

Poverty and Precarity

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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.

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 undernourished from generations of privation and exploitation by us. We used

to have a hard time getting rid of all the small sized clothes which came in to us. Ladies who could eat steak and salads and keep their slim figures, contributed good clothes, small sized shoes, and I can remember Julia Porcelli saying once, "Why are the poor always fat. We never get enough clothes to fit them." The American poor may be fat with the starches they eat, but the Puerto Rican poor are lean. The stock in the clothes room at Chrystie street moves quickly now.

It is hard to write about poverty when a visitor tells you of how he and his family all lived in a basement room and did sweat shop work at night to make ends meet, and how the landlord came in and belabored them for not paying his exorbitant rent.

It is hard to write about poverty when the back yard at Chrystie street still has the stock of furniture piled to one side that was put out on the street in an eviction in a next door tenement.

How can we say to these people, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven," when we are living comfortably in a warm house, sitting down to a good table, and are clothed decently. Maybe not so decently. I had occasion to visit the City Shelter last month where families are cared for, and I sat there for a couple of hours, contemplating poverty and destitution, a family of these same Puerto Ricans with two of the children asleep in the parents' arms, and four others sprawling against them; a young couple, the mother pregnant; and elderly Negro who had a job she said but wasn't to go on it till next night. I made myself known to a young man in charge (I did not want to appear to be spying on them when all I wanted to know was the latest in the apartment-finding situation for homeless families) and he apologized for making me wait saying that he had thought I was one of the clients.

We must talk about poverty because people lose sight of it, can scarcely believe that it exists. So many decent people come in to visit us and tell us how their families were brought up in poverty and how, through hard work and decent habits and cooperation, they managed to educate all the children and raise up priests and nuns to the Church. They concede that health and good habits, a good family, take them out of the poverty class, no matter how mean the slum they may have been forced to inhabit. No, they don't know about the poor. Their conception of poverty is something neat and well ordered as a nun's cell.

And maybe no one can be told, maybe they will have to experience it. Or maybe it is a grace which they must pray for. We usually get what we pray for, and maybe we are afraid to pray for it. And yet I am convinced that it is the grace we most need in this age of crisis, at this time when expenditures reach into the billions to defend "our American way of life." Maybe it is this defense which will bring down upon us this poverty which we do not pray for.

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.

It would complicate things rather, I can only explain, to give Roger a salary for his work of fourteen hours a day in the kitchen, clothes room and house; to pay Jane a salary for running the woman's house, and Beth and Annabelle for giving out clothes; for making stencils all day and helping with the sick and the poor; and Bob and Tom for their work—and then have them all turn the money right back in to support the work. Or to make it more complicated, they might all go out and get jobs, and bring the money home to pay their board and room and the salaries of others to run the house. It is simpler just to be poor. It is simpler to beg. The thing to do is not to hold out on to anything. That might smack of the Ananias and Saphira act.

But the tragedy is that we do, we all do. We hold on to our books, our tools, such as typewriters, our clothes, and instead of rejoicing when they are taken from us we lament. We protest at people taking time or privacy. We are holding on to these goods. It is a good thing to remember.

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 to think and read, and freedom from the people that press in on us from early morning until late at night. No it is not simple, this business of poverty.

"True poverty is rare," a saintly priest writes to us from Martinique. "Nowadays communities are good, I am sure, but they are mistaken about poverty. They accept, admit on principle, poverty, but everything must be good and strong, buildings must be fireproof, **Precarity** is rejected everywhere, and precarity is an essential element of poverty. That has been forgotten. Here we want

precarity in everything except the church. These last days our refectory was near collapsing.

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."

Over and over again in the history of the church the saints have emphasized poverty. Every community which has been started, has begun in poverty and in incredible hardships by the rank and file priest and brother and monk and nun who gave their youth and energy to good works. And the result has always been that the orders thrived, the foundations grew, property was extended till holdings and buildings were accumulated and although there was still individual poverty, there was corporate wealth. It is hard to keep poor.

One way to keep poor of course is not to accept money which is the result of defrauding the poor. Here is a story of St. Ignatius of Sardinia, a Capuchin just canonized last October. Ignatius used to go out from his monastery with a sack to beg from the people of the town but he would never go to a merchant who had built up his fortune by defrauding the poor. Franchino, the rich man, fumed every time he passed his door, at being so neglected, though this perhaps seems even more unbelievable than the climax of the story. His concern, however, was not the loss of the opportunity to give an alms, but he fear of public opinion. He complained at the friary, whereupon the Father Guardian ordered St. Ignatius to beg from the merchant the next time he went out

"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.

The merchant received Ignatius with great flattery and gave him generous alms, asking him to come again in the future. But hardly had Ignatius left the house with his sack on his shoulder than drops of blood began oozing from the sack. They trickled down on Franchino's doorstep and down through the street to the monastery. Everywhere Ignatius went a trickle of blood followed him. When he arrived at the friary he laid the sack at the Father Guardian's feet. "What is this?" gasped the Guardian. "This," St. Ignatius said, "is the blood of the poor."

This story was contained in the last column written by a great Catholic Layman, a worker for social justice, F.P. Kenkel, editor of the Central Verein in St. Louis, and always a friend of Peter Maurin, founder of The Catholic Worker.

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.”

“Voluntary poverty,” Peter Maurin would say, “Is the answer. Through voluntary poverty others will be induced to help his brothers. We cannot see our brother in need without stripping ourselves. It is the only way we have of showing our love.”