On Poverty

Dorothy Day

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

"The most significant thing about *The Catholic Worker* is poverty, some say." (DDLW #867)

"We must talk about poverty because people love sight of it, can scarcely believe that it exists." (DDLW #633)

"It is hard to write about poverty." (DDLW #633)

Dorothy Day's teachings on poverty are ubiquitous in her writings, were on display in how she lived, and continue to inspire countless people.

Poverty is not a simple notion for Dorothy but encompasses a certain taxonomy or outline:

- Poverty is distinguished from destitution
- There is involuntary and voluntary poverty
- Voluntary poverty may be a natural virtue or may be Holy Poverty

Responsibility for poverty may fall to the State, the Church, or to me. Also, the causes of poverty are numerous.

Dorothy's views on poverty did not go unchallenged, they were judged to be both unrealistic and self-serving.

The articles selected here are a sample of her views. At times she will clearly express her convictions, other times she will simply describe a concrete situation, letting the reader draw the conclusion applicable to their life.

Chapter 2

Poverty and Precarity

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.

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."

Chapter 3

Reflections During Advent-Part Two, The Meaning of Poverty

Ave Maria, December 3, 1966, pp.21-22, 29.

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.

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 Hos-

pitality 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.
