

# Vowed poverty: Gospel stewardship in a consumerist society

By Richard Woods OP

[Go Back](#)

For young people today, and no doubt many others, radical Gospel poverty is arguably the most difficult of the vows to understand and maintain, despite the tribulations of celibacy and the problems always associated with obedience. This is especially true for those considering religious life in the United States and other affluent nations, where highly conspicuous consumerism is both an economic and personal fact of life, even in religious orders and congregations. I have sometimes heard young Catholics wondering whether religious poverty has in fact become the opposite of its original form. Conversely, I believe that reconsidering voluntary poverty as ideal and fact can restore both meaning and confidence in today's rapidly changing and highly-charged world.

## Early Christian poverty

Evangelical poverty figured preeminently in the development of religious life from the earliest period of Christian history, even before the customary vows were identified and made obligatory for monks, nuns, and later members of religious orders and congregations.<sup>1</sup> In the third century, St. Anthony's famous conversion occurred on hearing the story of the rich young man and Jesus' invitation—"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). St. Luke's description of the primitive communism of the mother church in Jerusalem (Acts 4:32-35) influenced Anthony and also became the model for St. Benedict in the sixth century and for reform movements throughout the Middle Ages and ever since. Such radical notions have great appeal to the generous hearts of the young—and it is well to remember that most of the great religious founders from Anthony to Francis in the 13th century were barely out of their teens, if that.

But living poorly in the way of the poor Christ has always proved difficult to maintain for long, especially in the wake of institutional success. Umberto Eco's popular mystery novel and the film based on it, *The Name of the Rose*, focused on the real-life and bitter 14th-century controversy concerning evangelical poverty that split the Franciscan Order, but also pitted the radical Franciscans against the Dominicans.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, both mendicant orders espoused stringent poverty, but the Spiritual Franciscans proposed a much more rigorous interpretation, one which insisted that true mendicants, like Jesus and the Apostles, owned nothing—not property, buildings, investments, nor even the clothing on their backs.<sup>3</sup>

By the early 14th century, the original strict poverty of both Franciscans and Dominicans had eroded from within as their very success and the requirements of ministry invited (if not demanded) increasing institutionalization. Church authorities had also limited the mendicancy of the orders. Street begging was no longer allowed, and orders were expected to own their own houses, in order to avoid cooptation by landlords, whose disfavor could imperil the friars' presence and mission. Both the Conventual Franciscans and the Dominicans accepted the mitigation of the original vision of Francis and Dominic.

But in the early 14th century the Spiritual Franciscans challenged the relaxation of poverty, especially the ownership of property. Following more than a century of persecution, they were eventually recognized as preserving the primitive ideal of St. Francis himself. But over subsequent centuries, even the descendents of the Spirituals came to own buildings, cars, publishing houses, schools, universities, and other components of ministry in the modern world—like virtually every other surviving religious order and congregation.

But not all. When I was growing up in New Mexico, I came to know a modern St. Francis whose form of life closely resembled that of the Poverello—Brother Matthias Barrett, a diminutive Irishman who in 1951 had founded a small community near my family home in Albuquerque, the Little Brothers of the Good Shepherd. Their main ministry was caring for indigents. Like the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus founded by Charles de Foucauld and the Little Brothers of the Poor, Brother Matthias and his brothers lived poorly among the poor, relying on the generosity of others to aid them.

Some 25 years later, I was similarly impressed, not to say challenged, by the poverty (and vocational success) of the Missionaries of Charity, founded by the redoubtable Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Having been present when she spoke to a small gathering at Mundelein College in Chicago, I vividly remember the impact she made, not least because of the radical poverty she and her congregation espoused. In 2001, I visited a small orphanage run by her sisters in Baghdad, where true to the original vision of their saintly founder, they still live in strict poverty, devoting themselves to the care of infants

whom no one else can care for—those severely retarded or suffering from multiple birth defects. (In March of this year, in the very midst of the Iraq War, as diplomats, arms inspectors and journalists were rapidly exiting the city, I learned that two more sisters had left India for Baghdad to join the four sisters already there, foreseeing that the need for their ministry would soon be much greater.)

Time may temper the radical poverty of the Little Brothers and the Missionaries of Charity as it did that of their evangelical predecessors. But the place of poverty in the vision of their saintly founders and the life of their communities is worth remembering in light of their truly astonishing success, not to say survival in the modern world. I cannot help but wonder if the decline in vocations to the religious life since the end of the Second Vatican Council has anything to do with the contemporaneous inflation of what might be called the “visible standard of living” of members of more established religious orders, congregations and institutes.

## Poverty and the apostolate

From the beginning of the institution of vowed religious life, the point of evangelical poverty was recognized to be spiritual freedom rather than material deprivation as such. The radical poverty of the so-called Albigensians and Cathars of the 13th century, which superficially resembled that of the Franciscans, Dominicans and other mendicants, was rightly suspect because it rested not so much on shared possessions and concern for the poor, but a conviction that the material universe was tainted by evil.<sup>4</sup> Possessions were condemned not because they alienate us from our sisters and brothers and thereby from God, but because matter, including the body itself, was held to be a corrupting influence. Nothing could be farther from the joyous vision of Francis of Assisi, who despite his personal austerity recognized in the gifts of creation the hand of a generous and loving God. But as Jesus himself had insisted, Francis—and Dominic as well—knew that to bear spiritual fruit such gifts must be shared, not hoarded.

Theologians and spiritual writers also realized from very early times that the spirit of poverty was far more important than simple deprivation. Detachment from material cares and the obligations of administration were meant to free vowed religious for prayer and contemplation as well as ministry. Such poverty is understood primarily as a quality of mind or soul, something “interior,” from which arises the true value of “external” poverty: In the words of one of the great preachers of the 14th century,

You have sailed down the Rhine in order to take up a life of poverty. But if you fail to reach this ground within you, no amount of traveling will get you there. Do not waste your energy! Shed all outward attachments, turn inward, and seek the deepest ground of your soul; exterior precepts and techniques will be of no avail. No path of the sense will ever lead you there.<sup>5</sup>

But as history proved often enough, an emphasis on spiritual poverty over the observance of real poverty can easily slide into circumvention. Despite reforms and notable exceptions, by the time of the Protestant Reformation, many—perhaps most—European monasteries, convents, and religious houses such as friaries and priories had become rich, powerful, and ever more remote from the lives of ordinary people, especially the urban poor.

## Lilies of the field: wilt and gilt

More recent times witnessed a serious dilemma arise in regard to religious poverty. In the years following the Second Vatican Council, many congregations of teaching sisters in the United States were revealed to have little if any resources to care for their aging and ill members who had worked all their lives for little more than the food on their tables and barely adequate medical care. Unsalaries, such devoted workers had never dreamed of anything so utopian as a pension. As the number of new vocations diminished, the plight of aging religious women became increasingly serious, eventually requiring a massive effort on the part of the hierarchy (and generous giving by the laity!) to provide adequate housing, maintenance, and health care.

But as the median age of religious congregations rose and vocations declined, insurance and medical care costs also began to skyrocket. At the same time, educational requirements and the demands of an effective apostolate in an ever-increasingly technological age required increased expenditures for “basics” such as automobiles, computers and communications equipment, as well as ever-rising insurance costs for all these vehicles and devices.

Adaptation to the demands of contemporary society also produced a different and unsettling consequence for traditional religious life—the quest for comfort. As residences and work space were remodeled and adapted for an older and sometimes infirm community, “laborsaving” appurtenances, ever-expanding acres of carpet, television sets, institutionalized cleaning and cooking services, and well-stocked portfolios and retirement funds came to represent not the exception but the norm.

One of the regrettable side-effects of living in a consumerist society, in which the health of the economy is measured primarily in terms of the Dow-Jones and Nasdaq Composite Indices or their equivalent, is perhaps an inevitable slide toward emulation. Thus, while the living situation of religious men and women, both young and old, is rightfully more humane at present than the straitened conditions of the past, corporately it has often come to approximate, if not exactly pursue, the upwardly-mobile middle-class and upper middleclass values that had once repelled St. Anthony of Egypt and St. Francis of Assisi.

Ironically, as the life-style of religious orders and congregations achieved upper middle-class levels one way or another, real poverty increased in American society as it did in the world as a whole. It is therefore not an idle endeavor to wonder whether the ideal of vowed poverty as it is lived today in the United States and other affluent nations offers any hope to those trapped in a tightening net of economic desperation. The most pointed description of real poverty I have come across recently appeared in a national journal. It is worth contrasting it to life in religious houses and seminaries.

Being poor doesn't mean just having low or no income. It also often means a lack of stable housing, dependable transportation, weatherappropriate clothing, and, in too many cases, nutritious food. And did I mention health and dental care? Being poor means constantly weighing one priority against another, managing one crisis after another, allocating scarce resources to patch immediate problems. Knowing what's for dinner sometimes constitutes long-range planning. I suggest that this lack of stability (a stability the middle class takes for granted)—never having sufficient resources to plan or prepare for what might come next—is responsible for the dysfunctional, crazy-making chaos that so often accompanies poverty.<sup>6</sup>

It seems to me that one way of addressing the imbalance of poverty as real fact and spiritual ideal lies in examining how religious women and men attend to the daily requirements of responsible stewardship—both individually and perhaps especially corporately. This, in turn, should bear on how religious life might once again attract idealistic and generous young people who want to save the world, not merely preserve their souls from contamination by the outside world.

## Stewardship and ecological responsibility

In the early Christian era and especially in the Middle Ages, Gospel poverty was expressed as an effort to live and work in a spirit of freedom and simplicity, focused on the essentials of preaching, praying, teaching, and healing. Constructively, the prophetic repudiation of a society and culture which valued ownership, power, and prestige over commitment to the suffering poor, oppressed, and infirm (physical works of mercy) and the spiritually and intellectually ignorant (spiritual and intellectual works of mercy) represented what today we call social service. In contemporary society, most of these areas of concern and action have been taken over by governmental agencies, leaving religious with the option of either competing with or duplicating such work on one hand or, in many cases, actually finding employment within social agencies on the other, normally on a salaried basis with all the benefits (and risks) associated with such contractual work.

As a result, the value of vowed poverty for individuals today runs the hazard of being either wholly spiritualized or absorbed in the fiscally-driven social system. Corporate poverty is often equally invisible, if only because of the economic demands and realities of life in a highly complex social system. If the vow of poverty is not to become merely a private exercise of spiritual self-abnegation and a more or less empty corporate slogan, some form of expression must emerge that spans the social and cultural gap between a technologically dominant, monetarist society and traditional Christian values and action. One such countercultural emphasis, one that resonates strongly with many socially concerned young persons today, can be found in the theory and practice of stewardship.

In some respects, stewardship has already become something of a buzz-word, covering a multitude of good works, many of them connected with strategies to increase fund-raising or teach responsible moneymangement but without an express commitment to the care and healing of the world that links it to the essence of evangelical poverty. The heart of true stewardship, from a biblical, as well as contemporary perspective, is a passionate care for *welfare*—of people, the environment, property, the planet as a whole—by carefully using the resources God has entrusted to us.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most instructive descriptions I have found is from Marsha Sinetar's excellent book, *Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics*, where she writes,

...the original premise of stewardship had a threefold root: that there is a responsible servant in the form of each and every human, that there is a definite entrustment to the servant of everything that belongs to God, and that there is an ultimate accounting to God for the way the earth and all its people are cared for.<sup>8</sup>

When stewardship fails, as in Jesus' Gospel stories, personal and domestic chaos ensues. Ironically, ancient and contemporary history both show that the unintentional, if also inescapable, consequence of institutionalizing Gospel poverty has been the tendency towards "unjust stewardship"—self-indulgence, carelessness, and indifference to the natural and social environment. In today's world, the consequences of unjust stewardship include eating disorders, obesity, escalating health care and insurance costs, the multiplication of automobiles, high-end energy consumption, the generation of excessive waste, and both personal and corporate acquiescence, if not happy engagement in, the dominant consumerist mentality. The "world" of passive entertainment, and active or passive participation in ecologically destructive mega-corporations represent (but do not exhaust) those consequences.

Such a capitulation of responsible care for the world, both social and natural, has not gone unnoticed by many of the most committed young people in our society, for whom volunteer work with organizations such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International, the Sierra Club, Habitat for Humanity, the Peace Corps, and similar groups, as well as the developing lay-associate movements of many religious communities, are a more genuine expression of care and commitment than joining a traditional religious order. Such youngsters are not adverse to living frugally, if not poorly. But they want it to count for something.

Prophetic individuals and communities have called for a redefinition of the meaning and practice of religious poverty that will address both the needs of the world and the hopes of those who want to respond to it out of a sense of compassion. In this regard, religious communities experiencing a drought of vocations may do well to look carefully at how they live their commitment as Gospel stewards. On the whole, it seems to me in this respect that women's communities seem to be much more alert and active than men's.

## Pursuing Gospel poverty

In the years of mid-century America, just after the Second World War, Thomas Merton already could write prophetically to vowed religious women and men as well as to lay Christians,

It is easy enough to tell the poor to accept their poverty as God's will when you yourself have warm clothes and plenty of food and medical care and a roof over your head and no worry about the rent. But if you want them to believe you—try to share some of their poverty and see if you can accept it as God's will yourself!<sup>9</sup>

Gospel poverty, rooted in compassion and zeal for the Kingdom of God, stands over against any form of life (much less Christianity) that exalts wealth and defines riches as proof of grace, especially under the guise of stewardship. At best, wealth can be an instrument of salvation when it is shared: "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations." (Luke 16:9. Also see Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13). The accumulation of money and property for their own sake is and will always remain idolatrous.

But like the other evangelical counsels or vows, Gospel poverty is not simply a means to an end, whether ministry in general or social action in particular. It is a sacrament, an eschatological sign that expresses God's preferential option for the poor, to whom the Gospel *must* be preached (Matthew 11:5, Galatians 2:9-10). It realizes the incarnate presence of God in history, reaching redemptively not only into the depth of human misery but into the suffering of creation as a whole, reconciling and divinizing the world (Romans 8:19-23). Moreover, it can never be merely a private expression of devotion, but as a Christian way of being-in-the-world, it will have an inescapable and transforming social character.

If vowed religious life is going to attract the minds and especially the hearts of generous young women and men today, spiritual poverty will—indeed, must—become manifest in the relief of poor nations as well as poor persons, in the preservation and conservation of the environment, in the reduction of consumerism, militarism, and monetarism. Seen from the perspective of stewardship, the name of that poverty is *care*.

- 
1. Regarding early Christian attitudes towards wealth, see especially Justo A. González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*, San Francisco and London: Harper and Row, 1990.
  2. Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. Translated by William Weaver, New York: Harcourt, 1994.
  3. On the Spiritual Franciscans, see David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century after Saint Francis*, University Park, Penn.: Penn State University Press, 2001. For a brief history of the impact of mendicant orders on the economic structures of the Middle Ages, see Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978.
  4. On the origin and development of medieval heresy, see Malcolm Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from Bogomil to Hus*, 2nd. ed., Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992, and Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, 2 vols., Manchester University Press / New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967.
  5. Johannes Tauler, O.P., *Sermons*, Maria Shradly, trans., intro by Josef Schmidt, preface by Alois Haas, New York: Paulist Press, 1987, p. 107.
  6. Maddox, Barbara. New York: *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 2003, p. 18. HORIZON
  7. Among helpful resources in this regard see R. J. Berry (ed.), *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action*, Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2000; Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (New Studies in Biblical Theology), Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2001; Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Version for Creation Care*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001; Walter Brueggemann, *Using God's Resources Wisely: Isaiah and Urban Possibility*, Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993; Harold Coward and Daniel C. Maguire, eds., *Visions of a New Earth: Religious Perspectives on Population, Consumption, and Ecology*, Ithaca, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001, Joseph M. Champlin, *Grateful Caretakers of God's Many Gifts: A Parish Manual to Foster the Sharing of Time, Talent, and Treasure*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002; John Cobb, *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy*, Pilgrim Press, 1996; and John C. Haughey, *The Holy Use of Money: Personal Finance in Light of Christian Faith*, New York: Doubleday, 1986.
  8. Sinetar, Marsha. *Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics*. New York: Paulist Press, 1986, p. 54.
  9. Merton, Thomas. *Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: Dell, 1959 (1949), p. 101.

**Richard Woods, OP**, a Dominican friar, is an associate professor at Dominican University in River Forest, Ill. where he teaches pastoral and spiritual theology. Since 1981 he has been adjunct associate professor in psychiatry at Loyola University Medical School.

Related Tags:

- [contemplation 43](#)
  - [film 54](#)
  - [housing 43](#)
  - [ecology 10](#)
  - [television 34](#)
  - [vow of poverty 18](#)
  - [celibacy 81](#)
  - [conversion 87](#)
-