

# COME, FOLLOW ME!

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

**P**RIMARILY, poverty concerns our living relationship with Christ. It is the result of that relationship, and one means of expressing and developing it. Poverty, then, is concerned with loving God and all mankind and creation in Jesus Christ. The arms of poverty reach out to embrace the whole world and all mankind. Only secondarily is poverty concerned with things, and the 'thingness' of poverty means nothing unless it expresses this one great love which is at the heart of all reality. For poverty begins in the heart; it is an integral part of our awareness of belonging to Christ. We begin to be poor when we realize the givenness of all things, and especially of our own essential selves, through Jesus. It is vital that in our thinking about poverty we do not lose sight of the fact that poverty is intended to express our relationship to Christ first of all. As an ideal, it should manifest the faith and hope and love we have in Christ, and reveal our love and dedication to him. Any following of Christ demands this interior attitude. But the exterior gestures which express that attitude will of necessity vary; for they are only a secondary means and their genuineness will be measured against their efficiency in expressing dedication to Christ in a particular situation. For no matter how vehemently we rend our garments and appear in rags before the world, our witness will be useless if we have not first of all rent our hearts.

It is curious to note how materialistic many of us have become in our attitude towards poverty. We tend to think of poverty in terms of things and to define it in terms of what we should or should not have. We have fallen into the real sin of materialism, that of defining man in terms of what he has. Only we have done it in reverse and defined religious poverty in terms of what we have not got. Hence poverty is strict when we have little, less strict when we have more. The perfection of poverty consists presumably in having nothing at all. We deplore the materialism of the world and at the same time we make our being consequent upon our having.

The reaction against a poverty which is comfortable has not altogether shaken off this materialism. There has been a healthy and honest admission that for most religious the vow of poverty is an

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assurance that we shall never lack bed and board for the rest of our lives. Yet this has caused an unhealthy uneasiness. We find ourselves caught between the desire to retrench and to live more simply and the demands of an apostolate which often does not permit this. Often we have fallen into the error of trying to devise a poverty which is personally satisfying to ourselves. But we may still give all our goods to the poor, we may live in destitution, and still not have love. We are then nothing. We attempt to eliminate the appearances of affluence from our lives, but do we do this to salve our own consciences? or because we are upset by the reproaches made against us? Have we in the process lost sight of our main preoccupation, which is to show all men that God loves them? Is our being scandalized at ourselves entirely free from the scandal taken by Judas when Mary anointed the feet of Jesus?

Such questions are perhaps too blunt and unrefined; but why should we fear to answer them? Perhaps because we have forgotten the very basis of our own lives – Christ himself. We have forgotten the source and origin of our own vocation: the personal invitation of Christ to follow him. Let us make no mistake, that call is still there and all that is happening in religious life is but an invitation to get back to that fundamental and work outwards from it. God wants us to become, in Christ, wholly in love with the world, with mankind and with himself. But this is the work of more than a lifetime. We shall never love enough, or hope enough or believe enough. Why then should we expect to come up with some formula which will guarantee that we are poor enough? We are never going to be able to say: 'This is our poverty, and as long as we live in this way we shall be poor with Christ'. To do this would be to propose a perfect means which results in an imperfect end. Indeed we have to accept from the outset that we shall and should always be dissatisfied with the gestures of poverty by which we seek to express our dedication to Christ. No true lover ever feels complacent about the expression of his love. Even when he has given all it is as nothing. Furthermore, there is no reason why the exterior gestures which express our dedication should not vary from congregation to congregation, from community to community and from person to person. The very fact that there are different standards of poverty approved by the Church is an admission that poverty is not a uniform way of life, and that its exterior expression can be multiple. This is indication enough that in order to understand what we mean by poverty we have to go deeper. We have to see it not as an abstract noun to be defined

round a conference table, but as reality to be lived by a particular group of persons in a particular situation. In this perspective, being poor will mean the choice of the most apt gestures in this particular set of circumstances to express the love of Christ which possesses us. But whatever the external standard of our poverty, we can say from the start that its keynote will be to express open-hearted love and open-handed generosity. The opposite of poverty is not riches but meanness and possessiveness. Poverty is not a way of depriving ourselves of what we need, but a way of making sure that we can be continual givers with the Giver of all good things.

Poverty, chastity, obedience are but three facets of the one love. We must then beware of compartmenting and fragmenting them. The quality of each colours all three. The quality of our poverty is also a quality of our obedience and of our chastity; it illuminates them both. We may perhaps break a regulation about poverty, but there is no real sin against poverty which is not at the same time a sin against chastity and against obedience. For we do not sin against a concept but against a person. Sin is a turning away from love which is one, for God is love. We cannot know Jesus without knowing the Father, nor can we sin against Jesus without sinning against the Father and the Spirit of love. The Spirit is one, and fragmentation comes only with the crudest kind of materiality. There could be no greater travesty than to reduce poverty to having or not having things, obedience to doing things, and chastity to the bodily expressions of sexuality. The whole object of the life in the Spirit is to work towards the wholeness and integration of all aspects of life; for this wholeness is the reality of all that is. The nakedness of a St Francis, stripping himself of all he had, symbolizes not only his poverty but also his love and obedience. The rich young man who turned away from Jesus showed by that gesture the narrowness of his own heart and his deafness to the call of God. In this context, one hopes that when different commissions are set up to study poverty, chastity and obedience, they do at some point come together in a synthesis and not attempt to define each in isolation from the other.

But what more precisely is the particular quality in religious dedication emphasized by the notion of poverty? Any genuine religious experience must begin with a movement of conversion, a change of heart. Suddenly we become aware that someone else has entered into our lives. We begin to know and to love Christ as if for the first time, as if we had not really known him before. We may not be able to spell out the why and the wherefore of this experience,

but we know that it is so. Indeed, any attempt to analyse or rationalize the experience must seem trite and irrelevant. But somehow or other the hard core of our selfishness has been pierced and we begin to live in terms of Christ on a deeper level than we had formerly perceived. This inevitably implies change. For, just as any real contact with another human being changes us, so too real contact with the living God of all change invites us to a transformation of our former selves. This is one of the hall-marks of a genuine religious experience. God is the God of love, of growth, of development. He touches us in order to create us and to lead us to become the persons he knows we are. If we accept to open ourselves to the invitation of the love of God, we open our hearts to be changed.

Such a movement or change of heart may in its first beginnings show itself merely in a certain restlessness, a sense of unease, of being at sixes and sevens with ourselves. It can seem to be merely a feeling of dissatisfaction with myself, a sense that there is something I should do, coupled with an inability to see clearly what that is in terms of my life here and now. Such was certainly the experience of a Francis of Assisi, an Ignatius of Loyola, of Charles de Foucauld and, nearer home, of Malcolm X in prison and at Mecca. Sometimes the instinct of fear may lead me to withdraw, to seek to remedy this restlessness by consolidating the here and now of life and marking time. For the trouble is that so often we do not live our lives; we are lived by them. We can lose the urge to continue to become and by the same token lose the urge to be. This process has been canonized as 'settling down'; it is perhaps the most pernicious of our bourgeois vices and one of the most prevalent of our corporate sins against poverty. For any genuine religious experience invites us to get out of the rut into which we have settled comfortably. It invites us to sift through the values in our lives and to see them in another clearer light. Some will be seen to be genuine and in need of development; others will be worthless counterfeits to be rejected.

This process of re-evaluation is more dramatic when it involves a turning from the utterly false values of sin. When someone like a Malcolm X turns from a life of drugs, pimping and theft, the contrast between the before and the after is more immediately perceptible. But the movement of conversion does not necessarily involve a rejection of blatant sin. It can also consist in the rejection of a life of 'mini-virtues'. Conversion is intended to shatter not only our complacency in our sins but also our complacency in our virtues. The mists roll away and we find ourselves in the foothills and not

on the top of the mountain. We can choose to ascend or we can decide that this is as far as we want to go and wait for the mist to roll down again, as it surely will.

Even if we accept the shattering of our complacency and overcome the instinct of fear, the battle is still not yet won. The interior violence of this change of heart can manifest itself in an exaggerated external gesture which has a symbolic value. This phenomenon is a constant in the lives of many holy people. One thinks of Ignatius Loyola at Manresa allowing his nails and hair to go uncut, dressed as a beggar, living off scraps. He certainly never proposed this episode of his life as an example to be imitated. In the same way a Bernard of Clairvaux would warn his own monks against the very austerities he himself practised at the beginning of his monastic calling. For such actions are symbols of a deeper reality, a transformation of the heart. It is this transformation which will endure and eventually express itself in ways which integrate the person more deeply into history. This entry into history is the ultimate hall-mark of the genuineness of the total experience; for the God who moves our hearts is the God who works within the structures of time and place which he himself has created. However, we must allow for the symbolic gesture, which may seem exaggerated and unreal. We must see it for what it is worth, as an indication of a deeper transformation which is working itself out. Hence in the present process of renewal in religious life, it is vital that we search out the real meaning behind many of the gestures, amongst the young especially, which may seem exaggerated or excessive to those who are loath to depart from what are called established norms and practices.

We have to learn to endure the stirrings and diverse manifestations of this divine restlessness in ourselves and in others, with patience and with a growing faith and trust. For the readiness to pass our lives as they are through the sieve of this experience of the love of God is at the heart of religious poverty. The opposite of religious poverty is possessiveness. We begin to learn what it is to be poor with Christ when we enter into the experience of being dispossessed and come up against our naked selves. It is essential to note that this dispossession is the direct result of being caught up in and possessed by the love of Christ. We may give all our goods to the poor and still not have love. The gesture of dispossessing ourselves can have as much egoism as that of enriching ourselves. Hence any movement towards dispossession on our part has to be either a response to an invitation from Christ to leave all things and follow

him, or a prayer for such an invitation. The distinction between the two is essential, but it has often been misunderstood. The unspoken presupposition that material possessions are of themselves an obstacle to union with Christ carries the corollary that the way to union is simply to give up everything. This may be true, but only if Christ himself moves us to do this. The plain fact of the matter is that this invitation is not extended to everyone. The vast majority of christians are invited to keep what they have. This does not, however, dispense them from that attitude of interior poverty which is essential to the christian life. Just as poverty is a quality in our lives, so too is possessiveness. We must beware of treating either in terms of quantity. Religious can be just as possessive about their 'poverty' as the rich can be about their wealth. All christians, religious or otherwise, must manifest in their lives the truth that all things belong to Christ and find their meaning in him. The whole point of religious poverty is to do this in a way which will inspire the Church as a whole.

As christians we proclaim the truth that being is more important than having. We do this not through some personal evaluation of ourselves, but because we accept in faith the value that God has put on us in his gift of Christ. The worth of mankind as a whole and of each individual is Christ himself. In other words, we are worth more than the sum total of all humanity at its best. Furthermore, the whole of creation, in all its beauty and mystery as we see it with our human vision, does not match the vision that God has of all he has made. We still see in a glass darkly even when we look on the world and on men with eyes of love and wonder. Such belief in the immense richness of mankind and of the world in Christ is precisely what religious poverty is meant to express. There could be no greater aberration than to think of religious poverty in terms which in any way diminish the value of God's creation. It is the worst sort of self-deception to pretend that we do not need the world in which God has put us, nor should we be uneasy about admitting our needs. To be poor should mean that we are more and not less appreciative of our human condition.

Religious poverty is sometimes spoken of as liberating us for apostolic work. This sort of utilitarianism can also be seen in the argument that the vow of chastity is good and desirable because it liberates us from the cares of family life. Pushed to their logical conclusion, both arguments would lead to a theology which propounded God as useful to man. But we do not use God. The purpose of

chastity is not, and never can be, baldly utilitarian. If it is not a way of manifesting the personal love of Christ for all mankind and the consequent sanctity of all human love, then it is nothing. Similarly, if the purpose of poverty is simply to throw the burden of economic responsibility on to the shoulders of one member of the congregation, one wonders how that particular member could be allowed to take the vow in the first place. Religious poverty does not find its justification in the fact that it helps to finance apostolic works, such as teaching, or hospitals, by ploughing back the salaries of the members of a religious congregation into a project that otherwise would not be economically possible. When eventually such basic social needs as education and medicine are adequately catered for by state organizations, will there no longer be any use for the witness of religious poverty in these fields? If the sole purpose of religious poverty were to liberate religious for the apostolate, it has often failed in that purpose. Many congregations of religious today find themselves hamstrung in their apostolic planning by the institutions and properties they have acquired over the years.

Religious life as a whole is not justified solely in terms of its usefulness, any more than the Church itself is. This is not to deny that religious perform a useful role; but the norm of that usefulness must ultimately be sought in the very living heart of religious life; the sense of personal dedication in faith and hope and love to Christ. Working outwards from this point, we shall find our real effectiveness in ways which we do not even suspect. This basic inspiration lies at a much deeper level than we imagine. We must not forget that such an inspiration is something greater than even its first institutional expression, and we must beware of taking that first expression as an ideal. Ideals lie in the future, not in the past. It would be folly to wish to restructure the Church on the pattern of the Acts of the Apostles. But it would be just as much a mistake to be blind to the inspiration of simplicity and faith which the Church of the Acts portrays. The first jesuits walked their ways across Europe. Their modern brothers give the airlines good business. Should they, in the name of poverty, invest today in walking boots? Or should they not rather see the real poverty in the readiness to set out anew, the availability for all kinds of work, which was the reason why the early jesuits were such great travellers.

The fundamental reason for our poverty is that we are possessed by the Spirit of Christ. If we dispossess ourselves, that is but the negative way of expressing the positive reality of being possessed by

another. Once we begin to realise that the Lord is inviting us to follow him, then we have to begin to reconsider our whole lives on that basis. The fact that we no longer belong to ourselves must imply a rooting out of our possessiveness and a positive choice of a way of life which most helps us to consolidate and manifest our belonging to Christ. (This, incidentally, is the whole purpose of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius.) Poverty is one of the means we choose to live out the fulness of our relationship with Christ. The exterior gestures by which we express our belonging to Christ, and the belonging of all mankind and all creation to Christ, are not given to us automatically with our vocation. Nor can they be chosen simply on the basis of our personal inclinations. Such a choice would lead to our choosing a way of poverty which satisfies ourselves but which offers little or nothing to those whom our witness to Christ should enrich. Our personal inclinations must therefore be moulded by the situation in which we find ourselves and by the demands of a particular apostolate. This will inevitably mean that there will be differences in the exterior expression of poverty even within the same congregation; but those differences should all express the same fundamental inspiration. Hence it may not be possible or desirable to attempt to legislate for poverty in detail. Indeed, to do so would be to run the grave risk of stifling the Spirit. On the other hand, some sort of general guide-lines must be laid down and a balance must be struck between over-legislation and too vague principles.

In the past, most of the legislation in rules and customs has been negative. It has had to do with permissions to be sought for things and prohibitions about things. The training in poverty given in novitiates consisted largely in making the novices ask permission for everything. In practice this has sometimes generated the spirit of 'you can have anything you want as long as you ask for it'. The superiors who gave permissions felt they were safeguarding poverty by refusing permissions. Often they were simply being mean. The problem of poverty must be approached from another angle. We must ask how we can train people to the spirit of poverty, not simply by training them to ask for permissions but in a more positive way. If our poverty is the real expression of our awareness of what we have received in Christ, then surely one of the best ways of showing this is by our generosity. Poverty should mean a readiness to give of what we have got, a readiness to share all that we have, first of all ourselves and then the things that we have. The sort of people needed in religious life are those who are capable of giving of themselves;

and here again we see the intimate link between poverty and chastity and obedience. Poverty should mean hospitality, the open door which manifests the open heart. It should mean the positive orientation towards the real needs of man, rather than towards ensuring the economic stability of projects already in hand. There should be, as an integral part of our training in poverty, an education in appreciating all that is really genuine and beautiful. Not that religious houses should become minor Guggenheims; but at least they should be free of that exquisitely vulgar art and furnishing which has often characterized them. Poverty should mean that we spend our money wisely, to good purpose, and that our liberality is directed where it is most needed. If we are called to live and work among the poor, then we should share the reality and insecurity of their lives and earn our living with them. If we work among the more well-to-do, the consumer society, the witness of our poverty will be to show a cheerful generosity and simplicity to those whose lives are dominated by material considerations, and who tend to measure themselves by what they have. Here the real apostolate of poverty consists in treating people in terms of who they are in themselves, without consideration for what they have. Let us be ever grateful to benefactors, certainly, but let us beware of whom we allow to benefit us. Let us not go among the wealthy to parade our needs but to seek out theirs. The Good News is never successfully proclaimed cap in hand.

In all this there will be a constant demand on the individual, the community and the congregation as a whole continually to re-evaluate their situation in the matter of poverty. The external gestures of the spirit of poverty will necessarily change frequently and often if we are sensitive to the needs and demands of those to whom we are sent. It is here that the young and rising generation can tell us some honest home truths. There will be need for adjustment and also for radical surgery. But there is nothing more contrary to everything our poverty means than to keep on accepting things as they are for the specious reason that it would involve too major an operation to change them. Once we say this we admit that we are possessed by our possessions and, like the rich young man, we turn sadly away from the following of Christ.

The common life that we share is the love of Christ, our bond of community is the Spirit of love. This we share with the whole christian community and with the family of mankind. We are poor, whatever our situation, when we evaluate our lives in these terms.

Poverty does not mean that we should go round in rags, barefoot. What greater anomaly than a barefoot monk in a centrally-heated monastery? Poverty does mean that we put the right price on everything. The poor have to find out how much things cost. So must we. The real witness of our poverty will shine through when we learn to value people above things, being above having. This we can do because we know the supreme worth of Christ and the supreme value of belonging to him. We shall have to continue to battle with our needs and with the needs of others, for such is the human condition. But in this struggle, at least we shall be clear-sighted and honest, and be guided not by the desire for greater security but by the light of Christ. If we try to alleviate the material needs of mankind and our own among them, it will be so that we may more easily minister to the deep spiritual needs of man. We know how much we need Christ; our poverty is the means by which we can help others to realize that same need.

The present situation invites us to dispossess ourselves of much of what was regarded as essential and vital to religious life. We are becoming aware of how possessive we are, and future historians will be able to point to some curious symbols of salvation. The process has not ended and we have yet to learn the full extent of our possessions. We shall do that with faith and trust as long as we continue to find out first of all just how firmly Christ possesses us and how carefully he watches over his own. We clutch at straws to save ourselves from being submerged and the cross of Christ goes floating by unheeded. That cross is the sign of a complete and total giving of self and of everything, the sign of a love that is too great to worry about what people will think of it. That love is ours. Perhaps the best way of examining our poverty is to ask – How best can we give?