

Religious 'poverty'

- Poverty is not having what is necessary for a meaningful human existence.

a: This obviously includes food, clothing, housing, but most importantly it includes love. However important economic factors are, we cannot limit poverty to economic poverty without limiting human need. A person who does not have love is very poor indeed.

b: The level of poverty will vary from person to person. The more areas in which a person is deprived of real human needs the more that person is poor.

- Poverty as defined is unequivocally evil. It ought not be sought for oneself or for others. Everything should be done to alleviate and abolish it.
- Poverty as defined has never been the object of the religious vow. When religious suffered poverty, there was always an attempt to remove it by begging, working, and careful handling of resources.
- Detachment, simplicity of life, the common life, accountability are required of religious by their vow. But these virtues are exactly what they say: they are not poverty.

Poverty : Amos 2:6-8

‘I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy (ebyôn) for a pair of sandal –

they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted (anawim) out of the way;

father and son go in to the same girl,

so that my holy name is profaned;

they lay themselves down beside every altar

on garments taken in pledge;

and in the house of their God they drink

wine bought with fines they imposed.’

ebyôn: beggar, powerless, needy, hungry, thirsty, paralysed, blind, deaf, lonely, last-in-the-line, without-a-voice, redundant.

anawim: stooped, oppressed, trodden down, deserted, deprived, outcast, despised, cast-aside, humiliated, roughly-treated, burdened, yoked, trapped, caught, crushed by the blows of chronic misery.

- The religious vows to be poor-like-Jesus.

a: For the most part Jesus was not poor, for he had what is necessary for a meaningful human existence.

b: He was 'poor' in the sense that he shared in the human condition of being totally dependent on love and so on the free choices of others to give love or not to give it.

c: Jesus was 'poor' in that he shared the human condition of having to undergo experiences which he could integrate and in which he could remain sinless only with a struggle (Romans 8:3; 2Corinthians 5:21).

d: He was 'poor' in that he lived in intimate communion with his Father who is YHWH the one who hears the cry of the poor.

He chose therefore to be with people in so far as they were poor and to take up their cause. He was willing to be counted among them and to take the consequences.

e: Jesus was faithful to his commitment to the poor even when it meant that he was excommunicated, ostracized, and stripped of human dignity, power and reputation, and disturbed by fear, racked by pain, he faced an apparently meaningless death, even experiencing being abandoned by his Father.

- To be poor-like-Jesus is to accept (a matter of belief) and live out (a matter of life-style) my total dependence on love: the love that is God. This is possible only to the extent that I am obedient-like-Jesus = to hear in every person and in every event of my life God as Abba saying to me: 'You are my son/daughter; I love you; in you my heart delights'.

Listening to this and believing the one who speaks to me, I learn, like Jesus, to love-like-Jesus, to enter into a covenant of love with the world, and to be faithful to that covenant.

- a: This means being willing to give myself to any person insofar as that person is deprived of anything he or she needs to live a dignified human existence.
- b: It is a matter of sym-pathy, com-passion: Being with, feeling with, and offering one's self to poor persons, while accepting their offering of themselves to us.

c: It is a matter of doing what one can, accepting inability with them, and continuing to affirm that death is not the end. Our horizon, like that of Jesus, goes beyond death, for we do believe in the justice of God. We do what must be done now, while hoping for what only God can give beyond the realm of human injustice and sin.

d: We must pray for the grace that the many advantages we have received will not put a barrier between us and those who have not received these advantages. If we venture to call ourselves poor because of this, we must do so humbly, in front of those to whom the name belongs, hoping to be embraced by a God who is already theirs, not by reason of their being better or worse, but because it is his choice to be their Saviour.

- Religious who commit themselves to be with any person in so far as that person lacks what is necessary for a meaningful human existence, who hear the cry of the poor and take up the cause of the poor, who are closer in heart, in life-style and in sympathy to those who are poor than to those who are rich, can call themselves 'poor' only when four conditions are fulfilled.

1. We must do all our thinking about poverty in the presence of those who according to the indices of need are recognised as being truly poor. To them the word more properly belongs. They will know if our lives speak the Good News to them or not. They will know if we are playing ‘blind man’s bluff’, playing at being blind while able to go away and see: playing at being poor while having available the resources to meet our needs!

To fail to recognise this is to be ‘proud of heart’ - the ones to whom Jesus addressed the words: ‘Woe upon you who are ‘rich’! Some acknowledge and accept their dependence [= faith] and live it out [= life-style]. It is to these that Jesus spoke when he said: ‘Blessed are the ‘poor in spirit’! Apart from the cry of the poor, all prayer, including the liturgy of the Church, can become a dangerous drug, because God, the Father of Jesus, is the One who ‘hears the cry of the poor.’

Paul VI Bogata 1968

‘You are a sign, you are an image, you are a mystery of the presence of Christ. The sacrament of the Eucharist offers us his hidden presence. But you too are a sacrament - a sacred image of the Lord among us, as it were a revealing, unconcealed reflection of his human and divine countenance ... All the Church’s tradition recognises in the poor the sacrament of Christ - a mystical correspondence with the Eucharist.’

Paul VI Puebla, 1979, #1145

‘When we draw near the poor in order to accompany them and serve them, we are doing what Christ taught us to do when he became our brother, poor like us. Hence service of the poor is the privileged, though not the exclusive gauge of our following of Christ.’

When we do reflect on poverty in the presence of the poor, we must not fail to notice that despite its awful capacity to destroy, poverty does have a special power to open people to the truth and so to God.

a: It can bring home a person's existential need for God

b: It can impel a person to cry out to God in his distress.

c: It can bring a person to listen to God and to trust in God's word.

2. We must do all our thinking in the presence of Christ crucified. He gave his life because his heart was one with that of his Father. He bore witness to God's compassion for all, especially for those who had no reason to be convinced of this truth except their experience of Jesus.

3. We must do all our thinking about poverty while embracing the world. We must believe in the world, and recognise our responsibility for its desecration.

4. We must do all our thinking in a heart that is consecrated to God.

‘Blessed are the pure of heart, they shall see God’
They shall hear God’s response to the cry of the poor.

Whatever threatens to possess our hearts that is not of God and that would distance us from the poor must be shunned.

a: 'Unless you change and become like a little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'(Matthew 18:3).

b: material riches (Zacchaeus: Luke 19:8; rich young man: Mark 10:22)

worries (Luke 8:14; Martha: Luke 10:40)

pride (Luke 1:51-53)

unrepentance (Luke 3:7-9)

preconceptions (Nazareth: Luke 4:23-24)

power & prestige (Pharisees: Luke 11:37-54; 18:9-14).

c: 'If you exalt yourself you will be humbled; if you humble yourself you will be exalted'(Luke 14:11; 18:14).

I can be poor without purity of heart, but I cannot be a sign of hope to the poor without it. I may give all I have, but if I lack love I am nothing.

- The problem of poverty is personal, and therefore institutional: it involves the way people relate - economically and in every way. It therefore demands a communal commitment to oppose institutionalized selfishness, exploitation and irresponsibility. It involves contributing to every effort to alleviate poverty by creating structures (including economic structures) which will effectively relate finite resources to human ends: by co-operation, criticism or condemnation. If we are to play a role in effectively responding to the cry of the poor, we will need to be involved in communal processes.

‘If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow in all ways into Christ’(Ephesians 4:15). We will need:

- i) New common experiences
- ii) New common understandings of these experiences.
- iii) Processes for common reflection to bring us to a new common affirmation in regard to how things really are, and the real desirability and effectability of being poor-like-Jesus.
- iv) Consensus concerning what ought to be done to realize this value.
- v) New common decisions to do what is to be done.

Abbé Pierre

‘Let us never lose our living conviction that it is not necessary to wait until we are splendid people before we can do splendid things. That would probably mean waiting a long time, too long in fact!

We need only to understand one splendid thing and then try to base our whole life upon it: and that thing is that the person we must help in all things is the person who is suffering the most.’

Albert Nolan OP :Meaning of 'option for the poor'

(New Blackfriars 1986. Encounter Spring 1988, pages 3 and 9)

'The option for the poor is an uncompromising and unequivocal taking of sides in a situation of structural conflict. It is not a matter of preaching to some people rather than to others, or a matter of being generous to the 'under-privileged', or a judgment about the personal guilt of the rich, or even, in the first instance, a matter of life-style. It is the assertion that Christian faith entails, for everyone and as part of its essence, the taking of sides in the structural conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed.'

Albert Nolan OP :Meaning of 'option for the poor'
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'A thoroughgoing option for the poor includes the willingness to question one's assumptions and to learn from those who are oppressed. It is only after one has learned to have confidence in the ability of the oppressed to promote their own cause and to bring about their own liberation that one can begin to share that struggle with them and to make a contribution in real solidarity with all those who have taken an option against oppression.'

‘If the religious vow of poverty is going to make sense today, even to religious themselves to say nothing of other people, it cannot continue to be understood as a private reality operating in the closed system that the religious subculture once constituted. It has to relate the religious enterprise to the enormous human project of organising material resources for the creation of a genuinely human world. Religious poverty has to clearly cast the weight of Christianity into the balance on the side of responsible stewardship, institutional reform, and the liberation of the poor.

‘But even more importantly it should help to surface and explicitate the potentially evangelical values in this world struggle for a human economy and contribute an evangelical dimension where none yet exists.

To build the evangelical dimension into the contemporary economic struggle ... means to contribute to the effort not only by cooperation, criticism or condemnation, but by a mode of behaviour which arises directly from a Gospel poverty of spirit, itself the fruit of a profound experience of God’s gift to us in Jesus ...

Sandra Schneiders : New Wineskins (continued)

A poverty of this kind, which renounces both the childish irrelevance of an artificial dependence and the romanticism of a useless and unreal imitation of the destitute and concentrates on alleviating misery while building the structures of human solidarity, can make sense to the religious who vows poverty today. And although the world will undoubtedly not always like what religious are doing in this area, it will at least have to take it seriously' (page 102-103).

‘Jesus invites us to join him in the mystery of his total dependence and complete surrender into his Father’s hands. We respond to this invitation by choosing evangelical poverty. Jesus became one with the poor. We want to be like him, with him becoming detached from created things’(MSC Constitutions n. 44).

‘By professing poverty, we commit ourselves to be, like Jesus, completely available for God and the kingdom, in all things concerning material goods. Our sense of poverty will lead us to put all our talents, time and effort at the service of the community and its mission’(MSC Constitutions n. 45).

‘In order to grow in the commitment entailed by a preferential choice for the poor according to the spirit of our congregation, our style of life – both for individuals and communities – should always reflect a great simplicity, taking into account the circumstances of time and place. We adhere to the common law of work and do not look for privileges. With confidence in God we accept dependence and even insecurity, which is the lot of many people’(MSC Constitutions n. 46).

‘Faithful to Christ who loves the poor and the simple, we do not hesitate to become involved with those in need, and to share our goods with them. We commit ourselves as a community to the defence of justice, without hatred or envy in our hearts’(MSC Constitutions n. 47).

‘Each community through regular revision of life will examine before God the manner in which the vow of poverty is being lived, especially with regard to the following points:

- responsibility concerning the goods of the community
- simplicity of life
- a sense of work
- the quality of their sharing with the poor as well as with other communities and the missions
- their sense of social justice

In order that our detachment might be real, it must be collective as well as individual’(MSC Directory n. 42).