POVERTY, CHARITY AND KOINONIA

By PETER J. FENNESSY

'How can you reconcile your profession of poverty with the way you live?' Many religious are understandably embarrassed and justifiably ill at ease when this question is put to them, even though they have wrestled with the problem for many years, longer than their casual questioners. They have never been satisfied with the explanations and rationalizations of their mentors. Beneath the juridical definitions, they sense a basic deficiency; they cannot reconcile the felt richness of the gospel's call and ideal with the hollowness of religious poverty in practice.

Yet current explanations contain seeds of truth and values which, though partial, are undeniable and irreplaceable. Their very shortcomings indicate the areas where further development and expansion are needed.

1. Poverty is usually presented as dependence and detachment. It is a voluntary surrender of the independent use of material goods, undertaken in imitation of Jesus and at his command. The religious allows his use of goods to be regulated by superiors, hoping thus to overcome inordinate desires and to avoid entangling alliances. Such poverty aspires immediately towards an indifference and independence with regard to creatures, while its ultimate goal is the possession of God himself.

The explanation has its good points. It teaches that God is our supreme value, for whose sake we must be prepared to sacrifice any other value. It shows how we need to struggle against our possessiveness and to prevent material possessions from becoming our masters. Where superiors are prudent and religious are obedient, a balance is struck between the possession of real wealth and a destitution that is neither practised nor practicable. It offers some justification for the possession of material things, by those who have vowed poverty.

Its shortcomings are equally obvious, especially from the point of view that evangelical poverty is an essential of the religious life, and

as such, must clearly reflect the ideals of christian life and teaching. The widely accepted explanation of poverty is too negative, indirect and individualistic, too impracticable and unmotivating, and perhaps less faithful to the scriptures and the example and teaching of Jesus than one might suspect. In what follows, I want to look at each of these points, not in any destructive spirit, but in order to discover what further aspects of poverty should be included for a complete picture.

First, the given explanation over-emphasizes the negative side of creation. So much has been written of Jesus's teaching on the danger of riches that one may lose sight of another and more fundamentally important aspect of the christian attitude towards material creation. Matter is essentially good. When, in the beginning, God surveyed the works of his hands, he was pleased with them and declared them to be very good. It is part of God's design and not a fact to be deplored, that man's salvation, welfare and apostolic activity are tied up with creation and with matter. Creation is a means to the praise, reverence and service of God. Good use may and ought to be made of material things in as far as they help man in the attainment of this end. Such use, moreover, will give a better witness to God's presence in the world and the ordering of all created reality to him than would a renunciation of matter that is rather suggestive of manichean or platonic attitudes.

Christian attitude and action are primarily positive: recognizing the 'beauty deep down things', accepting these gifts and employing them properly, thereby sanctifying self and others and extending even to lesser creation the effects of Christ's redemptive act. Yet poverty appears – anomalously – to emphasize first and foremost the risk, the danger, the evil. It flees what it ought to encounter, it surrenders what it ought to employ. It has misplaced the emphasis.

Secondly, a conception of poverty centred upon negation and diminishment is too indirect in its bearing both on the good and on the living of a christian life. The proper object of man's will is the good, and therefore the positive. The negative, then, should be chosen indirectly. It is true that poverty is chosen for the sake of indifference, and indifference itself is desirable as a means to the attainment of God. But the ultimate goal, the supreme good, appears quite remote. Such remoteness on the part of the good and such directness in the choice of a negation are not necessary. Faced with a predominantly negative view of the vows, the will revolts and its revolt is not entirely unjustifiable. The christian and the religious

is called first to fulfil the will of God; he should choose the good and permit whatever negation or suffering results from this choice. 'Every man who would live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution':[1] the christian need not go out of his way to look for pain, he is not meant to surrender himself to the persecutors. The new christian commandment that we should love one another as Christ has loved us makes continual demands upon our pleasures, pride and possessions right down to the ultimate demand that might be made upon us to lay down our life for our brothers. So also, the religious whose life of poverty is dictated by a love of others, will suffer a far greater lack of material goods than he would ever incur by the direct seeking of self-denial, detachment or indifference.

Furthermore, such poverty is too indirect in regard to living the christian life. As a means towards virtues that facilitate the service of God and one's neighbour, it is remote from the end and belongs to the state of preparation for actual christian living. True, the christian and religious are always wayfarers, drawing ever closer to their goal, never expecting to find it under this sun. In this asymptotic approach to the perfect stature of manhood in Christ Jesus, the individual leads a life where every act of christian virtue prepares him to live more perfectly. This, however, is not the same thing as a succession of acts or a way of life undertaken primarily as preparatory, as a means to the virtue of detachment, which is in any case secondary. In that conception, the emphasis would seem to lie on semi-pelagian muscle-building. The entire picture needs to be reversed. If poverty is an essential of the 'ideal' state of christian living, it should be situated in the mainstream and not in the backwaters of christianity. It should deal directly with the essential of christianity and the religious life: perfect charity. Like the other vows, it should be a modalized expression of perfect love and not simply a means to a secondary virtue.

Thirdly, poverty as commonly understood seems too *individualistic* and too unrelated to the apostolic nature of the religious life, the ecclesial dimension of our faith and the essentially social aspect of the christian attitude towards material goods. Those who answer the call of the Kingdom join with Christ to recapture for God the real holy places – the souls of men – and they elect to follow him in poverty with this end in view. The individual religious lives in

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[1] 2 Tim 3, 12.

community with his fellow religious, with other believers and with the rest of mankind, especially the poor; the practical living of this communal life is frequently enough mediated through material goods. Furthermore, in the christian scheme, the right to private property must yield to the right that every man has to a decent life, for the goods of this earth are given for the common good of man first, and only secondarily for private possession. Yet, despite all this, the emphasis has been on the cultivation of individual and almost solipsistic virtue, unrelated directly or essentially to community or society. If poverty is to continue to be regarded as an essential of the 'ideal' state of religious life, it must have some reference to the apostolate, it must participate in making the religious a man for others, it must be both formative and expressive of community, as well as normative within the community for the use of material goods.

Fourthly, a view of poverty where the main stress lies on detachment and dependence is to some extent *impracticable*; as such, it can provide no adequate norm for practical judgments. Detachment and dependence – what sort of touchstones are these? Rare is the religious who does not feel that he could live in the midst of wealth without becoming unduly attached to it; rare also the superior who can be generally confident in his judgments about the inner dispositions of the members of the community. The familiar phrase, *omnia cum permissu* (all things, as long as I have permission), indicates the limited value that attaches to dependence as such as a norm. Rather than leading to detachment, dependence is more likely to result in the loss of personal responsibility, the loss of a sense of financial values, and the absence of any real need to depend in confidence upon divine providence.

The lack of any normative value in this poverty may be exemplified by the wide variety of life-styles to which it can be accommodated, life-styles often detrimental to the service of God and the integrity of the individual religious. One religious may suffer a lack of real necessities, even for his apostolate, because his superior is exercising him in virtue with some variation of the water-the-dry-stick game. When such a felt need is repressed or permission is refused, the result is more likely to be psychic frustration than detachment. Another religious, indulged with real wealth, is understandably unable to comfort himself with the notion that everything, after all, is being done with the superior's permission. Detachment as such does not demand any form of real dispossession

for the individual or the community; and it is therefore possible for either to live in a real wealth that is neither edifying nor productive of good. The layman is and should be scandalized. Unless in mistaken kindness he shuts his eyes and pretends that this anomalous situation does not exist, he is likely to be openly critical or silently cynical.

Fifthly, the current idea of poverty provides insufficient motivation. We have seen that it is too negative, too remotely connected with the good and with actual christian life and concerned with what is secondary; there is little motivating force in this. Besides, many religious sense little meaning in such a poverty, and cannot find in it a satisfactory explanation or norm for their way of life; if the trumpet gives an uncertain signal, who will make ready for battle? Really, what we are considering is both a call and a gift; it is aimed at some goal, but it also proceeds from some power. The logical explanation should uncover and explicitate the real incentive and source of psychic energy, which will enable the religious to carry on through the hardships of a life of poverty. This would be homologous in the spiritual life to the political principle that a person entrusted with a duty must be provided as well with the power to fulfil it. And these two aspects of poverty, its goal and its motivation, should be shown in any explanation in their relatedness.

Finally, just how faithful to the example and teaching of Jesus is this way of understanding evangelical poverty? Poverty has always been accepted as imitation of Jesus, at his invitation and for his sake. This is true, but is also very superficial as an explanation. It does not show what poverty is, nor why Jesus lived a life of poverty or offered such a life to others. Jesus had a unique mission amid socio-economic and cultural circumstances that no longer prevail, so that his external manner of living would be a very tenuous guide for the modern religious; thus poverty has rarely pretended to be a slavish imitation of Jesus' mode of life. What is it then? The deeper motivation of Jesus is elusive, but it would be unjustifiable to say that he is primarily seeking detachment, and it would be silly to say that *his* motivation was 'the imitation of Christ'.

The import of Jesus's life was love of God and love for men, not detachment from things. The first place is held by a commitment to God, by a seeking first the kingdom of God, with all other things coming second. Poverty for Jesus was not a means by which he might attain to God, but a result of his union with God. It was not the means of loving men, but the expression of that love.

2. To discover how far our poverty is faithful to the example and teaching of Christ, as these are authentically interpreted by the primitive Church, and to develop a concept of poverty that is in accordance with those norms, we must look at scripture and especially, I believe, at three details: the common life of Jesus and his disciples, the Jerusalem community, and the pauline collection.

First, the common life of Jesus and his disciples. It was to this little group that the rich young man was invited with the words: 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me'.[2] The young man turned down the invitation and went away sorrowful, 'because he had great possessions'; but we are to understand beyond this that he was too attached to them to give them up for Christ. This does not imply that detachment is the essence or the goal of poverty; on the contrary, it implies that detachment is a prerequisite to a religious life of poverty. The religious who has embraced a life of poverty is to some extent already detached. Detachment is the beginning of that life, not the end.

The young man is told first to sell his goods and to give the proceeds to the poor. This is not an action that the follower of Jesus can be contented with. The common purse of the apostolic group appears to have been used frequently for the benefit of persons other than the twelve,[3] and especially as alms for the poor.[4] In supplying the needs of others from what he and his disciples held in common, Jesus was simply practising what he himself preached,[5] and what the Baptist had preached before him.[6] It was no new or unusual teaching or practice, either for the jews or for other religious people.

If there is anything unusual about the poverty indicated here it might be the totality of the offering for others that Jesus admired,[7] a totality indicated by the complete dispossession of all that one has in favour of the poor, and a totality we might expect him to practise who in the end laid down even his life for others. One might be expected in such an offering to keep nothing for one's own comfort, to make no provision for luxuries or superfluities, and indeed to go even further than this.[8]

The young man is also invited to follow Christ. This means not

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[2] Mt 19, 21. [3] Mk 6, 37. [4] Mt 26, 9; Mk 14, 5; Jn 12, 5–6; 13, 29.
[5] Lk 6, 30–38. [6] Lk 3, 10–11.
[7] Lk 21, 1–4. [8] Mt 7, 25–34.

simply the inner imitation of Christ, but to walk with him and to share his life. It is much this same invitation that is made in the ignatian meditation on the Kingdom: 'whoever wishes to join me in this enterprise must be content with the same food, drink, clothing, etc. as mine'. The disciples lived a common life with Jesus, a frequent enough practice at that time for a wandering rabbi and his pupils. It was concretely expressed by the common purse. The sharing within the group was expressive of their mutual love and concern, the sharing outside the group expressive of their common love and concern for those in need.

Secondly, the Jerusalem community. After the death and resurrection of Christ, the disciples did not apparently abandon their former way of life. Indeed, they appear to have extended it, and to have lived in common with others who had come to believe in Jesus. The author of Acts writes:

> And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.[9]
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> Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.[10]

It has been suggested that in these early chapters of the Acts we are looking at the Church through rose-coloured glasses, seeing an ideal picture rather than an historical one. So much the better! An ideal picture of poverty and the christian community will be more useful to us than a factual account, for we are not seeking to know precisely how our predecessors lived, but rather how dedicated christians ought ideally to live. The story of Ananias and Sapphira[11] exemplifies the fact that there were those then as now who profess but do not live evangelical virtue, and indicates that the practice was neither universal nor of obligation. Each might undertake freely to share his goods in a total fashion with the needy, but once such an undertaking was publicly professed, before the Church and the apostles, one was under serious obligation of some kind. In the

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[9] Acts 2, 44–5. [10] Acts 4, 32–35. [11] Acts 5, 1–11.

case of Ananias and Sapphira, infringement of that obligation was literally mortal.

Between the two passages cited above, some sort of institutionalization appears to be developing. In the second text the apostles, and not the people themselves, distribute the funds to the needy, perhaps because this was a more effective means than individual action.

Two further developments between the two texts call for notice. First, in the earlier text, possessions and goods are sold, in the second, lands and estates. These christians might be following their ideas to their logical conclusions or acting in this way in view of their expectations of an imminent Parousia. But there may be an historical reason too. Famine and very hard times came upon Judea in the middle of the first century; this greatly increased the general need, and may have been the occasion for the disposal of even greater amounts of property than had hitherto been necessary. The situation was one of widespread actual poverty and hunger. In the later text it would appear that distribution is made to the needy principally within the limits of the Church; if there was such a limitation of alms to those within the Church, this might be explained in part by the greater need within the Church that would be developing at this time.

This sharing of goods within the Church went by the name of *koinonia* or fellowship, and as such it is directly related to theological themes. Our primary sharing is *in* a supernatural mystery: divine life. As a result of this we also have a sharing *with* each other. This is the theological significance of *koinonia* in the New Testament, apart from the financial sharing of the Jerusalem community and of the pauline collection. The fellowship that we have with each other, based upon our fellowship in Christ, finds expression in the sharing, on the concrete and practical level, of our material possessions. It follows immediately on that common life shared by Jesus and his disciples.

Can we explain this further, and give the inner motivation for such sharing? The author of Hebrews touches somewhat on the self-denial aspect of christian sharing: 'Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God'.[12] We need not look far to discover why such sacrifices are pleasing. Why else does a man deny himself and go without in order that

[12] Heb 13,16.

another person may have, if not because of love? Without this essential element, the external action is of no avail: 'If I give away all I have . . . but have not love, I gain nothing'.[13] Conversely, sharing is the very heart of love. In the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God, Ignatius makes two introductory points: love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words, love consists in *a mutual sharing of goods*. Nor are these goods confined to any particular category but they include possessions, honours, talents, knowledge, time, whatever one possesses. *Koinonia* is the response of the primitive Church to the new commandment of Christ: that we love one another as he has loved us. And this is the aim and whole meaning of the religious life, as is indicated by the title and total thrust of Vatican II's document on the life of the evangelical counsels: *Perfectae Caritatis*.

Thirdly, the pauline collection, where the same dynamic is at work. Paul himself stresses generosity to the poor. He places hospitality and contribution to the needs of the saints under the rubric of genuine love.[14] After settling his differences with the apostles and the Jerusalem community, he is asked only one thing: to remember the needs of the poor; the very thing, he says, that he was most eager to do.[15] And finally he begins the collection to help the needy in the Church in Judea.

But he also sees the collection as an expression of the bond of unity and community that exists in the Church on a deeper level than that of material goods. It was through the jews that the gentiles came to share the spiritual blessings of christianity, and thus it is fitting that the gentiles should share their material goods with the jewish christians who were then in need.[16] Paul also desires the Jerusalem community to accept the gentiles and the ministry he has been exercising. In this context, the collection is not to be seen as a kind of bribe: rather the response of the gentiles to the needs of Jerusalem is a manifestation of love, and thus a concrete sign of the presence of the holy Spirit in them. They have a sharing *in* the Spirit, and thus a sharing *with* the Jerusalem community, which, confronted by this public manifestation of the work of the Spirit, should accept the gentiles and acknowledge the work of God in them.

The collection, then, is basically a work of love and a manifestation of it:

[13] 1 Cor 13, 3. [14] Rom 12, 9–13. [15] Gal 2, 10.
[16] Rom 15, 26–8; cf Gal 6, 16.

> Now as you excel in everything . . . see that you excel in this gracious work also. I say this not as a command, but to prove that your love also is genuine.[17]

As a matter of love and a proof of it,[18] it is beyond obligation, and the response is expected to be free and spontaneous;[19] for in what other way can the law of love be fulfilled? Paul explicitly states that the gentile christians need not deprive themselves of necessities,[20] but also notes, and not with disapproval, that the response in Macedonia went much further. They gave out of their substance and beyond their means and even of themselves, first to God and then, by his will, to Paul.[21] Undoubtedly, such self-denial was not easy, but their action was done and the difficulty sustained in joy, a fruit of the Spirit:[22] for the lover all things are easy.

When Paul suggests that the corinthians act in imitation of Christ, he stresses not the earthly poverty of Christ so much as his emptying of himself in becoming man:

> For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.[23]

He who was in the form of God emptied himself to become man, so that man might share in his own divinity.[24] In this mission of the Son and in the humiliation of the cross is to be seen the greatness of God's love for the world,[25] and as God has loved us so we ought to love one another: what is to be imitated is precisely the love that impelled Christ to this sacrifice.

But our response is in fact more than the mere imitation of an exemplar or the practical expression of a doctrine to which intellectual assent has been given. It is derivative from an ontological presence and power, and expressive of a reality that has been received. Jesus became poor that we might become rich, and that enrichment is fact and not mere myth. Enriched by the reception of his divine life, motivated and sustained by it and operating in its power, the religious lives out its dynamic by giving of himself and his possessions so that others may not be in need.

3. A renewed understanding of religious poverty must therefore

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[17] 2 Cor 8, 7–8. [18] 2 Cor 8, 24. [19] 2 Cor 8, 3. 10; 9,7.
[20] 2 Cor 8, 13–15. [21] 2 Cor 8, 3–5. [22] 2 Cor 8, 2.
[23] 2 Cor 8, 9. [24] Cf Phil 2, 1–7.
[25] Rom 5,8; Gal 2,20; Jn 3,16; 15, 12–13.

meet two criteria. It must answer the felt needs of the contemporary religious, as outlined in the beginning of this article, and it must correspond to the scriptural indications touched on above. Both these requirements would appear to be met by a religious poverty which consists in the expression, through the mediation of material goods, of genuine love within the various communities formed by inter-personal relationships with Christ.

The ontological foundations of such a way of life are the presence of God and of true christian love, which supply the power and motivation for the life and which sustain the individual through whatever sacrifices this life entails. The work is thus brought to its perfection and fulfilment with the help of him who first began it in us. It is based on the positive and proper use of material creation to the extent that it may help the religious and others to attain the end for which they have been created. Thus it bears witness, not only to the intrinsic value of the creation and the supreme value of the final end of creation, but also to the value of the recipient as above the personal comforts of the religious.

The basic conditions for a life of poverty, besides a recognition of these values, are a dedication to God and a freedom from inordinate attachments to possessions. These are prerequisites and not simply goals.

The aim of poverty is the good of the beloved, and the presence in or to him of some concrete good that is in our power to bestow. Since every real gift is in intention a giving of the giver, of the personal reality behind the giving, the aim of our sharing is ultimately that the recipient may possess divine life and may be sharers with us in the reality that is the ultimate source of our action. And in God's mercy we do assist by the example of our lives in the communication of this priceless gift. The religious is thus concerned primarily with a direct living of the christian life and a fulfilment of the new christian law of love. His life is not just an imitation of Christ in a superficial manner or even at the level of motivation; it is a continuance today of Christ's own divine presence and activity.

The expression of the underlying reality and the means to accomplish the aims of a life of evangelical poverty is the sharing of goods. Thus it is directly related to the apostolate, where the religious shares with others his time, talents and knowledge, the goods that may be directly given and the possessions that may be administered by the order, not for their own comfort, but for the

benefit of the needy. It is related as well to the other vows: chastity, where there is a particularly personal self-giving to Christ and to others; and obedience, where one's knowledge and insights are shared in a common discernment of the will of God, and one's talents and energies for the accomplishment of the common purposes of the institute.

The situation in which this sharing takes place is necessarily social or communal, for it is the exercise of a virtue that is essentially inter-personal. The sharing that supplies real needs within the religious community is both expressive and formative of community and of mutual love and concern; obviously it should take place wherever there is need within the community, whether on the local, provincial or international levels. Apostolic use of goods, or their distribution as alms, is expressive of love and concern for the needy and of one's solidarity with them. Nor is this sharing entirely outgoing: the gifts of benefactors show the existence of a union – not of dependence alone but also of love – between themselves and the religious community, and through community with those in want.

The norms for particular uses of material goods are no longer purely internal, but to a greater extent may be found in the concrete situation: the real needs of others in comparison with our own comforts and luxuries. The norm is not complete, of course. There remains the need for clear discernment between claims that are not easy to reconcile: the immediate needs of the hungry and destitute on the one hand, the long-term requirements of the institute's spiritual, cultural or intellectual apostolate on the other. There is the very vague and perhaps deceptive question of comforts for the individual religious that are thought to produce a more effective apostolate. But what we are looking for is a more satisfactory norm for religious poverty than has been provided by the ideal of interior detachment. The concrete norm of the needs of the apostolate and of the truly poor is certainly a step in that direction.

The result of such a life of poverty, besides bringing relief to others' real needs, will undoubtedly be the experience of privation on the part of the giver. The religious who leads a life of unselfish charity will have to undergo many concrete sacrifices and sufferings; he will have less time and material goods at his disposal. In enriching others we shall frequently become poorer by the standards of this world. Yet such sacrifices can be borne in joy by that same power that began this work, and in confidence that God will supply every real need in his bountiful goodness and loving providence.