POVERTY: THE MODERN PROBLEM

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TO CONSIDER the role of poverty in religious life is not unlike considering the role of a buttress in a Gothic cathedral. That soaring arch has its own beauty and its own history. Yet its meaning, its function, is entirely relative to that of the whole building. It contributes to the balance of the whole construction and it is supported by other parts. Alone it simply cannot stand. Alone it would be no more than a curious landmark: either the sign of a project never completed or a ruin which stands after the building has collapsed.

Poverty has a role in a radical dedication to the service of the risen, living and present Christ. It is one aspect in that *intimate consecration* that is religious life, according to Vatican II. Poverty has its own beauty. No one who knows the life of St Francis of Assisi can fail to be captivated by it. Yet its beauty is perceived only in relation to a greater beauty. Poverty has its own history. Through repeated upsurges and declines it has survived to our days. Yet its history is an unfinished story, part of a much greater adventure than the leaving aside of nets and fishing-tackle. Poverty supports a daring leap into the dark, a leap called for by the gentle action of the Spirit of God in man's heart. But in itself it is nothing; it cannot fulfil a man's deepest desires.

This is our thankless task: to describe an arch in a cathedral. A frustrating enterprise. Yet we are encouraged by the hope that the reader himself will fit the fragments into a greater building; that is, into the gift of a mysterious dedication to Christ and his kingdom through religious life lived as a wholesome, single, prolonged act of love.

An honest and down-to-earth beginning could be to list the difficulties about poverty that religious constantly experience, hear and speak of in the world of today.

1. An air of hypocrisy surrounds the practice of poverty. Religious take a vow of poverty; they promise God publicly and solemnly to lead the life of a poor man. But few, if any of them, keep this vow.

Their standard of living is more than adequate; they do not lack anything. Neither individually nor collectively are they poor.

From this contradiction between vow and life religious think to escape by means of a legal fiction. They construe their own definition of poverty: they claim that it consists in a lack of ownership or possession and, consequently, in a legal dependence on the superior. They say that they have no wealth because they have no rights. Yet the fact is that with or without rights they have a good table, commodious living-quarters and security for the future. A typical illustration of this mentality is the religious who spends freely with some kind of extorted permission, or a religious who drives a luxury car that makes even the garage attendant gasp, and asserts that it is not against poverty since it is a loan from his sister with the permission of his superior. In sum, the problem is that religious vow poverty but they do not live as poor men.

2. To put an end to this air of hypocrisy perhaps we should frankly admit that poverty is an out-dated virtue. We understand today much better than at any other age that penury and deprivation are not virtues but a kind of disease. We know that poverty destroys individual dignity; like a cancer it kills a human community. The root of many evils, crime and violence, is to be found in the degradation that results from poverty.

It follows that poverty cannot be an *evangelical counsel* any more than disease. If there is something in the gospel to suggest the embracing of poverty, it has to be interpreted sensibly, much in the way as the exhortation to put out our eyes or cut off our limbs when they tempt us to sin. To be poor for Christ's sake is no more meaningful than to be sick for him: a calamity to be accepted, not a grace to seek. After all, those religious who do not seem to live up to their vow might be right. It seems that poverty as part of religious dedication should be abolished.

3. In any case, to write about poverty is to betray a fragmented vision of religious life. We need unity and harmony. Concentration on poverty is part of an on-going analysis that will never solve anything because it is unbalanced and one-sided. We need someone to write about religious life as one uninterrupted movement, as one single dedication.

4. Furthermore, even if we speak about poverty, it is nonsense to speak specifically about religious poverty. The Sermon on the Mount with its message that *the poor of heart are blessed* was addressed to all followers of Christ. No person nor community has the right to

appropriate to themselves Christ's promises. There is no such thing as religious poverty: there is a reward promised to all those who bear with christian patience the divine visitations which may inflict poverty on them.

These problems are extremely disturbing. Religious communities or individuals attempt to answer them intellectually or to solve them existentially. Books and articles investigate the meaning of poverty; many communities are undertaking new works that bring them into closer contact with the 'real' poor. All in all, there is a great ferment, full of promise but containing many unstable elements.

What we have to say here is no more than a small contribution to this great desire to understand and practise christian poverty. Yet, concise as we wish to be, we need to expand somewhat and rest our case on broader principles, precisely because poverty is just one aspect of religious life. An over-all look at religious life itself is necessary. For how can anyone speak sensibly about the parts unless he has taken a look at the whole?

The history of religious life is a curiously existential one. The leaders and founders of new communities were not inspired by previously-held theories or a kind of new theology. They appeared on the scene of history unexpectedly; at times quietly, more frequently in a dramatic way. They did not try to justify their initiatives and actions through careful reflection; they did not quote theologians; they simply sang the praises of the Spirit of God who moved them. They had an affinity with the prophets of the Old Testament. Most of them would have agreed that their life story was similar to that of Amos who liked to tend his flock and sycamore trees until Jahweh broke into his life and called him.[1] Historically, it seems correct to say that the great religious communities arose from an unexpected call and not as a sequel to a captivating theory.

Surprisingly, today the trend is reversed. There is a great deal of theologizing about religious life. It is assumed that life comes from our reflections. To a great extent this is to put the cart before the horse. Instead of discerning real inspirations we get busy writing imaginary constitutions. Our attention is distracted and misdirected. We work out a theology of religious life with fine precision and set up many committees to implement our vision. *Some* committees, of course, are necessary, but the right proportion is even more neces-

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1 Amos 7, 14.

sary. Once the balance is disturbed in favour of our planning, we hold the Spirit of God and man captive, and eventually we will suffer from starvation in our carefully constructed categories.

There is an easily discernible trend of thought today that regards religious life as a purely man-made construction, the result of man's own initiative. History gives the lie to such a theory. If we rely on witnesses who experienced God's call – Benedict, Francis, Dominic, Ignatius, Teresa, we find that their writings and sayings praise a divine initiative. Vatican II also speaks of a gift that the Church gratefully receives from God; in this the Council took a new step in an old direction.

Ultimately, the choice between the different ways of conceiving religious life is a fundamental option. Like many basic choices, it is hardly justifiable on rational grounds, although the choice should stand the test of theological examination. One must choose either to see and be convinced that religious life springs from the initiative of God, and that to be a religious means to respond with all the imagination and creativity of a child of God to a call at once clear and obscure. Or, one must choose the other view-point: that the initiative is ours and ours only. Then, certainly, it is in our power to build or to destroy religious life. In the first case there must be a living community before constitutions are written. In the second case constitutions are composed and then, hopefully, the community must be organized.

At this point we must state our own personal option. We believe that religious life is a gift, is due to God's initiative. No other option is possible if one listens to the testimony of those who influenced and shaped religious life in the course of history. It follows that we believe in communities first and in constitutions afterwards; because the Spirit of God deals first with man. It is only later on, in the course of time, that writings and rules are produced.

What has all this to do with poverty? A great deal. We can now say that religious poverty is part of a mysterious gift, the fruit of initiative that comes from the Holy Spirit. Our fundamental option will influence all our considerations.

The right question from now on is not how should we conceive and construe our poverty, but what is this particular *gift* that led many founders of religious communities to deprive themselves of so many material commodities of life; also, and paradoxically, what is this gift that led others to reach out for created things, to use them as much as possible to help the expansion of God's Kingdom.

Poverty, then, is a gift. But it is a specific type of gift with unexpected dimensions. It is not an object offered generously on a plate by the giver and accepted graciously by the receiver. It is hardly an object at all. It is an intangible gift, an attitude that grows out of a relationship between two persons who love each other. We spoke about God's initiative. In this initiative the real gift is the person of God to man. To accept this gift leads to poverty.

Our personal relationships always affect and transform our relationship to the material world around us. An ordinary meal becomes a happy celebration at a family reunion. The simple bread baked by the mother becomes rich in taste for all around the table. The wine with an ordinary label gives a festive warmth to all who drink it. The material world is transformed by personal relationships.

The radical love of God for man that is at the beginning of religious consecration has an effect on man's relations to all other creatures. Gold and silver that may have been important before lose their meaning; the deep blue of the sky and the joyful play of the water in a brook – none of them noticed much before – become a message of love.

When there is a great love between God and man, man's relations to the material world undergo a transformation. Some objects lose their importance, some objects become rich in meaning.

We should not speak so much about religious poverty as about the relations of the religious to the material world. He is a kind of prophet, and the life of a prophet is unpredictable, full of surprises. This life affects his relation to the material world. One example of this transformation is St Francis of Assisi, who threw away all the money he had, who stripped himself of all his possessions, clothes included. He did it under some mysterious impulsive love, not because he was seeking misery and nakedness. Another example is St Benedict and his first companions: they collected solid stones to build a monastery that was meant to last for centuries. They were not enamoured of walls. Love compelled them to build shelter for the peace they were seeking. Both movements, deprivation and enrichment, are acts of love. Neither can be justified other than through a personal inspiration.

At this stage, perhaps, the word poverty should be dropped. It would be better to speak about our relationship to the material world that springs from a person-to-person relationship. This relationship can cause movements in opposite directions: at times deprivation, at times enrichment.

It does not, however, make sense to speak about personal relationship between God and a single human individual. Man is person in a community. This social dimension is so much part of his being that he cannot be a person without a community supporting him. He develops in community. He is born into a family and takes his place in the civil society. Small wonder that religious life itself developed in community. The authentic dedication of the hermit to God will always remain an exception. The norm for religious life will be the community of quiet peace or of bustling activity: but always a community.

These communities are in fact a painful and joyous beginning of the ultimate kingdom of God, where all relationships spring from love and blossom into love. Christ himself started to build his kingdom through building communities around himself: that of the twelve, that of the seventy-two, that of the disciples. The first fruit of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was the bursting of the small community of the apostles into action, followed by the increase of that community through the baptism of the three thousand who joined it.

This insistence on community is necessary if we are to make certain that the communitarian dimension of religious poverty (or as we now say, better, of the religious' relationship to the material world) be not lost. One of the signs of the presence of the kingdom is the unity of minds and hearts that religious attempt to achieve among themselves, a unity due to faith and love. This unity, on the level of persons, suggests, indeed requires, a unity in possessing material things. Strictly defined personal properties would have an adverse effect on the meeting of minds and hearts. Common ownership is thus a natural outcome of community life. Such sharing of goods does not mean uniformity in the use of things; but it does mean a common dedication of all things to the service of the kingdom. Poverty is always a communitarian virtue. Or better, it is the whole community that together defines its relationship to God and to the material world around it.

At this point different communities may go in different directions. One community may decide to deprive itself of wealth to the point of penury with all the consequences that flow from such deprivation. Strangely, there will be a price to be paid for such an attitude: much time will have to be spent in begging, in simply obtaining the bare necessities of life. Yet these communities may feel that by living in this way they become prophets in action, bringing home

to all men as graphically as possible that there is a kingdom richer than all the riches of the earth. In this way they communicate the evangelical message.

Another community may put the emphasis on the use of all things for the expansion of the kingdom. They will gather wealth, not to accumulate it, still less to profit from it, but simply to use it to build the kingdom: by the publication of books, by running schools, radio stations, hospitals and so on.

Both types of community are authentic. There is room in the kingdom of God for both. The members of each are bound by the sermon on the Mount. There is no dispensation or exception to that. That is, their individual lives and community life has to be simple, frugal, organized more with trust in God's providence than in the capacity to collect funds.

We began by considering the problem of religious poverty; and gradually, by considering the great principles of religious life, we moved into a broader field. We concluded that in reality the relationship between the religious and his community on the one side and Christ on the other is what matters. No rule nor definition about the use or abuse of created things can ever be a substitute for this living, praying, ever fresh relationship between Christ and his disciples. Now perhaps we can take up specifically the problems stated in the beginning of this discussion.

1. No amount of words can absolve religious from a just accusation of hypocrisy if they do vow poverty in the sense of penury and deprivation and fail to observe it; such an inherent contradiction between the promise and the failure to implement it may well be more harmful today than in past ages. Today, our contemporaries prefer to call a spade a spade; if the vow does not mean poverty in ordinary plain language, that is, if it does not involve penury and deprivation, then the word 'poverty' should not be used. We have to accept the language as it is spoken and we cannot play the policy of Humpty-Dumpty toward the world, telling it that we mean something else than what we say. As a matter of fact, very few religious institutes mean to vow stern and harsh privation and penury. If they do not, they should not say so. Many religious institutes intend to vow, not poverty, but the dedicated use of material things for promoting the cause of the kingdom. They need ownership or possession, because temporal means in the world of today are necessary for the proclamation of the gospel, and for the celebration of the christian mysteries. The modern means of education, schools and

universities, communications-media, the printed word, radio and television, are all necessary for announcing and celebrating the mystery of incarnation. Without these media, a great part of the world would simply be untouched by the gospel message. Communities dedicated to such work should simply vow a common possession of all their goods, their use for the kingdom, and an ordinary frugal christian life.

2. This leads to the question whether anyone should vow poverty at all. Should we not rather say that as no one is entitled to inflict sickness on himself for the sake of the kingdom, so no one is entitled to degrade his own dignity through a way of life that is harmful to the development of the human person. Let us concede that there is a type of poverty that is sickness for a human being and a cancer for a community; it destroys both. The poverty that does not leave enough leisure to enjoy the beauty of God's creation and enough time to dream about the kingdom is a sickness. No one should vow it, still less should anyone impose it on others. On the contrary: evangelical poverty, although it involves privation, is fundamentally an enrichment. This is precisely what distinguishes poverty as understood in modern sociology from poverty as understood in the tradition of religious life. Evangelical poverty is first a great enrichment, and secondly, a measure of sacrifice. Its pattern is that of death and resurrection so essential to and part of the whole christian life. If the element of enrichment is not there, poverty is not desirable. The enrichment is always connected with the kingdom of God, with the conversation, communication, converse with God in community. A poverty that does not allow this is not genuine, and is therefore unchristian.

3. To consider poverty in itself is not necessarily a fragmentation; it is not the breaking up of a unity, but a description of one of the various reflections in this created world of God's unique love. He is one and his call is one: but we cannot perceive that call, or speak about it unless we look at the fruits of it in our visible and tangible world. One fruit of it in religious life is a wholesome relation of the dedicated person and community to the material things around them. To speak and to reflect on poverty is not necessarily to fragment the basic relationship to God; human limitations of thought and expression compel us to describe this unique love in its various aspects.

4. Finally, there are not two types of poverty, one which binds the religious, the other the rest of christians.

For all christians, the priority is in personal relationship that somehow involves the whole material world around them. There will always be some religious communities who deprive themselves of many things on the earth so that their ascetic way of life might be a pointer towards the kingdom to come. There will be other communities who dedicate themselves to the expansion of the kingdom. Whilst retaining a christian simplicity in their own life-style, they use the riches of the earth and the fruits of man's creativity to further the expansion of the kingdom.

In the beginning we likened the role of poverty in the religious life to that of a supporting arch in a gothic cathedral. The arch has no meaning in itself. But without the mutual strength of the arches the building could not exist. Poverty should never be elevated to an absolute value; its role is in expressing and buttressing personal relationships between God and man. Poverty as such has no value; it becomes meaningful in so far as it enriches others, after the example of Christ, who, 'though he was rich, for your sake became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich'.[1]

[1] 2 Cor 8, 9.