. The closure of a railway line that does not pay is not to be justified by the saving of money if the social life of an isolated community is thus made less than tolerable. Nor must even the blessings of a welfare-state economy negate all personal and family initiative.

A proper appreciation of material goods and the true meaning of evangelical poverty likewise appear in the thought of pope John XXIII. His position was that the thing to do with private property is not to abolish it, but to share it fairly and ensure that everyone has some, though not in egalitarian proportions. It was property that established the priority of the person over society and stood as his ultimate protector against the state; for total dependence on even a benign and paternalistic state was still a form of totalitarianism, inhuman if not unkind.¹ In this context, poverty meant the right use of property and the ability to subordinate it to other considerations. It was, for instance, impermissible to accumulate huge reserves 'in dubious and facile ways' or to pile up 'vast stagnant riches waiting to become fruitful'. This verdict faults the government which, for the sake of a hard currency and a stable balance of payments, deflates the national economy to the point where the people lose hope of improving their living standards; and it brings to mind the hideous modern sin of keeping new luxury blocks of flats and offices vacant, waiting for prices and rents to appreciate, whilst thousands of people continue to live in slums. So it is not what you have that puts you in peril of the judgment, but what you do with it: 'Happy is the rich man who is found to be blameless'.²

For religious, and even for secular priests, sterner standards apply. In Paul VI's thinking, they are to eschew superfluous comfort, exterior vanities and the accumulation of possessions (whether art treasures or dirty old pipes, no doubt). But he is not concerned to ensure discomfort for his clergy, and the key to his message is that he blends his plea for 'simplicity and frugality' with the positive and productive notion of 'liberality'. The Vatican Council adopted the same position,³ describing the virtue of poverty as the mystery of a love that spends itself prodigally, that emerges stripped and denuded of anything that might qualify its generosity. If priests are relieved

¹ Calvez, Jean-Yves S.J.: *The Social Thought of John XXIII (Mater et Magistra)*, London, 1964.

² Sir 31, 8-10.

³ *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

of material insecurity, it is so that they can be totally at their people's disposal. Like Christ, they have to be poor, that we, through their poverty, may be rich.¹

One of the reasons why the gospel message rings with less conviction than that of the revolutionary is that it cannot speak in terms of dramatic abandon. It has to speak subtly and to ask, not for what is sheer and simple, since God alone is that – but for an organized balance, difficult to assemble and maintain. Things are not to be rejected but to be used in right measure, with the right ingredients, in a flexible way that responds to changing circumstance. The kind of balance required for clerical poverty was explained some years ago by bishop Iriarte of Reconquista, Argentina, who exposed the dilemma of any pastor of under-privileged people who nonetheless have to come to terms with modernity. Such pastors must speak for a Christ whose working man's poverty was such that, unlike the fox, he sometimes lacked a hole to hide in. He washed the feet of his friends and used the lost groat as a teaching theme. Now Christ's representative has to address himself to a population of which sixty-five per cent are underfed and live in slums or shanty towns, yet who work for a world marked out by the sober lines of skyscrapers, in which jet aircraft draw straight lines between two given points, and the language of business is incisive. Yet

we for our part have to deliver this (gospel) message from the heights of our marble altars and episcopal palaces, in the incomprehensible baroque idiom of our pontifical masses, with their strange mitred ballet, in the still stranger circumlocution of our ecclesiastical language; and we go out to meet our people clad in purple, in a car of the latest model or a first class railway carriage, and our people come to us calling us 'your eminence', and genuflecting to kiss the stone of our ring. It is not easy to struggle free from all this weight of history and tradition.²

It is true that, since the bishop wrote, the liturgy has been simplified and rings are less often kissed; but the comfortable institution, however benevolent, still creates an 'us and them' relationship between the priestly caste and the faithful who hunger for the bread of life from the table and from the altar; It is for such reasons that the most effective missionary today is the one whose daily living identifies him personally with the people and who works through

¹ 2 Cor 8, 9.

² *Le Monde*, June 1, 1963.

the secular structures shared by all.

Enough has been said in these pages, however, about the personal poverty of the priest and the religious. If, for example, the religious order seeks to preach the spirit of poverty, it must do so as a community. There is surely something very odd about a group whose members live without carpets on their floors yet whose colleges, hospitals and other working centres depend for their survival on, say, the skills of their stockbrokers, who find the money for their clients' good works by helping to bolster a capitalist system fraught with injustice and non-christian competitiveness, with precisely the kind of ruthlessness that cannot and dare not consider the social effects of the pathway to capital gains. Shares may be held in a firm which does justice to its workers, consumers and suppliers alike; the british (and jewish) firm of Marks & Spencer is a case in point. But what of the great oil companies, whose involvement in power politics must raise a moral query affecting every dividend they pay? And even the firm that strives for justice within the capitalist structures must play by the rules of an international game which of itself is directed to impersonal ends and thus alienates all those involved in it. Graham Greene's socialist hero in *Stamboul Train* sums the whole thing up in terse and inescapable terms:

The proletariat have their virtues and the gentleman is often good, just and brave. He is paid for something useful, for governing or teaching or healing, or his money is his father's. He does not deserve it, perhaps, but he has done no one harm to get it. But the bourgeois – he buys cheap and sells dear. He buys from the worker and sells back to the worker. He is useless.

Today, most of us are or strive to be bourgeois, just that.

Now it is perfectly true that the christian moral tradition condemns, not capitalism as such, but its perversion; that the system, while distributing wealth unfairly, is as yet the only effective way we know of producing it – hence the rush by the eastern europeans to dilute and vary, in bourgeois terms, their socialist economies. It is also true that a radical revolution, completely overturning the system at a crash, would impose on the global nervous network strains it is too delicate to bear; that revolutions tend to pose more problems than they solve; that evolution is, of its nature, gradual. But the religious order should be in the vanguard of moves for structural *reform*, and, if its spirit of evangelical poverty is to exemplify the spirit of poverty needed by a prosperous secular society, it must

first decide what it thinks that spirit should dictate to the business world, preach it, and try to live by it with the additional touch of freely chosen, super-self-denial that will make its spoken message credible. In other words, we have to start, not by asking how poor the modern popes would have the religious be, but what spirit of poverty they have prescribed for the modern secular world – a spirit which the religious then must live and help the people to fight for.

There is no clearer denial of the virtue and spirit of poverty than the tendency of bishop and priest to alienate themselves from the worker's struggle for justice, and to pounce with condemnatory wrath on the current wave of strikes. For these represent, not greed, but a rejection of economic principles requiring that, for the so-called national interest, the relatively poor should stay poor. For it is true to say that, in Britain and the United States today, the wage-earner must run very fast for a very long time to remain in the same position *relative to the other classes*. In Britain, for all the talk of a property-owning democracy, the richest seven per cent of the people own eighty-four per cent of all private wealth, while only two per cent own fifty-five per cent of it. Something like eighty-seven per cent of the population own property valued at less than £3,000 (7,500 dollars), and their average holding is only £107 (267 dollars). When workers strike over one of their number's dismissal, it is not because they favour laziness or disobedience, but because they seek to establish the worker's right to a property stake in his job (as distinct from the shareholder's right to a stake in the firm's capital). That stake is not absolute. But neither may it be torn up in arbitrary fashion. Workers who seek this understanding from society at large are, in effect, preaching the spirit of poverty proclaimed by the social encyclicals and the Second Vatican Council – the use of possessions and money for the common good and for the good of the person; and these cannot be served by an over-concentration of wealth in too few private hands or in the hands of the impersonal state. A non-militant trade unionism, then, can easily be immoral, an acceptance of the practical atheism of the bourgeoisie. This, as Maritain says, leaves only the taste of ashes in the mouth of a civilization which has brought huge resources to the conquest of the earth but has not yet learned to master itself. There must, of course, be restraint on the part of all, for a cult of earthly riches, in which all men become consumers at the expense of production, is every bit as bad as one in which the consumers are too

few. But that system is to be condemned in which the wages paid are much too small to allow of accumulation and which only lend permanence to a system of classes, quite distinct from permissible hierarchy, and yielding only division.

It needs no re-emphasis that the christian message preaches workers' participation in the capital and profits, and also the managerial control, of his company; and the german system of a supervisory ('common sense') board, distinct from and superior to the managerial board of technical experts, is one that plainly calls for intensive study by christians. With this goes the general approach to savings and investment: encouraging workers through unit trusts and the like to establish security for their families through ownership. But far less consideration has been given to the need for a highly developed code of international justice. In his encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, pope Paul VI has laid down certain standards in this connection which, if implemented in full by the advanced industrial countries, would imply a revolution in our personal lives and a sacrificial lowering of our standard of living. Many a priest who now glibly preaches 'christian marxism' would have to forego the brandy and cigars he now enjoys at the rich man's table in between militant sermons in church and elsewhere.¹ To understand the spirit of gospel poverty, it will do no harm to remind ourselves of the stern prescriptions of this half-forgotten encyclical.

Pope Paul recalls St Ambrose:

You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich.²

Nobody's right to private property is absolute and unconditioned. 'No one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need, when others lack necessities'. If conflict arises between acquired private rights and 'primary community exigencies', it is

¹ If this sounds gratuitously unkind, it is because one is a little tired of such priests who, cosy in countries where civil wars are unlikely, preach revolution in the student milieu. Many of them would run a mile if they actually heard the whine of a bullet or had to salvage a child whose jaw had been blown off (which is the sort of thing that revolution means). These dubious gentlemen, whose priestly garb insults the memory of a martyr like Fr Camilo Torres, are to be sharply distinguished from the serious participants in the christian-marxist dialogue in Europe and the Americas, and from 'revolutionaries' like the saintly archbishop Helder Camara or the tortured dominicans in Brazil.

² *De Nabuthe*, c. 12, n. 53 (PL 14, 747): *Populorum Progressio*, 23.

the responsibility of the public authorities to search for a solution 'with the active participation of individuals and social groups'.¹ Moreover, if landed estates (or other acquired possessions) impede the general prosperity 'because they are extensive, unused or poorly used, or because they bring hardship to peoples or are detrimental to the interests of the country, the common good sometimes demands their expropriation'. Selfish speculation is immoral, and it is unacceptable 'that citizens with abundant incomes from the resources and activity of their country should transfer a considerable part of this income abroad purely for their own advantage, without care for the manifest wrong they inflict on their country by doing this'.² So much for certain leaders of under-developed countries with their numbered accounts in swiss banks, who share the guilt of the landed gentry and financial speculators of the latin countries in Europe and South America.

It is in section 26 of the encyclical that the pope goes to the heart of modern capitalist abuses – the international imperialism of money:

It is unfortunate that on these new conditions of society a system has been constructed which considers profit as the key motive for economic progress, competition as the supreme law of economics, and private ownership of the means of production as an absolute right that has no limits and carries no corresponding social obligation. One cannot condemn such abuses too strongly by solemnly recalling once again that the economy is at the service of man.

In this spirit, Pope Paul calls for a world-fund to assist developing countries, and for an international authority, not to abolish free trade, but to restore a certain balance to unequal competition and to ensure that primary producers are not at the mercy of fluctuating world prices to the point where their economies can be drastically shocked and reduced from month to month.³ It is for these words that the pope has been accused by the british tory paper, *The Spectator*, of being a marxist! Yet what he is calling us to do is simply to build 'a world where every man, no matter what his race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from servitude imposed on him by other men or by natural forces over which he has not sufficient control'. The section continues:

Let each one examine his conscience, a conscience that conveys a new message for our time. Is he prepared to support

¹ *Populorum Progressio*, 23.

² *Ibid.* 24. Cf also *Gaudium et Spes*, 71.

³ *Populorum Progressio*, 45 ff., 78.

out of his own pocket works or undertakings organized in favour of the most destitute? Is he ready to pay higher taxes so that the public authorities can intensify their efforts in favour of development? Is he ready to pay a higher price for imported goods so that the producer may be more justly rewarded?¹

It is to this examination of conscience that each of us must be led by the example of priests and religious. They must all have the tools and conditions to do their respective jobs, and there is no way of prescribing their standards of living in general terms. All one can say is that, while it is pointless for a priest to be cold if he cannot work properly without a fire, while the faithful have a duty and indeed want to ensure that he can live decently, he has to avoid all behaviour which will constitute a barrier between him and those he seeks to serve. He must decide for himself, each in his own circumstances, what this means for him in practice, and what it should mean for his order or congregation. If, as pope Paul puts it, development is another word for peace, then let us suggest that poverty, in its evangelical sense, means living a right order of priorities and arranging our use of material goods in a way that sees them as means and not ends. It is for this sort of poverty that, in particular, pope John XXIII and pope Paul VI have sought with zeal, and it is in that spirit of poverty that they have rebuked the modern capitalist. It would be simple to abolish private property and with it the need to exercise continual responsibility. But this is to dehumanize and depersonalize. It would be simple to prescribe a life of physical deprivation for religious. In fact, their task is very much harder and calls for the constant heroism involved in maintaining a delicate balance between what pertains to their life of service and what can only impede it. Sometimes, their identification with the poor will require them to live in caves, like Fr Gauthier. Sometimes it will imply just homeliness as distinct from excessive comfort. Modernity is not luxury, and it may serve the spirit of poverty to pay a little more for better quality goods that will last and relieve the faithful of the need to keep on dishing out money for replacements. Finally, the spirit of poverty may dictate an abandonment of certain specifically catholic institutions when the Church's work can be done, albeit with some hardship, through state and secular frameworks. Poverty means nothing if not adaptability.

¹ *Ibid.*, 47.