RELIGIOUS POVERTY: TRADITIONAL APPROACHES

By DAVID KNOWLES

OF THE THREE 'evangelical counsels', that of poverty is the most clearly and frequently enunciated by our Lord, but it has proved by far the hardest to define and to practise in a convincing way. While the vow of chastity is absolute, clear and comprehensive from the moment it is made, however difficult the perfect practice of the virtue may be, and while the vow of obedience, to those who have accepted it, can normally be accomplished, at least so far as external acts are concerned, without encountering a serious mental dilemma, the vow of poverty can only be defined at the two opposing poles of pure legality and pure spirituality, the renunciation of the use of the legal right to property, and the absence of desire to possess any created thing as one's own.

The teaching of Christ

We may begin by considering our Lord's teaching, and for our purpose his words will be accepted as they have been understood by the spiritual christian throughout the ages, for this is how they have affected the ascetic and spiritual practice of the Church.

And first, our Lord's own life. He was born *in forma pauperis* and died naked upon the Cross, and christians of every age have seen the deepest significance in this. His birth reveals the extent of the loving condescendance, his death the infinite self-abandonment of the Son of God. But the life of Christ between birth and death, so far as we see it in the gospels, was not the life of a pauper, or even of one living in the desert like John the Baptist. The household at Nazareth was not on the edge of the subsistence level, and his relatives were people of normal standing. True, he said of himself that he lacked the security of birds and beasts, but that was when he was practising what he preached, and had cut loose from his home and craftsmanship and was preaching the kingdom of God, trusting

solely in his heavenly Father for support. In fact, the support came, partly from those who, like Lazarus, received a prophet in the name of a prophet, partly from relations and followers such as the holy women. There is no evidence that the group of apostles suffered from want or exposure, and there is definite evidence that they had a common purse, from which they not only bought the necessaries of life, but also made gifts to the poor.

On the other hand, no feature of our Lord's teaching is more emphatic than his warning against the dangers and deceptions of wealth. The reader of the first gospel is brought up short by the first beatitude, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', where the word for poor is *ptochoi* – beggars.[1] In St Luke the phrase appears simply as 'Blessed are the poor',[2] but the primary intention is to suggest receptiveness, creatureliness in the face of God's Spirit and Word, though it certainly has also the paradoxical element of our Lord's early teaching, to shake his hearers loose from conventional values. The poor and lowly, he would have us understand, are more likely to be receptive to God's call, just as the rich are more likely to hear the call of the world.

More urgent still is the word to the rich young man who asked what he must do to gain eternal life. 'One thing is wanting to you. Go, sell all you have and give to the poor . . . and come, follow me'. As the sequel showed, the Lord knew his man; his riches held him back. Jesus did not, so far as we know, demand this change of life of Lazarus or Joseph of Arimathea. But the lesson he drew was universal. 'How hardly shall they who have money come to the kingdom of God . . . it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God'.[3] The saying indeed is true only of those who put their trust in riches, but for them it is terribly true, and without the uncovenanted grace of God those who have riches will trust in them.

The third great saying is a spiritual one; it holds also on the material level. 'He who loves father or mother . . . son or daughter more than me . . . is not worthy of me'.[4] Or as St Luke has it, 'Unless a man hate his father, mother, wife and children, yea, and his own soul . . . he cannot be my disciple'.[5]

Our Lord's call to the individual soul is therefore to give up all possessions in order to follow him. But the renunciation is made in

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[1] Mt 5, 3. [2] Lk 6, 20. [3] Mk 10, 25.
[4] Mt 10, 37. [5] Lk 14, 26; cf Jn 12, 25.

faith and hope. The promise to Peter and his brethren was for a reward hundredfold. This reward they had far more than a hundredfold in the Master they had found, but he shewed them also his chosen way of life, that he should share all things with his followers. This was the lesson they passed on to the Church when it came into being in Jerusalem. 'The whole host of believers was of one heart and soul, nor did anyone count his possessions as his own, but all things were in common . . . those who owned houses or land sold them and laid the money at the feet of the apostles, who gave to each as he had need . . .'[1]

These then are the two ways of poverty, not contrary yet not coincident. For the individual seeking God, the abandonment of all possessions in simple faith and hope; for the followers of Christ, the community of possessions and their use according to each one's need. Neither could or did become universal. Not every christian is called, or accepts the call, to give up literally all his possessions. And when once christianity became the religion of a whole region, community of goods was a moral impossibility. An enforced or programmatical communism is not christian; only love can be a motive for sharing all things.

The Desert Fathers

The birth of monasticism about 270 A.D. in Egypt, Palestine and Syria was partly an attempt to reassert the two calls to poverty. It was the gospel call to the young man that Antony heard and, hearing it, sold all he had and entered the desert. In the sayings of the Fathers, the monks of the desert, the emphasis is on the total gift:

> Abba Evagrius said that there was a brother who had no possessions but a gospel, and sold it to feed the poor. And he said a word that is worth remembering: 'I have even sold the word which commands me to sell all and give to the poor'.[2]

But even the Fathers realized that poverty in the material sense can never be permanently total. Man must eat and be clothed and have shelter, and from the first the monks of the desert worked and received money with which they bought their subsistence.

> A brother said to Abba Pistamon: 'What am I to do? I find it painful to sell what I make'. Abba Pistamon replied: 'Abba Sisois and others used to sell what they made. There is no

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[1] Acts 4, 32–3.

[2] These passages are taken from Chadwick, Owen: *Western Ascetisism* (Library of Christian Classics, vol. 12, London, 1958), pp 77, 80, 82.

harm in this. When you sell anything say straight out the price of the goods. If you want to lower the price a little you may – and so you will find rest'.

Another old man said:

It is not good to keep more than the body needs.
If you keep two shillings you will put your trust in them. Let us cast our care upon the Lord; it is for him to help us.

While St Antony was still alive, Pachomius was establishing on a large scale communities of monks modelling themselves on the first christians, with all things in common and supported by their own work done under obedience. Since that day the two kinds of monk, solitary and cenobitic, have always found a place in the Church.

The Rule of St Benedict

If we turn next to the Rule of St Benedict, it is because it can stand for almost a thousand years of catholic use and tradition. Modern scholarship has shown that very few of the precepts and only a part of the counsels of the Rule are original. Its author took the framework and the spiritual doctrine of the monastic life either directly or indirectly from the teaching of the monks of Egypt and of Syria, as seen either in their own utterances or as mediated and adapted by John Cassian, or from the writings of St Basil, St Jerome and St Augustine, or from the current monastic practice of the sixth century in Italy. As the footnotes of critical editions show, scarcely a sentence of any importance is without an earlier authority or direct source. Yet, though it lacks logical order, the Rule contains, and has been found by experience to provide, instructions or advice covering the whole of the material and spiritual ordering of a monastery and of the life of the individual monk. Though apparently a mosaic or cento of borrowings, it is nevertheless a distinctly individual whole, a witness to the monastic life of its own and previous centuries. As such it was recognized and adopted, and until the thirteenth century it was the code, either in itself or at first or second remove, of all western monks save those in celtic lands. There were many reforms, but these were directed either to a more exact observance, or to a more severe interpretation, of the Rule. The widest and most important reform of all, that of the cistercians, had for its motto: 'The Rule to the last dot'.

Within the Rule, therefore, is contained the nucleus of the mediaeval monastic tradition on poverty. St Benedict never uses the word poor or the abstract noun poverty *(pauper, paupertas)* of his monks.

The poor for him are the 'real' poor, those in material need, who come to the monastery gate for alms, or even offer their children to the monastic life. With his feet firmly on the ground, he never supposes for an instant that a family of enclosed monks in the desolate landscape of central Italy can exist permanently as dependent upon the charity of other people. The 'mendicant' status of the egyptian hermit or the carmelite nun, whatever its spiritual benefits, did not and could not appear above his horizon. This granted, the ascesis of poverty was shifted entirely from the material to the spiritual level. The monk need not be *seen* to own nothing, but he must abandon both the right and the natural satisfaction of owning anything. At his profession he must give or will away anything that he owns; the 'real poor' are specified as possible beneficiaries,[1] and his parents, if he is a child, must promise never to give him anything, either themselves or through a third party. In his life thenceforward he must neither give nor receive (without the abbot's permission) anything whatsoever, any mortal thing,[2] not even a letter or a token.[3] Why? Because he must not own or possess or monopolize anything. The ruling word is *proprium* and the quality is *proprietas*, an untranslatable word, since the elizabethan 'propriety' has now another meaning, while 'ownership' has a legal ring and 'possession' suggests an act or a habit rather than a psychological attitude. But translatable or not, we know well enough that *proprium* means 'my own, my very own', my private possession, something that no one can take from me, something that I can shut myself up in, something that (metaphorically) regards me as its master. That sense, that satisfaction, is a terrible vice;[4] and the Rule twice orders that it must be cut out by the roots.[5]

This vice of *proprium* (private) can only be avoided by its opposite *communis*, common to all, and the Rule uses the familiar text of Acts, 'that all things must be common to all'. Clothes, books, utensils, all belong to the monastery, and must be seen to belong to it, as common property. All are issued from the common store, and must be returned thither. This can only be safeguarded by a direct dependence for all things upon the goodwill of the abbot – then the monk is truly poor, a 'beggar'. And what are those things? Only what is,

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1 *S. Benedicti Reguli Monasteriorum* (3rd ed. Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 1935), ch. lviii, 58.

2 *Nullam omnino rem, nihil omnino* – ch. xxxiii, 2.

3 *Litterae, eulogiae, munuscula* are all barred – ch. liv.

4 *Nequissimum vitium:* perhaps with the full superlative force, 'the worst of vices' – ch. xxxiii, 14.

5 *Radicitus* – chs. xxxiii, 1; lv, 37.

in the abbot's judgment, strictly necessary, but he must judge as a loving father, not as an overseer; Benedict is no egalitarian. In fact, he helps the abbot to eliminate the needless by listing what is necessary – clothes, a knife, a stylus, a needle, a handkerchief (? or duster) and writing tablets. It is interesting to see writing materials in such a short list. Beyond this anything that is not necessary is superfluous; it must be cut out.[1] After use the article must be restored in the condition in which the monk received it; meanwhile, when using even the most common articles, he must treat them as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar. This exacting demand comes to the Rule from Cassian, who in turn took it from St Basil.

The Rule, in other words, demands from the monk what was later known to St Bonaventure and the franciscans as the *usus pauper*, the sparing and careful use of things that his condition demands of a poor man.

So much for the spirit of non-ownership, for which the Rule has no positive term. It contains, however, several precious indications how it worked in practice. The monastery had gardens, fields and workshops, all of them, as we might say, tangible assets. In addition, it had at least some ready money, and perhaps also real property, for the novice or his parents could make a deed of gift to the monastery. Moreover, it sold its produce, even if on easy terms; and the praise of field-work, that the brethren were then truly monks when they lived by the labour of their hands, shows that they were not in fact wholly dependent upon their own work. Finally, it is clear that the sparing use of things did not imply a community of scarecrows. The Rule lays down that when a monk is issued with a new garment, the old one shall be kept in the wardrobe for bestowal upon the poor. In short, the Rule accepts ownership of property and even of some money by the monastery as a body; but ownership of even the smallest thing by the individual monk is to be eliminated both in fact and in thought. All things are to be common to all and supplied by the abbot according to common or individual needs. Need *(necessitas)* is the operative word. All else is to be ruled out.

Franciscan Poverty

It is scarcely necessary to say that from the days of St Benedict down the centuries to the present day a principal – perhaps *the* principal – dissolvent of monastic fervour has been the possessive-

[1] Ch. lv, 22.

ness of both communities and individuals, abbots included. It was probably the universal acquisition of wealth by monastic houses that led to the erection of poverty, corporate and individual, rather than absence of ownership or spiritual poverty, as the goal at which many reformers aimed. It was not however, until the twelfth century, after the first flush of the new monastic orders, that the cry against wealth in the Church and in lay society became loud. For the first time since the decline of the roman empire, not only the great landowners, but the Church and the merchant cities of western Europe were becoming ostentatiously wealthy. In England, the potential wealth of the Church had probably more than doubled between 1066 and 1150, and the monastic orders had done much to raise the percentage. In addition, kings and merchants were far richer in 1200 than they had been in 1100, while the poorer classes, at least in the cities of Italy, Provence and the Rhineland, were strikingly needy. In consequence, from 1150 onwards numerous groups, both heretical, semi-heretical and fully orthodox, came into being among the middle and lower classes, with 'apostolic poverty' and the community of goods as the most important article in their programme. There was a feeling in the air that monastic renunciation of ownership was a sham, and that even the community of goods as practised in a monastery was more like a benefit club or a friendly society than evangelical poverty. Who would stand for God against Mammon?

The answer came from St Francis. All christian saints, some more obviously than others, had heard the call to leave all and to imitate Christ, but their lives had often been cloistered or spent preaching to the heathen. Francis, like Antony, heard his message in a verse of the gospel; yet it was not in the desert, but in the cities and fields and high-roads that he lived in following, quite literally, a few commands and counsels, and above all the example of the needy (as he saw him) Christ preaching the gospel and the naked Redeemer on the Cross. More than any other saint before or since, he lived out his conception of Christ-like poverty before the face of the Church. While in other matters he showed well enough that he could distinguish between the outward show and the inward spirit of self-denial, in the matter of poverty he could not see that separation was possible. The essence of poverty was for him freedom, but it was a freedom that demanded expression in physical abandonment.

Francis consciously and explicitly reacted against the monastic

rules and constitutions, even those of the cistercians, for most of those that had multiplied in the twelfth century were minute in detail and formal in spirit. Akin to Antony and Macarius rather than to Cassian and St Benedict, he accepted the words of Christ as literally true and lived them. That of the words he heard those to the disciples sent out to preach were the most significant certainly marks the difference between the vocation of the solitary and that of the evangelist, but the spirit is the same, that of following the call to the world's end and beyond. What distinguishes Francis, however, is not only that he followed the call *à corps perdu* – 'bald-headed' we might say – but that he begged all others – his friars, his 'poor ladies', his penitents and all christians – to do so with him.

Here we are concerned only with his call to poverty. This in Francis was of a different kind from that of any religious order of the past. With them, renunciation of possessions was a means or a condition of spiritual freedom from the desire for possessions, which left the heart free for God. With Francis it was the direct and absolute imitation of Christ, whom he saw, not precisely in Galilee or at Bethany, but in his moment of unique and supreme love of Calvary. Jesus redeemed the world naked, with even his clothes appropriated by others, and his followers and lovers must have literally nothing; the renunciation of rights and possessions and excesses was a beginning only; the friar must cut away from everything but his tunic and hood. Anything more than that immersed him in the bog of casuistry and the tangle of mine and thine. Again and again, when pressed by individuals such as the young friar who asked to have a breviary, and the ministers who implored him to allow mitigations to the Rule, he gave ground after obstinate resistance, lamented his weakness and came back on the rebound with the old cry – that he had heard the word from the Lord, and that this was the way a brother should live. Here was the Rule, and the Rule must be kept without footnotes *(sine glossa)*. Long after the friars had been regimented into an order, even after Francis had resigned the leadership, he returned in his Testament to the first principles that he had received from the Lord. Francis was of all the saints the most charismatic. He was indeed a living charisma whom interested parties tried in vain to treat as a mascot, and his insistence on absolute poverty has sounded down the ages a call as from the battlements of heaven to idealists and reformers. Those who, at the present day, are in labour to bring forth a renewal of religious poverty, hear the voice of Francis far more readily than that of Benedict.

The call of Francis was purely spiritual. He could never understand that his call was a word of God in his soul that gave him the power to do what God demanded; that his vision was incommunicable and that only one who saw what he saw could live as he lived. To others poverty was just poverty, and had its rules. To another, as to Wordsworth's stolid friend,

> A primrose by the river's brim,
> A yellow primrose was to him,
> And it was noting more.

But to Francis it was much more. The Grandimontine and other recent orders stood for rigid poverty. But it was not merely 'real' or 'rigid' poverty that Francis saw – though his poverty was real enough – but a heavenly freedom which he could only describe to others by a name of romance, Lady Poverty. The most sordid enemy of this freedom was money, metal coin, and in this he saw an almost transcendental evil. The merchant's son, the spendthrift king of the revels, had doubtless seen piles of coin, useless in themselves for any purpose, handled and hoarded and stolen and loved. Money in any case was a token of possession, of security against the morrow, and possession and security for Francis was what the Lord had given him when he gave his clothes back to his father and called upon his Father in heaven.

The history of the Friars Minor for more than a hundred years is tragic evidence of the eternal problem of embodying a spirit, a difficulty made visible in the case of poverty because embodied spirits, human beings, cannot fully free themselves from the material world by making a promise or joining a company. Even Christ as perfect man could not have spent his life in the physical nakedness of his Passion. The franciscans, guided by another saint, Bonaventure, compounded between the commands of Francis and the conditions of practical life by principles very near those of the Rule of St Benedict. They adopted the so-called *usus pauper*, the sparing use of material necessities. But many other ways were explored of concealing the gap between profession and practice, the ideal and the real. One pope ruled that Francis, when he wrote his Testament, had no canonical status to legislate for the order; another allowed the friars to choose friends to hold for their use the money they might not touch themselves; yet another removed scruples by declaring that the friars owned nothing, since the papacy had taken it all into papal ownership and the friars were beggars, medicants – a status that Francis had never wished for them. On the other side

the irreducible die-hards, the Spirituals as they were called, buttressed their position that they were the only true followers of Francis and Christ by attributing absolute poverty – non-ownership – to Christ himself. A corollary of this was that the zealot friars were the only true christians, and that all others should follow and imitate them. This dispute escalated into a theological controversy of great bitterness, and was only ended by a definition by Pope John XXII that Christ and the apostles had a true right to own property, and by his harsh practical argument of handing back to the franciscans the ownership of property of which an earlier pope had relieved them.

The franciscans stood apart from the other orders of friars both in their exaltation of poverty as the centre of their religious life and in the various controversies and humiliations which this brought upon them. The dominicans, though standing for an austere life and accepting a mendicant status, were kept on a level of sobriety by the doctrine of spiritual poverty elaborated by St Thomas. According to this, which did no more than formulate theologically what had always been orthodox spiritual teaching, the essence of the virtue of poverty was interior detachment. Granted that this existed, the use or even the ownership of goods was not illicit for christians or even for religious communities, so long as they observed the prescriptions of canon law in financial matters. Even a king might be truly poor in spirit, *magnas inter opes inops* – penniless among his treasures – and king David was a useful instance, for he had often declared himself poor in his psalms.

To the historian, the splendours and the sorrows of the franciscans, whether the first companions of St Francis or the spirituals, serve to show that the profession of poverty, in a religious body of any size, cannot take its norm from the practice of a saint, nor must it on the other hand hide laxity or mediocrity behind a bulwark of dispensations and legal fiction. All the saints have something impracticable in the examples they set and their visions of truth; for *ex hypothesi* they are heroes, moved by the holy Spirit to actions of which the normal christian is not capable. Francis was more obviously single-minded and heroic than most.

He will always stand out for our admiration and shame as an instance of what heavenly grace can do for a predestined soul who puts no obstacle in the way of God's action. Individuals with lesser gifts may and do still give examples of heroic poverty. But neither he nor they can be the norm for a large number, nor can they

translate their own vision in a language that the less gifted christian can understand. To that extent the friars who requested or accepted papal dispensations were fully justified, while the attempt of the spirituals to erect the saint's vision into a theological proposition of general obligation was disastrous. On the other hand, the make-believe of the laxer body of friars who gloried in the franciscan poverty while freely accepting gifts of all kinds and using charitable friends for what may be called banking facilities, is distressing in the extreme.

Taken as a span of a thousand years, the middle ages have shown the lines along which all traditional teaching on poverty must proceed. They have shown the two moments of the call of Christ, the one to the renunciation of all things, which can be begun by an act which in the saints is heroic in its scope, and must be continued by an ever deeper abandonment of all things for Christ; the other to a life of non-possession, sharing a common store with others and using sparingly what is only lent, not given. This second call, which in a sense is the first call extended over a life-time, can be set out in simple principles, but their application must be left to individuals or families, and they can only be safeguarded by an unremitting and severe spiritual judgment. It is this that has been wanting again and again in the history of the Church, not least in our own day. Wise provision of the necessary and drastic excision of the superfluous, both governed by a trust in God which forbids the amassing of reserves against a humanly invisible future – these are spiritual qualities which are essential for the maintenance of religious moderation, and they are rare in any age.

A review of the whole of monastic and mediaeval spirituality may perhaps suggest that poverty, understood in its common, human sense of material want that irks and stunts human life at all points, is not the best word to describe a life-long spiritual ideal. It is not the word used in general practice by patristic or monastic spiritual writers, and when it became common in the later middle ages, it led more than once either to an excessive attention to the virtue of poverty, as if it were the queen of all christian virtues, or to an endeavour, which must always in the long run be futile or dangerous, to pare down to vanishing point all material resources of all kinds. There must always be a point when physical deprivation reaches its limit for all living a normal christian life, even one of penance. *Est modus in rebus.* Only to love, and to the abandonment of self which love implies, can there be no limit.