

Religious Poverty

Ascetical Value

The Decree for Religious describes voluntary poverty as “an expression of the following of Christ” (n. 13). What is the force of *an* expression? Is it one expression among many possible ones, something arbitrary, accidental, perhaps peripheral in the following of Christ? If institutionalized, religious poverty is in question, I think the answer must be yes.

The Decree, however, conceives poverty on a deeper level. It is a basic Christian attitude of disponibility. The Council says that by poverty religious “share in the poverty of Christ who for our sakes became poor, even though He was rich, so that by His poverty we might become rich (cf 2 Cor 8:9; Mt 8:20.)” Christ’s poverty was His self-emptying to the point of death, giving everything, even the showing forth of His own divinity. The Son of God became as poor as He possibly could, taking on the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom 8:3; Phil 2:7). Voluntary poverty is a participation in this poverty of Christ.

Christ’s poverty was not primarily a socio-economic condition. It was an attitude of heart and soul that disposed Him to say as He came into the world, “Behold, I come to do thy will, O God” (Heb 10:5-7), an openness that allowed Him to say in life, “I always do the things that please the Father” (Jn 6:38) and in death, “It is consummated.” (Jn 19:30). His poverty, like all Christian poverty, was a spirit which manifested itself in sacrifice, i.e. giving, and expressed itself in a whole style of life. It was a spirit of openness and generosity to God.

The Decree intimates that this disposition is both the preparation for and the consequence of finding one’s “treasure in heaven.” It is found in a laborious, hard life,

but one that is without “undue solicitude” and manifests “trust in the provident care of the Father in heaven (cf Mt 6:25).” One Gospel pericope that seems to catch the true spirit of poverty is the Sermon on the Mount:

Therefore I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, what you shall eat, nor yet for your body, what you shall put on ... But seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things shall be added to you. (Mt 6:25-33).

To seek first the, kingdom is to live by this spirit and to practice Christian poverty.

The interior attitude is not the whole of Christian poverty. But it is the soul, and any practice of poverty will be valid in direct proportion to the degree that this spirit animates it. The first beatitude, both in Matthew and Luke identifies the poor in spirit as those who possess the kingdom now. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Luke promises this to the actually poor; Matthew, to the spiritually poor. But both authors see the relationship between spiritual enrichment and a personal or human poverty. They are correlatives. Legalistic or purely external poverty has no place in this perspective. It is not fanciful, therefore, to say with John 23 that the Church is “the church of the poor.” One Yugoslav bishop said at the Council: “In my opinion, poverty is the foundation of all holiness. When the Church was poor, it was holy.” Yes, poverty and holiness are different aspects of the same Christian life. Both terms would seem to be more meaningful if we put them in the language of spiritual writers who refer to them as humility and charity.

This mysterious reality of Christian poverty is a biblical concept that has its roots in ancient Israel. It took centuries in developing. Originally the poor were not singled out for blessings (Prov 19:4, 7); on the contrary, riches were looked on as a divine

commendation. The “good-life” ideal was a sufficiency for all:

... give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food that is needful for me, lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, “Who is the Lord?” or lest I be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God. (Prov 30:8-9)

In the course of time the poor were oppressed by the powerful, and prophets like Amos and Jeremiah rose up to defend them against social injustice and to proclaim Yahweh’s protection of them. Their emptiness made them open to God’s gifts; they were the humble and the weak who felt their own nothingness and their dependence on God. The rich felt no need of Yahweh and drifted into self-satisfied security. The *anawim*, the socially poor, came to be identified with the spiritually poor, the pious servants of the Lord. Their suffering, their need, their persecution drove them to the beneficent protection of Yahweh. Job is an example of the *anawim*. So is the Suffering Servant. God’s protection of the *anawim* was celebrated in liturgical prayers, some of which have come down to us in the psalms. (e.g. Ps:131).

By New Testament times the poor were a clearly defined group of believers, the meek and humble of heart. They were the faithful remnant, the friends of the Lord. Our Lady stands out as their finest example, and her *Magnificat* is a beautiful summary of *anawim* spirituality. Mary was poor in this world’s goods, though not destitute, but her real poverty consisted in her felt need for God and her complete openness to the divine will. Socio-economic poverty was definitely a secondary feature whose whole value lay in its connection with interior poverty of soul.

Nevertheless the material renunciation of riches and possessions is recommended in the New Testament, especially St. Luke, for many reasons, because, for example, riches are snares and delusions (e.g. Lk 12:16-21; 32-34). The poor, not the rich, will be rewarded in the next world as the Dives and Lazarus parable teaches (Lk 15:19-31).

Biblical poverty is never just an interior attitude, however primary that is. It is also a material, temporal condition that creates the atmosphere and need for God. So Matthew records Our Lord’s words to his followers to sell what they have and give it to the poor (Mt 19:16-22) and. Our Lord’s warning to the rich of their hazardous condition (Mt 19:23-26). In Luke the disciples are sent forth in their first missionary journey without staff or shoes (Lk 9:3; also Mt 10:10; but cf. Mk 17:8-9). At the Last Supper, however, Our Lord reverses this directive and tells them to take staff and shoes (Lk 22:35-6).

Thus both fact and spirit, both effective and affective poverty are necessary and complementary aspects of the kerygma on poverty. The Council places the emphasis on spirit. When it speaks of voluntary poverty, it appeals to texts on detachment rather than actual deprivation. It does not use the Lukan saying that the disciple must renounce everything (Lk 14:33) or the story of the rich young man (Mt 19:16-22). Rather it cites the example of Christ and alludes to texts on complete trust in God (e.g. Mt 6:20; 6:25). Perhaps it is significant that the Council does not apply to religious poverty St. Paul’s statement of his own personal detachment, that he was at home both in abundance and want (Phil 4:11), though it does use it for priests in the *Decree on Priestly Ministry* (n. 17) when it urges them to voluntary poverty. Religious poverty does not prosper in the midst of abundance, but only in deprivation and want. The Council seems to distinguish between voluntary poverty, which is for all Christians, and religious poverty, which is a special kind of voluntary poverty:

With regard to religious poverty it is not enough to use goods in a way subject to the superior’s will but members must be poor in fact and in spirit, their treasures being in heaven. (cf Mt 6:20).

Like the poor of Yahweh the religious is less tempted to place his trust in riches, worldly influence, or human importance because he does not possess them. He has

chosen this state because he believes that this is the surest way to find his riches in God.

Ecclesial

The Vatican Council urges religious to be poor in fact as well as in spirit. The *Decree* gives a few directives on implementing this desire. It reminds religious of their duty to labor like poor men; it allows the renunciation of inheritances, it asks for corporate poverty; it promotes the sharing of goods by communities; and it praises the witness of community poverty. But in general it leaves to religious the working out of new forms and structures.

Have we not too often attacked the problem of forms too abstractly, in terms of economics and sociology rather than theology? By this I mean we have tried to renew and update our practice of poverty by laying down socio-economic norms. We have distinguished, for example, between personal, apostolic, and community poverty. What is in accord with poverty in one of these areas may not be so in another. So the individual religious cannot hoard supplies, but the community can be a provident householder who lays in bargains for the future. In fact, the industrious econome is praised for his foresight. The apostolate is usually given *carte blanche*, at least to the extent the community finances can bear, even though the law of “poor-means” — the weak things of this world confounding the strong — remains a necessary principle of the apostolate and hence a brake on expenditures for the apostolate. After all, the Church’s apostolate does not flourish by Madison Avenue techniques as much as by the charity and poverty of the weak of this world.

This division of expenditures is of some help, but its application is either too obvious or too vague. A similar principle, again sociological, is the local standard of the people one serves. What is acceptable religious poverty in affluent America may be downright scandal in Africa. Rich parishes

and neighborhoods will allow a higher style of convent building and table than those of the inner city. Thus, for example, air-conditioning in a religious house might be in order in a wealthy area, but not in the slums. This principle is a dangerous one; it seems to bear within it the corruption of true religious poverty. Religious are called to more than affective poverty. If they must work among the rich, as surely they must, they must still identify with their own social class, the poor of Yahweh, whether these poor are to be identified with the middle class or the very poor. Perhaps in some cases it would be better to live in a poor neighborhood and commute to one’s apostolate in a fashionable section of town.

The two norms given leave an immense area to prudential judgment, almost too much to make them of much real service. But a more serious shortcoming of this kind of consideration is the tendency to put a materialistic slant on poverty. Poverty becomes a matter of dollars and cents rather than an attitude of heart and soul. The skimpier and saver, the religious with the patched clothing or the convent that costs the province the least, are according to these norms the ones who practice poverty best. This is not necessarily true. The types of material poverty are varied, and each community must be guided by its own charism in the matter.

The forms would take care of themselves if we were perfectly formed religious. This is why the ultimate answer to this and so many other dilemmas in the spiritual life will probably wait for an American Saint, one who is led habitually by the Holy Spirit and at the same time is thoroughly a part of the American cultural scene. Even in this case we would need more than one saint, because circumstances vary so much. While we wait, should we not look to our own inadequate but still authentic American Catholic spirit as the point of departure for thinking about forms of religious poverty? At least should we not begin, not

with sociology, but with theology, and attempt to apply the *anawim* concept to our actual daily lives?

Our real effort in concretizing poverty must be in terms of building up a poverty of spirit that is personally authentic and socially a witness. Let me suggest a few approaches.

What promotes a sound spiritual life promotes poverty of spirit. Religious practices in themselves, especially acts of self-denial, have real efficacy today as always. Cardinal Newman's words remain applicable even with our incarnational apostolic preoccupations:

I must say this ... that the comforts of life are the main cause of our want of love of God; and, much as we may lament and struggle against it, till we learn to dispense with them in good measure, we shall not overcome it. Till we, in a certain sense, detach ourselves from our bodies, our minds will not be in a state to receive divine impressions, and to exert heavenly aspirations. A smooth and easy life, an uninterrupted enjoyment of the goods of Providence, full meals, soft raiment, well-furnished homes, the pleasures of sense, the feeling of security, the consciousness of wealth — these and the like, if we are not careful, choke up all the avenues of the soul. ...

People who satisfy every need, who know no want or deprivation, who indulge, as Paul VI said, "in the little extras and luxuries" are less likely to be able to taste and see how good the Lord is. The emphasis today, however, should not be on practices but on personal responsibility. In the past we seem to have begun with practices and hoped that the spirit would eventually overtake the forms. This was true in all areas of spiritual life. The young were taught, for example, that they must get permission to use things, to say "our" instead of "my." These practices were ordered to teach dependency on God (through dependency on a superior) and a non-possessive spirit (through denying private ownership). In the spirit of Vatican II should we not reverse this process and from the very beginning put the responsibility for expressing poverty in proper forms on the individual and on the community? This emphasis is positive

and personalist; we do not write off achievement; we only change the emphasis. We would begin with a responsible use of things rather than self-denial as such, and endeavor to see that use as a service to a person, the Person who is Christ Jesus. This would assume that personal encounter with Christ, that experience of God which is the beginning of all true spiritual life.

The *Decree's* emphasis on "the common law of labor" fits into this perspective. Was the Council thinking here of the penitential aspect of daily work, that fallen man must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow? This and more. It seems to be taking note of social reality today. Able-bodied men earn their bread by their work, not by alms, and religious are no exception.

Labor is corrective for a real hazard of poverty. Man has been given the role of dominating the universe. His work not only builds up the universe; it matures the man himself. He cannot evade this responsibility without suffering in his own personal development. Man works or he dies. Yet it is a temptation to the poor man to stand immobile, to be uninvolved, disinterested, apathetic. Religious must beware of this danger. They are not exempt from human tasks even when they endeavor to practice poverty. They must manage to combine hard work, whether at the desk or in the field, with real poverty of spirit, "without undue solicitude" and with "trust in the provident care of our, Father in heaven."

The American danger seems to be work without poverty of spirit, without detachment, with an involvement that swallows up the religious. By and large, religious are hard workers but too many of them are activists. St. John of the Cross, the great doctor of detachment, equivalates detachment and poverty of spirit. Today we speak of cultivating distance from things, a healthy objectivity toward persons and things even in the presence of great love and interest. This quality is especially necessary for man the worker, the Christian man-in-the-world

who is responsible for the world. There is no need for contempt of creation, no room for disdain or unhealthy fear. The Teilhardian “passionate indifference” is as valid as the Sanjuanist *nadas*. In fact the two formulations have very much in common. Both will preserve a man from being possessed by his work and keep him from undue solicitude because he leaves the results of his work in the hands of Providence.

Is not this affective detachment the reason for the expropriation of inheritances allowed by the Council for religious with simple vows? To give possessions back to God whether by renouncement or by sharing them is to return them to God’s rule. It is to reestablish all things in Christ. (Eph 2:10)

Possessing so easily means being possessed, whereas freely giving of one’s possessions is to re-possess them in their substance, truth and reality. This paradoxical doctrine of St. John of the Cross is one of the theological bases for freely giving of one’s own. We must be willing to give everything — time, energy, money, talent, “even to the very stripping of our skins for Christ.” That great modern teacher of detachment, Salinger’s Zooey, says: “As a matter of simple logic, there’s no difference at all, that I can see, between a man who’s greedy for material treasure (even intellectual treasure) and the man who is greedy for spiritual treasure. As you say, treasure’s treasure. ... It seems to me that ninety percent of all the world-hating saints in history were just as acquisitive and unattractive as the rest of us.”

In order to reject acquisitiveness, to rise above “having” and live on the level of “being” it is not necessary to abandon the world. This is one way, often grossly misrepresented and wrongfully discarded today as unchristian. As the monastic way it has its own validity. Today, however, the Christian sees his task as reestablishing all things in Christ. This, of course, is God’s work in Christ; yet as a great American Catholic said so simply, “Here on earth God’s

work must truly be our own.” We are committed in a very human way to building up the city of man. This will involve for individual religious and their communities the same risks, insecurities and worries that beset all men, especially the poor, in the world. There is the constant struggle to make ends meet, to live within an often inadequate budget, to husband what money and resources one has in the best interests: of one’s projects. There is the necessity of taking risks and chances, of making commitments without absolute assurance of the money or the personnel. All this is a real practice of poverty because it casts us on the hands of the Lord.

Redemptive Value

We have listed ways of practicing poverty under the rubric “Ecclesial” because they are the ways the Church and Vatican II seem to suggest for religious poverty. The Council has advocated a more radical poverty. It is concerned with public witness as well as private practice. The two go together. It is difficult to practice personal poverty in the presence of rich appointments in house and furnishings and daily table. It is impossible to give witness of community poverty where there is even the appearance of luxury, excessive wealth or the accumulation of goods.

But poverty is likewise sterile “if charity and unity do not shine forth in the religious community who hold all things in common,.” This aspect is the proper ecclesial character of religious poverty. Religious poverty exists in the Church to bear witness to fraternal love in the Church. In this witness of charity expressed and suffering endured in a life of poverty lies the redemptive value of religious poverty.

The primitive Jerusalem church held all things in common as a sign of their brotherhood. The Acts of the Apostles records: “And all who believed were together and held all things in common and would sell their possessions and goods and distribute

them among all according as anyone had need ... the multitude of the believers were of one heart and one soul and not one of them said that anything he possessed was his own but they had all things in common.” (Acts 2:44-5; 4:32). The renunciation of goods by the early Christians was done in the service of charity and hospitality (cf Mt 19:16-26). The Council recalls this direction of poverty to religious. They are to share their goods with each other, with other houses, other provinces and the Church. They are to share them with the poor. While they retain the right to possess according to their constitutions they must not hoard lest they give the lie to this witness of charity.

The connection between religious poverty and community life is so close that some would change the name of the vow of poverty to the vow of common life. Poverty’s meaning in actual practice is sharing. Voluntary poverty makes charity more possible because it disposes for generous giving, for sharing both within and without the convent walls. Such sharing creates community; it not only witnesses, it causes community to exist; it breaks down the wall of partition that alienates and separates men from each other. Such charity redeems because to create community is to redeem.

Religious have a built-in apostolate in their poverty. If they identify with the poor, live like them, work with them, become one with them, they will win the poor; and it must be remembered that the poor are not only the destitute of this world. All men, even affluent Americans, are poor in one way or another. They are poor in knowledge or poor in love, insecure, anxious, fearful. Poor men refuse to call anything their own. They are willing to share their goods with the Church and with the poor. The sacrifice demanded by this kind of program should not be minimized; only truly spiritual men and women will be able to do it. But unless religious orders do renew their status as the poor of Yahweh, unless the Church of the Poor becomes truly a poor

Church neither religious orders nor the Church will be fully engaged in dialogue with the world.

In the face of a world where two-thirds are actually poor, where instant and mass communications report the affluence of the few and the poverty of the masses, where men and institutions are judged by what they are and not what they should be, *the Church of the diaspora will stand or fall not by its words but by its witness of poverty*. Poverty is the sign that the apostle is preaching in the strength of Christ. If it is a mere name, lip service of the gospel texts that have an idyllic but unreal ring, the Church will fail in its missionary apostolate. The world will listen to us if we are little, humble, and poor.

Eschatological Value

The vows place, or better, confirm a Christian in his eschatological state; he no longer lives for this world, but for the world to come. *Perfectae caritatis* in defining the religious spirit makes the point that the religious not only dies to sin in order to live for God; he renounces the world. (n. 5) Religious renounce true human values, which in our redeemed universe are Christian values. They thus place their center in the Risen Saviour in a more eschatological way than those who remain in the secular city. They are more palpably pilgrims, awaiting the return of their Lord and Master.

We must not exaggerate. All Christians center their lives in the Risen Christ; they live no longer for selves but for Christ Who died for them and rose for them. Translating this option into day-to-day living means one thing for the layman, another for the religious. Both use “the world”; both build up the city man. They do so, however, in different proportions. Active religious especially, like teachers and social workers, attempt to unite the two dimensions of Christian life, the this-worldly aspect and the other-worldly, the incarnational and the eschatological, in a workable balance. Their

lives are dedicated to promoting the cultural and technological as well as the religious dimensions of life.

Religious are eschatological witnesses in their renunciation. But they must be witnesses to the good of creation, to the mysterious presence of the Lord of history in all the events, institutions, people and things of the earthly city as well. The Church's attitude today calls all Christians, religious included, at least those engaged in a secular apostolate, to be open to the world, to dialogue with believers and unbelievers alike, to be positive in their attitude to every true human value. God speaks to us through this world and in no other way. His explicit communications in Bible and Church are not his only manifestation. They help us to hear his voice as in history, and make us able to read the signs of the times. The priest and Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan were so engrossed in their own tried and true ways of religion and life, that they failed to recognize the call from God in the ill-fated traveler lying by the roadside. Perhaps we are too wedded to old forms of religious life that do not fit our apostolic commitments. Perhaps we are heirs of monastic forms that fit the contemplative monk but are less compatible with a life supposedly designed to care for bruised souls or bodies. Withdrawal from the world, religious observance, distrust of the world — these are values which are not absolute and must be integrated into a renewed apostolic life. Specifically, even if our apostolate is to meet youth where they are and bring them to maturity in Christ, do we keep people too far out from us, from our nicely ordered convents and monasteries, from our tightly scheduled horaria? Are we so devoted to our observances that charity must wait till a prayer schedule is fulfilled? These are not easy questions, because daily prayer

and daily observance as well as keeping distance from the world are all important for religious. My point is that they are not the only values in modern, active religious life.

We religious have a lot to learn from the incarnational movement that has culminated in "secular Christianity." This is more than a fad, though the movement has its faddists. We belong to a redeemed humanity and are members of the new heavens and earth already existing among us. Vatican II has taken over this world view. From now on *The Church in the Modern World, the Declaration on Religious Liberty* as well as the classic preface to these documents, *Pacem in terris*, should be required reading and study in novitiates. We must become men and women of our time and world, men and women first, if we would be spiritual and religious. Spirituality is not a veneer, a layer of attitudes and practices that do not affect the humanity of man.

The attitudes of the religious should be St. Paul's words to the Corinthians: "For all things are yours ... and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's." (1 Cor 3:22-23). All things are at the service of God and the brethren, all things — possessions, reputation, leisure, interests — are disposable for the salvation of the world. Sometimes this means renunciation, even to the creation of that vacuum and emptiness of heart and soul that calls out to God to be filled by Him. At other times it means using the world. Even here one uses it with the knowledge that God must be working in and through our own efforts; otherwise those efforts are not salvific. "The Spirit saves, the flesh profits nothing." Religious, then, whether they use the world as if not using it or reject the world in order to give it back to God's reign are giving the eschatological witness which is their duty and their privilege to perform in the Church.