Religious poverty: witness to the risen Christ

By Michael D. Guinan O.F.M.

Go Back

Religious poverty these days would seem to be a pretty hard sell. On the one hand, we live in a culture with an inordinate emphasis on material possessions. More and more artificial needs are created, and our worth is tied to what (and what brand of) things we have. On the other hand, we are more aware than ever of the presence of grinding hunger, homelessness and need, both here in the United States and in many countries throughout the world. How can such conditions be in any way good and embody positive values?

Poverty and plenty, as economic and social conditions, would seem to be the logical starting place for discussing the meaning of vowed religious poverty. Like many apparently "obvious" things, however, this would be a mistake. Religious poverty is a religious reality and to understand it properly, it must be placed in a religious context. It would likewise be a mistake to begin with the vow of poverty taken by religious (religious poverty). Since the poverty of vowed religious is simply one way of living the common Christian call to holiness, we will examine, first, a general understanding of human existence before God, and then look at what positive meaning "poverty" might have (Christian poverty).

Human before God, embedded in relationships

To be human is to exist at the center of a series of relationships, all of which make up who we are. These relationships are basically four: to the self, to other people, to the material world, and to God. Our first relation is to ourselves. Each of us represents a unique embodiment of God in the world. We are multifaceted realities with a variety of needs (physical, psychological, intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic). We must attend to and care about balancing different dimensions of ourselves if we are to grow as healthy living entities.

As living entities, however, we do not live alone. On the most basic level, we are born into and grow up within our families. As our circles of experience broaden, from home, to neighborhood, to school, to city, to country, to world, our lives intersect with many others, as friends, working acquaintances, peers. We become more and more aware that the "rugged individualist," the "lone ranger," of popular culture is not a very healthy model to emulate.

But we cannot stop here. As individuals within communities, we are all part of something larger: the whole of material creation. In the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2, human beings are deeply rooted in the earth. The name "*Adam*" itself points to this: 'adam (human being) is taken from the '*adamah* (the ground) (Genesis 2:7). And as our ecological crises make clear, our actions affect much more than ourselves; they flow out and affect the very structure and stability of the world itself. We are not in this alone.

Finally, all of this—the individual, the society, the natural world—exists not only in relationship to one another; all exist most deeply in relationship to God. Around, in, and through all of these levels, is God. To understand everything that exists at its deepest level, it must be seen in its relationship to God.

Image of God

To be human, then, is to live embedded in a series of relationships. But which of them is the most basic? From a religious point of view, the answer is obvious: the relation to God. Scripture points us to this in its very first pages: as humans, we have been created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-28). Israel was forbidden, as part of the Ten Commandments, to make images of God (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 5:8). The living God of Israel can be imaged only by living beings who do what God does. What does this mean?

Two things are essential to being and living as God's image. First, we recognize and accept the fact that we are image; that we are called to reflect another who comes first. We are not number one, but number two. This involves the humble recognition on our part of creaturehood and limitation, a recognition that we, and all the relations to others and the material world that make up our lives, exist only as gift. We are called into existence by and are completely dependent upon the loving and life-giving word of God. We can call this the stance of faith.

Second, we must live out our imagehood. The biblical text in Genesis specifies this in two directions, to be life-giving and to share God's dominion. While procreation is an obvious way to image God's lifegiving, it cannot be restricted to that. All of our concerns for life and the quality of life, on whatever level, manifest this concern of God.

While "having dominion" has a harsh sound in English, it is a very positive concept. Whatever our dominion is, it must be modeled on that of God. Throughout the Scriptures, God's royal dominion is one of subduing chaos, in its various forms, and establishing a universe marked by just, right relationships and peaceful order. To be an image is to be a co-creator, sharing in God's royal activity of lifegiving, justice-doing, and peace-making. We can call this a stance of charity or love.

By way of summary, we can say that to put our relationship to God first means that we recognize, in faith, our complete dependence on God and that we receive our whole lives as the gift of God. It means that we then live this out, in charity, and manifest it in our efforts to maintain and restore, where broken, the life, justice and peace that should characterize us in relation to ourselves, to others, to the world and to God. The two are flip sides of the same coin and represent the challenge of being human before God. As Christians, further, we believe that we find the fullest model and example of God's true image in the person and life of Jesus Christ, the "image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

The other relationships

The relationship to God is the foundation and basis for all our other relations, i.e., to self, to others and to the natural world. What about these relations? We can note, first, that they are not optional. We may live them well or poorly, but live them we will. They are part and parcel of who we are as human beings. Second, as inevitable as they may be, they are not, as we have just seen, central. The relation to God is central. We can become obsessed with ourselves (pride, selfcenteredness), with others (as objects of sex or power, for instance), or with material things (wanting more and more possessions). To treat any of these other relationships as central is to push God out and to put it in place of God. The biblical term for this is idolatry.

Third, because material possessions, other people, ourselves can in fact become idols, it does not follow from this that they are evil. We, by our sin, can turn them into idols; that does not make them demons. Throughout Christian history, movements have arisen to deny their value and worth (e.g., Gnosticism, Manichaeism, Jansenism), but the simple fact is that they are all part of God's good creation and part of God's good gifts to each one of us. Thus, whatever Christian poverty might mean, it does not and can not imply any degradation of material reality.

Defining Christian poverty

We can now offer a working definition of the virtue of poverty. It is not defined in relation to an economic or social condition, nor in relation to material things. It is defined in relation to God. *Religious poverty is the manner in which our living of the risen life of faith and love, opened to us in and through Christ, bears consequences in our relation to material things*. Let us comlook more closely at the implications of this. In discussing the meaning of Christian poverty, taking our inspiration from Scripture, we can see two kinds of guidelines, negative and positive.

Negative aspects of poverty

On the negative side, it is clear that poverty in the sense of economic deprivation or lack of the necessities of life is never a virtue. It is a scandal, the result of injustice, and an affront to the royal justice of God. Nowhere in Scripture do we find that such destitution can be good. The poor cry out to God to deliver them from their distress (Exodus 2:23-25). By ushering in God's kingdom, the Messiah comes to put an end to such conditions (Matthew 11:5; Luke 7:22).

At the other extreme, the biblical tradition recognizes that great riches and abundance represent a danger to our life with God. They can make us proud and arrogant and lead us to forget God and almost always involve sin, injustice and oppression (e.g., Deuteronomy 8:10-14; Hosea 13:6; Proverbs 30:7-9; Sirach 31:1- 11). The danger of riches in following Christ is a recurring theme in the Gospels (Matthew 6:19-34; Luke 12:33-34; 16:13-15). Both material riches and material poverty are negatively evaluated in the biblical tradition. One represents a threat to our physical lives, the other to our spiritual lives. Neither extreme can be romanticized as if it were some kind of virtuous ideal. They both need the positive witness of Christian poverty.

Positive aspects of poverty

The first positive dimension of Christian poverty roots it radically in faith. The first and most basic demand of living in covenant with God is faith. In the Bible, this is sometimes described as "the spirit of the '*anawim*." This term begins by referring to a social category, to those experiencing oppression, but it broadens to include what Matthew's Gospel will call "the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3). The '*anawim* recognize their complete dependence on God and place their whole lives in God's care. Mary, the mother of the Lord, is presented as a model of this kind of faith (Luke 1:46-55). Material things can present one of the strongest and most common distractions and obstacles to this kind of faith. Christians must be ready to sacrifice their possessions, or anything else for that matter, if and when these become obstacles to their growth in faith. This is the basic teaching, for example, of the Gospel story of the call of the rich man (Mark 10:17- 22; Matthew 19:16-22; Luke 18:18-23), of the Lucan "catechism of discipleship" (Luke 14:25-33), and of Matthew's version of the beatitudes (Matthew 5:3). Material possessions do not have to become an obstacle, but if they do, the Christian faces a choice.

The second positive dimension of Christian poverty is radically rooted in charity, which includes as an integral part of itself an active concern to put an end to poverty. As God's Messiah, Jesus preached the advent of God's kingdom, a kingdom bringing with it a radical reversal of the status quo. Jesus preached the Good News to the poor that their poverty was at an

end. The Christian community rooted in shared faith, worship, and prayer, works to continue Christ's work "so that no one is in need" (Acts 4:32-35).

Both of these aspects of Jesus' teaching, his call to put an end to suffering and poverty, and his preaching to all who open themselves in faith, appear in the episode of the toll-gatherer, Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). Jesus responds to Zacchaeus' eagerness and openness to hear the Gospel; he goes and dines with him. Resisting the murmurings of the self-righteous crowd, Zacchaeus "stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much'" (Luke 19:8). Jesus preaches the kingdom to all, calling them to be converted, to do penance, to open themselves to receive God, recognizing their need and dependence. They must become '*anawim*. In turn, they are called to join in and continue Jesus' work of bringing Good News to the poor, of putting an end to poverty, hunger, injustice. God's kingdom is a new kind of society with a new set of values. Christians are called to embody these in their lives.

Poverty as a dimension of religious life

What we know today as vowed religious life in community has developed over centuries, even millennia of the church's life. As we observed above, it does not represent "another" Christian life, but is basically one way to live out the common Christian call to holiness that is addressed to all. Religious communities seek and strive to be more visible manifestations of the new kind of society with a new set of values which is the call of all Christians. The vow of poverty that religious take is simply an extension of the Christian poverty discussed above.

In the past, a number of wrong turns have appeared in the context of religious poverty. Some have tried to define it in materialist terms: thus, instead of looking at what and how much we have, it looks at what and how much we do not have. "We're poorer than you are; we have less, etc." This is simply materialism in reverse; one of the early signs of its presence is that charity toward others, particularly one's fellow religious, goes out the window. Others try to impose their own views about what is and is not poverty on everyone else in the community. This is simply a power play hiding behind pious pretexts. Similarly, an attempt to be guided in poverty by "what the poor do" is a dead end. What poor? And what behavior? And who decides? The older practice of looking at poverty in terms of asking permission to use money, even in small amounts, can be conducive to immature and ultimately irresponsible behavior. There is likewise little point in trying to standardize poverty or to come up with one uniform understanding.

From what we have already seen regarding Christian poverty, religious poverty is rooted in the same twofold perspective of faith and charity. As an expression of faith, religious poverty needs to be constantly rooted in a life of prayer, both personal and communal. This is, indeed, the basis of all. Religious as individuals and as groups then live a life of charity manifested in diverse ways such as simplicity of lifestyle, an open and welcoming spirit, a sense of gratefulness before God for the many gifts (beginning with our own existence) which we have received. It can be directed outward through efforts to put an end to conditions of poverty and injustice, both through working directly with the marginal in society and through working to change the larger social structures that produce the injustice in the first place. There are no set formulas, no "one size fits all," no calculated guidelines. It is an ongoing journey of faith and love.

Religious poverty is really not a "hard sell" at all. Jesus did not come to sell anything, but to invite us all to share in his life with God. Vowed religious, through their personal and communal witness to the presence of the risen Christ in our lives and in our midst, is the only attracting "sell" there is.

Further reading

Guinan, Michael D., OFM. *Gospel Poverty: Witness to the Risen Christ*. New York: Paulist Press, 1981.

Guinan, Michael D., OFM. T*o Be Human Before God: Insights from Biblical Spirituality*. Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1994, esp. pp. 11-26.

Schneiders, Sandra, IHM. *New Wineskins: Reimagining Religious Life Today*. New York: Paulist Press, 1986, esp. pp. 168-90.

Schneiders, Sandra, IHM. *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life*. New York: Paulist, 2001, check the index under "poverty."

Michael D. Guinan, OFM *is a professor of Old Testament and Semitic languages at the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif. He is a contributor to several biblical commentaries and biblical spirituality publications.*

Related Tags:

- old testament 14
- bible 46
- scripture 121
- vow of poverty 18
- celibacy 81

© 2024 National Religious Vocation Conference NRVC

(*) Site design and programming by ideaPort, LLC