

*The scandal of poverty has taken new forms in our time – the contrast is no longer between individuals within one community, some rich and some poor, but between communities, some affluent and (at least in the eyes of almost destitute Africans and Asians) Christian, some poor and non-Christian. On the one hand, the well-to-do Christian of the West has to learn to re-think his giving of alms; on the other, the Church has to prevent herself being identified with the affluent West – too often setting limits to its almsgiving like the rich Roman lady in the letter of St Jerome' quoted below. In facing the accusations of those who are the truly poor of our day, both Church and individual can realize again the radical meaning of poverty in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, both by Christ himself and the interpreters of his message throughout the centuries.*

Christ, who in his Gospel promises only crosses and afflictions, has plainly no need of rich men in his holy Church; their grandeur has nothing in common with his deep abasement, with God's humbling himself even to the cross. We may judge, therefore, that he does not seek the rich for their own sake. For to what use can he put them in his kingdom? To build him grand temples, to enrich his altars with gold and precious stones? Do not suppose that he takes pleasure in such adornments. He accepts them from men's hands as marks of their piety, as the homage of their devotion; but so far from asking for such costliness, is it not manifest that there is nothing more cheap and common than the necessities of his worship? He asks only the simplest water for the regeneration of his children, a little bread and wine for the celebration of his mysteries, spring of all graces. Never has he held himself better served than when sacrificed to him in dungeons, and when faith and humility were the only adornment of his temples. Before, in the ancient law, he required pomp for his service; but in the worship of the New Covenant his way is simplicity, and this is to show the rich of the world that he needs neither them nor their treasure except for the service of the poor.

Christ needs nothing, and Christ needs all: nothing, according to his power; all, according to his compassion. This is the mystery of the New Covenant. The same mercy which once constrained him, Christ the sinless, to bear the burden of every guilt, constrains him now, Christ the blessed, to bear the burden of every wretchedness. For as the most sinless is he who bore most of sin, so the richest is he who bears most of need. Here he is hungry, there thirsty; there he groans in chains, here is racked by diseases; he suffers at once both heat and cold. Poor indeed, and poorest of the poor, for all other poor suffer for themselves only; Christ alone suffers in the universal body of all the poor.

In the Old Dispensation, God was pleased to show himself in splendour and majesty,

and hence it was fit that the Synagogue his bride should have marks of outward greatness; in the New, God hid his infinite power under the form of a servant; hence the Church, his mystical body, must be an image of his lowliness and bear about her the marks of his free abasement.

*from a sermon by Bishop Bossuet 'On the Eminent Dignity of the Poor in the Church'*

A cleric who serves the Church of Christ should first of all know the meaning of his name, and when he has rightly defined it he should seek to be what he is called. For since the Greek word *kleros* means 'portion', clerics are so named because they are the Lord's portion or because the Lord is theirs. But he who is himself the Lord's portion must be such as to possess the Lord and be possessed by him. He who possesses the Lord and says with the prophet, 'The Lord is my portion' (Ps. 83.26), can have nothing other than the Lord: for if he has anything but the Lord, the Lord will not be his portion. . . . So I beseech you do not think that holy orders are only a variety of your former military service: thus do not look for worldly gain when you are fighting in the army of Christ, lest, having more than when you became a cleric you should hear it said of you, 'Their portions shall not profit them' (Jer. 12.13). Let the poor and strangers know your simple table, and in them Christ will be your guest. Avoid like the plague a priest who is also a man of business, one who has risen from poverty to wealth, from obscurity to high office. 'Evil communications corrupt good manners' (I Cor. 15.33). You despise gold; he loves it. You trample money underfoot; he seeks it. You love silence, peace, solitude; he prefers talking and controversy, the markets and the streets and the drug stores. When your ways differ so much, how can there be harmony between you?

*from a letter of St Jerome to Nepotian*

Nowadays you see many women filling their wardrobes with dresses, putting on a new dress every day, and even so they can't cope with the moths. . . . But Christ lies at their doors naked and dying. When they stretch out their hands to the poor, they sound a trumpet. When they invite people to an *agape*, they send out a town-crier. Quite recently I saw the most important lady in Rome – I won't mention her name, for this isn't a satire – standing in the basilica of St Peter's, with her bodyguard of eunuchs in front. She was distributing alms to the poor with her very own hands so as to enhance her reputation for holiness. And she gave each one of them a penny! Just at that moment – as you could easily guess from your experience – an old woman, as full of years as she was rich in rags, ran forward to get another penny. But, when her turn came, she got a blow in the face instead of a coin, and she had to pay with her blood for her terrible crime.

*from a letter of St Jerome to Eustochium*

Possessions are not a property but a loan. For how many owners has every estate had, and how many will it have! . . . This is true of our houses and of all our goods. The only riches we retain and take with us when we die are those of the spirit. . . . Imagine a man with a long train of attendants clearing a way along the streets, wearing silk, riding arrogantly along with his head held high. Do not be overawed, but smile. We laugh when we see children playing at kings, so laugh at his way of carrying on, for it is no better than theirs, nor indeed so pleasant, for there is not the same innocence and simplicity as with children. With them all it means is laughter and pleasure, but he is made ridiculous and contemptible. Glorify God, who has kept you free from this theatrical ostentation.

*from a homily of St John Chrysostom on I Timothy 3*

Poverty is honoured by Christ: let us honour it as well. Let us honour it and not despise or detest it as a state of life, whether it be our own or that of our brethren. We must honour it as a merit, as a free disposition of the soul, liberating the soul from a disordered attachment to worldly goods and leading it towards goods that are spiritual and towards the exercise of charity and love. Poverty nowadays arouses much serious concern. Men are studying its problems and are seeking to remedy them. But to give honour to poverty means more than to mend it. . . . The modern concern for alleviating poverty is already a great and praiseworthy thing, a Christian thing indeed. But a complete vision of human life in the light of Christ sees more in a poor person than someone in need. It sees a brother of mysterious dignity, a dignity which entitles him to be respected, to be treated with consideration and with more than mere sympathy. The face of the suffering Christ glows through the very rags of the poor.

*from a sermon on Christmas Day, 1959, by Cardinal Montini, afterwards Pope Paul VI*

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