

Poverty and the Religious Community

by Roger Ruston, O.P.

The first thing to be clear about when speaking of religious poverty is that we are using a metaphor, an equivocation. Religious poverty, whatever its exact form, is a certain renunciation of material goods voluntarily undertaken. On the moral level, therefore, it has only a superficial resemblance to actual poverty, the indigence of the people who are poor in the social sense. For actual poverty is not voluntary and its result is to reduce the person who suffers it to a kind of powerlessness, a slavery. The poor are by an inevitable social logic in the power of the rich. They have very little control over the course of their own lives. The poor in our industrial cities for instance are reduced to the exercise of that little bit of illusory freedom that is handed out to them by the rich in the form of choice of different brands in the supermarket, choice of programmes on TV, the unpredictability of the bingo game or the betting shop, the promise of something new in the amusement arcade where working-class housewives can be seen any day of the week trying to increase their house-keeping money playing the fruit machines. Economic poverty is one term of a relationship within society and not a mere simplicity of life. It is the foundation of other kinds of poverty: powerlessness to maintain local community in the face of council planners and property developers; educational deprivation; a ruined environment, and so on.

Poverty, then, is something suffered at the hands of other people and therefore worlds apart from a condition of life freely undertaken. The poor are not masters of their own lives. The religious, however, is a master of his own life. It is a matter of free choice from the outset. Taking a vow of obedience does not nullify this, for the choice is his and at any time he can reverse the situation, either from time to time, depending on the friends he has, or permanently—something impossible to the really poor person. Moreover the religious cannot, by any effort of will, put himself in the position of the poor. If there is any truth in what I have just said about the consequences of real poverty, there is no reason why he should ever want to.

Morally speaking then, whilst actual poverty is always an evil, religious poverty is intended to be a good thing: a regaining of human freedom with regard to material things, a correction of the very evils that have produced actual poverty. Both poverty and riches manifest in the same society the consequences of an evil attitude to material things, and the rich man in his own way has lost the mastery of his life—a traditional theme in the Bible which comes out very strongly in those gospel passages that are always called upon to

support religious poverty. Religious poverty then must have something to do with regaining the mastery of life.

The second point to be made clear is what follows from this, that religious poverty cannot be restricted to the interior life of the religious community. If it is to be some kind of restructuring of men's relationships with each other based on a changed attitude to material goods then this restructuring must continue in some form outside the walls of the community. If it is to be of any profit in a Christian sense rather than in a merely stoic sense, then it must have consequences for the actually poor and not merely for those very few individuals who take it up. It must be a reorganising force in society, on however small a scale, otherwise it is nothing. So if we are going to be justified in retaining the word 'poverty' even in a metaphorical sense there must be some connection between the economic level to which members of the religious community have submitted themselves and that of the actually poor around them, even if they are morally speaking very different things. Otherwise the religious house in its material isolation is simply ranged on the side of the rich, however frugal might be the personal lives of its members. I am at one with Karl Rahner in his essay on the subject when he says that a rich religious order cannot have any poor members. It is not possible to avoid taking sides in our society.

These are the only conditions under which we can continue to use the word 'poverty' for the religious thing. And it is important that we do continue to use it. The gospel is, after all, the good news to the actually poor, so we cannot afford to lose the connection, however much our use of the word seems hypocritical. It is a constant reminder of the intended connection between the religious life and the bringing of the gospel to those who need it.

The third thing to make clear is that it is a mistake to try to abstract a single essence of religious poverty which will be the same in any time or place. The best of recent studies of the subject—e.g., that of J.-M. R. Tillard, the Canadian Dominican—have shown that there is no single traditional practice of evangelical poverty such that the only kind of change it can undergo is a quantitative one—sometimes being well observed, sometimes not, depending on the fervour of the time. Voluntary poverty has been connected with many different kinds of response to the gospel: some have taken it on in order to achieve the true community of brotherly love, some for the sake of working amongst the poor, others have desired to be alone with God in the desert, others have rid themselves of possessions so that they can be free to be travelling preachers, and others yet again have simply desired to imitate Jesus as closely as they could. And so it goes on. This variety is not surprising when we remember that response to the gospel cannot follow a fixed pattern, the same for everyone. Poverty must always be the expression of some *particular*

response, some particular approach to God through the inspiration of the Spirit.

Moreover, the great variety of forms taken in history by religious poverty is to be expected from the fact that it derives from no single biblical root. There is a variety of theologies of poverty in the Bible itself, particularly in the gospels, and one's religious practice of it is often slanted by the particular text that is the source of inspiration. To name but a few: there is the story of the rich young man and his failure to follow Christ; there is the sermon on the mount and its counsel to take no thought for the morrow—part of St Matthew's theology of perfection; there is St Luke's estimation of the poor as the blessed of the kingdom; there is the shared life of the Jerusalem community; there is St Paul's willingness to submit to any conditions of life in order to keep on preaching the gospel. In so far as different religious orders have responded to these different aspects of the gospel so have they come up with widely different versions of religious poverty. They are of course connected in the sense that they are all supposed to be means towards achieving the same end—the kingdom of God. But it is idle to try to reduce them all to a single essence. They are various *instruments* for the achieving of the common end. This is the word used by St Thomas when discussing evangelical poverty in the *Summa Theologiae* (IIa IIae, Q184 art. 3, Q186 art. 2). I will say more about his treatment of the subject in a moment.

From the three main points I have made it is clear that it will be a difficult task to make general statements about poverty in community that will be of any use to particular communities, so diverse are they in their response to the gospel. But I believe that some useful things could be said so long as we don't try to say too much. The problem of the poverty of any particular community can only be settled when we know what the community was set up to do and where it is situated. Just about the only common factor that we should expect to find is some attempt to restructure people's relationships with material possessions—and through that, with each other—as I mentioned earlier. But that is a pretty generalised ambition.

The fact that we have to deal with particulars in the final analysis can be seen as soon as we take a look at the early Dominican experience. Most of the confusion among historians about what poverty meant to the earliest Dominican preachers—whether or not it was 'absolute', whether or not it was borrowed from the Franciscans and so on—derives from the kind of mentality that looks for a single definable kind of behaviour called 'poverty', confusing religious poverty with actual poverty and the different modes of religious poverty with each other. What is striking is that the two greatest minds behind the evolution of poverty in the order—Dominic and Aquinas—were both completely free from such misconceptions.

St Dominic formed his first male communities for the sake of preaching the gospel. That much is certain. If he had been intent on

perfecting religious community life in itself he would have remained as a canon of Osma or else joined some more monastic community. It is important to realise that this was not his intention. For it meant that every traditional religious practice was bent to the main purpose of the enterprise—often to the consternation of his contemporaries. Moreover, the final pattern of life for the friars was only worked out over a period of time. The final form of poverty in the first order—corporate mendicancy and the renunciation of fixed revenues together with ownership of large priories and all the means of study supplied—this was only arrived at through reflection on the experience of the first preachers. It is clear that St Dominic did not come from his cathedral precinct fully armed with some fixed idea of 'absolute' poverty. He was by all accounts a very frugal man and tried to persuade his followers to be the same, but this in itself did not amount to the mature policy with regard to possessions that was to evolve on account of the preaching.

Dominican poverty was part of a widespread movement of reaction against the luxury and avarice of the Catholic clergy. In Dominic's day great simplicity of life and learning were very much the distinguishing marks of the heretics. Only the poor and learned preacher—the one who could be seen to be imitating the simple life of Christ himself—could get a hearing. So poverty and learning were adopted as the twin tools of the preaching; something which all previous missions sent to deal with the situation had lacked. This is not to say that it was purely a matter of practical expedience, for the failure of the other churchmen to respond to the gospel themselves was precisely the cause of their failure to convert anyone. Gradually, working from a fairly traditional monastic viewpoint, Dominic came to see not only that the personal poverty of the preacher was vital to his mission but also that the revenues and lands traditionally possessed by large religious committees were an obstacle to the task. So by the time of the first General Chapter the regulations about corporate possessions and begging were worked out.

There are obvious ways in which large corporate possessions would have hindered the preaching: it would have meant spending too much time with administration and the rest of the business that had hindered the monks from doing the job; it would not have answered to the criticisms of church wealth that were everywhere mounting; it would have hindered the development of that faith in the providence of God that is needed by anyone engaged in preaching the gospel. Mendicancy was the obvious way to cope with these requirements. It meant that collecting alms could be associated with preaching itself, the labourer being worthy of his hire. It meant that a vast amount of energy was not spent on domestic administration. But of course it would never have worked if the conditions had not been right. Almsgiving was then most firmly established as *the* way for Christians to demonstrate their love of God. It was an "almsgiving society" in a

way that ours obviously is not. The task at hand, the social conditions and the religious expectations of people did much therefore to determine the kind of poverty that was practiced. It is clear that the greatness and permanence of Dominic's provisions for the order lay in their adaptability, in their freedom from absolutes and in the importance of dispensation. He was responding to the needs of preaching the gospel according to the time and place as any good apostle ought. It was through his inspiration too that the notion of the 'apostolic life' began to change to something more like its modern meaning. It had been the traditional term for religious life in community taking its inspiration from the apostolic community of Acts, where 'everything was held in common and no one had anything he called his own'. But now it began to connote life in a community devoted to preaching: the apostolic life in the fullest sense.

Less than fifty years later, St Thomas generalised this early Dominican experience, bringing it into relation with the entire monastic tradition, in his theology of the religious life. Now it is the concept of *perfection* that forms the backbone, as it were, of the argument. This is not a concept that is very attractive to us, associated as it has been for centuries with an individualistic, moralistic view of the religious life supported by a confused and half-understood theology of 'states of perfection'. But for better or worse we cannot avoid the idea of perfection for it is not only a key concept in the traditional theology but also in the New Testament, especially the gospels. We had better try to make something of it. What the word *teleiosis* means originally is completion or reaching the end, the goal of motion or development. Now if christianity were simply a religion of moral self-improvement then perfection would mean—as it has come to mean only too often—an intrinsic state of the individual, the peak of his performance or something of the kind. But according to Christianity the end of man is not an intrinsic state but another Being altogether—God. So, says St Thomas in the *Summa Theologiae* IIa IIae 184, art. 1, 'Something is said to be perfect insofar as it attains its proper end, which is the ultimate perfection of the thing. Now charity is what unites us to God, who is the ultimate end of the human spirit'.

It follows from this (art. 3) that Christian perfection is a matter of obeying the precepts rather than of following the counsels, for we are commanded to love God and our neighbour with everything we have and there is no half-way measure when it comes to reaching the end itself. The evangelical counsels may be thought of as *instruments* designed to remove certain impediments to charity: preoccupation with family, business affairs and the like—things which are not in themselves obstacles but which may become so in the life of this or that person.

In St Thomas's day there were those who said that corporate possessions held by a religious house were a sign of imperfection, bas-

ing their arguments on the gospel text, 'if you would be perfect, go sell all you possess and give to the poor'. The answer to this was (Q188, art. 7) that perfection consists in following Christ, not in being poor. But poverty may help one to achieve this by removing the impediments of care, love of riches and vainglory. Of these, care cannot be entirely eliminated from the human condition. That which arises from a modicum of possessions need not interfere with charity. It is even commendable if it is care of *common* possessions. But different kinds of religious life have need of different amounts of wealth for accomplishing their special purposes. A religious order is not more perfect if it is poorer but if its poverty is more adapted to its end. Poverty then can never be an abstract standard of perfection if perfection is thought of as being the attainment of the goal of the whole enterprise, God and his justice. Contemplatives will need less than those devoted to nursing and teaching, but they must have their own permanent means of support. But those who contemplate and give to others the fruits of their contemplation—the Dominicans—they will need least of all in order to do their work well, since they of all religious should be free of useless care. This is what the first generation of preachers discovered. As charity takes on different modes of response to the gospel in the different situations, so must religious poverty change its aspect. But so far as I can tell St Thomas nowhere speaks in terms of that manifest absurdity, 'absolute' poverty.

When it comes to responding to the gospel, the text to which St Thomas alludes—that of the rich young man in Matthew 19.16-22 and parallels—is one of the most important in the tradition. It has often—mistakenly—been thought of as the unique foundation for the vow of poverty. We ought to consider it briefly, the episode that begins, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life? . . .' and ends, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and come, follow me'. The other sayings attached to it are important for the purpose of interpretation: 'How hard it will be for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven . . . it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, etc. . . . And Peter said, lo, we have left everything to follow you, what shall we have? . . .'

Most modern commentators, including Catholic ones, are agreed that this gospel episode of the rich young man does not teach that there is an ordinary way and a more perfect way to heaven. There is no foundation here for the idea that there are two classes of Christians, those who may be content with obeying the precepts and those who are able to receive the counsels and give up everything. It has been demonstrated well enough that 'perfect' in the story does not mean anything other than 'good' (Légasse, 1966). And they both mean reaching the goal of human life—God himself and the life of his kingdom. 'Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good'. The fact that the young man has obeyed the commandments from his youth does not make him perfect because it does

not make him good, or at any rate, not good in the ultimate religious sense. To be good according to the Law is not good enough when it is a matter of union with God himself. So the story is about the offering of salvation to one single individual and his failure to respond to it. Clearly the basic point is the *dangerous nature of riches*. They can block one's salvation. What the young man lacked was not evangelical poverty but God. And union with God was what Jesus was offering in his invitation to join him and his band of disciples who were the beginning of the kingdom.

The main point of the Judao-Christian distrust of riches, which is a constant theme in the Bible and which this story sums up, is that they *divide the heart*. The perfect or righteous man is the simple man, the man with undivided heart, single-hearted in his devotion to God. There are two powers contending for man—the two masters of the gospel saying—and no compromise is possible. It goes without saying that this is not a universal condemnation of possessions as such, but of the state of mind that idolises them. But it must always be added that the idolisation is only too easy. One is better away from temptation. Through riches one too easily succumbs to forgetfulness of God, to contempt for the poor, to pride and consuming anxiety. And all these things prohibit one from entering the kingdom of God which has finally arrived in the person of Jesus. So one would be better off without riches. They isolate one from God and from one's neighbour. To my mind it is this that constitutes the 'counsel' that is offered in the story of the rich young man. I don't suppose that any conscientious Christian, religious or not, could fail to agree with the wisdom and urgency of the message. Detachment from possessions is meant to give place to reliance on God and to love of one's neighbour: 'sell all you have and give to the poor'. It has nothing to do with a purely moral perfection, the kind of thing that is too easily confused with a personal meanness and distrust of life. It is simply a preliminary to faith in God and love of one's neighbour—it clears the ground as it were

The story of the rich young man then should work on us in the same way that the parables work on us: it is not meant to lay down any set mode of behaviour, to be copied to the letter, but it is meant to act like a yeast in the conscience, to prepare the Christian for the time when he has to make a choice of two ways of life: either to make possessions his god or the Lord his God. And this is a choice for everyone to make, not on the one hand merely religious, and not on the other hand, merely people who earn more than £20,000 a year.

Needless to say, in the case of the religious, the taking of the vow of poverty is not the unique once-for-all solution to this problem. The choice will have to be faced many times and one hopes that the responses will become more and more mature as he sees the point more clearly. Religious poverty is not a matter of simply shedding one's goods as if that were commendable in itself. That would bring

one no closer to God. Riches are dangerous because they isolate the individual who possesses them. The poverty of religious people, therefore, should break down the isolation and bring people together. It should involve a different usage of material things, such that they cease to be things that come between people and prohibit living together, and become instead *means* of living together, instruments of communication. The world ought to be seen as potential gift rather than as potential possession. And behind this change in the use of things there would be a change in the use of oneself. One would cease to keep oneself and one's personal gifts apart, for private benefit and enjoyment. Many men and women in the history of the religious life have found that the channels of communication have been most open when they have had use of the barest minimum of things. But this is not always the case.

So, like chastity and obedience, poverty cannot be a fixed pattern of behaviour which can be defined and exactly legislated for in advance. In particular, any attempt to reduce it to a simple rule of getting permission for everything one uses or spends would destroy the response. And it would, at the same time, destroy responsibility. People who are able to respond to the given situation in the right way are what I would call responsible, and if religious poverty is not a matter of continual individual response then it cannot bring about any kind of adult responsibility. It is an unfortunate fact that much of the practice of religious poverty leads directly to the formation of irresponsible people.

This is frequently the result of one of the most common interpretations of religious poverty which makes it simply a matter of personal dependence on superiors—the idea that what one has renounced is not the use of things as such, but the right to dispose of them as one wills, so that the only thing that is really forbidden is to use property without the permission of the superior. That view was very frequent among theoreticians of the religious life up to the time of the Council. According to this theory, dependence is supposed to unite the religious with the actually poor person in his lack of liberty, and dependence on others. The two states were seen to be essentially the same. Of course this is nonsense. For one thing, I, as a religious, am freed from all anxiety about where my food and clothing and everything else are going to come from. It is absolutely guaranteed by the community. For another, I have at my disposal a large array of things that the poor man never gets the chance to use. Even though everything has to be obtained with permission, it is already *mine*, not someone else's like the goods of which the really poor man is deprived. They are in the hands of the rich. They are simply unavailable. So the religious, upon whom economic reality does not impinge, and who can get what he needs just by asking, is not easily going to come to a sense of responsibility where goods are concerned. He is still fundamentally a receiving individual and not a giving one. Dependence on

permission coupled with complete ignorance of where it all comes from is the condition of children, not of adults as religious are supposed to be. The whole purpose of the enterprise surely is that one should be transformed from a receiving individual into a giving one. I would say that no practice of the evangelical counsels must be allowed to interfere in a serious manner with the development of normal adult responsibility in matters of possessions, sexual life and disposal of time or personal gifts: the three areas they are meant to cover.

What about that other common interpretation of poverty: that it is essentially *sharing in community*? Will that cover the response to the gospel that I have been talking about? And will it help to develop the sense of responsibility that is needed? I think it could do if properly understood. Those who put the emphasis on this aspect of poverty usually appeal to the Jerusalem community in the Acts of the Apostles. Let us consider it briefly.

There seems to be little doubt that the Jerusalem community after Pentecost was understood to be in direct continuity with the band of men and women who had followed Jesus in the flesh. Remember how they kept a common purse. After Pentecost, with God once again in their midst, 'they held all things in common and sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need' (2.44f). 'Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid it at the feet of the apostles, and distribution was made to each as any had need' (4.32-35). Monastic tradition apparently saw in the community of Acts the origin of all later religious life. It was even held that monks were simply continuing what had been practiced in the beginning by all Christians and that it was others who had become less observant in the course of time. There is probably a grain of truth in this, but let us be careful about the comparisons we make.

If this is treated as a paradigm for the religious community in itself and not for the city of God as a whole, then it can lead to a serious mistake—one which normal Christian families know how to avoid on their own account. The sharing of goods among the first Christians could not possibly be reduced to the common possession of wealth by a limited group of people. It has much more significance than that. The community of Acts is not directly comparable with any subsequent religious community for the simple reason that it consisted of a large and growing number of people, chosen for no other reason than their faith in Jesus. Luke says there were thousands of them. Even allowing for exaggeration there must have been a very large number of people. It was more like a city within a city than a religious community—a grand experiment aimed at

founding the city of God itself in which the poor are no longer poor and the rich at last freed from the everlasting circle of self-love. It was not merely the setting up of a limited commune of picked individuals as is every subsequent religious community. It was in a way the whole Church, a new beginning for the human race with a new relationship with the material world.

Let me state it quite clearly: sharing one's goods in a small community is an easy thing to do. You don't have to be a religious to do that. Students in digs do it. Families do it. In different parts of the world groups of people that we like to refer to as 'primitive' tribes find nothing more natural. It is a natural human tendency to share with your own kind and those areas of society where it has become impossible even to do this are in a very bad way indeed. Insofar as a religious house witnesses to a different pattern of things it may do some good. But the good it does will always be very limited if its sharing is contained within the walls.

I have already pointed out that the chief danger of riches is that they isolate and lead to ignorance and contempt of the poor. They can of course isolate a community as well as a single individual. An irresponsible and non-responsive community is equivalent to so many irresponsible and non-responsive individuals for all the good it does. No amount of sharing within the walls will impress anyone who does not actually live there.

The early monastic fathers certainly had a much broader interpretation of religious poverty to offer than one of simply sharing everything within a discreet group. According to Basil, for instance, the goods which are renounced on entering the monastery are at the service of the Lord, which means, among other things, at the service of the poor. They do not belong any more to the people who have renounced them. In the eyes of the early monks the giving of alms was fundamental to the practice of poverty. The whole monastic tradition insists that the monk must not be a parasite on society but must work for his living, giving what he has of surplus to the relief of the poor. His liberality must be *more* than that of the ordinary man. Some of the early monks set up industries for the employment and relief of local poverty. Their monasteries were centres of civilisation and community, spreading abroad a different way of living—not taking what they could like most other human groups but giving what they could. It reversed the natural selfishness of human groups, in the same way that the selfishness of the individual was supposed to be reversed within the monastery walls. It was the work of putting creation in order, of propagating the brotherhood of men. In my opinion this is one characteristic that is inseparable from genuine religious poverty. As with the individual within the walls, so with the community as a whole. If *this* is the way that sharing is conceived then it will lead to the kind of responsibility I have been talking about. The individual will not be content to live richly with per-

mission when he is conscious of his connections with his brethren outside the walls.

Furthermore, a community isolated from its environment by a high standard of living and a feeling of total security will be pretty disastrous for the preacher who hopes to preach from it. What has he the right to say? A congregation always knows when a preacher is living in a world of his own. Is this the reason why, for instance, the working people in one of our parishes learned generations ago to switch off their attention as soon as the priest got up to preach? If the men of that community did not eat too well at times, at least they were totally secure and extremely well-housed and they preached against socialism whenever they got the chance.

So a community engaged in preaching the gospel—while it must make sure it has access to the books in the traditional Dominican manner—cannot afford to keep up the barriers to communication that are the product of a superior standard of living. This does not amount to a romantic wish to identify with the working classes, but simply a desire to keep open the channels of communication.

Whatever the special function of the community, whether it be preaching or not, there will be some kind of communication involved, some kind of mending the broken lines between people, something that helps people inside and outside the house to regain the mastery over life. *Ability to communicate* could indeed serve as a test for the authenticity of religious poverty on both an individual and a community level. One might find, for instance, that being perpetually broke is rather a hindrance to communication than a help. There will be some kind of mean to be found in each particular set of circumstances.

There are many aspects of the question that I have not been able to mention in this paper. I have not, for instance, spoken of the attempts that have been made in many religious communities to give individuals a greater economic responsibility, notably the drastic solution tried by many French Dominicans of living in very small communities of wage-earners. There are indications that the religious life cannot long survive the many additional problems that projects of this kind fall prey to. But how does one come to a sense of responsibility while at the same time avoiding the debilitating anxiety of ordinary economic existence? I am sure that this question and the others I have raised must be answered soon if religious life is going to contribute what it can to the human race.

The following works were found to be of great use in preparing this paper :

Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, Q184, Q188.

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Chesterton and Distributism

by Ian Boyd

Chesterton never gave a systematic account of what he meant by Distributism anywhere in his writing, but the outline of this socio-political philosophy is clear to anyone who is familiar with his work and that of the circle of writers to which he belonged. As the name implies, Distributism meant first of all that property should be distributed in the widest possible way. Belloc stated the case for this policy in *The Servile State*, which he published in 1912 and which became the text-book of the movement. He argued that Socialism and State Capitalism were helping to create the same kind of society in which power would be concentrated in the hands of a small ruling-class and security would be given to a permanent proletariat whose economic position would be fixed by law. The only alternative to the 'slave' state was the Distributist state of small peasant ownership and workers' guilds. The nearest approximation to this simple society was found in medieval times. Consequently Distributists must be prepared to repudiate modern industrialism in its present form and work for a return to the past. The way in which this theory was interpreted among Belloc's followers is best illustrated by a quotation from a Distributist manifesto published twenty-five years later:

Distributists agree with Socialists in their condemnation of the present system of society, but they think the evil is far more deeply rooted than socialists suppose . . . Distributists propose to go back to fundamentals, and to rebuild society from its basis in agriculture, instead of accepting the industrial system and changing the ownership, which is all that Socialists propose. Apart from their conviction that industrialism is essentially unstable and cannot last, Distributists refuse to accept it as a foundation upon which to