

LOVING POVERTY AS A MOTHER. IS IT POSSIBLE?

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Introduction

WOMEN ARE ASKING NEW QUESTIONS TODAY, facing issues different from those that in other times might have been uppermost in women's minds. Women's consciousness has been raised about justice for oppressed persons and classes, and certainly about justice for women. Women who direct the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius or who make retreats that are inspired by them bring with them their experience(s), questions and issues. In the encounter with a text, the questions and experience brought to the text influence the meaning imparted by it. Women must, therefore, voice their questions and articulate their experiences, both personal and communal (that which they share with their sisters throughout the world). It is important for both director and directee to consider these questions and experiences in a retreat or a counselling situation.

With these considerations in mind, I propose to look at the phrase 'loving poverty as a mother' through the eyes of women. Much of the research for this article was done through interviews with practising spiritual directors and with women religious who are in communities that have been influenced by the Ignatian tradition.¹ Most of the literature I have reviewed is by women. Before looking at the interpretations of these women, I will locate the phrase in its context—The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus—and note some of the difficulties associated with the notion of poverty. Then I shall turn to women's thoughts on the notion of loving poverty as a mother and ask how women might reinterpret it. Finally, I shall offer some insights garnered from the interviews with the practising spiritual directors and from the writings of feminist theologians that may provide ideas for continuing the conversation.

'Loving poverty as a mother' in context

The text as it appears in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus (no 287) reads:

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All should love poverty as a mother and according to the measure of holy discretion all should, when occasions arise, feel some effects of it; further they should be ready to dispose of their temporal goods whenever the superior may command it, in the manner explained in the aforementioned Examen.²

Ignatius developed his view of poverty out of contemplation of both the Franciscan and monastic ideals. After weeks of prayer, he chose the Franciscan tradition for his society, stressing being poor and lowly like Christ, begging for one's needs out of complete trust in God's providence, and rendering generous service to God's people as a means to God's glory.

According to the Examen, would-be Jesuits are directed to distribute their goods to the poor, not to their relatives, either directly or through 'pious persons' who will see to it that the goods are used as instruments of God's glory and service. It is counselled also that Jesuits be aware that they use nothing as their own and that whatever is chosen with regard to disposition of material goods, the end in view is the greater glory of God and the perfection of the individual.

Poverty is seen as both personal and apostolic. As many commentators point out, the spirit and concept of poverty developed in the Constitutions is that of the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises wherein one desires to be free of excess baggage and from excessive self-interest and to be personally Christlike. These desires are bound up with the desire to further the work of Christ in the world today. Poverty then has both an external and a psychological aspect. It is mendicancy requiring discerning trust in divine providence (Ignatius always dealt with God before any undertaking) combined with an anxiety-free, respectful attitude toward money and its use.

Poverty is also bound up with humility, a desire to be free from self-centredness and to enter upon a deeper relationship with God. For Ignatius, only the desires that comprise the Third Degree of Humility give the person the freedom to cope with the injuries and insults that come with the apostolic life and to proclaim the reign of God, with Christ. In this context, the directive to love poverty as a mother includes actual freedom from material goods, begging for what one needs, generous use of goods for God's service, trusting in God that God will in some way provide for one's needs, accepting the stress of the apostolic life, desiring to live as Jesus did, and desiring freedom and humility—and all of this for the greater glory of God.

Economic, religious and evangelical poverty

Prescriptions and rules in documents such as constitutions of religious institutes eventually lose their original vigour. The apostolic poverty envisioned by Ignatius, and by founders of other religious orders and congregations as well, became privatized over time so that poverty became a matter of getting permissions and being exempt from dealing with money and material goods. This led to the individual's dependence upon superiors and non-involvement with the concerns of ordinary people. Somehow or other, interior detachment from material goods and from one's own will and desires accompanied by generous and fruitful apostolic labour in schools, hospitals or other service-oriented institutions was identified as the spirit and practice of poverty. This situation obtained at least until the 1960s and the advent of reforms initiated by Vatican II.

Recent Jesuit General Congregations, as well as Chapters and other meetings of most religious institutes, have dealt with the issue of poverty. Space does not permit development of the issues surrounding religious poverty, except to say that attempts are made to examine evangelical in addition to religious poverty. Evangelical poverty calls for involvement in the world, not separation from it, and for solidarity with people who have to worry about filling their material needs, i.e., the ordinary working individual and family, and people who are poor, marginalized and/or destitute. Most importantly, it calls for efforts to change the systems that make it difficult or even impossible for people to move out of a situation of poverty into one where they have at least minimal satisfaction of human needs.

These same meetings and innumerable writers on the subject also recognize the difficulty of looking on poverty as a virtue today. We view poverty as massive and dehumanizing, as a systemic evil that keeps people powerless and without the means to live a truly human existence. At the same time, these writers say that Christians have to live evangelical poverty in a credible way if they expect to have an apostolic impact.

Women consider 'loving poverty as a mother'

The preceding paragraphs have sketched the issues connected with the notion of poverty—economic, religious and evangelical. Now we need to ask whether the admonition to love poverty as a mother says anything to women today. What might women think when they consider these words? In particular, what might the women think who are either directing others or making retreats in the tradition of

the Spiritual Exercises?³ Let us examine each element of the phrase under discussion—love or value, poverty, mother—from a feminist perspective.

Value: Women's studies have shown that women's value system has to do more with mutually enabling relationships and interdependence than with hierarchy; women view powerful activity as assertiveness, enablement, nurturance and care. In a study of women's development, Carol Gilligan writes: 'In their portrayal of relationships, women replace the bias of men toward separation with a representation of the interdependence of self and other, both in love and in work'.⁴ On the objective side, women's studies have documented social expectations related to gender. Psychological research has shown that both women and men attribute greater competence to men than to women; the tendency is widespread to overvalue male performance and to undervalue women's performance, to attribute men's achievements to innate characteristics and women's achievements to good fortune or favourable connections. Undervaluing of women's achievements has been documented in real life situations as well.⁵ Women's reflections on poverty as well as the elements associated with it (trust, dependence, work, power, management of money and property) will come out of such value systems.

Poverty: In considering poverty, thoughts like the following may come to a woman's mind: poverty is a matter of little in the way of material goods versus riches, powerlessness versus power, subordination versus being in charge, having no money or material goods to manage versus managing money and material goods, dependence versus independence.

Women may also think of the dramatic increase of the number of women and their dependents living below the poverty line, a trend that has become known as the feminization of poverty. According to United Nations statistics, women form one-half of the world's population, but do three-fourths of the world's work, receive one-tenth of the world's salary, and own one-hundredth of the world's land.⁶ Various studies of women and work in the United States have come up with statistics indicating that women constitute fifty-one per cent of the population and forty-four per cent of the paid labour force. Women working full time earn less than sixty-five per cent of white male's earnings; women earn less than equal pay in the same occupations as men; over sixty per cent of women in the work-force are in temporary or part-time positions with little job security and few benefits; the number of women in non-traditional jobs or professions

(non-traditional in that they have traditionally been filled by men) represent only four per cent of the total work-force. Gains in employment opportunities in non-traditional fields have been minimal: women and girls continue to be enrolled in education and training programmes that prepare them for low-wage jobs in traditionally female occupations.⁷ Women's activities as mother and homemaker do not count as work worth remuneration; divorced and single mothers are at a financial disadvantage. The bishops of the United States condemned such discrimination against women as immoral and called for efforts to overcome the effects of sexism in society.⁸ Add to these statistics the fact that women are sexually harassed and exploited, victims of sexual abuse and of rape.

Women may not have all of these statistics at their fingertips when they consider the idea of loving poverty, but most women have some experience of economic disadvantage in the market-place and/or at home, as well as experience of powerlessness and discrimination, e.g. advancing so far in a corporation and no further, being shut out of certain positions in church or business, being a very small minority holding public office, generally being disadvantaged by the patriarchal social system. So women might well ask what there is to value in poverty.

If poverty is presented as surrender to God, women are no better off. Biblical and traditional God-language is overwhelmingly male. Many scholars have documented the power of language to influence the way we think. They have also emphasized the connection between the socio-cultural situation of the speakers and their language. Language itself is a powerful force in establishing positions of domination and subordination and in legitimating authority.⁹ The overemphasis on male God-language has served to legitimize patriarchy. Anne Carr writes about women who report that the official language for God has given them a powerful white, male God who requires unquestioning obedience. This is an image of God

as authoritarian, as a judge 'over against' the self, humankind, the world. It is an image of God as power, in the sense of control, domination, even coercion (which has) instilled in them a sense of their status as children, a sense of powerlessness, dependence, distrust of their own authority, experience and knowledge.¹⁰

According to the women directing Ignatian retreats, women are increasingly conscious of the inappropriateness of the Church's public language for God and of what the traditional images of God

have done to their own self image. A study by Jean Baker Miller M.D.¹¹ provides some useful insights here. Basically, she asks how women can move from a devalued position to fully valued effectiveness.

Mother: The thought of mother calls forth both positive and negative images. A woman might well think about her own mother or of ideal mothers she knows, and she might relate to all the wonderful qualities and experiences connected with motherhood. Parental love—mother love—is a powerful experience of love that is not calculated, that rejoices in the gift of life, and that generously nurtures life. A woman might reflect on parental or mother love and on characteristics attributed to mothers, such as being self-sacrificing, generous, nurturing, hard-working, loving and hospitable. But a woman might think also of more negative characteristics of mothers, such as being the heart (not the head) of the home, being too self-sacrificing, being submissive to and dependent upon one's husband. One might think of mothers who are holding down two jobs—managing their careers, taking care of the home, and being the principal care-giver to their children. The woman might well be, or at least be acquainted with, a single mother trying to juggle job, child care, and maintenance of home and family life. Or she might be or know a single mother receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and trying to make ends meet.

Women might also think of 'Mother Church' and the ambivalent position in which they find themselves in regard to this Church. The 'mother' through whom their faith has been nourished is also the source of anguish and their experience of exclusion. Women read in the official documents of the Church about the Church's insistence on the dignity of the human person, yet they find themselves excluded from full exercise of their rights in the same Church, especially from full participation in the sacraments and from meaningful decision-making positions. In the second draft of their pastoral letter on women, the U.S. bishops quote women on their feelings toward the Church:

The church . . . often seems distant from the poor woman's reality. She . . . feels like a stranger . . . No one reaches out to her. She is embarrassed to share how she really feels and thinks! What will people say? (Can this be God's way?)¹²

The facts and statistics in the preceding paragraphs indicate that the notion of loving poverty as a mother is not to be taken

uncritically. Certainly linking poverty with motherhood raises the question whether it is an appropriate way for women to approach God. Women bring to a consideration of poverty experiences that are unique to them. This is so whether we consider poverty as exterior (economic poverty) or interior (humility). In an article on the Spiritual Exercises in their present-day application, we find a statement that women may be considered a specific manifestation of 'the world of the poor, the downtrodden, the disinherited', and of those who suffer invisibility in a largely unbelieving world.¹³ Women considering poverty come from an experience of the sin of sexism in both civil and ecclesiastical society, which results in sexual and economic exploitation, vulnerability in the legal system, exclusion from positions of power in both Church and civil society. The bishops of the United States have acknowledged that such treatment is 'contradictory to the vision of human rights and freedoms that Christ offers'.¹⁴

What to do?

It is always easier to document problems than to offer creative solutions. This case is no different. Therefore, I shall not try to offer full-blown solutions to the problem presented by poverty in either of its aspects, but I shall offer a few suggestions in the hope that they will encourage further conversation and provide some ideas for women and men involved in making or directing Ignatian retreats.

Feminist attempts at liberation operate in the tension between the fact and perception of the ordinariness and unfairness in most women's lives (to a greater or lesser degree) and the call for justice, equality and true freedom. A critical feminist theology of women and work and, I think, of women and poverty needs feminist visions of liberation "'as a telescope . . . to penetrate what is closest to hand"' and to bring about changes which transcend limitations'.¹⁵ If a goal of the Exercises is the transcending of limitations and attainment of greater freedom, then I think the task of a critical feminist theology is that of the Exercises as well.

A first suggestion I would offer is that spiritual directors read some of the feminist theology that is abundantly available today. Such scholars as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Anne Carr, Sallie McFague, and Sandra Schneiders have written on biblical interpretation, Christian feminism, God-language and the relationship between faith and feminism. Other writers have produced works in these same areas as well as in spirituality, liturgical theology,

language, Christology and ethics or moral theology. Good spiritual direction has to be grounded in good theology. Therefore, knowledge of feminist theology is important for anyone directing retreats today. Anne Carr argues that feminism is a challenge to Christianity, but at the same time 'it has a powerful grace in its call for the church to be faithful to its own transcendent truth, to the deepest meaning of its symbols, its great tradition, and the new experience of over half its faithful members'.¹⁶

Second, spiritual directors need to recognize that a woman's temptations and consciousness of sin are different from a man's. Not only is a woman the target of injustice and discrimination arising from sexism, her sins and temptations 'can never be encompassed by such terms as "power" and "will to power"'.¹⁷ Rather, a woman's experience of sin is essentially related to the fact that she is a woman and to her vulnerability to gender-related pitfalls. For example, a mother would know the experience of self-transcending love, but she should learn, too, that a woman can give too much of herself to the point that little or nothing would remain of her own uniqueness. Other temptations are to excessive dependence, passivity and a poor sense of the woman's own loveliness.

The spiritual directors I interviewed said that for most women poverty as surrender to and dependence on God indicates a stance of passivity, whereas the healthy response is assertiveness. All of these spiritual directors mentioned the over-emphasis on self-sacrifice in role expectations for women. So, in speaking of interior poverty or humility, attitudes such as dependence and self-sacrifice are to be examined critically. The appropriate response might better be an active engagement in the struggle. For example, women in abusive situations (and many women who make retreats or weekends of prayer are in abusive situations) need to find their own freedom. They need to be in touch with their own inner strength and find the support of other women so that they can be assertive, take hold of their lives, become self-reliant and so find release from the oppressive situation. Women need to be encouraged to come together with a new sense of themselves as women, learning to value themselves and others as truly worthy. The Pax Christi vow of non-violence has proved helpful to some women: it represents a stance of active engagement in the struggle for freedom and healthy self-determination.

Third, spiritual directors must take seriously the challenge to re-image God, a task that requires a conversion of the imagination.

Imagination is understood as a constructive capacity to integrate our experience into effective and dynamic wholes which will function in our interpretation of further experience. In other words, we take an active role in forming our basic, interrelated images of self, world and God. If the world is imagined as patriarchal, and willed by God to be that way, God is seen as the divine patriarch ruling over it and enjoying absolute power over all persons and things in the world. Such a vision has been encouraged in all of us by experiences at home, and in school, church and society. A woman with such an imagination may well see herself as inferior, 'subject to human men and ultimately to the infinite divine male who established the patriarchal world order'.¹⁸ It is particularly important, therefore, for women to imagine God as other than father, king, ruler, almighty and all-powerful. Although restructuring the imagination can be threatening and unsettling, it can be done. Conversion of the religious imagination is needed, first in regard to God and then in regard to our relationship with Jesus Christ. Schneiders suggests a therapy of the imagination not primarily by way of abstract ideas but through language, art, interpersonal experience, dance, movement and good use of symbolism. All experiences that help retreatants to get in touch with their imagination and allow it to be healed are to be encouraged.

Many theologians, both female and male, have suggested different ways to image God. Christian feminism takes issue with the exclusive use of masculine images for God and with the literal interpretation of any symbol or image. The tradition has always maintained that any analogy is more unlike than like God in its comparison of earthly realities to divine reality. Scholars who have explored the use of metaphor stress the importance of not losing the 'is not' that underlies the 'is' in every metaphor applied to religious knowledge. Along this line, Sallie McFague's work in metaphorical theology provides some direction in the work of restructuring the imagination. In her book, *Models of God: theology for an ecological, nuclear age*,¹⁹ she attempts a remythologizing of the relationship between God and the world, experimenting with models of God as mother, lover and friend, and with the metaphor of the world as God's body. Other theologians have suggested other theological reformulations.²⁰ Following upon this conversion, or going along with it, is the readiness to reinterpret the bible from a feminist perspective, i.e., in such a way that both its oppressive and its liberating power is recognized.

Conclusion

Christian feminist theology and critical feminist interpretation of the bible, as well as of the Christian tradition, are eminently qualified to subvert antifeminism. In the view of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

a critical feminist interpretation of the Bible can contribute to such a 'subversion of antifeminism' by denying any divine-religious authority to the biblical 'subordination' passages and by 'envisioning' and 'building up' women-church as the discipleship community of equals that from 'within' will contribute to break open the closed patriarchal systems of church and society.²¹

Efforts by feminist spiritual directors and by the women following the Spiritual Exercises are within this framework. As one such director put it, 'Women are in an eminent position to incarnate God in the world today' and to bring about a world true to the early Christian confession, 'There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3, 28).

NOTES

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² St Ignatius of Loyola: *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, translated with introduction and commentary by George E. Ganss S.J. (St Louis, Missouri: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), p 164. For other references and explanations, see Ivens, Michael: 'Poverty in the Constitutions and other Ignatian sources', *The Way Supplement* 61 (Spring 1988) pp 71-78, and Tetlow, Joseph A.: 'The transformation of Jesuit poverty', *Studies in the spirituality of the Jesuits* 18 (November 1986).

³ The spiritual directors with whom I spoke said that many of the women (both religious and lay) involved in retreats, weekends of prayer, and/or spiritual direction are in dysfunctional relationships. Increasing numbers of women are aware of the discrimination they suffer in both Church and society.

⁴ 'In a different voice: visions of maturity' in *Women's spirituality: resources for Christian development* (Paulist Press: New York, 1986), p 82.

⁵ See M. E. Hawkesworth: *Beyond oppression: feminist theory and political strategy* (New York: Continuum, 1990), pp 48-52.

⁶ Cited in Elizabeth Johnson: 'Recovering women's faith experience from the scriptures', *Miriam's song II* (Hyattsville, M.D., Priests for Equality), p 8.

⁷ Information based on fact sheets from Wider Opportunities for Women, 1325 G Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

⁸ *Economic justice for all: pastoral letter on Catholic social teaching and the U.S. economy* (Washington, D.C., National Conference of Catholic Bishops), p 88.

⁹ Letty Russell: 'Inclusive language and power', *Religious education* 80 (1985), p 586.

¹⁰ Anne E. Carr: *Transforming grace: Christian tradition and women's experience* (Harper and Row: San Francisco, 1988), pp 139-140.

¹¹ *Toward a new psychology of women*, second edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

¹² 'One in Christ Jesus: a pastoral response to the concerns of women for church and society', no. 146, *Origins* 19 (no 44, April 5, 1990).

¹³ Quoted in Marie-Louise Rosenblatt: 'Women and the Exercises: sin, standards and New Testament texts', *The Way Supplement* 70 (Spring 1991), p 19.

¹⁴ 'One in Christ Jesus', no 140.

¹⁵ Christine Schaumberger: 'Sharing and feeding the hunger for bread and roses. Towards a critical-feminist theology of women's work', *Concilium* (T & T Clark, Ltd: Edinburgh, 1987), no 194, p 126.

¹⁶ *Transforming grace*, p 2.

¹⁷ Valerie Saiving: 'The human situation: a feminine view' in *Womanspirit rising* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), p 37.

¹⁸ See Sandra Schneiders: *Women and the Word* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), pp 15-18.

¹⁹ Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.

²⁰ A convenient overview of this whole issue can be found in Anne Carr's book *Transforming grace: Christian tradition and women's experience*. See especially pp 134-157.

²¹ *Bread not stone: The challenge of feminist biblical interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p 152.