

# POVERTY AS A SPIRITUAL VALUE

By IGNATIUS KELLY

CLARE'S AND FRANCIS' CHOICE of poverty is well known. They both made a total renunciation of all possessions, material, spiritual and religious. Francis' favourite expression for poverty, '*sine proprio*', says more than the renunciation of property. It means to live 'without anything of oneself'.

One day at mass he hears the gospel which told of how Jesus sent his disciples out to preach, forbidding them to take with them silver, gold, money, bread, staff or sandals. Francis took the message as addressed to himself personally: 'This is what I desire with all my heart'.<sup>1</sup> This incident marked the final phase of his conversion. Immediately he dressed himself in only one tunic which he tied with a cord and went to live among the lepers and the poor. He set out to imitate and represent the life of Jesus by literally reproducing it as far as possible.

Francis asked his followers simply to observe the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, without anything of their own and in chastity. No one was to be accepted into the brotherhood who had not given all his goods to the poor and who had not become radically poor himself. Francis for his part had chosen a life of total insecurity, reducing possession to an absolute minimum: food, clothing, tools for work and a breviary for the recitation of the divine office. So much for material goods. But we also possess spiritual goods. The learned who wished to follow Francis were asked to renounce their learning.<sup>2</sup> All must strive in humility to strip themselves of all desire of self-affirmation and self-justification.

I have emphasized particularly the negative side of Francis' and Clare's poverty. There is much more to be said in a very positive sense about their poverty. But it is this more negative aspect – their total renunciation of any and every form of possessions – that seems to have caught people's imagination. It is not surprising that some wonder whether such extreme forms of renunciation and especially the striving for total self-abasement can have any positive meaning for us today. Some would even see this attitude towards self and possessions almost as a kind of perversion, much more likely to hinder human development than promote it.

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There is general awareness of the present challenge poverty presents to the human race. The extent and magnitude of the problem are really terrifying. Apart from the millions living at subsistence level in the Third World, the number of poor in the First World is rapidly increasing. There is also general awareness that poverty, at least on the scale in which it exists today, is man-made, and largely the result of economic, political and cultural exploitation, and that international and financial institutions need to be reformed to ensure a more equitable distribution of the world's resources and greater international solidarity.

The successful resolution of the problem of poverty requires personal conversion on the part of all. A change of structures will not of itself bring about lasting justice and peace. Without personal conversion the new structures will be perverted in their turn because of humankind's insatiable desire for possessions, power and pleasure.

#### *Forms of poverty*

Poverty is not an abstract concept with a fixed meaning always and everywhere. Like riches it is to be understood and measured in relation to the prevailing socio-economic and political situation. The present great diversity in forms and degrees of poverty throughout the world is, perhaps, reducible to three kinds of poverty.

There is a poverty intrinsic to the creature as such. This is the most fundamental form of poverty since it means total dependence on God for our very existence from moment to moment. This poverty will continue for all eternity to God's glory and our perfect fulfilment and happiness. All other forms of poverty ought to be assessed and judged in relation to it.

There is a poverty which consists in the lack of a good or goods necessary for the completion of our humanity whether individually or collectively. This includes great differences of forms and degrees of poverty varying from, for example, the lack of a square meal or of a shirt on one's back or of a roof over one's head to lack of the Beatific Vision. The lack may be simply the normal concomitant of a person's growth and development. On the other hand it may have been imposed on a person by others. It may be physical, psychological or spiritual. It will admit of different degrees relative to the socio-economic, political, cultural and religious situations of different times and places. Everyone will experience this form of poverty to some degree and all through life, as a lack of some good necessary for the full realization of their humanity.

There is the voluntary poverty of Christians resulting from their conversion to the gospel. A preferential option for the poor, for instance,

is incumbent on all Christians after the example of Jesus himself. It admits of degrees which might be expressed by prepositions: 'for', 'with' and 'as'. All must make a preferential option 'for' the poor. This implies the resolve to try and judge every situation from the perspective of the poor and to show solidarity with them as best one can. Some Christians will go further and live 'with' the poor, in their midst. Others will go still further and live 'as' the poor live. But for various reasons, whether of age, aptitude, experience, previous formation or because of their particular ministry in Church or society, not all will feel they can live 'with' the poor, much less 'as' the poor live. This is reasonable.

Apart from this freely chosen poverty according to the gospel some, including non-Christians, will choose poverty as a virtue with or without reference to the gospel and, through the moderate and sober use of material things, strive to acquire greater spiritual freedom to pursue higher values such as culture, solicitude for others, prayer or contemplation.

Of these three basic forms of poverty the first, creaturely poverty, is the most important and is generally the most neglected today as the world becomes increasingly more secularized. To grasp its meaning is vital for an understanding of Clare's and Francis' poverty. However, it is the second form of poverty that most impresses us, partly, no doubt, because it exists on such a vast scale today. The North-South divide and the glaring inequality of resources it presents calls for a revolution in human relations. Though we are not personally responsible for the existence of the problem we are all involved in the search for a solution.

Society is built on the use and exchange of goods and material things at every level, personal, interpersonal and international. We are constantly using material things. We exchange cards and letters – at least at Christmas! Mountains of butter or mountains of arms pass from nation to nation, from continent to continent. We put a part of ourselves into our use and exchange of things: love or hate, care or indifference. In this way each of us makes our personal daily contribution towards the realization of a better world or a worse one. Like the frost and sun we blight people or enable them to grow. Wealth and possessions have a social dimension. By setting one's heart single-mindedly on them one weakens and eventually destroys fraternal bonds.

At the heart of human existence there is a threefold problem which we might term the three Ps: the immoderate desire for *possessions*, which leads to the immoderate desire for *power* over people in order to get their possessions. This combination can then lead eventually to the immoderate desire for *pleasure* in the form of complete self-centredness. We all

need possessions for our human dignity. We all need a shirt on our back. But we do not need five hundred shirts. We could pass on some to Cafod. We all need autonomy and independence for the free exercise of our gifts and talents. But genuine independence implies the interdependence which acknowledges and respects the dignity and rights of others. We all need affection; we all need to love and be loved. But self-centredness thwarts this basic need. Genuine love of others and especially of the poor is incompatible with an immoderate love of riches or their selfish use. It calls for a modest, simple life-style. Therefore a spirit of poverty and detachment as well as actual sharing with those in need are required of all of us.

It is a fact, however, that today the right use of wealth has become a more important issue than its actual possession and, furthermore, that power and influence now depend more on access to information and the ability to use it than on the possession of wealth and property.

#### *Gospel poverty*

An essential characteristic of the Kingdom is the centrality of the poor. Running right through the Scriptures is the theme of God's special concern for the poor. The prophets insist that genuine worship of God and the pursuit of social justice are inseparable. In the gospel poverty cannot be separated from the person and teaching of Jesus. He identifies with the poor and makes a preferential option for them. This is evident in his lowly birth in Bethlehem, in his working for a living in Nazareth and supremely in his death on the cross, the symbol of all outcasts and the marginalized of Church and society. Love of Jesus must include love of the poor. Following in his footsteps, we in our turn must make our preferential option for the poor and be ready to share our possessions, material and spiritual, with them according to their need, using whatever resources of wealth, power or influence we may possess to remove all forms of human misery and promote justice and peace. Our Christian faith demands action for justice according to each one's ability.

At the heart of the gospel we find an ineradicable opposition between God and Mammon.<sup>3</sup> The least one can say in this connection is that Jesus presents wealth as an almost insuperable obstacle to salvation and offers no solution to this problem except that one should give away one's riches. However the words of Jesus are more frequently directed to a positive approach to poverty than to a negative criticism of wealth.<sup>4</sup>

The Beatitudes are addressed to all and call for conversion of heart whereby we accept the rule of God in our lives. Such conversion implies

more than care and solicitude for the poor and generosity in sharing our possessions with them. It means getting rid of a part of ourselves: our prejudices, attitudes and values which are often the very things preventing us from reading the signs of the times in and through which God addresses and challenges us. It means accepting Jesus and his way of life as the standard and criterion for our life. A spirit of detachment from material possessions and concern for the poor in the form of a preferential option for them will follow naturally from such personal conversion.

*Poverty of Clare and Francis*

The basic experience of Clare and Francis was of a loving God,

our Creator, Redeemer and Saviour . . . who is perfect good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good, who alone is good, loving, gentle and understanding . . . delightful and utterly desirable beyond all else for ever and ever.<sup>5</sup>

Before such a God, the supreme and only good, they experienced their own nothingness. It was an experience of their creaturely poverty, especially of that form of it which consists in their 're-creation' through grace as children of the Father, as sister and brother of Christ and as indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Francis simply desired to be a good Catholic. What was most important for him was what he had in common with all the faithful: the inestimable privilege of sharing in the divine life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He writes: 'We should make a dwelling-place in our hearts for him who is the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit'<sup>6</sup> and 'We should desire above all things to have the Spirit of the Lord and his holy operation'.<sup>7</sup> Francis founded the Third Order in which people who were not religious in the canonical sense could live the fulness of the gospel life no less than Clare and Francis himself. The good news of the gospel is addressed to all Christians and all are invited to live the gospel counsels, including poverty.

The Our Father, which is a summary of the gospel,<sup>8</sup> is the common prayer of all Christians. Part of Francis' conversion consisted in learning to pray the Our Father, the words of which he knew from childhood. Summoned by his father before the bishop of Assisi to answer for the alleged misuse of his father's money and property, he threw his clothes at his father's feet saying:

From now on I will be able to say freely, Our Father who art in heaven, and not father Peter Bernardone, to whom, behold, I give up not only the money but all my clothes too. I will therefore go naked to the Lord.<sup>9</sup>

Francis wants to live out the love relationship of Jesus to his Father which forms the very core of the gospel.

Celano, the first biographer of Francis, writes that Francis seemed to his contemporaries 'like a new man from another world'.<sup>10</sup> This is the very definition of a Christian who, having died with Christ in baptism, has entered the world of the risen Lord and now shares in the divine life of Father, Son and Spirit. Henceforth, like Francis, he will be a 'stranger and pilgrim' in this world.<sup>11</sup> He has been to a better place and can never again feel quite at home in this world. This ought to be a powerful incentive for all Christians, as it certainly was for Francis, to sit lightly to all earthly possessions. Francis for his part already possessed the greatest gift of all, God himself, and there was no room left in his heart for anything else: 'We should keep nothing of ourselves for ourselves but give ourselves wholly to him who gives himself wholly to us'.<sup>12</sup> He therefore abandons his social class, refusing to follow in the footsteps of the prosperous businessman, his father, and instead becomes a friar 'minor' associating with the lowliest.

While renouncing everything Francis is very far from disdaining anything. He sees all creatures as God's precious gifts and accepts them as such with profound gratitude. I am reminded of the story of the maths teacher who was in the habit of asking questions to keep her pupils' attention. 'Michael,' she said, 'if you put your hands in your pockets and found 56p in one pocket and 45p in another, what would you have?' To this Michael replied in utter astonishment: 'Someone else's trousers'. This is a parable of our life. What have we that we have not received? Everything is gift and the Creator's greatest gift to us is himself in his inmost divine life. This idea of the 'giftedness' of everything is part of Clare's and Francis' basic intuition and experience of God who is supremely good and the only good; the world is neither sacred nor secular but sacramental. Everything points beyond itself to God, the great giver. But gifts are meant to be shared and Francis will share everything he has with the needy.

Poverty and fraternity are therefore complementary. Francis' tender love and solicitude for the friars and the Poor Clares extend beyond them to embrace all, especially the lepers and the poor. But animals and inanimate creatures are also included as his brothers and sisters in this universal brotherhood of all creation. All are the Creator's gifts and, as creatures, all are equal.<sup>13</sup> For Clare too her sisters are God's gifts to her.<sup>14</sup>

The true source of Clare's and Francis' poverty is their spiritual and mystical experience of God as loving Father: 'We should greatly love the

love of him who loves us greatly',<sup>15</sup> and Clare writes: 'Love him totally who gave himself totally for your love'.<sup>16</sup> Their poverty is both the consequence of this spiritual experience and the means of expressing and preserving it. It is not just a form of asceticism nor is it an end in itself. Clare and Francis read the signs of their times and chose their particular way of life as the appropriate response to what they read. They lived in a time of transition from a feudal to an industrial and commercial economy in which money and the avid pursuit of wealth were beginning to play a decisive role. By their whole manner of life and especially through total renunciation of possessions they recalled and bore witness to those aspects of the gospel of which their contemporaries needed especially to be reminded. Their poverty, 'minority', fraternity, prayer and contemplation were derivatives from their basic mystical experience of God as loving Father. These are all part of the gospel and have permanent value, but the forms which Clare and Francis gave them are historically conditioned. These forms were valid for the time in which Clare and Francis lived but are not necessarily valid for our times. It is not a question of reproducing their lives through a kind of superficial, external imitation. Rather the task is to rediscover their basic intuition and then express it in ways which our times require.

Other articles in the present Supplement will be concerned with this question and an important factor in this endeavour will be one's understanding of spirituality.

### *Spirituality and poverty*

In the past spirituality was concerned primarily with formal prayer and personal devotion. It tended to be other-worldly and individualistic. But our world is a graced world; all people have one and the same divine vocation and the Holy Spirit offers to everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery.<sup>17</sup> So spirituality is an awakening to the presence of the Spirit within and amongst us. It is primarily in the midst of life with its tasks and responsibilities that God addresses and challenges us, not primarily in religious exercises or formal prayer. Indeed, the quality of our prayer itself will be determined to some extent by the quality of our life. Prayer is the celebration of life; the celebration in adoration, thanksgiving, contrition and supplication of the divine mystery which constitutes the inmost reality of life itself.

Our personal experiences, our relations with others, the particular circumstances of life with its lights and shadows, its strengths and weaknesses, our use of possessions and material things – it is in and through all these that we encounter God, the Beyond in our midst, as he

summons us to persevere in our tasks and assume our responsibilities for each other and for the whole human race. He will not accept complacency in our successes nor despondency in our failures. He summons us beyond them. The best is yet to be!

A spirituality which sees God thus immanent in life, yet calling us beyond our achievements and failures, provides a vision and enthusiasm to work towards an ever more perfect integration of the two basic dimensions of life: love of God and love of neighbour. It enriches interpersonal relations. It also has socio-political implications.<sup>18</sup> We are being influenced constantly by our society and its values, and personal conversion needs to be accompanied by persistent efforts to change unjust structures and resist the different forms of exploitation which give rise to them. Spirituality, therefore, helps us to grasp the intrinsic connection between faith and justice and the far-reaching implications of a preferential option for the poor. This is an option not for poverty but for people. And because people are important, the option demands of us a new attitude to possessions and to the way we use the world's resources and a willingness to share these equitably. In a word, spirituality as understood today views poverty as a genuine and very important spiritual value.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas of Celano, *First life of St Francis*, section 22 in M. A. Habig (ed), *Francis of Assisi, omnibus of sources* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), p 247.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas of Celano, *Second life of St Francis*, section 194 in *Omnibus*, pp 517-18.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 6: 24; Lk 16: 8-13.

<sup>4</sup> J. L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chapman, 1966), 'Wealth', pp 924-5. Cf also R. J. Karris, 'The Gospel according to Luke' in R. E. Brown (ed), *The new Jerome biblical commentary* (1988), p 708.

<sup>5</sup> The Earlier Rule 23 in R. J. Armstrong and I. Brady (trans), *Francis and Clare* (Paulist Press, 1982), pp 133-4.

<sup>6</sup> The Earlier Rule 22, Armstrong, p 128.

<sup>7</sup> The Later Rule 10, Armstrong, p 144.

<sup>8</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2761.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Celano, section 194, *Omnibus*, p 517.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Celano, section 82, *Omnibus*, p 297.

<sup>11</sup> The Later Rule 6, Armstrong, p 141.

<sup>12</sup> A Letter to the entire Order, Armstrong, p 58.

<sup>13</sup> Cf 'Canticle of Brother Sun', Armstrong, p 37-39.

<sup>14</sup> Testament of St Clare 7, Armstrong, p 228.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Celano, section 196, *Omnibus*, p 519.

<sup>16</sup> Third Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague, Armstrong, p 200.

<sup>17</sup> *Dogmatic constitution on the Church in the modern world* 22.

<sup>18</sup> Cf Anne E. Patrick, 'Ethics and spirituality: the social justice connection' in *The Way Supplement* 63 (Autumn 1988), pp 103-116.