

The response to the incarnation of God's love has taken as many forms as there are traditions within Christianity. For many of our readers, the response has gone beyond a 'mainstream' pilgrim path that began at baptism, for they have taken a further step that is much less trodden – and less secure. (The uncertainty of partial understanding is not among the things abandoned by those who enter religious life!) Yet they seek to grow in Christ while on the *camino* of their profession. While some imagine the mystery of God (of life, we might say) as something they need to grasp, many who join convents and priories do so because, frankly, *they* have been grasped by something they sense as 'greater'. They cannot *not* go further in search of what has taken hold of them. For life. What 'grasps' a disciple may be awe at some revelation of the beauty of God (in a liturgical hour, perhaps, or a conversational moment); or it may also be a sense of distress at the sight of injustice in society and a dedicated resolve to react from within a congregation that has long pioneered causes of justice and peace.

In *RLR* this year we will listen to disciples who belong to religious congregations and orders tell what they mean by 'poverty, chastity and obedience' – and by other vows taken by some. Tony Gittins starts us off in these pages. To know the nature of a thing, Aquinas taught, is to know how to talk about it. The Word made Flesh can be followed in a life like his, a life of dedication (obedience) and selfless love (chastity), practised in the clarity of an unimpeded outlook (poverty).

Some disciples we have known joined religious life and later left it. Both decisions may in some cases have been correct. It was Chesterton (quoted by McGrath, *op. cit.*, p 38) who said that 'the best way to see if a coat fits a man is not to measure both of them, but to try it on'!

We come to the Father 'in Christ' because the Saviour is the way the Father comes to us. Christian disciples realise that in terms of knowing God we are still largely in the dark. 'Now I know only in part'. It is the darkness we call 'faith'.

2014 Series on the Vows of Consecrated Life

Poverty *for* Life

ANTHONY J. GITTINS, CSSp

FOR MANY YEARS I have spoken on the subject of Poverty in Religious Life to an 'Intercommunity Novitiate' group comprising novices and directors from a dozen religious orders of men and women within driving distance of Chicago. Some of the novices from the early years are now Novice Directors themselves; and still they invite me back. What follows covers much the same ground as my annual talks, adapted, however, for *Religious Life Review*.

'Poverty for life' is highly ambiguous, loaded with connotations more obviously negative than positive, and therefore worth exploring in the context of religious life. In its obviously negative sense, poverty simply denotes lack, deprivation, destitution – or destruction of human dignity. In French, *pauvreté anthropologique* indicates human impoverishment, material or moral. Likewise, 'for life' can describe a judicial decision ('Sent to prison *for life*; a *life sentence*') or a terminal condition ('Suffering Type 2 diabetes *for life*, or destitute *for life*'). Such negative associations indicate a condition that, far from life-giving, is life-taking or life-destroying; the expression 'for life' describes bleakness and even hopelessness. Because this is not the poverty anyone would choose, it cannot possibly be what we mean when speaking the vow of 'poverty for life'. As a purely negative state, poverty is an abomination with nothing whatsoever to recommend it.

Fortunately, the phrase 'for life' can also mean 'actively promoting life' (*contra* 'against life'); 'life-giving'; 'generative'. If described in this sense, the word is evidently being used very differently, therefore the 'poverty' must be of a quite different kind. Such 'religious poverty' cannot be imposed, but it may be chosen. One reason might motivate religious women and men; but those who espouse it must be able to justify referring to it specifically as *religious poverty*.

Questions immediately arise. If *religious poverty* is life-giving', exactly whose life are we talking about? If it is simply one's own, it becomes self-indulgent, not generative, and perhaps even sterile. In order to be both altruistic and generative, my *religious poverty* must turn my life inside-out, direct it at my neighbour (and my God), and help in some fashion to give life to the world. 'I have come that they may have life', said Jesus, 'and have it to the full' (John 10:10). Unless this is the focus of our *religious poverty*, we betray the real meaning of religion, and our actual 'poverty' is hypocritical, a scandal indeed.

Authentic religious poverty is an instrument or means, but not an end in itself. It should serve, not simply as a way to *achieve* personal sanctity (which, as a form of Pelagianism, would be heretical), but must become a way of sanctifying us so that our transformed lives become a sacrament, an efficacious sign of real hope for others. This shows itself in solidarity and commitment to alleviating the sinful poverty in our world, by working against unjust structures and in favour of dispossessed and unjustly treated human beings.

WHY ON EARTH RELIGIOUS POVERTY?

'Why on earth?' This rhetorical question is often articulated when people encounter problems with enormous implications for fellow earthlings. But it is not only rhetorical: after all, 'on earth' is the context of all human and animal life, and therefore *on earth* is precisely where human problems must be addressed. We cannot simply pray for people, or be concerned for people

in general: there are no 'people in general', only real, actual, flesh and blood individuals; and prayer without good works is close to magical thinking, sitting back and waiting for a miraculous response. If we had real faith – expressed in a burning commitment to the Realm of God and to loving the neighbour we see and the neighbour we have not yet met – then our vows of poverty, chastity and obedience would actually affect the world beyond our fingertips. Thus, 'Why on earth religious poverty for life?' becomes a question that almost answers itself: it is, like the life of Jesus, 'for the life of the world'. And a commitment to religious poverty becomes an urgent stimulus, a goad and focus for our everyday lives.

In order to be both altruistic and generative, my *religious poverty* must turn my life inside-out, direct it at my neighbour (and my God), and help in some fashion to give life to the world.

Another reason the context of our religious poverty is 'on earth' is because our commitment is not simply *spiritual* (to our own sanctification and perfection on earth), but *incarnational* (specifically to living focused on promoting God's Reign on earth, among our flesh-and-blood sisters and brothers, fired with God's 'preferential option for the poor'). When Jesus taught his disciples, he instructed them to pray that this Reign or Kingdom would become a reality '*on earth* [not yet] as it is in heaven [already]'. He demands that we live for others, working with them and on their behalf, to build a better world on the principles of God's justice. And our religious poverty 'for life' is expressed in the way we live, not selfishly inverted, but altruistically *everted* – turned inside out, poured out, according to Jesus' example, 'for the life of the world'. In Judaism, this is *tikkun olam*: healing a broken world, one act, one person, one day at a time.

Thirdly, we might remember – as Cain failed to do – that we should be our brothers' and sisters' keepers (*cf* Gen 4:9). St Paul describes and defends the mission he undertakes: 'You see, all this is for your benefit, so that the more grace is spread throughout the world, the more thanksgiving there will be, for the glory of God' (2 Cor 4:15-16). Paul emphasises two things: that he was impelled or inspired to do as much good as possible *for others*; and that the underlying purpose, apart from improving their lot, was to glorify God. This can well stand as a challenge to – as well as a hallmark of – our own religious poverty, inspired by the same sense of mission.

MOTIVATION FOR 'RELIGIOUS POVERTY'

People take vows for many reasons. But *religious poverty* is different both from the grinding poverty to which millions of people are subjected and from which they are unable to escape, different too from vowed poverty as a 'way of (individual) perfection' or removal from 'worldly affairs' (the *fuga mundi* or 'flight from the world' of the religious ascetic. Specifically *religious poverty* should meet certain criteria, and I will outline four of these now.

Firstly, it is explicitly and existentially committed to the Reign of God. Those without vowed poverty are not of course excluded from this commitment, but a religious vow is a *public* statement of our commitment to the poor, in God's name and for their sake, a statement that this commitment can be scrutinised and, if appropriate, seen as hypocritical if our actions were to belie our vows.

Secondly, acknowledging that 'the poor' have a right, as human persons, to advocacy and to justice, we publicly declare that we are their advocates and friends: not merely in theory, but in the lived practice of our religious lives.

Thirdly, having taken to heart the 'woes' Jesus declares on the rich ('they have their fill now' [Lk 6:24]), we pledge ourselves not to be misers (selfishly rich) but open-handed and 'poor' – in the Lukan sense of not independently wealthy but sharing a common table in solidarity with those who are needy

[Lk 6:20]. In a world of self-sufficiency, acquisition and independence, we are called to 'mutual indebtedness' or true reciprocity, a significant hallmark of the early Church (Acts 2:42-45). Such mutuality goes beyond an 'in-house' sharing, because the missionary call each of us has received generates a centrifugal movement of outreach beyond our own kind.

A fourth reason for our 'religious poverty' is that it will be an antidote to the pernicious disease that threatens our world: the cancer of appalling extremes. Our world sees unthinkable riches stick to the hands of the few, while equally unthinkable poverty scars the lives of the many. Dulled though we are by a deluge of statistics, we have nonetheless no excuse for pleading ignorance. Vowed religious poverty is one positive response that attempts to bridge the gap, by a recirculation and redistribution of resources, from those who have but do not need, to those who need but do not have. Extremes, as found in human living conditions, are effects of structural sin. By the vigorous practice of religious poverty, we can restore the balance just a little, by redirecting our resources to favour those most sinned against.

FROM VOW TO VIRTUE

Aristotle maintained that unless virtues (and vices, for that matter) are embodied, they simply do not exist. They do not exist in a Platonic world of ideas but in the real world of human social interaction. If nobody in the world loved, there would be no love in the world, and if nobody hated there would be no hatred. In this light we may usefully distinguish vows and virtues. Vows are encoded, articulated as verbal formulae; virtues are embodied, practised in daily living. Sometimes *vows* can become binding and sterile, but *virtues* are always liberating.

Vows, pronounced in the past and maintained by discipline and adherence to the letter of the law, dehumanise the person who takes them, while failing utterly to alleviate other people's dehumanising poverty. If our vow of poverty makes us misers (loveless, unhappy hoarders or punctilious rule-keepers), and

if a legalistic attitude produces selfishness (thinking only of myself) and injustice (failing to think of others), then rules and rigidity have replaced love and liberality. Likewise for the other vows: a narrow, legalistic reading of the vow of chastity can produce cold, loveless and self-focused people, and a similar attitude to obedience can produce servile automata lacking human freedom and dignity.

The corrective is to practise the *virtue* of poverty (and of chastity and obedience) and let the *vow* take care of itself. Begin with the virtue ('love one another'; 'give, and it will be given to you') and the contours of the vow will reshape themselves around a human rather than a legal reality. Begin with the virtue and our lives will be re-focused on the *anawim*, God's remnant poor. This will challenge and disturb us until we realise that making exceptions is sometimes more godly than keeping the rules, and promoting freedom and dignity is always more important than observing the letter of the law. Of course, the challenge to 'religious poverty' as it is lived in the context of a community will inevitably reform and refocus the community, so that its vowed poverty is directed where it should be, to where Jesus directed his.

As individual and community constitute a mutual challenge, we are less likely to privilege our own rights and entitlements, and more likely to hear the cries of the poor. Unless we do, our 'religious poverty' becomes a scandal. When we do hear them, religious poverty comes under the probing light of God's justice. Here is St John Chrysostom:

It is not possible to be wealthy and just at the same time. Do you pay such honour to your excrements as to receive them in a silver chamber-pot, when another [person] made in the image of God is perishing in the cold?¹

Do these words have anything to say to my current 'religious poverty'?

St Basil the Great is no less direct:

¹ See J. Liebeschuetz, *Barbarians and Bishops*, Oxford, 1990: 176.

Are you not a robber, you who consider your own that which has been given to you solely to distribute to others? This bread which you have set aside is the bread of the hungry. Those riches you have hoarded are the riches of the poor.

More recently, Jacques Dupuis writes:

Jesus not only showed a 'preferential option' for the poor; he is not simply 'on their side', but he personally identifies and associates preferentially with them: he is not simply *for* the poor, but *belongs* to them and is *with* them.²

To justify our selfish consumerism by claiming it is 'within the vow' rings very hollow. If our anchor, our point of departure, is the vow we articulated in its canonical legal form, then a certain pattern will emerge in our lives and in our attitudes to things and to people. The vow will tend not to become an instrument or a means to an end (the realisation of its life-giving potential), but a purely formal legalism that we either observe without love, or simply honour in the breach. We may rationalise our behaviour, but at the cost of spontaneity, generosity and credibility with ourselves and with those whose lives our vow is intended to assist. Practising the 'art of the possible' and sticking to the letter of the vow, we put the soullessness of the law in the place of love.

Vows lived virtuously rather than merely legally will bear fruit to be seen and enjoyed by others, because virtuous vows are neither privatised nor hidden but open rather to public scrutiny and accountability. Virtuous living never justifies itself by claiming strict adherence to the letter of Rule or Constitution while actual people remain deprived of basic human rights. Virtuous vows will be shape-changers over time, since they will seek and find expression in changing times and circumstances. Virtuous vows express themselves as the fruits, not only of community-based decisions, but also of personal and individual responses to the cries of the poor. A characteristic of charisms is that they exist for others, to be given away. A

² Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, Orbis, 2002: 30.

community whose vowed poverty fails to find contact with real people beyond the confines of the community is a contradiction and a scandal.

'HOLY POVERTY': OXYMORON, OR AUTHENTIC VALUE?

Rich and poor both agree about one basic thing: poverty is bad. But on the question of how to respond, they are in total disagreement, forever opposed. By contrast, vowed religious publicly embrace 'holy poverty', but are by no means always seen to embrace the poor people in their neighbourhood or beyond. Sometimes, like the rich, they are insulated, separated from the poor, seeming even more familiar with the values of the rich than with the experience of the poor.

What of the prospect? Even as the poor covet wealth, they fall further away from the prosperity or relief they desire. Meanwhile, as the rich acquire more wealth and protect it, so their riches may increase but they are falling further away from the authentic humanness and respect they covet. What about the religious? We are pledged to redistribute wealth, not simply as commodity but as relationship, humanness, and for the authentic well being of all.

Whenever poverty demeans a person, whenever it is systemic, and whenever it fails to evoke a godly response from the broader community, it is absolutely not holy and 'holy poverty' is a contradiction in terms: an oxymoron. But if *religious* poverty serves to free people (including the professed), whenever it serves to enhance our trusting reliance on God and helps to make more loyal disciples and followers of Jesus, such religious poverty is indeed holy. It is holy when a person is committed to radical justice and to knowing the poor (not just 'knowing about' a category of people) on a daily and lifelong basis.

Religious choose *religious life* when they profess their vows. Our lives must demonstrate that we are fully alive, we have life, and we are neither going through the motions nor waiting for death. Not only must we be palpably alive: we must be life-

giving agents. The choice we made at profession can never be simply an historic moment: we must *continue* to choose, to reiterate our commitment. After all, we do not choose poverty as such; we choose people. Nor do we choose poverty as such, but religious poverty, focused on Christ, on community, on real human beings. Aung San Suu Kyi said pointedly, 'if you choose to do something, it is not a sacrifice, it is a choice'. Some of us would do well to remember this. Furthermore, part of the practice of religious poverty requires that we sometimes choose *not to choose*, for the greater good and the practice of the virtue.

Viktor Frankl, psychotherapist and Auschwitz survivor, said 'to live, you must choose; to love, you must encounter': weighty words and well worth pondering. He observed that many people who were liberated from Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1945 and who might well have survived, died, not so much because of the unspeakable privations, but because they had given up hope. Without hope there was no survival. He distinguished people who, each day, made a conscious choice for survival, and those who did not. The former had a much greater chance of surviving. 'To live you must choose' later became one of Frankl's axioms. He observed that it is impossible to love in theory or in the abstract, because we can only love actual people. There are no people in the abstract, no people in general, and no love in theory only! Applied to our lives and religious poverty, these two axioms might significantly assist our own conversion.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

If, then, we cannot practise the virtue of religious poverty in theory *only*, I should offer some practical suggestions.

1. *Never walk by the poor: walk with them, lest you walk on them.*

There will be days when we do walk past a person in need. But if we try to follow this suggestion, at least you will be *aware* that you have done so. When Jesus said, 'Whatever you do to the least ...' he did not offer a qualification or let-out clause, nor did he indicate that excuses would be

'understandable'. Authentic religious poverty cannot be insensitive to our poor sisters and brothers. No religious should be able to appeal to the vow of poverty as an excuse for not attending to a needy person; that would truly be inexcusable. Nor can we hide behind the fact that our community already gives to the poor: religious have allowances, and to carry some spare change (not just pennies) specifically for the needy would seem to be the very least we can do to live what we say we live: life-giving solidarity with the poor. And each of us should be able to challenge our religious communities to do more. There is *always* more we can do together. Religious poverty is not just a matter of economising but of being open-handed and open-hearted.

2. *Resist creating a personal comfort-zone that isolates us from the poor.*

We all need privacy and solitude. But we can easily become isolated and comfortable within our own little worlds. We need to cultivate a degree of vulnerability; some call it *disponibilité*, being available in certain ways. One way is by practising the virtue of religious obedience and being ready and willing to subordinate our own desires to the needs and demands of the wider community. Another is by being explicitly available to people in serious need of our time, talent or resources. If we make selfish choices and justify possessions as entitlements or as serving the mission, while turning a blind eye to the poor, we are seriously lacking in religious poverty. Such selfishness and featherbedding becomes addictive and thus exceedingly difficult to break free of.

3. *Deliberately choose direct service of/to the really poor.*

Our good intentions sometimes fail to materialise, and it is easy to delay implementation indefinitely, even while believing we are actually committed to needy people. Sometimes it becomes necessary to make a bold move, to commit ourselves to a specific course of action, lest procrastination accompany us to the grave. We cannot claim to know 'the poor' until we know some of them by name. To identify another person by

name and face-to-face indicates at least a fledgling relationship. Many marginal people are virtually invisible and thus become anonymous. This makes it easier for us to sleep comfortably in our beds, responding to Jesus' challenge by saying, 'When did we see you naked...?' and so on (cf Mt 25:31-46). Authentically to encounter a virtually invisible and anonymous stranger is to recognise a sister or brother – and siblings have names. It may take some time before names can be exchanged, because that depends on mutual trust, and our homeless, destitute and marginalised poor do not have any immediate reason to trust people who pass them by, condescend, or even abuse them. But until we can call each other by name, we do not yet have a relationship. Direct service, by volunteering in a shelter or soup-kitchen, visiting people who are isolated in prison or institutions for the elderly, making home visits to the housebound, or going out of our way, as Jesus did, to encounter people who are by the wayside or have lost their way: these are some avenues to explore as we attempt to live our vowed life of religious poverty.

4. *Recycle your life*

The suggestions I have just presented can be distilled into this single injunction: recycle your life. We recycle waste, from paper to plastic and from telephones to computers: a sign of social responsibility. But as religious we are called to ongoing and radical conversion of life – to God, to the world in which we live, and to the humanity we are called to serve. To do nothing beyond taking care of our own wants and needs is sinful. We must do something, though we cannot do everything. Jesus came to lay down his life for his friends, when 'friends' implied radical inclusion and 'laying down [his] life' embraced his *living* as much as his *dying*. We may not lose our life to violence, but we must attempt to pour it out in service as Jesus did. Our vowed religious poverty is a public statement of our intention to do precisely that.

When good people do nothing or merely a bare minimum, in a world of immense human need, they become *bad people*. Our religious poverty should always serve God's mission –

the *missio Dei* – and not simply ourselves or our religious community: God's mission is all-embracing, and we are agents, instruments, of that mission – else we are failed religious.

CONCLUSION

The poor do not have retirement plans, health care, interest-bearing accounts, portfolios or property: we do. Well and good, but the 'preferential option for the poor' is not an option but a choice, and a choice that *must be made* by those who call themselves disciples of the One whose preferential option underscored his entire life and ministry. The biggest hope of religious life is each of us, today's religious. And the biggest obstacle to authentic religious life today and potential religious life tomorrow is each of us. In a world where so many millions of human lives are at risk, and where so many millions of people hardly have a life worth living, let us ask: Do we – will we – have the conviction and the courage to embrace again, today, and for the people of God, religious poverty – *for (the) life (of the world)?*

2015: Year Dedicated to Consecrated Life

In the course of a meeting with the Union of Superiors General in Rome in November 2013, Pope Francis announced that 2015 would be 'dedicated to consecrated life'. The Pope's meeting with the group had been expected to be short, but he stayed three hours. The encounter was a colloquial and fraternal discussion, consisting of questions and answers. Those in religious life, Francis suggested, are men and women who can 'awaken the world'. Dealing with the formation of religious, the Pope said he saw formation as 'an artisanal craft, not a form of policing'. He called on bishops to see those in consecrated life 'not as helpers but rather [as having] charisms that enrich dioceses'.

Ignatian Spirituality and Jesuit Identity

Thoughts on the Election of Pope Francis

BRIAN O'LEARY, SJ

Pope Francis is the same age as this author. We have lived through the same historical period of tumultuous world events (beginning with World War II) and of correspondingly turbulent ecclesial events (culminating in Vatican Council II). True, we have been living on different continents and our local histories, traditions and cultures inevitably colour our perspectives. Nonetheless, new media technologies and the globalisation phenomenon have ensured that we both appreciate the interconnectedness of everything that happens, whether in Argentina or in Ireland or anywhere else. If we were ever to meet we would have much in common to reminisce about and many insights to share.

But our affinity would not end there. As fellow Jesuits we share the same Ignatian spirituality that has its roots in the Spiritual Exercises. We have also been incorporated into the Society of Jesus through a carefully structured process (formation) as described in the Jesuit Constitutions. Our longevity likewise means that we have experienced significant modifications in the interpretation and practice of the Exercises and consequently in our understanding of Jesuit mission. The Society today is in discontinuity as well as in continuity with the Society we joined. Most Jesuits dare to think that these developments have been, in the main, well-grounded.¹ Negotiating all these changes has not been

1. There is a parallel here with the pre- and post-Vatican II Church within which the Society of Jesus exists.