POVERTY AS CURSE, BLESSING AND CHALLENGE

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Last Saturday, the President urged people in this country to put their thermostats down to 65°. One of the leading newspapers took the occasion to point out that such a request would not have meant any sacrifice for an earlier generation of Americans who were used to a less artificially protected environment. Behind this comment there was a clear appeal for a tougher, less complicated and less costly style of living.

This concern for a more austere style of life, a stop to consummerism, a limit to growth ("Enough is Enough" is the title of a recent book) is becoming widespread among the intelligentia and the leadership of the churches throughout the developed world. In a book that has been widely used in The Methodist Church, Dean Freudenberger insists:

> A clean-up of our lifestyles is badly needed, for we casually waste food, energy and other resources that are painfully scarce in most of the world. *(Christian Reponsibility in a Hungry World, p. 89)*

The reasons for this appeal are certainly diverse: There is the "ennui," the sense of meaningless, the lack of zest, the jaded appetite produced by the escalation of consummerism. The law of diminishing returns operates here also—the point comes at which the mere display of a millian new products—not to speak of the deafening sound of propaganda—becomes next to obscene to anybody with a minimum of good taste and sense.

The awareness of the fact that our escalating production and waste are rapidly depleting the material resources of our world is slowly penetrating the consciousness of an increasing number of people.

But there is also an awakening of conscience—the perception of the tragic condition of two thirds of the people in this planet, whose desperate plight and desperate need have been made public in recent years by government organizations, churches, social scientists and even the mass media.

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Thus a call to a new asceticism is sounded. We have responded to this challenge by making the question of new styles of life the basic and unifying subject of our reflection during this week. I must confess at this point that my own reaction to this subject as a person coming from the "Third World" is one of mixed feelings. One the one hand, we feel a great sympathy for the rejection of the crude materialism, the debasing conception of what it means to be human, the cheapening of the relation to neighbor and nature inherent in the consumer's society. And we are moved by the sincerity of the desire to face the problems of the poor of the world that inspires the efforts of many to re-direct human production in order that it may really serve human need there where it is more urgent.

But we have also our concerns. It is so easy—as we say in Spanish —to "turn necessity into a virtue." What necessity? An article in the *Herald Tribune* (July 28th, 1976) had this to say:

> A blueprint for a new economic era published today outlines profound changes in lifestyles that will be needed over the next five years *to put capitalist societies back on the track for sustained economic growth*. . . . .The most significant change is a shift away from the consumer-oriented growth. . .to a model. . .with the emphasis on improving and expanding economic plant and equipment. . .[Then several necessary measures are surveyed, and the article ends:] a broad social consensus will have to be sought to keep the belt-tightening from setting off social conflicts.

When we Christians put all the weight of Biblical compassion and the strength of spiritual determination behind the appeal for a new and more ascetic style of life. are we taking up the cause of the poor or are we supporting the "social consensus" that will "put capitalist societies—the rich—back on the track for sustained economic growth"? (This, certainly, completely aside from the nature of our intention—which I am far from disputing or doubting).

Our ambivalence in respect to this appeal does not mean rejection or indifference. What it means is that a change of life-styles is significant from a Christian point of view, when it is consciously, intelligently and persistently related to the condition and need of the poor and to their struggle for a new life for the whole mankind. My attempt this evening is to begin to spell out our understanding of what is involved in this condition.

I. Poverty As Curse

Christians—particularly the theologians and preachers—have demonstrated an unsurpassed ability to de-fuse the Bible. The Biblical

teaching on wealth and poverty is one of our most magnificent feats of interpretation. The medieval Church found a perfect mechanism: the actual poor were blessed because they would eventually inherit heaven—so they need not worry about their situation. Jesus' call to poverty could be vicariously assumed by a specialized group of people (the monks), whose sacrificial piety would endow the Church with significant wealth—through work and alms—while they remained personally poor and thus were also assured of attaining eternal bliss. And the rich could enjoy their possessions as long as they were prompt and generous in offering charity that, in turn, would also open for them the pearly gates of Paradise. Thus true doctrine was honored and everybody was satisfied. Or should be!

Most of the poor in the Western world eventually left the Church. But this fact has not discouraged the interpreters. Because resourceful scholars soon discovered that the Biblical notions of "wealth" and "poverty" had little or nothing to do with economic facts but were to be understood as "states of mind," "attitudes," "an inner disposition." Thus, the wealthy can keep his wealth as long as he is not "internally attached to it." And let the poor beware, because if he attaches too much importance to material things he is a "rich at heart" and will not enter the Kingdom. It is unfortunate that the rich young ruler did not understand that this is what Jesus really meant, so he went away sadly. And it is really a shame that Jesus did not call him back to explain the metaphorical character of his commandment to "go and sell his property."

You will excuse me if these comments have a tone of irony. But in the face of reality and of the almost uniform exhortation of the Bible it is difficult to see these interpretations otherwise than as a tragic irony—all the more painful when we realize the absolute good faith and intention of most of the interpreters! For, in the Bible, "poverty" is first and foremost a fact—the tragic and debasing condition to which some people are reduced.

> the destitute huddle together, hiding...
> The poor rise early like the wild ass,
> when it scours the wilderness for food;
> but though they work till nightfall,
> their children go hungry.
> Naked and bare they pass the night;
> in the cold they have nothing to cover them.
> They are drenched by rain-storm from the hills
> and hug the rock, their only shelter.

Naked and bare they go about their work,
and hungry they carry the sheaves;
.....
they tread the winepress but themselves go thirsty.
Far from the city, they groan like dying men,
and like wounded men they cry out. (Job 24:4b-12ab)

There is here nothing metaphorical for anybody who has seen the shifts entering the mines in Bolivia or South Africa, the shanty towns perched on the slopes of the hills outside Rio de Janeiro, swept once or twice a year by flooded streams, the swollen bellies of barefoot and naked children in Bolivia or Central Africa, the teaming alleys of Calcutta or the mud-eating campesinos of Northeast Brazil We can now add numbers to Job's pictures. It is two out of each ten babies born dying in India. It is two out of every three persons in this world living below the minimum food standard and thirty million dying each year of starvation—a figure not reached in any war! It is the 300 million attacked by malaria each year—one in every hundred fatally.

If we prefer a modern, scientific description of Job's picture of poverty, here is one:

> The victim of starvation burns up his own body fats, muscles and tissues for fuel. His body quite literally consumes itself and deteriorates rapidly. The kidneys, liver and endocrine system soon cease to function properly. A shortage of carbohydrates, which play a vital role in brain chemistry, affects the mind. Lassitude and confusion set in, so that starvation victims often seem unaware of their plight. The body's defenses drop; disease kills most famine victims before they have time to starve to death... (*Time*, November 11, 1975, p. 68)

This is the picture of 500 million people—more than twice the population of this country—one out of every six human beings on this planet.

There is nothing metaphoric and nothing romantic in this picture. When Gustavo Gutiérrez defines poverty as "the lack of economic goods necessary for a human life *worthy of the name*" (*Theology of Liberation*, p. 288), one should pay attention to the last words. There is a condition—and it is the condition of hundreds of millions—in which human life in any meaningful sense of the word ceases to exist. What is the meaning of being "father" when you have no protection to offer, no food to provide, no wisdom to transmit because your brain

and your heart are damaged and your eyes look without light or tears at the newborn baby lying on the floor? How can you be a shepherd without a herd, or a peasant without land, or a husband confined in the compounds of Johannesburg—three or four hundred miles from your wife, your people, your gods!

The Bible, which prefers to use a "photographic language"—as Gelin puts it—speaks of "the frail one," "the bent one," "the begging one"—this is the poor.

But Job's description is not completed in his portrait of the poor. He has more to say:

> Wicked men move boundary stones
> and carry away flocks and their shepherds.
> In the fields they reap what is not theirs...
> They drive off the orphan's ass,
> and lead away the widow's ox with a rope.
> they snatch the fatherless infant from the breast
> and take the poor man's child in pledge.
> They jostle the poor out of the way;
> the destitute huddle together, hiding from them.
>
> (Job 24:2-4a)

There are also other words to translate Job—and Ecclesiastes, and Amos, and James today. The Brazilian bishops said to the country less than three months ago: "Indians, especially those in the Amazonian region, are losing vast areas of land to ranchers and homesteaders, some of whom were in turn expelled from their land by powerful companies [American individuals and companies bought 150 million acres in 5 years]...If the Indians survive, they are exploited as cheap labor, or they go to the edge of the cities, or, hungry and suffering, they wander along the highways that cut up their reservations."

There is also other language for these facts. The ratio of the price of raw material (that the poor sell) and manufactured goods (that they would have to buy) has changed by 25% in favor of the latter in the fifteen years 1950-1965. The developed countries spend annually two hundred billion dollars in armaments while their aid to underdeveloped countries adds up to no more than 20% of that sum in one of the most "generous" years. Nations which constitute 16% of the population of the world control 75% of the world revenue. Each dollar invested in Latin America between 1950 and 1965 was paid back by four dollars repatriated as profit, without counting reinvestment. An African peasant obtains, in return for one hundred days of

very hard work, a supply of manufactures whose value amounts to barely twenty days of very simple labor of a European skilled worker.

Poverty is neither an accident nor a mystery. More than two hundred years ago ,John Wesley was saying that attributing poverty to laziness or indolence was "wickedly, devilishly false"—and then he went on to offer an analysis of the conditions as he saw and understood them—unemployment, misappropriations of grains and lands, etc. Poverty is not a disconnected fact. It is the inevitable and quite normal result of a total situation determined by the laws, goals and structures of the economic system which we have developed—now on a world scale—for the production and distribution of goods—and consequently for regulating work, human relations, man's use of nature, the goals and values of human life. The poverty of nearly two billion people on this earth's landscape is not a foreign body that has suddenly landed on this planet—it is part and parcel of the way in which we have ourselves cultivated this garden!

In other words—today—as the Roman Catholic bishops put it in their document in Medellin in 1968, "poverty" is "sin"—our sin, the sin of the powerful!

II. Poverty As Blessing

And nevertheless, poverty is also a blessing. The blessing is not the new pharisaical "praise of poverty" that we have begun to intone in the West. "After all, the poor enjoy a peace and a wholeness that we have lost." It is not peace and wholeness—it is malnutrition and the lassitude of death. The blessing of the poor lies in his anger and his hope.

From the depths of deprivation and suffering, Job found the words to describe the plight of the poor and oppressed. But in the power of a faith that clings to God's justice, the vision of suffering awakens the prophetic promise of judgment and deliverance:

> . . .yet God in his strength carries off even the mighty:
> they may rise, but they have no firm hope of life.
> He lulls them into security and confidence;
> but his eyes are fixed on their ways.
> For a moment they rise to the heights, but soon are gone
> *iniquity is snapped like a stick.* (Job 24:22-24a)

Four hundred years later, a woman sings the words of judgment:

> "He has brought down the monarchs from their thrones,
> but the humble have been lifted high.

The hungry he has satisfied with good things,
the rich sent away empty." (Luke 1:52-53)

And his son will announce that the liberating promise of God's universal jubilee "has come true today in your very hearing." Therefore—because God's promise has come and is coming true—"blessed are the poor."

Soon in Judea, and Samaria and "to the ends of the earth" a growing fellowship of slaves, poor artisans, hired soldiers— "the low and contemptible, mere nothings" as one of their teachers said—will find in this message the name and the power of the God of the poor and the downtrodden.

Promise, suffering and hope are inseparable terms. In a section in which he criticizes what he considers an insufficient understanding of the genesis of hope, Rubem Alves has beautifully expressed this relation between suffering and hope.

> Suffering is thus the mother of hope. When it engenders the negation of what is, it prepares the way for a new day. It is historical suffering that keeps hope radically historical, as the overcoming of what today makes man unfree for the future and for life. If this were not so, hope would vanish in the indefiniteness of an abstract future and would be unable to serve man in his task of creating the new tomorrow. (*A Theology of Human Hope,* p. 120)

We should be careful when we speak about this "privileged condition of the poor." We are not dealing here with any subjective moral or spiritual superiority. The poor are not purer or less corruptible or more generous. But *they stand at a different place,* and therefore they have a different perspective. They experience things which we do not experience, and therefore they can see things that we cannot see.

Not all of them can see them. It would be wrong and misleading to believe that the poor—simply because they are poor—can conceive hope and demand liberation. Hugo Assmann has expressed it very precisely:

> The poor are not, in a spontaneous way(privileged as hearers of the summons of God. The poor are also in captivity, not only in the sense of material oppression; they have within themselves ideological oppressions, and, in Latin America, Christian oppression in particular. . . .Not in every context, not under every oppression, can the Word of God be heard. (*Theology in the Americas,* p. 300)

In order that the poor may relate suffering to hope, and oppression to liberation, there must be a word of promise and a call to the Kingdom. What the Bible tells us is that the poor—because God is especially and resolutely the God of the poor—are the privileged addressees of that Word: "I thank you Father, God of Heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things to the learned and powerful, and have revealed them to the little ones." This is the *epistemological privilege of the poor.*

This is happening today throughout the Third World and in many sectors of the developed world. The word of hope has penetrated the paralyzed minds and hearts of the oppressed and kindled in the womb of their suffering a project of liberation: "We shall overcome."

When the poor commit themselves to the active fulfillment of their hope, their very suffering becomes their strength. They can live, and hope, and persist and struggle for decades, or centuries in Vietnam, or Angola, or Brazil. They can rejoice in small victories and press on persistently to greater ones. They can share with each other from their own misery. They can rebuild twice, or ten or a hundred times their huts. They can overcome death because they are one and they can surmount frustration because their eyes are not fixed on subjective self-contemplation but on the future of hope.

But this project of the poor is not in today's world merely a feeling, a shout of protest, a vague movement here and there. It takes more and more the form of a total project which includes an understanding of the systemic conditions of oppression and deprivation, of the objective causes rooted in the present economic and political system. It means also a vision of a new society. And it finds expression in a concrete strategy and action which, if it is not necessarily uniform, has a certain common basis.

III. Poverty As Challenge

It is at this point, I think, that these things have a specific relevance for us. And by "us" I mean Christians in the developed world and those of us in the underdeveloped world which are in a privileged situation. A specific relevance at two interrelated points.

We may be inclined to listen to all that has been said now as "bad news" and, to the extent that we accept it, to receive it as an accusation—perhaps just but nevertheless demoralizing. This is why our reaction is so frequently: "Yes, I know this happens, but I am tired of hearing it—there's nothing I can do. And therefore I don't want to hear any more of this." Or perhaps we take this situation as a mere challenge to good will and benevolence; we explain away

the radical character of the challenge and undertake a few actions at a spontaneous and unreflected level which does not seriously touch the center of our faith and our life.

In either case we would miss, I am convinced, the deeply evangelical meaning of the situation. The struggle of the poor must be for us, in the deepest sense, *good news.* It is the news of *our* liberation. We will not be delivered from our captivity to things, to the meaninglessness of a consumer's society, from our ennui and pessimism, by some individual or collective act of our will, by the adoption of some new habits or the exercise of some old virtues. We can only be delivered by *a transformation of the conditions of our life,* by the creation of a new world and a new day *for all of mankind.* And we should not kid ourselves into believing that the strength and dynamism for such a change lies with us. It is in the hands of the poor of the world. All we can do is to enter into *their* struggle, to make *their* cause our own—to be evangelized by them!

This means, of course, to participate also in their suffering. It may be the visible suffering of persecution, torture, prison, death, alienation from friends and family that so many Christians (and non-Christians) ministers and laymen are undergoing in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America. It may be the inevitable suffering of a change in the conditions of life that the organization of a new society brings with it. It may be—more likely—here the sense of rejection, or moral loneliness, of internal incertitude and ambivalence in our own feelings and attitudes. It is costly. But there is no conversion without the pain of repentance; there is no resurrection without death; there is no new identity without being buried with Christ in the baptism of his death. And nothing short of conversion and a new birth is what is required of us—and offered to us.

I think this is of the essence of the Gospel. When Jesus said that "the poor will always be with you," he was not offering a social prognosis but stating how to honor him. For a short time, a few men and women had the unique opportunity of seeing, honoring and serving God in the one man—Jesus of Nazareth—in whose poverty he had emptied all the richness of his glory and power. Since then, we are invited and commanded to honor God in the many with whom this man chose to identify himself forever—the little ones: the hungry, the sick, the prisoner, the naked! There is no other way to see, to meet, to honor God—not, at least, the God who dwelt in Jesus of Nazareth.

It is in this context that discipline, self-negation, a certain asceticism, a new lifestyle has meaning. This is also what Dean Freudenberger has in mind: not a mere trimming of our budget—so that we

will have more to save and so buttress the system. It is a disciplined style of life that can give us more time, more resources, a clearer perspective to participate actively in the change of public priorities, local and national policies, personal forms of service that relate to the struggle of the poor.

"Christian poverty has meaning" writes Gustavo Gutiérrez in connection with this theme—"only as a commitment of solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer misery and injustice" (p. 300). And Ricoeur completed the thought: "You cannot be with the poor unless you are struggling against poverty."

It is this meaningful and intentional discipline that we meet, for instance, in Saint Francis. It is the same ethos behind Wesley's famous dictum: "Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can"—for him the last injuction conditioned and gave meaning to the first two. It is in line with Paul's conception of the meaning of work: "The thief must give up stealing and instead work hard and honestly with his own hands, *so that he may have something to share with the needy.* (Eph. 4:28)

This conversion to the poor must be both passionate and enlightened. The Christian faith has been indicted as "opium for the people." Perhaps instead of rejecting in indignation or accepting with shame such accusation, we ought to ponder its meaning and message. And this relates to what I call an enlightened conversion to the poor. For a long time in the history of mankind, hunger and poverty have been a constant and unavoidable factor. The resources that were at human command and the knowledge that had developed were as yet unable to cope with the hazards of nature. Religion was able in that situation to alleviate the sufferings of some and to open beyond suffering and death a horizon of hope for many. Why should we be ashamed of it? A wise and compassionate doctor knows that a pain-killing drug will be his last service in a terminal disease. But he knows also that putting to sleep a person who needs to be awake and sensitive to fight disease is criminal.

The Church must discern the signs of the times. At a moment when we have the knowledge and the resources to put an end to the suffering of the larger part of the world's population, a Church that keeps administering a drug or that sacrifices itself with a few patches of new cloth here and there on the outworn garment of our economic and social structure is betraying both the people and the Lord. The solidarity with the poor took at one time the form of comfort and charity. Today it takes the form of support and participation in their struggle for a new world—a new age for all mankind in which the new

possibilities made available by science, technology, human creativity, may be placed at the service of a solidary material and spiritual development in justice and freedom.

This will not be, certainly, the final form that the Christian service to the poor will take. There will be new needs and new tasks beyond the present battle for justice. But we cannot take refuge in them in order to avoid our present task. The words of Jesus, "Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day" is both comfort and warning. God's providence will not fail us tomorrow. Our obedience must not fail him today.

Those of us who have to count ourselves among the rich and privileged have begun to realize the depth of human suffering and the weight of our responsibility. We have begun to be aware of *our* condition as the beneficiaries of our brothers and sisters' exploitation. Jesus does not make things easy for us. He warns us: "It is more difficult for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." But for God this is not impossible. What God can do is not to smuggle us into his Kingdom in spite of our "wealth"—least of all "with our wealth"—but to give us the power and the will to be converted to the poor, to take up their cause and to follow him.

The rich world has begun to feel remorse. This is partly the reason for the search for a new life style. But, as Paul taught us, remorse may lead to death as well as to life. It can only lead to life when it is enacted in disciplined, persistent, passionate, intelligent obedience. If this happens, the poor will have become for us the messengers of Good News—the harbingers of redemption!