

Poverty Is the Pearl of Great Price

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Summary: Discusses the difficulty of self-supporting and how voluntary poverty and manual labor are the means of the C.W. to achieve justice. Remarks that personal responsibility alleviates destitution but gives “plenty of holy poverty.” (DDLW #172).

Jacques Maritain, speaking at a Catholic Worker meeting a few years ago, urged us to read the Gospels. Therese of Lisieux, the little saint of our day, carried it next to her heart. Even if we read only the Gospel for Sunday, several times, God sends us a special message for our need.

I thought of that a few Sundays ago as I read the parable about the lost sheep. Certainly the men around the Bowery are lost sheep. They are our brothers in Jesus; He died for each of them. What respect we should feel for them!

When we began the Catholic Worker, we first thought of it as a headquarters for the paper, a place for round-table discussions, for learning crafts, for studying ways of building up a new social order. But God has made it much more than all this. He has made it a place for the poor. They come early in the morning from their beds in cheap flophouses, from the benches in the park across the street, from the holes and corners of the city. They are the most destitute, the most abandoned.

It is easy for people to see Jesus in the children of the slums, and institutions and schools are built to help them. That is a vocation in itself. But these abandoned men are looked upon as hopeless. “No good will come of it.” We are contributing to laziness. We are feeding people who won’t work. These are the accusations made. God help us, we give them so little: bread and coffee in the morning, soup and bread at noon. Two scant meals.

We are a family of forty or fifty at the Catholic Worker. We keep emphasizing that. But we are also a House of Hospitality. So many come that it is impossible to give personal attention to each one; we can only give what we have, in the name of Jesus. Thank God for directing our vocation. We did not choose this work. He sent it to us. We will always, please God, be clambering around the rocks and briars, the barrenness, the fruitlessness of city life, in search of lost sheep.

We are told to put on Christ and we think of Him in His private life, His life of work, His public life, His teaching and His suffering life. But we do not think enough of His life as a little child, as a baby. His helplessness, His powerlessness. We have to be content to be in that state too. Not to be able to do anything, to accomplish anything.

One thing children certainly accomplish, and that is that they love and wonder at the people and the universe around them. They live in the midst of squalor and confusion and see it not. They see people at the moment and love them and admire them. They forgive and they go on loving. They may look on the most vicious person, and if he is at that moment good and kind and doing something which they can be interested in or admire, there they are, pouring out their hearts to him.

Oh yes, I can write with authority. I have my own little grandchildren with me right now, and they see only the beauty and the joy of the Catholic Worker and its activities. There is no criticism in their minds and hearts of others around them.

My daughter, too, was raised among the poor and the most abandoned of human beings. She was only seven when the Catholic Worker started, and now she has a daughter of seven and four others besides.

It is good to be able to write with authority about the family, about poverty in our day - the involuntary poverty which all families must endure - about insecurity and unemployment. A few years ago, visiting my daughter, I was lying awake at 2 a.m., worrying because David had just lost his job and Tamar was about to have her fifth child. The former boss, who also owned the house they lived in, had come bearing oranges for the children and to tell them to move at once. What a strange juxtaposition of gestures! And I was torn between wrath and the necessity to train oneself in loving one's enemies, hating the sin but loving the sinner.

But then I thought, "Thank God I have this suffering of joblessness and insecurity and homelessness together with others. This day, for the sake of the family, there are so many compromises. But we must learn to accept the hardest of all sufferings, the suffering of those nearest and dearest to us. Thank God for this training in suffering." Accepting this made it easier at the time to go back to sleep. Since then there has been more of the same. Thank God for everything.

The fundamental means of the Catholic Worker are voluntary poverty and manual labor, a spirit of detachment from all things, a sense of the primacy of the spiritual, which makes the rest easy. "His praise should be ever in our mouth."

The reason for our existence is to praise God, to love Him and serve Him, and we can do this only by loving our brothers. "All men are brothers." This is the great truth that makes us realize God. Great crimes, it is true, have been committed in the name of human brotherhood; that may serve to obscure the truth, but we

must keep on saying it. We must keep on saying it because Love is the reason for our existence. It is what we all live for, whether we are a hanger-on in Times Square or the most pious member of a community. We are seeking what we think to be the good for us. If we don't know any better, often it is because radio, newspapers, press and pulpit have neglected so to inform us. We love what is presented to us to love, and God is not much presented. It is as hard to see Jesus in the respectable Christian today as in the man on the Bowery. And so "the masses have been lost to the Church."

We who live in this country cannot be as poor as those who go out to other countries. This is so rich a country that luxury has developed at the expense of necessities, and even the destitute partake of the luxury. We are the rich country of the world, like Dives at the feast. We must try hard, we must study to be poor like Lazarus at the gate, who was taken into Abraham's bosom. The Gospel doesn't tell us anything about Lazarus' virtues. He just sat there and let the dogs lick his sores. He would be classed by any social worker of today as a mental case. But again, poverty, and in this case destitution, like hospitality, is so esteemed by God, it is something to be sought after, worked for, the pearl of great price.