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A Vow of Poverty

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The proper understanding and prudent practice of religious poverty has probably never been easy in any age. It is of the very nature of religious poverty, because it has to do with material goods with which we cannot dispense absolutely and whose value is always relative to cultural situations, that it is always a provisional arrangement that has to be constantly reevaluated and readjusted.

Our own times are characterized by conditions that make the understanding and prudent practice of poverty even more difficult than in times past. The major difference between our own age and any previous one, in relation to poverty, is our global interdependence at the economic level and our awareness of it.

First, we are aware of the immense variety in standards of living throughout the world and even in our own country. No matter how simple a lifestyle we adopt we cannot escape awareness that it is luxurious by comparison with that of many of our sisters and brothers...

Second, we are aware of the immensity of the problem of poverty, which makes individual acts of sharing and hospitality seem almost pointless...

Third, and following from the last point, we realize that the only way to affect the economic situation in which we live is to act collectively upon institutions. Poverty, the evil that is eating up our brothers and sisters in so many places in the world, is not natural disaster, nor merely the result of individual selfish choices. It is a systemic evil that must be dealt with systematically; it is institutional sin that must be dealt with institutionally. Whatever poverty means today, it has to take account of these realities.

THE TWO FOCI OF RELIGIOUS POVERTY TODAY

Religious poverty has two foci for the contemporary religious and calls for two rather distinct, though not unrelated, types of practice. The first focus is the societal one and has to do with our individual and corporate impact on the institutional sins that are making and keeping poor the majority of the earth's people while the minority becomes progressively richer. The second focus is the personal spiritual one that has to do with our own ascetical preparation for and interior exercise of that openness to God in grateful receptivity to salvation that is the sine qua non of genuine holiness.

The Societal Focus. Religious poverty is the way religious situate themselves in relationship to material goods, and since material goods are foundational to our relationship with other people, religious poverty is necessarily a social virtue.... It seems to me, and to many religious, that the first objective of religious poverty today has to be contributing to the restructuring of the economic situation on a worldwide scale. This seems especially so for apostolic religious for whom the call to participate actively in the transformation of the world in Christ is so integral to their religious vocation.

There are innumerable ways in which religious can begin to exercise their vow of poverty in relation to the economic

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Sandra M. Schneider, IHM

and environmental situation of our time.... The energetic exercise of *personal civic responsibilities* such as voting, writing to congresspeople, protesting local injustices, supporting nonviolent efforts to influence corporate powers, attending meetings where our presence can help is a way to help bring about the kind of society in which the poor will begin to attain justice.

Proper *corporate planning for the care of our own personnel* is another unglamorous but important contribution to the future well-being of our society. As a society we are getting older. We can plan for a future in which the elderly will have secure, meaningful, and productive lives or we can ignore the demographic data available to us and let develop a world of underemployed, unfulfilled people dragging out meaningless existences in a world that does not want them.

Another important area of personal and corporate decision making concerns the appropriate and effective *commitment of some of our personnel and resources to direct work with the materially disadvantaged*. For some of us it will be the decision to undertake that work ourselves; for others the decision to support those who do in one way or another.

Direct involvement in political ministry ... is a particularly powerful way to influence the distribution of money and services to the poor.

This certainly does not exhaust the possibilities of active involvement in the restructuring of our world in justice and love. These are meant only to suggest that the vow of poverty today calls upon us to do for our time what our forebears did in simpler and more direct ways for theirs.

The Personal Focus. It is perhaps time to revive our awareness of the intimately personal character of the practice of poverty that must complement societal involvement... Without even hoping to exhaust the possibilities I would like to point out, by way of example, a few areas in which the incorporation of poverty into our personal lives might be meaningful and spiritually fruitful for us as 20th-century religious.

The first area is one most serious religious have been bewitched, bothered, and bewildered by for several years: *simplicity of life*.... Voluntary simplicity of lifestyle says that

enough is enough, that material goods should be acquired only to the extent that they are really necessary and not as a frantic defense against mortality or an endless competition with one's neighbors.

But simplicity of life also fulfills an important function in the spiritual life of the individual.... If we want to pray, to be available for God and others, to keep our lives focused on the purposes for which we chose religious life, we cannot surrender ourselves to the current of materialism that carries our culture.

A second area in which poverty might touch our personal lives has to do less with behavior than with attitude. I am speaking of the deliberate development of the *sense of gift in life*. We live in a culture of achievement and production that believes that people should and do get what they deserve. As Christians we know that this is not so. The infinite bounty of God begins with the gift of life itself and continues with everything that sustains it. Our activity is not so much an earning our way as a cooperating with the Creator God in transforming history into God's reign of justice and love.

Building this attitude of grateful response into our lives requires a constant cultivation of faith against the seemingly self-evident "way things are" around us.... The capacity for enjoyment, for the sharing of simple pleasures, for delight in uncontrived beauty has to be developed in our artificial and overstimulated environment.

A third area in which the personal practice of poverty might be developed today is one that was not available to many religious in more enclosed times: *hospitality*. To welcome others into our homes and into our lives is naturally easier perhaps for extroverted types, but it is a challenge for everyone because it involves putting ourselves at others' disposal.

Another area of personal poverty, one that seems to me more and more significant, has to do with one of the most painful aspects of real poverty, namely, the *lack of options*. The real differences between the truly poor and people who choose a poor lifestyle is precisely that the latter choose it, and they can unchoose it if things become too difficult. Even if they never do, the fact that they can assuage the violent determinism that constitutes real poverty....

There are many aspects of our lives in which we have choices that the poor do not have. But there are also areas in which we do not have choices. We cannot lengthen our day,

and if someone consumes time we had allotted for other purposes there is no reclaiming it. We cannot do anything about weather that keeps us from getting where we need to go. We cannot keep from getting the flu and losing a week of work at a critical juncture in an important project.... When our options evaporate we experience solidarity with the poor, not the conspicuous solidarity of chosen deprivations but the real solidarity of fellow-sufferers in a world we do not control and cannot change.

One of the many areas in which many of us probably experience our lack of options most painfully is precisely that of effective action for justice. We know that most of what we do, in a personal way, will not have much effect on the unjust social systems in which we live. Even worse, we also

know that we are constantly implicated in fostering the very systems that we have analyzed as unjust and exploitative.... The point is, in many areas we really have few or no options either for effective action against or for non-participation in structural injustice. Our frustration matches in some ways (certainly not all) the frustration of our

victimized brothers and sisters. What they cannot do for themselves we cannot do for them, and the more we care the more this hurts. The name of that hurting is compassion and it is a fruit of genuine poverty.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude with a simple, tentative definition of religious poverty. Religious poverty is an evangelically inspired and structured relationship to material creation that involves owning well, using well, and suffering well for the purpose of transforming human existence, our own included. Its goal is a community in which all have the material supports necessary for truly human living whose fullest realization is that total openness to God that makes salvation possible and real. ■

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