

Poverty Is to Care And Not to Care

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Summary: Reflects on the struggle to achieve voluntary poverty in small steps and for a lifetime. Notes that even honorable work involves taxes used for war. Condemns advertising for increasing desires often leading people to poverty. (DDLW #647).

Last May I wrote an article on Poverty and Precarity, using the latter word of Fr. Crenier who spoke of the need of religious orders to embrace precarity. That article was translated and reprinted in Giordani's *La Via* in Italy. We could write for the next twenty years, as we have been writing for the past twenty, of poverty and its joys and sorrows, and still not clarify all that is meant by it. St. Francis was the little poor man and none was more joyful than he. But he began with fear and trembling, with tears, hiding out in a cave from his irate father, expropriating some of his goods (which he considered his inheritance) in order to repair a church and rectory where he meant to live. It was only later, that he came to love Lady Poverty. He took it little by little; it seemed to grow on him. Perhaps kissing the leper was one great step that freed him from attachment to worldly goods, to his fastidiousness, or fear of disease.

Sometimes it takes but one step. We would like to think so. And yet the older I get the more I see that life is made up of many steps, and they are very small affairs, not giant strides. They may loom large in our consciousness, they may look big, but they are but boulders on the way that we have overcome. I suddenly remembered last month that I had kissed a leper, not once but twice, consciously, and I cannot say I am much the better for it. My progress has been no swifter. Once it was on the steps of Precious Blood church early one morning. A woman with cancer of the face was begging (beggars are only allowed in slums) and when I gave her money (no sacrifice on my part but merely an alms which someone had given me) she tried to kiss my hand. The only thing I could do was kiss her dirty old face with the gaping hole in it where an eye and a nose had been. It sounds like something but it was not. One gets used to ugliness so quickly. What one averts one's eyes from one day, can easily be borne the next.

Another time I was putting out a drunken prostitute with a huge toothless rouged mouth, a nightmare of a mouth. She had been raising a disturbance in the house. I had been remembering how St. Therese, whose feast is also this month, said that when you had to say no, when you had to refuse anyone anything, you could at least do it so that they went away a bit happier. I had to deny her a bed but when that woman asked me to kiss her, I did, and it was a loathsome thing, the way she did it. It was scarcely a human normal mark of affection.

One suffers these things and forgets them.

But the daily, hourly, minutely, giving up of one's own will and possessions, which means poverty, is a hard, hard thing, and I don't think it ever gets any easier.

You, can strip your self, and you can be stripped, as Koestler wrote in his story of a French concentration camp, but still you are going to reach out like an octopus and seek your own. Your comfort, your ease, your refreshment, and it may mean books, and music, the interior senses being gratified, or it may mean food and drink. One giving up is no easier than the other. Cups of coffee, cigarets, jealousy of time etc.

Personal Affair

These are the things we all know about, or should know about. It is a personal affair, such poverty, for the celibate, willing or unwilling.

How does property fit in, people ask. It was Eric Gill who said that property is proper to man. And St. Thomas Aquinas said that a certain amount of goods is necessary to lead a good life. The recent popes wrote at length about justice rather than charity, that should be sought for the worker. Unions are still fighting for wages and hours, and it is a futile fight with the price of living going up steadily. They are fighting for partial gains and every strike means sacrifice to make them, and still the situation in the long run is not bettered. There may be talk of better standards of living, every worker with his car, and owning his own home, but still this comfort depends on a wage, a boss, on war. Our whole modern economy is based on preparation for war and that is one of the great modern arguments for poverty. If the comfort one has gained has resulted in the death of thousands in Korea and other parts of the world, then that comfort will have to be atoned for. The argument now is that there is no civilian population, that all are involved in the war (misnamed defense) effort. If you work in a textile mill making cloth, or in a factory making dungarees or blankets, it is still tied up with war. If one raises food or irrigates to raise food, one may be feeding troops or liberating others to serve as troops. If you ride a bus you are paying taxes. Whatever you buy is taxed so you are supporting the state in the war which is "the health of the state."

Renting

When the catholic Worker started back in 1933, it was possible to rent all the apartments one wanted. One could always have a home in the old law tenements which after all had water and toilets and could be heated very satisfactorily with gas or pot bellied stoves. Such heat was more satisfactory very often than the steam heat which went off in the night, and which stayed on during warm spring of fall days. Housing reform has meant that thousands of such buildings have been closed down, not repaired and refitted for occupancy, and all the new housing has not sufficed to take care of the people. It is not only that our municipal lodging houses are full of families, as well as single men, unemployable and migrant workers; other old law tenements are overcrowded as they never were before with a tremendous influx of Puerto Ricans and all the other poor who have not been able to pay the new rents charged.

There is no knowing how many stay in these old tenements, in one apartment. There is not the strict supervision of one's company and relatives that there is in the housing projects.

The Enslaved

We had no trouble renting even with five children in the family. Now it is quite another story. It is all but impossible, and then only with the help of the law, to rent an apartment or house for a family with children. Most of the young families in the Catholic Worker movement have had to buy, seeking a down payment from loans, from the G.I. bill of rights, from family friends, from relatives, or in some cases, saving it with grim self denial, cutting out every superfluity until a necessary down payment has been saved. Steady work is presupposed of course, a city job, civil service, the kind of a job that will make a bank feel sure of the home owner. The fact is, we are not a nation of home owners. We are a nation of people owning debts and mortgages, and so enslaved by this installment buying that we do indeed live in poverty and precarity.

The only way to live in any security is to live so close to the bottom that when you fall you do not have far to drop, you do not have much to lose.

Honorable Occupation

The argument may go this way, but we still can choose what seems to us the most honorable occupations, which have to do with human needs. We can choose the kind of work most necessary to do, and if possible where there is no withholding tax for war. Ammon Hennacy in working by the day, at hard farm labor, has not paid income tax for years. One can so cut down one's standard of living that no income tax is required; families with many children pay no income tax. One can protest in many ways this contribution to the atom and hydrogen bomb. If one owns property the government then can take a lien on it. If one has money in the bank, the government can confiscate it. So truly such protest as this calls for the most profound poverty and a voluntary doing without property.

Voluntary Poverty

All this is by way of saying that poverty is no longer voluntary, no longer a counsel, but something which is laid upon us by necessity. Even in the natural order, it is more profitable to be poor, to deny oneself, to do without the luxuries in order to have the necessities of food, clothing and shelter. The merchant, counting his profit in pennies, the millionaire with his efficiency experts, have learned how to amass wealth. Following their example, and profiting by the war boom, there is no necessity for anyone, so they say, nowadays, to be poor. Given health of mind and body, of course.

But the fact remains that every house of hospitality we have is full. There is the breadline standing outside 223 Chrystie St. every day twice a day, two or three hundred strong. Families write us pitifully for help. This is not poverty, this is destitution.

In front of me as I write is Fritz Eichenberg's picture of St. Vincent de Paul. He has a chubby child in his arms and a thin pale child is clinging to him. Yes, the poor we are always going to have with us, our Lord told us that, and there will always be a need for our sharing, for stripping ourselves to help others. It always will be a life-time job.

So-Many-Poor

But I am sure that God did not intend that there be so many poor. The class structure is of our making and our consent, not His. It is the way we have arranged it, and it is up to us to change it. So we are urging revolutionary change.

How much land does a man need? Some of us only need the six feet to hold us when we die. Some of us need half an acre and would have a hard time tilling that. Some need 3 acres and a cow. We need shelter and we need work and our days are spent in earning them. It should not be so grim a proposition to raise the funds to help them. Every other type of building is going on in the country and the family still lacks land and home. Peter Grace once said to us, "If you paid the peons in South America more than seventy-five cents a day, they'd only work a couple of days a week, only for enough to live on." I have heard this statement many times from other employers, whether they too were employed by a corporation, or whether they were responsible as employers.

Deadly Sin

There have been many sins against the poor which cry out to high heaven for vengeance. The one listed as one of the seven deadly sins, is depriving the laborer of his hire. There is another one, that is, instilling in him the paltry desires to satisfy that for which he must sell his liberty and his honor. Not that we are not all guilty of concupiscence but newspapers, radios, television, and battalions of advertising men (woe to that generation) deliberately stimulate his desires, the satisfaction of which means the degradation of the family.

Providence

Because of these factors of modern life, the only way we can write about poverty is in terms of ourselves, our own personal responsibility. The message we have been given is the Cross, Christ and Him crucified. "The apostle must bring faith in providence back into the world," Fr. Regamy writes. "He must show what Christianity asks of us. . . I would betray Christianity if I did not repeat his law. . . trying to get to the depths of men's hearts, to its most secret place where the most depraved man is as innocent as a child." We believe this but on the other hand we have seen the depths of the faithlessness and stubbornness of the human soul, we are surrounded by sin and failure, and it is a mark of our Faith in Christ and our brother to believe this. We must continue to write, to appeal and to beg for help for our work and for an increase in a love of poverty which goes with love of our brothers.