Reflections During Advent-Part Two, The Meaning of Poverty

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Summary: Gives examples of false voluntary poverty and refutes the notion that real poverty doesn't exist. Challenges everyone to a personal response, not a government one, to poverty and to ask ourselves "What shall we do?" Gives examples and concludes that all can do something and that whatever work of mercy we perform we "do it for love of Jesus, in His humanity, for love of our brother, for love of our enemy." Points to the scandal of the wealth of the Church and thanks God for the sacraments and the Word in the Scriptures–our light and our food. (DDLW #560).

THERE IS A STORY of Tolstoi's called "How Much Land Does A Man Need?" It is the story, as I remember it, of a peasant who left his good land and home to go to the South, where he had heard there were thousands of fertile acres for the asking. He made his way to the nomad tribe and asked for some of their land. The chieftain told him he could claim as his own the amount of land he could encompass on foot, from sunup to sundown. When he had rested from his journey he set out running at a pace he felt he could sustain, for he had great confidence in his own strength and endurance, and began to stake out his land. But his greed was greater than his endurance, so his strength began giving out towards the close of the day. By the time he had run the immense boundaries he had chosen for himself, he fell dead at the feet of the Cossack chieftain. He ended in a six-foot grave dug merrily by his scornful hosts, who sensed that the earth was the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

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We had a man living with us once who claimed that all illness was a punishment for some fault. When Sunday visitors came in happily with bunches of poison ivy, picked because of their bright colors or pretty berries, he labeled the visitors as "acquisitive." It was the fault he most despised, perhaps because it was the one he was most guilty of himself. He wanted to be poor, yet he looked upon all things around him as his own and gathered them to himself.

At the same time, he did not like to work, to be exploited, he called it, in our present acquisitive, competitive society, so he preferred to gather furniture and even slightly spoiled food from off the city dump near the farm, and felt he was exemplifying voluntary poverty.

Another family moving in with us, on one of our Catholic Worker farms, felt that the beautifying which had made the farmhouse and its surroundings a charming spot was not consistent with a profession of poverty. They broke up the rustic benches and fence, built by one of the men from the Bowery who had stayed with us, and used them for firewood. The garden surrounding the statue of the Blessed Virgin, where we used to say the rosary, was trampled down and made into a woodyard filled with chips and scraps left from the axe which chopped the family wood. It was the same with the house: the curtains were taken down, the floor remained bare, there were no pictures–the place became a scene of stark poverty, and a visiting bishop was appalled at the "poverty." It had looked quite comfortable before, and one did not think of the crowded bedrooms or the outhouse down the hill, or the outdoor cistern and well where water had to be pumped and put on the wood stove in the kitchen to heat. Not all *these* hardships were evident.

On another farm we owned–a larger place where we could accommodate more children in summer, more families, more men from off the road–there was the same lack of plumbing arrangements and the same need to heat the place with wood fires Even the nearby city helped us out by bringing logs from trees which had fallen in storms and blocked the highways, to increase our store of fuel. The place was old and beautiful, and had a carefully tended flower garden with peonies, iris, forsythia, perennials and annuals that delighted the eye and kept our chapel furnished with color and fragrance. Here one of our prosperous visitors looked around with a censorious eye and commented, "You call this voluntary poverty? I could not afford a country home like this."

She did not see the three sets of outhouses set back in the trees and bushes which had to be used winter and summer (the temperature often dropped to 10 below zero); nor did she see our bare dormitories with their double-decker beds crowded together, nor the living quarters of a family over the carriage shed that was heated only by an old stove in the middle of the barnlike structure, nor the wayfarers' dormitory down below where men came in from off the road at any hour of the night or day (and sometimes with a bottle to keep themselves warm!). No doors were ever locked in that farm by the road.

It is not right to justify oneself, but we tried to point out how ungrateful we would be to God and to our benefactors if we did not, by hard work and care, improve what we had received in the way of land and house. The very men who had come to get help had stayed to give help and had made the place what it was by constant hard labor.

But the poor, it seems, have no right to beauty, to order. Poverty must be squalor, filth, ugliness, to be esteemed as poverty. But this is destitution, and it

was usually from such destitution that our family had come "up in the world." Our visitors did not recognize true poverty–voluntary poverty now-offered up by these men for the sake of their fellows . . . a poverty on the part of students and volunteers as well as men from the Bowery, which meant no money to jingle in the pocket, no wages, having to ask for tobacco, to wear the clothes which "came in"and to have no privacy, which is the greatest desire, the greatest need of all.

Right now on our farm at Tivoli, New York, there****are five hermits in the woods who have rebuilt old campsites so that, winter and summer, they can live alone.

During the 33 years that the *Catholic Worker* has been published and the Houses of Hospitality and farms have grown up around the United States, there has always been this misunderstanding of poverty.

For a long while, poverty was denied–we just did not have any, according to popular belief, in our affluent society. Many a time I was queried by students, "where is poverty? We do not have any around this prosperous Middle West, for instance." I was asked this question at Notre Dame, when I spoke there, and to show that there *was* poverty Julian Pleasants and Norrie Merdzinski, both Notre Dame students. started a House of Hospitality in the off-bounds section of South Bend. With the help of Fr. Putz and Fr. Mathis they kept it going during their student years, to care for unemployed and unemployable men off the road. The same question was asked me in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and I could only point out that where there was a Good Shepherd home for delinquent girls, and an Indian reservation, and a prison and a public ward in the hospital, there was poverty. You could always find poverty at the public dump, or in the prison or hospital. All founders of religious orders and societies searched out poverty.

IT WAS Michael Harrington's book *The Other America,* and Dwight McDonald's long review and analysis of that book in the *New Yorker,* that made the problem explode in this country, to use an expression of Abbe Pierre, who himself works with the destitute and homeless. This book of Mike's, which came as a result of his two-year stay with us as one of the editors of the *Catholic Worker,* started the War on Poverty program.

But it is not to discuss solutions proffered by government or city agencies that I wish to write, though this long introduction was necessary to clarify the subject. War, and the poverty of peoples which leads to war, are the great problems of the day and the fundamental solution is the personal response which each of us makes to the message of Jesus Christ. It is the solution which works from the bottom up rather than from the top down, and makes for readiness to join in larger regional solutions like the organizing of farm workers with Cesar Chavez, community solutions of Saul Alinsky, village solutions like Vinoba Bhave's in India, etc.

The wonderful thing is that each one of us can do something about the problem, each one of us can give his response and can go as far as the grace of God leads

him; and God "ordereth all things sweetly," and there is no need to be afraid as to where such a response will lead US.

"Ask and you shall receive," Jesus told us, and this asking may be just that question "What shall we do?" Samuel asked it, St. Paul asked it–"Lord, what will you have me do?" and they seemed to get direct answers. Paul was struck blind, literally and to everything else around him except that one great fact, "whatever ye do to the least of these My brethren, ye do to Me." If you feed them, clothe them, shelter them, visit them in prison (or go to prison and so are with them!), serve the sick, in general perform the works of mercy, you are serving Christ and alleviating poverty by direct action. If you are persecuting them, killing them, throwing them in prison, you are doing it to Christ. He said so.

When the crowd was moved by John the Baptist and asked, "What shall we do?" he said to them, "He who has two coats give to him who has none." He also said, "Do injury to no man. Be content with your pay." Or with no pay at all. If you are voluntarily giving away what you have, giving your coat, don't expect thanks or the reform of the recipient. We don't do it for that motive, with the expectation of reward. We must do it for love of Jesus, in His humanity, for love of our brother, for love of our enemy.

Charles Peguy in one of his poems, *God Speaks,* tells the story of the prodigal son and comments, "That's the kind of a Father we have, who loves even to folly, who forgives seventy times seven, who rushes out to embrace and feast the prodigal son." This is the kind of love we must have for the poor. The kind of love which will give away cloak also if coat is demanded of you.

Nobody is too poor to help another. The stories in the New Testament are of the widow's mite, of the little boy's loaves and fishes, of the cloak, of the time given when one is asked to walk a second mile.

Another Russian story which profoundly moved me was *The Honest Thief,* by Dostoievsky of the hardworking tailor who lived in a corner of a room, and yet who took in one of the destitute he encountered. The guest begged and drank and the tailor suspected him of stealing his one treasure, an old army coat. He spoke to him harshly, but when the thief ran away, the tailor searched him out and brought him back to his corner to nurse him in his illness. "Love is the measure by which we shall be judged." And by not judging we too shall not be judged.

I am thinking of how many leave the Church because of the scandal of the wealth of the Church, the luxury of the Church which began in the very earliest day, even perhaps when the Apostles debated on which should be highest in the kingdom and when the poor began quarreling as to who were receiving the most from the common table, the Greek Jews or the Jerusalem Jews. St. Paul commented on the lack of esteem for the poor, and the kowtowing to the rich, and St. John in the Apocalypse spoke of the scandal of the churches "where charity had grown cold."

It has always been this way in the Church. On the one hand the struggle for detachment, to grow in the supernatural life which seems so unnatural at times, when the vision is dim.

Thank God for the sacraments, the food of life which we**can receive to strengthen us. Thank God for the Word made flesh and for the Word in the Scriptures. Thank God for the Gospel which St. Therese pinned close to her heart, and which the murderer Raskolnikoff listened to from the lips of a prostitute and took with him into the Siberian prison. The Word is our light and our understanding, and it is also our food.