

## THE STRUCTURE OF RELIGIOUS POVERTY

BY

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THE love of Lady Poverty is not a simple thing, a plain virtue, but a complexus of spiritual qualities which extend to the whole of the spiritual life, since poverty is one of the fundamental means of perfection, and therefore something which involves the practice of perfection. In order to be able to envisage it properly and grasp its function, it is important to distinguish clearly the virtues and gifts of the Holy Ghost which play an immediate part in the practice of holy poverty, and make up its spirit. Poverty deals with man's relationship to material things, and their perfect use, or non-use. The virtues concerned are: firstly, on the human supernatural level, liberality and magnificence; then, on the divine level, the gift of fear of the Lord; further, in relation to God, these are perfected by humility and hope, and in relation to man by the reciprocal relations of almsgiving and gratitude. Lastly the apostolic poverty of the gospel, summed up by St Jerome in the phrase *Nudus nudum Christum sequere*, 'Naked follow the naked Christ', and the institution of religious poverty sum up this complexus of spiritual qualities as perfection and as means to perfection.

## LIBERALITY AND MAGNIFICENCE

Although the motives and driving force of evangelical poverty come from beyond the bounds of material things, in itself it is fundamentally a virtue which determines the right and the perfect attitude to material things, and makes man and man's action good in relation to them. This virtue is liberality, completed in its larger aspects by magnificence. The desire to have a virtue called poverty arises in part from a confusion of poverty with its motives, and in part from a misunderstanding of the nature of liberality, which is primarily a perfection of soul, and only secondarily a use of things, and finds its highest realisation when things are abandoned as far as this world allows. The word expresses better than poverty the nature of this perfection of soul, a freedom, a readiness to use up and get rid of things for a good purpose; poverty

of spirit better expresses the motives which lead to perfect liberality and magnificence. But unless the normal everyday perfection in the use of material things is kept at its basis, poverty as an idea can easily call into the vices of avarice or prodigality, and lose touch with reality.

Liberality is a disposition of the will which restrains the passions of love and desire of material goods, and of pleasure and pain in their possession and loss. It thus involves a whole right attitude of mind and will, and consequently also of feelings, towards things, and it results in a proper use of things. It is the virtue which poverty of spirit must use all the time. Material goods are for use; the proper attitude to them is to use them for a purpose, especially in giving them to others. Perfect liberality is ready to give all; religious poverty vowed to God does give all, and detaches mind and feelings radically from things, and is thus an outward expression of perfect liberality, and tends to develop that virtue gradually, by compelling the regular practice of it in a high degree of perfection. The religious must use his vow of poverty to learn to love, desire, enjoy, regret and use things only as means, without attachment to them as ends in themselves, so as to attain perfect liberty with regards to things and to use them as a master.

The chief vice opposed to liberality, and therefore to religious poverty, is that of avarice: the attachment to things for their own sakes, and so an improper love and desire of them, a wrong joy and sadness about them, and a defective use of them; an unwillingness to give, an unreadiness to see things consumed in good use, an avarice in acquiring goods. It is a capital sin, one of the fundamental tendencies of human nature, for there seems to lie happiness in the security of possession and the self-sufficiency it gives. Religious poverty seeks a different self-sufficiency; one based on trust in God's providence with a capacity to stand alone, being ready to do without all but God. But it must always be on its guard against the recurring tendency to hold on to things for themselves, instead of regarding them as things to be used. The opposite vice of prodigality is not so dangerous; it is the lack of a proper carefulness about things so that they can be put to a good use. The religious, regarding all as God's property

and that of the poor, will be careful not to waste; yet will save so as to be able to spend more effectively, not just for saving's sake.

Magnificence completes the virtue of liberality: the large use of material goods to carry out big and difficult plans. The religious must have this virtue, since the abandonment of all goods to do great work for God, whether contemplative or active, is a supreme work of magnificence; those engaged in active works will continually be called upon to spend goods (not indeed their own) on a magnificent scale for the glory of God and the common good; while the contemplative's use of such goods as he needs must also be large in view of the great end which they serve. They must be great-minded in their use of everything and never niggardly, never afraid to see goods used up on a large scale, nor yet thriftless, wasting large sums on small projects. Even the work of the most humble individual religious is always part of some great work for God and souls, and requires to be done in a large-hearted and generous way to fit into the whole.

#### THE GIFT OF FEAR AND THE BEATITUDE OF POVERTY

Perfect poverty of spirit is an effect of the Gift of Fear, since it goes beyond the normal human ideal of the perfect use of things and aims at total abandonment, and therefore total dependence upon God for all. Its source is therefore a sense of reverence for God as the fatherly source of all good, and the abandonment of all glorying in other good things, in order to cling to God in everything and to take all from his fatherly hands. The poor in the Scriptures are especially those who depend upon God for all, and such is the aim of religious poverty. It implies a life of adoration of God's holy will, other things being taken and used only in dependence on his will and without any attachment. But, absolutely speaking, the Gift of Fear tends to absolute denudation of all created goods, so as to possess God alone. It is only tempered by the exigencies of the ends which God wills us to pursue. Desire is wholly for God and his riches; its reward is the kingdom of heaven, the possession of God's riches. It raises liberality and magnificence to a divine level: the use of material things in a godlike way, without any need for them or attachment to

them, since all need and all attachment are satisfied in God. They become far removed from a spirit which is always counting things, a concealed avarice, and are ready to use much or little just as God wills. Creatures are appreciated as God appreciates them; man is freed to enjoy creatures in a way which he cannot do so long as he has not abandoned them. A joy is born in the common goods of nature, instead of in personal possessions, and so a sense of kinship with all men and all natural things is bred. A new sense of the brotherhood of men and the fatherhood of God comes into being; for the poor depend on God and fellow men and nature for all their needs, and are ready both to give and to receive freely and joyfully. It is complacency in riches owned that avoids suffering, casts it on to others, refuses to suffer and to love.

#### HUMILITY AND HOPE

Magnificent liberality, driven by the Gift of Fear to refusal to seek good outside God and a perpetual tendency to strip clean of all but God, holds a precarious balance between pride arising from its great ideal and despair owing to the difficulties of its attainment: it needs the virtues of humility and hope to be perfectly itself. Humility enlarges the motives for evangelical poverty by considering the nothingness and sinfulness of man and his utter dependence upon God, and so corrects any tendency to act proudly from man's own strength, and to attribute things to self. Humility springs from the reverence for God given by the Gift of Fear, and is a knowledge of what we are, and a restraint from being above ourselves.

It proclaims that all material things are received from God, and demands sincerity of conduct in the light of this conviction, so that things are only used as entrusted to us by God. We have no claim on anything at all: absolute poverty is the standard; things are only for our use. Humility goes further: the sinfulness of man is known, and how creatures are a snare and a danger to the unworthy self. Things are to be used in fear and trembling, and reduced to a minimum. The sinful soul is judged worthy of punishment, and there will be joy in having less than is necessary as a penalty for its sin and a medicine for its weakness. However great the works undertaken, all will be done in complete dependence upon God,

uniting perfect magnificence with perfect humility. Religious poverty thus springs from humility and tends to develop humility and this virtue brings us close to God's absoluteness and to our own nothingness, and excludes the intrusion of any creature into this pure dependence.

The restraint of humility is balanced by the encouragement of hope. The magnificent aim of seeing God's kingdom first supposes that lesser things will be provided. The resources, material, physical and mental, will be given. But all this is in the supposition that God's kingdom is being sought first. In proportion to the spirituality of the work done will be the hope in God's providence; but in so far as material things are sought, the promise is less sure. Indeed, where the work is primarily spiritual it will be undertaken in direct dependence upon God's providence. The normal means of raising funds will often be excluded deliberately in the interests of the spirituality of the work, which might be compromised by seeking the approval of the world, by becoming involved in excessive material cares, or by being dependent upon money and not upon God. Religious poverty builds on the providence of God and not on the securities of this world. It acts in this way both in the big undertakings of a community and in the daily small needs of the individual, for though a community may enjoy some property and security, to the individuals all is part of God's providence and by way of alms.

#### ALMSGIVING AND GRATITUDE

The life of religious poverty in relation to others is dominated by the act of charity which is called almsgiving, and the virtue of gratitude which is the response to it.

On the one hand the good works of religious are performed by way of alms: the giving to one in need, out of compassion, for God. What is given is primarily a spiritual work of mercy, and any material goods or expenses involved are given together with the spiritual gift. In this way all use of material things by religious subserves the spiritual good of others, and so has the character of an alms. Those who receive spiritual or temporal benefits from religious are indeed bound by way of friendly justice to recompense the religious, and in this sense the material things received by them are earned; but it is not

a relationship of strict justice, since it is not a contract which can be enforced, but a debt of fairness in friendship, in so far as when one does a service to another it is only fair that the other should make the best possible return. From the point of view of the religious, again, the work is not done for the sake of the temporal reward, and this is only a means necessary in order to be able to continue to give freely and more abundantly. The mendicant ideal presses this freedom of giving and receiving still further, by requiring the labourer who earns his hire by spiritual good deeds to ask that wage as a free gift only, and renounce even his right in friendly justice. The virtue of liberality here recedes behind charity: liberality (or the spirit of poverty) is the necessary preparation and condition giving freedom in relation to worldly goods, which makes possible the perfection of charity which expresses itself in a life of total almsgiving.

The response to the almsgiving of others is the virtue of gratitude: this makes recompense to a benefactor by respect, praise, remembrance, prayer, comfort, advice, care for spiritual welfare, and if necessary by material aid also. Since alms are received as a gift of charity, not of justice, the recompense is to be measured by charity and not by justice. Now love has this peculiarity: the more it is given, the more it is due. Hence the obligation of gratitude is endless: it means a constant and ever growing relationship of charity and friendship in God with the benefactor.

The spirit of poverty thus opens up the path to perfect love of the neighbour. Detachment from material goods, readiness to expend them liberally and magnificently, destroys the segregating effect of personal possession, and opens the heart to the needs and sufferings of others. On the other hand, dependence on the free giving of others for material needs is a means of increasing in humility, detachment and freedom from the ties of worldly goods, and makes the whole world kin.

#### NUDUS NUDUM CHRISTUM SEQUERE

St Jerome crystallised poverty in a phrase which has ever since rung down the ages: 'Naked follow the naked Christ. Hard, lofty, difficult; but the prizes are great.'

The poverty of our Lord in the gospels, the poverty pre-

scribed to the apostles in the ministry, the poverty shown in the Acts of the apostles, have made concrete and personal the attraction of evangelical poverty, especially for those engaged in apostolic works. They follow Christ stripped of all: in his freedom to be without things; in his liberty to use and enjoy things in simplicity as gifts of his Father; in his joy in natural things and fellowship with them; in his friendship with the poor; in his union with God, renunciation of his own will and devotion to his Father's will; in his humility, sorrow for sin, reparation; in his having nothing and possessing all things. Here are great prizes of naked following of the naked Christ.

The apostle must be poor: to be able to give God a total and disinterested service, to reveal the transcendent nature of the kingdom, the pearl for which all is sold; to show the absolute and paternal sovereignty of God, to whom all belongs, from whom all is received, who is the poor's only security; to recognise the poor as the preferred of God, to be able to make contact with them and understand their spiritual, mental and material life, so as to be able to win them.

#### RELIGIOUS POVERTY

The systematised poverty of religious orders attempts to secure the benefits of evangelical poverty while retaining some stability and organisation of religious life. The removal of care about material things is necessary for the perfection of the spiritual life, not merely as an escape from worries and cares which would impede it, but from the very nature of perfection which means total giving of self to God. Religious poverty accomplishes this by a complete renunciation of at least the *use* of goods: this is common to all forms of the vow. The religious has the use of nothing as his own, takes all from God, uses all in complete dependence on God. If rightly used, all the virtues spoken of must be practised in a high degree of perfection in all the events of daily life. The essential is that personal property, if not altogether renounced, can never be in the use of its possessor, but must be ceded to others as to use and usufruct; so that every material thing in the use of a religious is completely in the hands of the superiors, and the individual has a right to precisely nothing with which he is in contact. The religious has a right to nothing: the use of things

must be determined exclusively by what is necessary to do God's will. This is not to be measured by a merely utilitarian standard, but by the absolute demands of God's transcendence, our nothingness, and the nakedness of Christ. Hence the religious life, a life of tending towards perfection, provides the benefits of evangelical poverty in a form in which both the highest perfection of the spirit of poverty is possible, and in which the imperfect are able to learn poverty of spirit gradually, by being compelled, so long as they live the religious life, to make acts of the virtues which compose it, acts which normally suppose and develop the interior virtues themselves.



## CARTHUSIAN ASCETICISM<sup>1</sup>

BY

A CARTHUSIAN

*I am come so that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.*—John 10, 10.

**I**F you were to ask each of us, 'Are you willing to die to yourselves?' we should all reply sincerely, 'Yes; we are willing. . . .' But it is not enough to say or even to think so, for it is possible to deceive ourselves. Dying to ourselves is no theoretical problem composed of abstract thoughts and reasonings; nor does it consist in making resolutions for the morrow which is always later. . . . It means putting them into practice. To die to ourselves *externally* is to detach ourselves from all ties, whatever they may be; but this detachment must be complete, whole, irrevocable, and there must be no looking back. This is going a long way. . . .

Because we are Christians we should be detached from all exterior things. Our vows secure this detachment; they are made to free us from all slavery, to break the ties by which sin has bound us. But we must beware, for we bring with us into the monastery our own nature, with all the tendencies that sin has infused into it. This nature sometimes attempts to take its revenge without our realising it, to recover for itself what

<sup>1</sup> Translated from *La Vie Spirituelle*, October 1950. by Benedicta Burns.