

Poverty Without Tears

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*Summary: Reviews several books on voluntary poverty, especially **Poverty** by Fr. Regamey. Elaborates on the joy of, objections to, and purpose of voluntary poverty. Rejects capitalist and communist solutions to real poverty, pointing to decentralization and distributism as the answer. (DDLW #230).*

Poverty is the name of a book issued this spring by Sheed and Ward. It is written by a French Dominican and translated by Rosemary Sheed. It costs \$2.50 but it would be no violation of voluntary poverty to buy it because it can be considered a tool, a means, to work out your salvation.

The Rich and Poor in Christian Tradition, the writings of many centuries, chosen, translated and introduced by Walter Shewring, and published by Burnes Oates and Washbourne in England, in remembrance of Eric Gill who also wrote on Poverty, is another book which also belongs on every lay apostle's shelf. Wherever you turn in this book there are writings that make you groan to think how little is written today concerning the needy and the poor. This book should be a constant companion like the Bible, the missal, for in it are the writings of the Fathers of the Church. In it is the secret of sanctity.

The Poor and Ourselves by Daniel Rops, is another book which should be mentioned here, although it is out of print and hard to find. But in it he talks of the destitute and that wall that exists between the rich, the poor, and the destitute that can only be bridged by love and bread and not by any words.

The Shewring book is one to be quoted from at length and reprinted bit by bit, to make our readers familiar with the writings of the Church, but the Father

Regamey book is now being reviewed, because there is that in it which especially needs to be stressed, a sense of the need for **joy in poverty**. And this is hard to write about.

The subtitle of **Poverty**, is **An essential element in the Christian life**. Without it we are lost. The book is dedicated to Pol Dives, whoever he is, "the apostle to glorious poverty." We wish the author had spoken more, in his foreword, about this man. "I am bold enough," he writes, "to offer these pages to him with the hope that he will use them from his place in heaven to say to the heartbroken without number, the words he said to some of them during his mortal life: 'Do let us stop talking about bleak poverty; accepted poverty is glorious.' He had every right to say so. I do not say that he had touched bottom for with misery there is no bottom. But he had gone so far that his stomach had shrunk and could only take in a very small amount of food. Whenever he saw a man looking sad, he at once asked his name and address: 'I must get him to accept his distress.' I only wish I could find one or two of those he comforted now. But after all he can only have repeated to them the sublime commonplaces of the gospel. The thing was to make them come alive, and he was one man who really did, for to him they had become life. I am certain that he was born only to connect those two words, 'poverty' and 'Glorious'."

But there is not much chance that this book will find its way into the hands of the kind of people we meet up with, who are the destitute and the poor. So let us hope that it will reach and convert a tremendous number of lay apostles who themselves will espouse poverty and live it gloriously and bring a sense of joy to those who are poor. That joy will bring them the energy and power to praise God and begin to **take what they need** of His creatures instead of allowing themselves to be poisoned and perverted and deadened by the non essentials of our industrial America.

This is really a call to a general strike, a revolution, an expropriation of land and tools. It could be dynamite, this book, but it won't be, because the argument will go on as to what is poverty and what destitution, and how can you stop making bombs and tanks and airplane parts and television sets and pepsi-cola and brassieres and chewing gum and ash trays, and wouldn't it throw people out of work, and how can you stop buying all these things too, since that too would throw people out of work? The interminable idiocy of the talk about poverty! As soon as you begin talking of stripping yourself of cigarettes, (and ash trays) chewing gum and pepsi-cola, and (if you can afford it) television sets—then you are called a Jansenist or a Manichaen, negative in your approach, a deviationist heretic of an opponent of the working class as well as of the Church. If you cry aloud for land and home and tools and the good natural life for the poor without which a good supernatural life is impossible, then you are either an escapist and an inhabitant of an ivory tower, or you are a Communist in disguise trying to do away with **property**.

And you are a communist also if you cry out for peace and against increased armaments— against the making of the hydrogen and atom bombs and the paying

of federal taxes for the making of those bombs. We know, who picketed March 15 before the tax offices up on 45th street, because we heard these jibes as we walked to and fro with our signs.

Yes, it is hard to talk of the glory of poverty and the joy of poverty without offending all. "You make things sound too easy, too pleasant," is the accusation leveled at us by our own friends and readers when we talk of the pleasant aspects of living in the slums of the city, or in poverty on the land. Or—"What do you want—that people should stay in this condition?"

We can only reply with Eric Gill, that the aim of the Church is to make the rich poor and the poor holy. "There is always enough for one more," as a Spanish friend said, "Everyone just take a little less." "If everyone would try to be better, then everyone would be better off," Peter Maurin said. "No one would be poor if everyone tried to be the poorest."

It is almost a rule of life, those words of Peter's.

Another accusation is lodged at us—and that is that we see the misery of our life too clearly. We are always looking out of back doors. We see the rats that swarm the tenements, the vermin that crawl on the wall, the stench in the hallways of the poor, the garbage filled gutters, the greasy moisture oozing from the walls of the cold tenements, the dirt and degradation of the human beings who throng every day, rain or shine, in long lines outside our door for soup and bread.

Any statement on our part that we love this life, that we would not be happy elsewhere, that we rejoice in such wretchedness, would lay us open to the charge of perverseness, of masochism, or most damning of all, of sentimentality.

And yet we do dare to say that this rejoicing is a measure of our love. To love is to be happy, and yet to love is also to suffer. To love the poor, one must be one with them. There is always the yearning for union, for the close embrace, even if it leads to depths unutterable. We must show our love for Christ by our love for the poor, so how can there help but be a rejoicing at the chance to show this love.

Fr. Regamey well knows the wretchedness of poverty, the fear of the poor. The Hebrew language, he says is rich in words which express poverty, and one word especially gives the idea of growing weak and wavering, another means to be black, to be in affliction. And yet even in this affliction, cannot there also be joy. "Tho he may smite me yet I will trust in him." "In peace is my bitterness most bitter."

Yet without God, without love,— of course there is nothing worse than this poverty and destitution. Only God gives it meaning.

Fr. Regamey says we do not give enough thought of the poverty of the country and times in which Christ lived. She was an occupied country and her conquerors were harsh. He did not lead a resistance movement but "he talked of the blessedness of poverty, and of tears, of gentleness and peace." That is the tone of the gospel.

And yet Christ ate in homes of the rich and He loved the household at Bethany. Fr. Regamey interprets the words, "One thing is necessary," when our Lord chided Martha for her bustle, as "One dish is enough." Christian families looking towards healthy asceticism know well the one-dish meal. Nevertheless, Christ spoke in harsh tones of the rich and St. James almost rages, Fr. Regamey points out. He is careful to say, however, "wealth is not an evil in itself. The very fact that it is so formidable attests to its value: only what is good can awaken desire. It is only because possession of any kind is a reality that voluntary poverty and poverty in spirit are great and glorious things."

"Would the earth," asks Clement of Alexandria, "produce such riches if they brought death? . . . Their nature is not to command, but to serve us."

But Fr. Regamey does not quote St. Gertrude's dictum in regard to property, "Property, the more common it becomes, the more holy it becomes." And this too needs amplifying when we consider the great holdings of the Church held in common. The voluntary communism of the Church has been the greatest success, so much so that it has meant persecution after persecution to detach her from her belongings on this earth. Persecution has a two-fold aspect, it is deserved as well as undeserved. She would not be pruned except that she is always bearing fruit, and it is to bear more fruit that God allows the pruning that is going on now in Poland, Czechoslovakia and other Communist-dominated countries. Oh, if the Catholic press would only carry the rejoicing that should go with this stripping and martyrdom how it would confound the world. Rejoicing such as that of St. Ignatius who forbade his flock to rescue him, he exulted as did all the martyrs at being found worthy to suffer. "When people do not see my body any more, then I shall be a real disciple of Christ, share in the sufferings of Christ," Fr. Regamey quotes him as saying.

If we were truly poor we would be in a good position to share this rejoicing. But I don't wonder that here in America you don't hear much of it. (How many visiting priests in New York stay at the Waldorf-Astoria? How many accept subsidies from the railroads who have robbed the poor? Maybe they do get special rates, but it is a scandal, in the face of the poverty in the world.) Naturally they are not in a position to cheer on the poor martyrs in Europe and China.

When I spoke recently at Notre Dame a rich young man asked me if many gave up their wealth to the poor and went to live with the poor. I could only reply that I knew of none, and that they would be condemned as fools by the very poor for whom they sacrificed their goods. (Our faith in this way is exercised, to see Christ in His poor, and such exercise should make it strong and with it our love.) We did know one young man who tried to, whose confessor told him to keep his money and administer it for the poor. But Fr. Regamey has this to say:

"Is it more perfect to give up once and for all everything one has, or to keep one's wealth and put it to a charitable use? Tradition has constantly taught that **in itself** the first sacrifice is better. Needless to say, a given soul may merit

far more by the second than the first. It all depends on charity, and on our individual vocation.”

One could write volumes on this subject of poverty, it is so rich, and you learn so by doing. St. Francis says that you do not know what you have not practiced. I know that I can write far more on the subject than I could seventeen years ago when the Catholic Worker started. Of course I learned by my mistakes. For instance, I learned about vocations to poverty, about presumption and pride in poverty, about the extremists who went to the depths in practicing poverty, (if one can reach them) and after a few years left work and settled down to bourgeois and individualistic comfort. It is good to accept one’s limitations, not to race ahead farther than God wants us to go, not to put on sackcloth and stand on the street corners. I do not know who said it, but it was a wise priest—“Do not do any penance that you do not want to do.” In other words, pray for the desire, and even **desire to have the desire** for poverty. Most people do not see the sense of it, it is nonsense to them, because it goes against the senses, exterior and interior.

I cannot think of anything better than this book of Father Regamey’s to build up that desire. It is jammed full of sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph which could be quoted. It is condensed, only 180 pages, but you are carried away on page after page so that it could be used for a meditation book for the coming year.

Once or twice I started to be critical but I found I could not be. Once when Fr. Regamey seemed to be accepting too uncritically Bossuet’s opulence. “He came to feel that if he limited his style of living, he would lose more than half his genius.” We must admit the possibility of detachment in the midst of obvious luxury of house and equipage and table, but just the same, what we need today in the face of materialist America and Russia, is the glorious poverty of St. Francis, of St. John Marie Vianney, of Charles de Foucauld, of St. Benedict Joseph Labre – whose poverty was the destitution of our skid rows and boweries.

Pere Regamey issues a call to change the world, “the world of capitalism and communism” which he equally condemns. “The Christian who is obedient to the spirit of Christ wonders which he hates most, capitalism or communism, so hostile to each other, so fundamentally alike. He holds the same grievance against both, that they have taken from the poor the spirit of poverty, and so cast them into despair. This crime shows most clearly in capitalism; but communism and all other materialist systems which promise paradise to these little ones produce the same results, for to give rise to a hope placed in the things of earth, and a false hope at that, is to give rise to almost a double despair. We certainly have a job to do of restoring earthly justice to the disinherited; the Church has been calling us to it through the mouths of recent Popes; but she keeps her scale of values constant, she always holds the Godward life of the soul highest of all.”

On my last visit to the west coast I saw plenty of poverty and destitution. After

Mass one Sunday there was a communion breakfast in a parish hall (coffee and sweet rolls) and I talked to all the women in the parish of the works of mercy, and I pointed out that we were all poor, having need of each other, and that some could give time, or strength to each other, in addition to the more palpable things like food and clothing and lodging. Doing a week's wash for a sick mother is no small work of mercy! I knew that most of my listeners were poor, but I did not realize how poor until Fr. Dugan took me around afterwards to visit some of them in their homes, those same women I had been talking to. The parish was down by the railroad tracks and is made up of two-story frame tenements like those of New England mill towns. I was horrified at the condition of neglect of the houses, and when I saw inside, I found them worse than New York tenements. Families of seven and ten and twelve children were in two rooms, with no heat, no hot water, one bath in the hall for all, and every one or two room suite rented out to families for fifty dollars a month.

Men built double decker beds for their children but still they have to sleep three or four in a bed. There are 30,000 heads of families unemployed in Oakland. It was real January weather when I was there, cold enough for one's heaviest clothes, as cold as New York. There are many migrant workers settled in Oakland, Stockton, Sacramento and Fresno, glad of anything in the way of shelter to be out of the cold and rain. I visited one family in a tent in Mountain View, one of the children sick with pneumonia, others with colds, and the mother trying to cook and wash clothes on the wood-burning kitchen stove set up in the tent. There are literally tens of thousands of families living this way in one room, and in tents.

Only the other day the New York Times had a front page story of the condition of the migrant farm workers in California, but it is a pattern which is carried out all over the country, in every state, and which goes with and is a necessary part of our collective industrialized pattern of life. De-centralization, Distributism, Christian communal villages, self governing—these are disregarded in a general acceptance of “life as it is.” Meanwhile, the storehouses are bulging with powdered eggs, milk, grain, stores of all kinds, and for the poor there is not even the bread of sorrow; there is neither work nor bread.

On the one hand there are the government plans for subsidies for the farmers, price controls, etc. The dairymen talk of a surplus of milk while the children sicken and die. Farm journals talk of the subsidy. They write of three choices open to them, selling the surplus to a condensary, reducing their herds, or dumping. They ask for a drop in price from 3 to 5 cents; a greater differential between store and home delivered milk; an inconsequential price difference between a quart of milk and a 1 1/2 oz. can of evaporated milk and not the present ten cents; and finally penny milk for school children. They say that a movement towards a control of the industry as a public utility is inevitable. But with the present government control, taxation is up and prices are down and the dairymen complain that they cannot get more than 12 cents a pound for cull cows from the butcher.

It is the same with all crops, raisins, apricots, peaches, poultry, cotton, apples, citrus fruits and wool of that rich state of California. It is the same with water, electric power, with the very soil itself—how to own it, how to control it, how to legislate about it, how to change the pattern as it now is.

There are politicians and lawyers studying all these things, and most of them are working towards bigger and better organization. And in the face of **their** solutions, the Christian solution, the solution proposed in this book, and in the Gospels, is that of **voluntary poverty** and the **works of mercy**. It is **the little way**. It is within the power of all. Everybody can begin here and now even if it means only (!) girding themselves, stripping themselves, and even the doing of it means the battle has begun, the fight is on, and victory is assured.

We have the greatest weapons in the world, greater than any hydrogen or atom bomb, and they are the weapons of poverty and prayer, fasting and alms, the reckless spending of ourselves in God's service and for His poor. Without poverty we will not have learned love, and love, at the end, is the measure by which we shall be judged.