

DISCERNING THE IGNATIAN WAY IN POVERTY TODAY

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THERE IS PROBABLY no more threatening topic to be discussed in this symposium than that of ignatian poverty.¹ On this topic above all others, jesuit rationality and pragmatism are not enough. Feeling and passion are indispensable, and probably some conflict, too. We are, then, in an ideal situation for discernment. We need to attend to our feelings, whatever they may be; we need to struggle for inner freedom. We need to be ready, in love, to call each other from mediocrity to conversion to the gospel.

The question of poverty, we are fond of saying, is complex. And so it is. But so is a living organism – our bodies for example. As long as our bodies are healthy, their complexity does not oppress but rather delights us. It is only when the body is sick, out of tune, enslaved to forces which are too much for it, that its complexity becomes a problem. Is the body of the Society of Jesus in America today sick in the area of poverty? If it is, how shall it be healed, liberated?

Since this paper is prelude to a discussion, it will be partial rather than comprehensive, evocative rather than systematic. It presupposes or prescinds from the historical or canonical approaches to

¹ The following works have been helpful, along with the *Spiritual Exercises, Constitutions*, etc., in preparing the present paper, and will provide helpful background for our discussions: Decree 18 of the 31st General Congregation, together with *Statutes on Poverty and Other Matters that Go With Poverty*, promulgated by Fr. Arrupe on September 15, 1967; the letter of Fr. Arrupe 'On Poverty, Work and Common Life', April 14, 1968; the tentative conclusions of the sub-commission for the revision of the statutes on poverty, particularly those dated July 20, 1972 and December 29, 1972; the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI on renewal of the religious life, June 29, 1971, especially nn. 16–22; the letter on poverty of Fr. Heinrich Kraus, provincial of the Upper German Province, February 2, 1971; Karl Rahner, 'The Theology of Poverty', *Theological Investigations*, volume 8, pp 168–214; D. Knight, 'Saint Ignatius' Idea of Poverty', in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 4 (January, 1972), No. 1, pp 1–37; *The Way, Supplement No. 9, Poverty* (Spring, 1970), which includes essays by Ladislav Örsy and myself, and also a survey of the theme in recent literature, by Michael Ivens S.J.

ignatian poverty. My remarks come under four headings: 1) I will seek to sketch some of the features of a much needed hermeneutic of ignatian poverty; 2) I will attempt to describe the field of ignatian poverty, that is, the dimensions of human life which it directly touches; 3) I will make some brief observations on what is distinctive of ignatian poverty; 4) I will address myself, also briefly, to the question of how we are to seek a realization of ignatian poverty today.

1. *The need of a hermeneutic*

Our pressing need is not for a content but for a process. How do we assemble the 'data'? How do we deal with it when we have it assembled? How do we relate to one another in the process of dealing with it? And how does it affect the way we live, and in turn itself get modified by the way we live? Much of the value of historical studies of ignatian spirituality in general and of ignatian poverty in particular is lost because too often they stop just when they have reached the beginning, namely the question: So what? Granted that Ignatius lived in such and such a way, developed in a certain direction, wrote thus and so, legislated as follows – so what? There is no reason why the hermeneutical advances realized in biblical scholarship should not be brought to bear on the life and writings of Ignatius and of his Society in all its historical development. I can here sketch only a few of the salient features of such a hermeneutic of ignatian poverty. While most of what I will be saying is applicable to other dimensions of ignatian spirituality, it must especially be brought to bear upon the question of poverty, because it is complex, crucial and threatening.

First, since we are dealing here with the mystery of redemption as those who are within the mystery, we must acknowledge that our inquiry is being conducted by sinful christians, that we ourselves are part of the problem. Grateful as we are for the gift of redemption embodied in our christian and ignatian vocation, we dare speak of ignatian poverty only in a posture of *metanoia*, a spirit of shame and confusion at our betrayals in the area of poverty. Only the poor can truly understand poverty, and it may well be that the best we can achieve in our present discussion is to encourage one another to make those changes in our life together which are preliminary to a renewed experience and appreciation of the poverty of Christ and Ignatius in our heritage. At any rate, let us not assume in our hermeneutic of ignatian poverty that we are in fact poor men presently capable of identifying it.

Secondly, this hermeneutic must be wary of reifying and dichotomizing ignatian poverty. There is no such *thing* as ignatian, or christian, poverty. Poverty is not a thing. It is a condition of persons and communities, a situation, a complexus of attitudes, and a dimension of an integral life. This is not yet a definition of poverty; in fact, it is only in a broad sense that christian and ignatian poverty can be defined. In the inevitable struggle to do so we achieve rather an identity than a definition; the end product is not so much genus and species as an always inadequate conceptual and linguistic expression which, together with the *lived* expressions, provide us with a creative symbol, both challenging and supportive, of the kind of commitment we have made to God and to each other. This is, indeed, a rather abstract description for a reality which I am insisting is not abstract. I hope at least that it may make us wary of identifying the reality and the description.

If we must not reify ignatian poverty, neither may we dichotomize it. Ignatius's *conceptualization* of poverty must not be separated from his *experience* of poverty from which it derived and which in turn it nourished. Ignatian poverty must not be *unduly* differentiated from the poverty inherent in the gospel and from other forms of christian poverty such as the franciscan (though, as I shall later indicate, we may legitimately speak of distinguishing features of ignatian poverty). Poverty as expression of our vowed commitment must not be isolated from celibacy and especially from obedience. Poverty as a gospel attitude and a freely chosen way of material existence must not be divorced from poverty as an oppressive socio-economic condition. And finally, poverty must not be conceived as concerned with the relationship of man to matter as if this relationship were extrinsic to his relationship with God and his fellow men; on the contrary, christian and ignatian poverty is constitutive of a distinctive way of being with God and with one's fellow man.

Thirdly, and as a kind of counterpoint to the preceding, there are necessary differentiations which must enter into our discussion, particularly the distinction between the underlying mystery or reality which is finding expression, and the culturally conditioned expressions. It is here especially that archaism and fundamentalism are hazards. That Ignatius prayed with tears for days and weeks over the poverty of the houses of the professed is not necessarily a call to renew poverty by restoring houses of the professed; in and through the specific elements of the total situation in which he was discerning the way of poverty for his Company, we must seek the underlying

meaning and intentionality, not as a general principle from which we now draw conclusions or which we apply to very different 'cases', but as a kind of transcendent horizon or light which affects profoundly the way in which we look upon the specific elements in our total situation today.

This leads me to a fourth remark regarding a hermeneutic of ignatian poverty, which explicitates what has been implicit in what I have already said. This hermeneutic will verify what I have elsewhere called a process of historical identification and contemporary discernment. It will take place in a kind of scissors action or counterpoint between attention to charismatic origins and historical developments, on the one hand, and attentiveness to the contemporary *signa temporis*. In its retrospective aspect, it is not content with a purely detached and objective exegesis of texts (though such exegesis is indispensable), but seeks a *committed* appropriation of the past in the present for the sake of the future. All christian hermeneutics is *anamnesis*, renewal of a covenant, and it is eschatological in the sense that it terminates in decision, the free, responsive shaping of the future. And both the anamnestic and the eschatological character intrinsically affect the way in which we attend to contemporary signs of God's presence and call. It is *because of* the past, not in spite of it, that we are called to be open to what is new in the present. And it is because our past is a past of free and responsive election, choice, that we must passionately identify with it if we are to be truly free to shape the future. Our past, when truly remembered, liberates for the future.

All that this is really saying, perhaps, is that our task regarding ignatian poverty is a call to a communal discernment of spirits, to decisional process touching the way we are to relate to one another, to the Church, to mankind, to God and his Christ, as regards material existence. Without elaborating on the specifics of this discernment process, let me say that the way we choose to *speak* of ignatian poverty is not a mere preliminary to election or decision, for word is not extrinsic to life: word *is* deed, provided it be a true word.

2. *The field of poverty*

In view of the considerable diversity of meanings given to the term *poverty*, most of which are legitimate and relevant, it may be worth while to say something briefly about the *field* of poverty, that is, a) the specific dimensions of human and christian life covered by the term, b) the aspects of the christian mystery which especially

relate to poverty, and c) the human and christian values which christian history reveals to have been sought through the practice of christian poverty. Broadly but properly, the term poverty would seem to describe how man relates, through a freely chosen or imposed privational status and attitude, to the material world, with which he is linked through his own body. More importantly, the term poverty designates how this privational relationship to the material world mediates man's relationship to his fellow men and to God. Within this broad conception of the field of poverty, there is room for distinguishing between socio-economic poverty (which itself needs inner differentiation) and the poverty of the gospel, where again one would need to distinguish poverty as an inner attitude of spirit (sometimes extended to the point where it is more or less identical with faith in its privational aspect) and poverty as situation or embodiment of the gospel. Allowing for such distinctions, and for broad and strict understandings of the term, it seems to me that in a series of discussions on jesuit life where celibacy and obedience are dealt with as distinct topics, it is important to keep the reference to materiality prominent in our discussion of ignatian poverty.

In so brief a presentation, one can barely mention some of the more important aspects of the christian mystery in its doctrinal character which are particularly related to poverty. A theology of creation would highlight the grandeur of man in his creation as steward of the material world, and would undoubtedly, in the context of today's ecological problem, seek to elaborate a nuanced understanding of man's *dominion* over the material creation.² It would call attention to the human potential for developing the image of God in man through work, art, culture, civilization, sacramental worship. And it would today reflect on the human values of justice and peace from the viewpoints of man's relationship to the material world.

A decade ago, the creational-incarnational dimensions of christian faith, perhaps predominantly teilhardian, would have dominated a theological reflection on man and the material world. Today, it seems to me, our mounting experience of the demonic in our world calls for a new emphasis on how sin has affected man in his material environment, how human sin becomes the sin of the world, how concupiscence as a theological and ascetical concept now needs socialization and politicization. Theologians like Schoonenberg,

² Cf Gen 1, 26; Ps 8, 6-8.

Metz and Rahner are providing us with the language we need to give voice to our experience that there are indeed sinful or concupiscent structures, that violence does get institutionalized, and that the struggle for peace and justice entails more than the conversion of consciences. A certain convergence of sound theological opinion today suggests that the ascetical struggle for personal integrity and freedom and the social, economic, political and cultural struggle for the liberation of man from his own oppressive constructs are one and the same struggle. If there is any one sign of the times which needs to be central in our reflection on ignatian poverty today, I submit that it is this convergence.

But if a christian theology of sin and concupiscence points to this dark existential of our life, a christian theology of redemption or liberation points to an existential of light. Where sin has abounded, grace has yet more abounded. If man can project his concupiscence into structures of violence, a similar projection of faith and grace is an imperative of the gospel and, however interwoven with that which it has sought to combat, a reality of christian history. In this perspective, then, voluntary christian poverty emerges as something old and something new: the something old is the lived expression of an apocalyptic, critical, counter-cultural christian faith always in protest against the idolatrous enslavement of the material world and of man through the projection of human greed; the something new is the explicit realization that the christian mission and message are directed not merely to personal consciences in the context of life in society, but to the renewal of society itself through an effort to liberate its institutions, structures and processes, and thereby man himself from the enslavement produced by the projection of human sinfulness and concupiscence.

If these are some of the doctrinal sources of a redemptive poverty that seeks to liberate man and his world, we can now enumerate some of the values which have been sought and, in a measure, achieved, through voluntary christian poverty down the ages: the freedom of man for God in faith and trust, manifesting God's glory through man's embodied affirmation that he does not live by bread alone; fraternity among those who share material privation in faith and trust; the freedom to be one's true self, unencumbered by preoccupation with triviality; freedom to be at the service of the poor and witnesses to them, through the works of mercy and, increasingly in our day, through the work of justice and peace; the release of human creativity through art, work, etc.; the amelioration

of the material world itself, its liberation from bondage, when men who reverence the divine in it without idolatry draw it into a partnership of faith.

3. *The distinctiveness of ignatian poverty*

My remarks here must be extremely brief, and are concerned more with context than with content. What I have already said about a hermeneutic of ignatian poverty warns us against seeking genus and specific difference in a self-conscious effort to demonstrate that Ignatius was not Benedict or Francis. Nevertheless, it is both possible and necessary to engage in the always unfinished task of identifying how the ignatian charism verified itself in this dimension of the life of his Company. The task is always unfinished, primarily not because the historical data is incomplete or in need of further organization, but because *we* are incomplete in our effort to understand and follow Ignatius.

It seems clear that Ignatius himself underwent a development in the expression of his desire to be poor with the poor Christ, and it may be said (a suggestion for which I am indebted to Ladislav Örsy) that poverty for the later Ignatius was more clearly differentiated from franciscan poverty, especially by its subordination to that ecclesial and apostolic mobility which assumed primacy in the ignatian vision. This primacy of the apostolic over the forms of material existence must not be taken, however, as indicating that Ignatius took a purely pragmatic or instrumentalistic view of the experience of material privation. Here David Knight's observations serve as a corrective to that bland acceptance of middle-class comfort in the name of apostolic efficiency which is one of the principal blocks to the reform of jesuit poverty today. Ignatius's tears on the matter of fixed revenues for the professed become incomprehensible in such a view. It was precisely because Ignatius deeply experienced the incongruity of a comfortable existence for those called to identify themselves totally with the crucified Christ and with his exigent message, that he built into our Society a bias toward frugality and simplicity, an affinity with those who in the ordinary sense are poor, and, in the symbol of the special vow of the professed regarding changes in the Society's poverty, an abhorrence for the inevitable drift toward comfort and security, which is a constant threat.

Ignatius himself tended to formulate relationships in terms of ends and means to the ends. The danger of such a formulation is that of a certain mechanization of life. I would suggest that a more organic

model might help us to relate the various aspects of jesuit poverty among themselves, and jesuit poverty as a whole to other dimensions of our entire life. In such a model, as in an organism, not everything is equally central; there are critical centres which profoundly affect the life of the whole organism, without themselves, however, being immutable or immune from positive or negative influences, from what is more peripheral. Judgment regarding this or that dimension of our poverty, the level of material frugality, the measure of autonomy given to individuals or local groups, the matter of fixed income, etc., will take place not so much by deduction from fixed principles or with reference to a fixed centre as by a certain *discernment of congruity*, always with reference to the whole of the life of an individual jesuit or of a community. Here and now, in this situation, with these people and these apostolic goals, to what degree does our life, especially as regards poverty, remain faithful to the gospel and to the ignatian vision?

4. *Discerning ignatian poverty today*

In the light of all this, what are we to do? It squares with what I have said that no single reform or implementation of ignatian poverty represents *the* thing to do. The *direction* of our efforts might be to move towards the necessary conditions for a communal discernment-process in our local communities, provinces, assistancy, and worldwide Society regarding poverty. In fostering those necessary conditions, the directed retreat would seem an indispensable aid. It also seems to me that we have great need today for significant efforts on the part of a few communities in each province, probably new communities, to experience, in our contemporary context, the effects of frugal and even precarious living. Such pioneering ventures would take the *young* Ignatius, and his early years with his companions, as inspiration. If fully and sympathetically endorsed by all of us, they could provide us with a concrete challenge to move towards a genuine reformation of our life of poverty. Finally, and perhaps in conjunction with such communities, we jesuits need to acknowledge our need for help from those outside the Society. Especially among those who have committed themselves to the cause of peace and justice, and among the victims of war and injustice, we will find, if we really want to, those who can teach us much about what we are capable of doing and suffering for the name of Jesus, and to benefit those for whom he died.