

REDEMPTIVE POVERTY

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A QUICK LOOK BACK

A measure of the seriousness, if not severity, with which we Redemptorists viewed the vow of poverty can be found in the oath which all superiors were required to take in front of the community on entering office. *"I promise under oath, and bind myself, under pain of mortal sin, to the Divine Majesty, never to permit the members of the Congregation, remaining at home, to have for their own arbitrary use, for any reason whatsoever, any sum of money, even the smallest...."* Any tinkering with one's patrimony could lead to exclusion from the Congregation for the confrere involved and deposition from office of any superior who gave such a permission or tolerated such an abuse.

The meticulous detail of the twenty nine pages of prescriptions in the "old rule" concerning poverty are a matter of public record as well as a fading memory. It all became vivid for me when I came across a novitiate notebook of a recently deceased confrere. When a novice, over 40 years ago, this confrere had made notes on all the novitiate conferences and had kept them in mint condition! These notes certainly convey the tone or feel of how the vow of poverty was presented in those days just prior to Vatican 11. Redemptorist poverty was taught as "the surrender of the independent use of money and material things". Careful distinctions were drawn between the vow proper, the virtue or spirit of poverty which was meant to infuse the living of the vow and the acceptance of the inconveniences inseparable from the keeping of the vow. Considerable emphasis was placed on the physical and external aspects of the vow: *"When we take the vow of poverty we accept all the inconveniences of it so we have only ourselves to blame"*. The novices were often challenged to see poverty not in terms of what they can get but in terms of what they can do without. They were warned about the mentality of trying *"to get the superior round to my way of thinking"*. In true Redemptorist style the notes were peppered with colourful examples of how religious found ways rounds the multitude of regulations then associated with the living of the vow of poverty.

Of course there were some keen insights into the human condition; it was noted, for example, that those who devoted a lot of time and energy to

their possessions were often possessed by their very possessions. The novices were alerted to the view that *"the less we had 'outside', the more demanding we are 'inside'"*. Some connection with those who had no choice in their poverty was noticed in the recommendation that our way of living poverty should *"never be a source of amusement to the really poor"*. Redemptorist poverty, it was claimed, is not merely penitential but it is positive in its scope, helping us to serve God more freely. The essential link with Christ was acknowledged: *"We possess all because we possess Christ, yet we have nothing because we have Christ"*.

It has to be admitted that our very detailed regulations concerning poverty (down to such curiosities as "under-stockings", "half-silk umbrellas" and ornament-free walking sticks) evoked a sense of legalism and externalism bordering on formalism. No criticism of the 'old rule', however, can take anything away from the heroism of the confreres who lived out their vow of poverty in simplicity of heart and handed on to us a sensitivity for gospel poverty which still haunts us. Something of Alphonsus' love for evangelical poverty still unsettles us and almost goads us into searching for the inner meaning of this vow.

OF PERFECT CHARITY

Perfectae Caritatis was a watershed in the renewal of Religious Life. In terms of poverty the decree spoke, not of *our* poverty but of the poverty of Christ. Rather than focus on property or money it spoke of our sharing in the poverty of Jesus and stressed the conciliar expectation that the renewal of religious life would give rise to new forms of gospel poverty. In a renewed Church, renewed religious would be "poor in fact and in spirit, having their treasure in heaven". There would be a new emphasis on the common law of labour and members of Congregations would be able to renounce their patrimony. Communities and Institutes are called also to poverty and should give a "quasi collective" witness to poverty, especially by shunning "any semblance of luxury, excessive wealth and accumulation of property".

While religious engaged with the call to renewal, the whole Church was rediscovering its apostolic vocation to be a Church of the Poor inspired by the early Christian community described in Acts (2:42-47 and 4: 32-35). While much energy went into the details of renewal (as laid out in *Renovationis Causam*, 1969), great enthusiasm was also experienced for

the "option for the poor". Paul VI in *Evangelica Testificatio* (1971) linked the renewal of gospel poverty to issues of justice. Recognising that many religious had found new meaning to their vow of poverty in the struggle to relieve the evils of economic poverty and destitution, even to the point of being tempted to take violent action, Paul VI nevertheless placed religious poverty within the context of social justice. Ever sensitive to the cry of the poor, vowed religious would avoid all compromise with any form of social injustice. They would be in the forefront of raising conscientiousness to "the drama of misery and to the demands of social justice made by the Gospel and the Church" (18). Paul foresaw that some religious would take their vow of poverty and their concern for the materially poor so seriously as "to join the poor in their situation and to share their bitter cares", an experience which became known as "insertion". Religious Institutes as such could re-order their pastoral priorities so as to be more available to the needs of the poor. The pope also was aware of some of the dangers presented by the new situation: religious who now earned salaries could come to judge their worth by what they earned; they could be tempted to hang on to some or all of their pay; they might find it hard to limit their use of goods to what is necessary for their apostolate and they might succumb to "an excessively superficial preoccupation for appearing to be poor" (22).

For Pope Paul, the beginning and end of religious poverty and religious dedication is what he called "heart-to-heart union with Christ". Who can forget the ringing cry towards the end of his apostolic Exhortation:

"Today more than ever the world needs to see in you men and women who have believed in the Word of the Lord, in his resurrection and in eternal life, even to the point of dedicating their lives to witnessing to the reality of that love, which is offered to all." (53).

A TIME TO RESPOND

In the wake of the Council there was a torrent of response, not simply in theological reflection but in actions, decisions, and experiments. In terms of gospel poverty this produced a great richness of ideas and an enthusiasm in the Spirit for new ways of celebrating this gospel value.

Poverty as Justice. The 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus looked carefully at the Jesuit experience of this vow. In their search for what they called "authentic evangelical poverty" the Jesuits examined the following topics:

- a) The self-emptying of Christ and the Jesuit vocation to serve the poor and humble Christ. The call to gospel poverty is a call to share in that *kenosis* : like Christ and with Christ the Jesuit empties himself, becoming poor and humble like Christ.
- b) The signs of the times, especially seeing the ministry of justice as part of contemporary gospel poverty. They concluded that poverty as working for justice is a condition of Jesuit credibility. Such a focus on work for justice would lead to the setting up of communities inserted among the poor.
- c) The style-of-life in Jesuit communities would have to reflect the commitment of the Society to 'poverty through justice'.
- d) The question of mediocrity: there was a recognition that any compromise in matters of "remuneration, salary, alms or anything else" is "vicious and insidious and cannot be tolerated under any colour whatsoever".
- e) Poverty of means: in order to observe the Jesuit apostolic mission "to preach in poverty", there was a call to review institutions and structures and to submit ministerial aids to the principle of what is more conducive to God's service.

This programme set the tone for many apostolic communities to connect gospel poverty with social justice and thus to avoid a tendency to over-spiritualise discourse about poverty. J.B.Metz brought together the mystical aspect of gospel poverty, uniting us to the dynamic of losing our lives and finding them anew, with the political dimensions:

"Poverty as an evangelical virtue is a protest against the tyranny of having, of possessing and pure self-assertion. It impels those practising it into practical solidarity with those poor whose poverty is not a matter of virtue but is their condition of life and the situation exacted of them by society" (Followers of Christ p.49).

Poverty as Simplicity

Many commentators on religious life proposed that the word 'poverty' in the sense of the religious vow of poverty was so worn out that it would be better to find a fresh name for the same reality. Most commonly the

noun 'simplicity' figured high in the stakes for replacing 'poverty'. The idea of gospel simplicity sits well with what has always been understood by evangelical poverty and yet it is free of economic connotations and free of the confusion with the social evil of poverty and destitution. Timothy Radcliffe writes: "One of the most radical demands of the vow of poverty is surely that we so live in simplicity as to see the world differently and gain some glimpse of the utterly gracious God" and to root that in reality he continues: "The world looks different from the back of a Mercedes than it does from the seat of a bicycle". Simplicity challenges our 'comfort zones' and our sense of privilege.

Another aspect of simplicity and another way of speaking of gospel poverty is the language of 'the common life'. In Fr Lasso's *Communicanda* 11 we read that leading a common life on a daily basis "may be the only face of poverty which it is now morally possible for us to show in order to give meaning to this vow for ourselves and for others" (38). Others have spoken about the vulnerability presupposed by the common life: "Do we live the insecurity of giving to the community all that we receive, exposed to the risk that they might not give us all that we think we need?" (Radcliffe p.46). In an age which promotes individualism and yet longs for fellowship and interdependence, the vow of poverty witnesses to a way of freedom through sharing. In a world which promotes self-fulfilment and self-absorption there is something surprising about the deliberate choice of self-sacrifice for others, indeed for the Other.

In tandem with simplicity and the common life much is made of the notion of 'solidarity' as a synonym for poverty. More than a feeling of togetherness, solidarity involves mutual dependence and is expressed in a life-style of sharing. In the context of the vow of poverty solidarity evokes not only the idea of interdependence within units of a religious family but interdependence between religious communities and those in real need. Solidarity in poverty means solidarity with the poor. An aspect of simplicity and solidarity which has come to the fore is the sense of poverty as stewardship and care for the integrity of creation. Often inspired by a Franciscan celebration of all creation, such stewardship impacts on the care and responsibility for religious buildings, on ecological sensitivity to our planet down to respect for the small details of the lives of our brothers and sisters around us.

New ventures in gospel poverty

Throughout the twentieth century there have been many new ventures in living out evangelical poverty. Blessed Charles de Foucauld pioneered a radical way of simplicity and an apostolate of presence in the Sahara. The fraternities of Little Brothers and Little Sisters which drew inspiration from Brother Charles adapted his charism to community life and found ways of living and working "au coeur des masses". The Worker Priests (Mission Ouvriere des Pretres) sought to live the gospel in the world of marginalized workers, sharing their style of life, living from the same meagre wages, adjusting to their housing conditions and participating in their recreations. Blessed Theresa of Calcutta initiated a religious family whose simplicity of life and ministry for the poorest of the poor speaks to the whole world. After the Vatican Council these efforts in radical gospel living led to a wave of renewal both among the established religious institutes and among the many new movements in the Church. New forms of contemplative living, new developments in monastic traditions and new initiatives in apostolic religious Congregations were all marked by a zeal for authenticity in mission, gospel poverty, real community and deep prayer.

GOSPEL POVERTY IN THE NEW CENTURY

It has to be admitted that the enthusiasm for a renewed theology of poverty and the experiments by communities or individuals of living a life that is poor in spirit and in fact, is a minority interest. There is a reluctance to speak about gospel poverty such is the unease it generates in most religious today. The nagging questions about the quality of our witness in this area, the uncomfortable compromises we have negotiated, the mediocrity into which we have fallen, all these things keep us silent about our vow. Brother Roger of Taize used to say that talking about religious poverty scorched his lips when so many people were living in real poverty with no hope of relief. In Africa the paradox of consecrated men and women claiming to live in poverty yet surrounded with most modern conveniences while their sisters and brothers endure desperate deprivations is acute.

Many therefore feel that contemporary religious have lost their way in the living out of the vow of poverty. Some salve their conscience with

the thought that others in the community or institute are involved in the struggle for justice; others take refuge in the ethos of the Order which needs expensive institutions for its mission. But the Spirit still nags away, unsettles us and prompts us to look this whole matter in the face.

In our Redemptorist tradition we can see the Spirit at work over a number of years. At the final General Chapter of the 20th century it was agreed "That we carefully examine and renew our living of the evangelical counsels in the light of our community and mission" (Orientations 3.5). In the Superior General's report to the 2003 General Chapter paragraphs 18 to 26 are devoted to that call of the previous General Chapter. Admitting that there has been very little discussion about any of the vows, the Superior General highlights the "constant temptation to mediocrity" and the possibility for us "to slide into a bourgeois life-style and a consumer mentality". Responding to the General's challenge the Chapter recognised "that the Congregation is being offered the grace to renew its living of the evangelical vows of chastity, poverty and obedience". (Message 4). The orientations of that General Chapter asked for special attention to be given to the demands of inculturation when trying to renew our living of the vows (Orientations 9).

The first step in renewing our living of the vows is the acknowledgement that such a renewal is necessary, a recognition that we have settled into "a sedate and secure way of life, by which we have diluted the radical response of our profession". (Letter of Superior General 02.02.04)

By the time of the midsexennial meetings of 2006 the General is still drawing attention to our failure to offer a counter-cultural witness in our style of life because of our failure to inculturate the values of the consecrated life in the many cultures in which we live and work. His conclusion? "I believe that the whole Congregation needs to ask itself about the testimony of our consecrated life: *whether in fact our way of discipleship says anything at all?*".

It has to be said that the work of restructuring the Congregation for its Mission has absorbed a great deal of attention and interest. But restructuring goes hand in glove with renewal of our consecrated living. Restructuring our vow of poverty may, in the end, prove as decisive for our fidelity to our vocation as new networks, conferences or federations.

REDEMPTIVE POVERTY

Following the lead of *Perfectae Caritatis* our Constitutions on poverty begin with the clear identification that what is at stake here in the first place is not *our* poverty but the poverty of Christ. The poverty of Christ consists in his complete self-emptying, his *kenosis*, even to the extreme of dying so that we might have the fullness of life. Here we have the heart of evangelical poverty: a self-emptying that leads to a new richness in spirit. No theory or practice, no fancy names or postmodern profiles which avoid the way of self-emptying can be called gospel poverty. How individuals, communities, Provinces or whole Congregations empty themselves will introduce questions about cultural and economic differences. The call to die to self so that we might live to God is heard in every Christian heart; in the case of vowed religious the call takes on a particular profile which reflects the charism of the religious Congregation. That is why Franciscan poverty will have a different feel to it than Benedictine poverty. That is why Redemptorist poverty will be closely associated with the Mission of the Congregation. It explains why C 66 can talk about what is in fact 'cultural poverty' when we are called "to understand those values that are held in esteem by other peoples though they may not perhaps appeal to themselves or their own culture".

The poverty of Christ reflects the poverty of the Father who gives to the Son all that he is and both Father and Son pour out the Spirit into our hearts. This poverty of God is another expression of the nature of God's love. "The Father effaces himself behind the Son....God makes himself vulnerable in the flesh of his Son....He makes himself a beggar for our love....He receives his joy from us" . (Poor, therefore Rich) To be taken into this mystery of God's self-giving is to experience poverty and richness at once. If as Christians we are icons of Christ, then we reflect his passage through death to life; as religious we allow his style of self-emptying to continue in us.

Through centuries of reflection the Church has come to see that the mystery of redemption is not limited to any particular act; Jesus is redemption in his person and his every act is redemptive. Not only his death and resurrection but his conception, his birth, his hidden life, all are redemptive. His silence during the long years before his public ministry is redemptive, his use of material things, food, drink, clothes, money, all is redemptive. Hence in Christ our poverty is redemptive:

what we are and what we do, how we use material things, how we care for the environment, all is redemptive.

Being redemptive, our poverty is therefore also missionary: it is an expression of our "missionary charity" (C.65) and becomes a sign of hope to the actual poor we are evangelizing. Our redemptive poverty finds expression in our freedom to move from place to place (C.67) for the sake of our mission. Likewise redemptive poverty reflects Jesus' own style of self-emptying which is evoked among us by the language of 'distacco': "a life of moderation detached from earthly riches, a life which involves dependence and limitation in the use and disposal of material goods" (C.68). In the current discourse of the Congregation our redemptive poverty means a life *given* for abundant redemption.

The call to discover new ways of practising redemptive poverty (C.63) can include not only the renunciation of patrimonial goods (C.70), but recognising new faces of poverty among us. As Blessed Theresa of Calcutta used to say, the poor and neglected can be in the next room, so individuals and communities can be practicing an unsung aspect of redemptive poverty.

Some confreres and some units of the Congregation are living the poverty of diminishment. Faced with a steep decline in numbers, there is an inevitable decline in the quality of community life. Living the reality of diminishment, either personal or collective, is surely an aspect of gospel poverty, handing over the dying process to the Lord of all life.

Akin to diminishment is the poverty of failure which seems to haunt so many. Coming towards the evening of life many look back and wonder what is there to show for it all? So much in our Redemptorist life is precarious: our grip on the ministry, our inner life, our health, our financial resources, our future. Pointing to heroic failures, like St. Clement, is cold comfort to those of us who do not have Clement's robust faith and hope. Cardinal Hume in his last illness and troubled by these questions concluded that God wanted him to come before him with empty hands, relying solely on God's constant compassion. Dealing creatively with failure is surely a significant part of contemporary poverty.

An insidious temptation which we all face at some time in our Redemptorist journey is to give way to the culture of mediocrity. Perhaps we can even speak of the poverty of mediocrity. To live in an

atmosphere of dullness, staleness or boredom can be a severe test of one's joy in the Lord. When the prevailing attitude is "So what?" or "Who cares?" and the prevailing practices are governed by the lowest common denominator, it requires a richness of spirit to withstand such bleakness. While Fr. Haring used to remind his confreres penitents that "we are not called to mediocrity", it is, perhaps, more trying to live with our own mediocrity than with the mediocrity of others. Either way, it is a face of poverty we must address.

The new faces of poverty are legion: there is the poverty of stress, of the confrere left in a responsible position so long that he comes to loathe his situation; there is the poverty of incompetence where confreres are left behind by computer wizards or where academic or literary efforts go unnoticed and pastoral initiatives ignored. There is a host of situations arising from physical, psychological, mental or spiritual difficulties in all of which the call to continue to give one's life for abundant redemption is heard.

Redemptive poverty must mean that we can find a generosity of spirit, individually and as a Congregation to allow the transformative power of the poor Christ to work within us. In reclaiming our vocation to evangelize the poor and to be evangelized by the poor we are touching on a central nerve in our Redemptorist ethos: to be "for the poor, with the poor, as the poor and by the poor". To find structures in our personal lives to be ever closer to the poor Jesus, with the poor Jesus, as the poor Jesus and by the poor Jesus is an imperative that cannot be gainsaid without losing our tradition. To find structures for our communities and for the Congregation to live missionary poverty will also be a work of the Spirit to which the Congregation, as a work of the Spirit, is open. In this respect we are not starting from scratch. Not only do we have a living tradition of redemptive poverty, we also have Constitutions and Statutes already in place which, if observed in the spirit in which they were written, go a long way to disclose to us the meaning of the poverty of Christ.

A first step for us then would be to review our present structures of living the vow: are we poor "in spirit and in fact"(C.68)?, do we consider ourselves bound by the law of labour (C.64)? are our goods "simple in style....and held in common for common use"(62)? How keen is our sensitivity to the poverty of the world "and to the grave social problems" afflicting those around us (044)? How often do we have a "periodic review

with the aim of furthering the practice of poverty in a really genuine way (046)? Most pertinent of all, perhaps, how can we avoid "even the appearance of a peculium" in a culture where all religions seem to have some degree of independent use of money (047)? Such questions have to do with the structures of poverty already in place.

Looking at the question of restructuring our practice of poverty each Region will have to approach this from its own perspective. From my perspective in Africa I can see a need for some structure to address the needs of the economic poverty -if not destitution- of the families of many confreres. If there is no such structure, then inevitably individual initiatives with or without permission will emerge and the common life will be endangered. Likewise structures are needed to address the urgent social and pastoral crises which the scourge of HIV/AIDS, for example, presents on a regular basis. With no such structure individual confreres with the right contacts will fund all kinds of projects and administer serious amounts of money without reference to community or superiors. The lack of adequate structures to address urgent local needs can even protect the community from getting involved in a creative way in the local situations while those who do get involved, but on a purely individual basis, are subject to criticism from all sides. Mindful of our mission of abundant redemption, it is possible with a bit of imagination to share our facilities with care-givers, to help the helpers, and so be evangelized in our path of poverty by those who share in the passion of Christ cannot be concealed. In implementing the supreme law of charity our poverty must redeem both recipients and donors.

C.59 (on religious chastity) speaks about us being "so captivated by what the kingdom of God offers" that only by choosing religious chastity can we respond personally and fully to God's love for us. The same dynamic is at work in our vow of poverty. We are to be so captivated by what Jesus wants to do in us and through us for his poor, that only by choosing redemptive poverty can we respond personally and fully to God's love for us. Perhaps then a stage in reclaiming our poverty is to talk to one another about what really captivates our heart?