

## Poverty and Precarity

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*The Catholic Worker*, May 1952, 2, 6.

*Summary: An essay on the mystery and complexity of poverty, real and voluntary kinds. Enumerates the many forms of poverty, the irony of "poverty" in "rich" religious orders, and finally poverty as a means of helping the poor. (DDLW #633).*

Poverty is a very mysterious thing. We need to be always writing and thinking about it. It would seem strange that we must strive to be poor, to remain poor. “Just give me a chance” I can hear people say, “Just let me get my debts paid. Just let me get a few of the things I need and then I’ll begin to think of poverty and its pleasures. Meanwhile, I’ve had nothing but.”

This last month I have talked to a man who lives in a four room apartment with a wife and four children and relatives besides. He may have a regular job and enough food to go around, but he is poor in light and air and space. Down at the Peter Maurin farm each of the corners of the woman's dormitory are occupied, and when an extra visitor comes she must live in the middle of the room. During a visit to Georgia and South Carolina I have seen the shacks Negroes are living in, and the trailer camps around Augusta, Georgia, where the Hydrogen Bomb plant is under construction. They may have trailers but they are also poor, physically speaking, in the things that are necessary for a good life. Trailers cost money, so do cars, and food is high and no matter how high wages go, a sudden illness, and accumulation of doctor and hospital bills may mean a sudden plunge into destitution. Everybody talks about security and everybody shudders at the idea of poverty. And in fear and anguish people succumb, mentally and physically, until our hospitals, especially our mental hospitals, are crowded all over the country.

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I am convinced that if we had an understanding and a love of poverty we would begin to be as free and joyous as St. Francis, who had a passion for Lady Poverty and lives on with us in joyous poverty through all the centuries since his death.

It is hard to write about poverty. We live in a slum neighborhood that is becoming ever more crowded with Puerto Ricans who are doubling up in unspeakably filthy, dark, crowded tenements on the lower east side and in Harlem, who have the lowest wages in the city, who do the hardest work, who are little and



I can remember our first efforts nineteen years ago. (With this issue we start our twentieth year.) We had no office, no equipment but a typewriter which was pawned the first month. We wrote the paper on park benches and at the kitchen table. In an effort to achieve a little of the destitution of our neighbors we gave away even our furniture and sat on boxes. But as fast as we gave things away people brought more. We gave away blankets to needy families, started our first house of hospitality and people gathered together what blankets we needed. We gave away food and more food came in. I can remember a haunch of venison from the Canadian Northwest, a can of oysters from Maryland, a container of honey from Illinois. Even now it comes in, a salmon from Seattle, flown across the continent; nothing is too good for the poor. There is no one working with **The Catholic Worker** getting a salary, so no one is bothered with income tax, and since all of the leaders of the work give up job and salary, others of our readers feel called upon to give, and help us keep the work going. And then we experience a poverty of another kind, a poverty of interior goods of reputation. It is said often and with some scorn, "Why don't they get jobs and help the poor that way? Why are they living off others, begging?" Just this last month a long letter came in along these lines, and another group in St. Louis emphasized that they didn't live by begging.

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Occasionally, as we start thinking of poverty, usually after reading the life of such a saint as benedict Joseph Labre, we dream of going out on our solitary own, living with the destitute, sleeping on park benches or in the Shelter, living in the Churches, sitting before the blessed Sacrament as we see so many doing, from the Municipal lodging house around the corner. And when these thoughts come on warm spring days when the children are playing in the park, and it is good to be out on the city streets, we know that this too is luxury and we are deceiving ourselves, and that it is the warm sun we want, and rest, and time

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We have put several supplemental poles and thus it will last, maybe two or three years more. Some day it will fall on our heads and that will be funny. Precarity enables us to help very much the poor. When a community is always building, and enlarging, and embellishing, which is good in itself, there is nothing left over for the poor. We have no right to do this as long as there are slums and breadlines somewhere."

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"Very well," said Ignatius obediently. "If you wish it, Father, I will go, but I would not have the Capuchins dine on the blood of the poor."

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Mr. Kenkel's last comment was, that the universal crisis in the world today was because of love of money. "The present Egyptian crisis is but one scene in the great oriental drama that has been unfolding for the past years," he wrote. "The Far East and the Near East" (and he might have said all Africa also), "together constitute a great sack from which blood is oozing. The flow will not stop as long as our interests in those people are dominated largely by financial and economic considerations."

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