

## CHRISTIAN POVERTY: SIGN OF FAITH AND REDEMPTIVE FORCE

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**S**OME PEOPLE are born poor; others are made poor. For the most part, in either case this poverty is slavery, the result of external oppression, a demand made by some of God's children upon their own brothers and sisters. This poverty is a human contrivance, a stubborn trace of a resilient inhumanity in the face of God's unalterable generosity.

This essay focuses on another kind of poverty, however: one which is a matter of godly conviction and choice. It is the poverty of God himself in Christ who was born poor and who made himself poor for the sake of his Father's kingdom. It is also the poverty of those who wish to be poor in Christ. What is the meaning of the Christ of poverty, and what is implied by the lives of men and women who today voluntarily accede to Christ's admonition, 'If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me' (Mt 19, 21)?

On one level, of course, the reason for choosing to be poor is obvious: Christ presents voluntary poverty as an earnest expression of one's desire for perfection, and he unambiguously promises those who make themselves poor for the poor that they will be rich for ever. But the question needs pursuing. What are the values of this poverty, to make Christ himself assume it, so that he does not hesitate to link the desire for perfection with the abandonment of earthly riches? And why is the choice of poverty associated with the assurance of an eternal treasure?

For some, these questions are not the most significant, nor would their answers be compelling. There are people, seeking only the praise and glory of God, who, as St Ignatius describes them in his *Spiritual Exercises*, 'desire and choose poverty with Christ poor rather than riches, in order to be more like Christ our Lord'. In the lives of such people there is no need to question what voluntary poverty means, nor is it necessary to know why Christ commits himself to such a life. The important truths are only that Christ freely lived poorly, that he invites others to do likewise, and that by his graciousness it is possible to reflect his choice and life of poverty. This attitude finds virtue in the imitation of Christ and his style of life without attending sufficiently, I think, to the charge we have inherited: that we are to put on the mind of Jesus Christ. There is no propriety in criticizing the desire to be poor with Christ poor, but I believe that such grace-inspired ambition, left unexplored, allows much of the richness of chosen poverty, both in Christ and in his followers, to remain unappreciated, and

perhaps much of this poverty's challenge to be ignored. To begin, then, what might be the meaning of the poverty into which Christ freely entered?

*Poverty: sign of the faith necessary for salvation*

Let it be said at once that Christ's poverty is of the very fabric of his being. Although divine, yet he 'did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are' (Phil 2, 6-7). Just as, in his incarnation, Christ truly dispossesses himself of divine prerogatives, so, in his commitment to poverty, does he enter into a condition of worldly dispossession. In Christ, poverty is a continuation of the process of self-emptying and self-forgetfulness which began with his agreement to enflesh the word of his Father's promise to Israel. Christ's decision never to grasp after the things of the world reflects surely his conformity to his Father's will; but this is a conformity arising out of confidence and faith so profound, so compelling, that Christ can resist the temptation to establish and confirm his identity in anything but his Father's love. He knows himself as his Father's Son, as the loved One of God; in this knowledge he finds not only his strength to work, but also his freedom to forego the satisfaction of accumulating the products made available as a result of his labour.

Confident of his place in his Father's heart, Christ is no less aware of the secrets of that heart, especially of the Father's love for all his children who either do not know that they are loved, or do not know how to receive that love. And so, Christ lives in a way that confers new life upon himself and upon others. He allows his Father to be truly Father; he allows himself to be formed as Son, which is to become even as the Father, and he grows in love of his Father's loves. His single and singular response to the Father overflows and is multiplied in the life and works of that love which has no end. In recognition of this life and love, Christ is raised high.

Christ's poverty, then, is an externalization of personal openness to his Father's love, and of his trusting acceptance of his Father's plan of salvation. In choosing poverty, Christ in effect grounds and locates himself in the life of his Father, learning his love so that he can live and share it with others. At one and the same time, this decision reveals the uniqueness both of the Father and of the kingdom to which he calls us. Beyond this, Christ's entrance into poverty illuminates the inner disposition which must characterize all those who wish to be joined to the Father. Christ, freely poor, is the living sign to us of that faith which is necessary for salvation. He comes in poverty out of love so that we might know that salvation, precisely as the expression of the Father's love, is, like love, a gift which can never be won, but only earnestly desired, patiently sought and, in the end, gratefully received in handing oneself over to God in love and trust.

Christ's decision for poverty is meant to deal the death-blow against the illusion that salvation is the reward of our labours; if self-righteousness reflects a deluded state of mind, no less does the attempt at self-sufficiency

betray one's ignorance of life in the Father's love. The poverty of Christ is both a challenge and an inspiration; it tests us and encourages our response to a divine Father who uses his powerful love to surprise and confuse us, and to draw us to reliance more upon him than upon ourselves. The poor Christ calls us to recast radically our thoughts and ways, for these are not the Father's. False gods and self-reliance are equally ineffectual for salvation. Only the Father's prodigal love which we accept and cherish in living faith finally matters.

Thus, around Christ's poverty, and the attitude it embodies, is centred much of the new and startling truth of Christianity. For this poverty seems to be connected to the introduction of a new law (of love), a new salvation (by grace through faith), and a new kingdom (offered as a gift to be freely and actively received). Just as the poor of the earth are essentially powerless in the economic order, so all people are without effective power in the order of salvation. Had Christ come in riches we might find this truth even harder to accept than we presently do. As it is, Christ's free acceptance of poverty proclaims that there is everlasting life in opening oneself completely to the rich hopes and love of the Father for us. When poverty is an expression of one's acceptance of the Father's presence, power and saving action, then only and truly is it a value to be lived.

*Poverty: redemptive force for others*

So far we have looked at Christ's poverty as a chosen style of life illuminating an interior disposition of that faith which is essential for human salvation. But there is also a prophetic dimension to Jesus's poverty, by means of which his life proves provocative to poor and rich alike. In addition, then, to telling us something of the kind of personal relationship Jesus enjoyed with his Father, his poverty is meant to be a redemptive force for the lives of others. Christ's poverty must be viewed within the context of his life-mission; he walked the earth as servant of all people in need of the gospel of redemption; his desire was that everyone—poor and rich—would hear his good news, do penance and believe. His poverty was part of his message and crucial to his mission.

I would suggest, therefore, that, in the lives of those who choose today to be poor for the sake of the kingdom, poverty ideally incarnates not only their own open abandonment to the Father's love, but also their earnest desire to extend the redemptive concern of Christ for all people. These people choose poverty for the sake of the poor and of the rich. They assist the poor in a practical way by using their talents on behalf of the poor, or by surrendering their wealth to them, or employing it for their benefit. The poor are served in still another way, however, on the level of the spirit; those who undertake to live christian lives of poverty signify their faith in the Father and his kingdom, knowing that this world and its standards are not ultimate and will not prevail. Those who are religiously motivated to

live poorly die to the world's way of measuring success; their lives are transformed into shouts of exhortation to the poor not to be blinded into seeing and desiring nothing beyond the satisfaction of material needs.

But the gospel is not for the poor alone. The rich also need its life-offering. Thus for the rich, no less than for the poor, the lives of those who choose poverty must carry redemptive significance, and they can in two ways: first, by the example of a simple life-style and by an informed exposition of the christian principles of social justice, the poor in Christ may encourage the advantaged of the earth to human responsibility; secondly, those who enter into christian poverty may humbly serve as signs of admonition to those who are well-off, whether they be consciously oppressive, mindlessly ravenous, or simply incautious in their material accumulations and expenditures, that their lives must be tempered by God's perspectives lest this earth's happiness be the only one they ever know.

Anyone who wants to enter into poverty with the spirit of Christ must know that the Father's desire is for universal salvation. Choosing poverty with Christ poor must involve, therefore, a concern not only for the material and spiritual welfare of the poor, but also, and equally, for the spiritual welfare of the rich. There is always a danger that those who wish to be poor in Christ will become myopic and unchristian, that they will grow preoccupied with enhancing the material welfare of the poor, wresting wealth and power from their possessors, forcing indeed the hands of the rich, but all the while leaving their hearts untouched, unnoticed and even uncared for. The well-off, in short, are left ill-disposed for receiving the Father's life. This, of course, is a most unsatisfactory situation, and one in which no follower of Christ can be joyful.

Although the point hardly needs emphasizing, let it be said simply that working for the material enrichment of the poor is not the sole or ultimate expression of the spirit of christian poverty. Unarguably, any profession of love for the poor would be ungodly, senseless and deceitful were it to omit any effort to win release for the poor from the economic, political and social chains that keep them imprisoned both in body and in spirit. At the same time, however, it would be misrepresentative of Christianity to suggest that liberating others from economic deprivation or oppression, in itself, either fully reveals or finally exhausts the riches promised by the Father. Christian love demands that the poor come to realize that their economic liberation is ultimately significant only in terms of that interior freedom, by means of which they may realize themselves as their Father's children, gratefully receiving his love and heartfully returning it.

When people choose poverty for the sake of God's kingdom, they choose it for the sake of the poor and of the rich, for all who need love's redemption. Being poor in and with Christ involves indeed a labour to relieve the burden of the poor; but it also essentially involves a commitment to communicate to all people a knowledge of, and a yearning for, the best and the most that

our Father offers: his life and his love. If Christians must not betray the poor, neither must they abandon the rich; if the rich do not take the gospel to heart, we can wonder why, but we must also increase our efforts and our pleadings that their hearts may be opened to the Father. If this happens, not only will there be rejoicing in heaven but also on earth, for no one receives the Father except through the Spirit of the Son, in whom all are brothers and sisters. Thus the poor cannot help but be materially benefited by the entrance of the rich into the spirit of the gospel, because if any return is made to the Father, it is made necessarily to those whose fullest dignity lies in being sons and daughters of our Father who gave the riches of the earth, and wants them to be shared by all. If the gospel moves the rich to lose their hearts to the Father, it must also move their hands to refashion the earth, and to make room for the poor where they may come more easily to know the Father's goodness and more freely to taste his sweetness.

### *Conclusion*

Our reflections suggest, then, that Christ's poverty is an illumination of his inner being; it speaks of his knowledge of his Father's goodness, and it reveals the trusting love which frees him to seek first the Father's kingdom and to rest his being in being Son. But Christ is not Son for himself alone, and so his poverty is also a call to all people to enter into that spirit which allows them to acknowledge the Father as Father and to enjoy his offering of unending life. Likewise, some people are inspired by Christ's Spirit today to choose poverty as a way of embodying an appreciation of the richness which is theirs by virtue of their calling as sons and daughters of God. But the poor with Christ also have a hope: that their poverty will invite and challenge others, poor and rich, to join them in the cry of praise and love, 'Abba, Father'.