

International A + JP Conference SIM July 2024

Reflection – Poverty

“Let us refer all good to the Lord, God Almighty and Most High, acknowledge that every good is His, and thank Him, from whom all good comes, for everything. . . To Him all good belongs, He who alone is good.”

Francis, *Earlier Rule*, 17.17-18.

“O holy poverty, God promises the kingdom of heaven . . . to those who possess and desire you! O God-centered poverty, whom the Lord Jesus Christ, . . . Who rules heaven and earth, Who spoke and all things were made, condescended to embrace before all else! . . .

If so great and good a Lord, then, on coming into the Virgin’s womb, chose to appear despised, needy, and poor in this world, so that people who were in utter poverty, want, and absolute need of heavenly nourishment might become rich in him by possessing the kingdom of heaven, be very joyful and glad! . . .

What a great and praiseworthy exchange: to leave the things of time for those of eternity, to choose the things of heaven for the goods of earth!”

Clare, *First Letter to Agnes of Prague*, 16, 17, 19-21, 30.

I chose these two quotations to discuss the Franciscan vision of poverty because that vision presents a contrast to what most of us experience in our daily life in the “here and now” world. For Franciscan poverty -- which is the same poverty spoke of in the Gospels --opens up for us an alternate world: the “new creation” of the promised Reign of God. When we look carefully at the meaning of “world” in the Scriptures, we discover that term is highly polyvalent. The world that God created through the Word includes not only our wonderful, limitless natural universe but human beings, whom God so loved as to become one of us in the Word made flesh. This world sprang forth – and at this very moment is springing forth - from the creative hand of God who declares it “very good.” This is the world for which Francis gives thanks and praise!

Saint Bonaventure lyrically praises Francis' vision: "His attitude towards creation was simple and direct, as simple as the gaze of a dove; as he considered the universe in his pure, spiritual vision, he referred every created thing to the Creator of all. He saw God in everything, and loved and praised Him in all creation. By God's generosity and goodness, he possessed God in everything and everything in God. The realization that everything comes from the same source made him call all created things - no matter how insignificant - his brothers and sisters, because they had the same origins as he." (*Legenda Minor*).

But it is important to recognize that this mystical theophany that Bonaventure describes was achieved by Francis only at the end of his life, after a long and painful struggle. For this originally good Creation has been shaped by humanity throughout history into the "world" in another sense – one fashioned, not according to God's original divine plan into a community of justice and love, but according to the Kingdom of Satan, a destructive regime of greed, self-seeking pleasure and power, hatred and violence. This world is the one that confronts us each day when we pick up the daily newspaper or open the Internet! This is the "world" of which St John warns: "Do not love the world or the things of the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world, for all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desires are passing away!" (1 Jn 2: 15-17).

The good news that we Christians take comfort in each day is that the creative Word of God has taken human flesh in the person of Jesus to proclaim anew the vision of the peaceable Kingdom of God's Reign and show us humans a path to begin to bring it to reality. This is the good news that our sister Clare rejoices in today!

Jesus chose a pattern of life deliberately opposed to the false values of the Reign of Evil and, furthermore, through his Spirit has empowered us to follow his example of self-giving rather than self-seeking. Clare rejoices that she has seen the paradoxical path to fullness of life in the Kingdom Jesus promises – the path Francis also took to achieve his vision. It is the path to which Paul urges us: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5-8).

These two diametrically opposed projects of life are manifest in our attitude toward possessions. This is perhaps most evident in Luke's Gospel: "Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God. . . But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation'" (Lk 6:20, 24). Jesus' words here present a stark contrast to most of the Old Testament, where piety and prosperity are generally linked. Material rewards were the expected consequences of keeping God's law. Cf. Dt. 6:3, 11:13ff., Ps. 112: "Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandments. . . Wealth and riches are in their houses!" The righteous could expect strong sons, beautiful daughters, and full granaries. We still hear this 'gospel of success' repeated today by some Protestant 'evangelical' preachers.

But the prophets began to challenge the idea that worldly success was an inevitable sign of God's favor: the wealthy and powerful were often those people most hard of heart in heeding their message. But it was not until after the Exile that Judaism begins to develop a sense that material prosperity does not necessarily go with piety; maybe it is even typical that the person who is devoted to the law of God will find themselves among the "little ones" of this world. Indeed, among some of these *anawim* a conviction emerged that the righteous person could not expect to prosper in this world, especially as they came to experience that this present time is under the dominion of Satan. It is only in a coming age, when God establishes his Reign, when his servants will be rewarded.

Jesus' preaching - as seen in the Beatitude presented in Luke above - expresses the conviction that we must choose where we wish to have our fulfillment: in the "here and now" or in the coming Reign of God. The parable of the wealthy man and the poor Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) states there will be a reversal of fates in the age to come: "remember that during your lifetime, you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things: but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony." Mary herself rejoices in God's judgement: "He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Lk 1:53). Why? Being rich seems to make people resistant to any transformation of life. It makes us content to maintain the status quo, to do things our own way, rather than yearn for the good things God is offering. That is wealth's most insidious effect. If you are wealthy, things are good as they are now. Change becomes a threat rather than an opportunity to enjoy a different kind of life.

It seems unlikely we will be permitted to dine at both banquets. Why is this the case? Looking at Jesus in terms of the great values of the Jewish Scriptures, we see him preaching grateful acceptance of God's good creation, compassion toward the poor and the oppressed, and prophetic resistance toward injustice. From this perspective, his primary concern when he spoke of material goods would be to stress how the good things we possess might help us fulfill what he calls the second great commandment: reaching out to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mt 22:39). Jesus certainly does this. But he was equally concerned with the role of material possessions for the practice of the "greatest and first commandment" (Mt 22:38), the absolute and total love of God above all things. Jesus was acutely aware of the potential of wealth to pervert the human heart and so to subvert the relationship of a person to God. This is stated most clearly in the principle: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon" (Lk. 16:13). The term "Mammon" personifies wealth as a god: money is not just a morally neutral means for accomplishing human goals that might be evil or good. Mammon is God's competitor for the human heart. How far can we achieve great worldly success without compromising our devotion to God? (We think here of Francis's violent reaction against money!).

Jesus' encounter with a rich ruler (Lk 18:18-30) illustrates this competition. This man seems at first not to have let his riches displace his desire for God. He begins by asking Jesus, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" In answer, Jesus summarizes the commandments concerning the love of neighbor. "I have kept all these since my youth," replies the ruler, and Jesus accepts him at his word. Even so, Jesus sees the inner corrupting effect that wealth is working on this man. So he offers him a way to end its pernicious influence. "There is one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." A person whose deepest desire is for God surely would leap at the invitation to daily, personal intimacy with God's Son. But it is too late for the rich ruler — his love of wealth already exceeds his love for God. "He became sad, for he was very rich." Jesus recognizes the symptoms and says, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

This is such a radical challenge to traditional Jewish teaching on fidelity to God and material blessings that the disciples ask: “Then who can be saved?” (Lk 18:26-27). “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God,” Jesus says. Something like a divine miracle is required to break the hold of money on the heart of its owner. For wealth is not what we own; it is something that owns us. People do not usually become rich by accident. The commitment of time and effort expended to make a lot of money, the insensitivity to other’s needs if one concentrates on pursuing financial gains, and the almost inevitable injustice involved in acquiring such wealth, are an absorbing preoccupation that almost always, Jesus implies, takes God’s place in a person’s life.

Elsewhere in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus suggests how such a miracle might take place. “I tell you, make friends for yourselves with the Mammon of wickedness so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal dwellings” (Lk 16:9). Here we see that worldly wealth – dangerous as it is – might still serve the God’s Kingdom, when people reach out to share that wealth with their lesser sisters and brothers, helping to create a community where all belong. Later Jewish tradition had already come to the insight that almsgiving effects reconciliation and forgiveness: “It is better to give alms than to lay up gold. For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin” (Tb 12:9). And so Jesus tells us: “Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven” (Lk 12: 33). As we have seen, he had already given similar advice to the rich ruler.

We see this teaching in action in Luke’s portrayal of the early Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles. People sold their property and handed it over for distribution (Acts 2:44-47, 4:32-35) so that “there was not a needy person among them.” Here the Old Testament emphasis on justice is now subsumed in an ideal of the new People of God. Israel was a community of blood and therefore caring for all its members was an evident obligation in justice. The new Christian community was not bound together in any natural way – especially as they quickly incorporated ‘unclean’ Gentiles into their body. It was only their faith in Jesus, crucified, risen, and present in their midst, that bound them together. No one was to be excluded or marginalized or considered a stranger. This new People of God would achieve equality only if all its members willingly humbled themselves. Jesus’ disciples were to seek the “lowest place” (Lk 14:10), seeking to be “servants of all,” following Jesus’ own example (cf. Lk 22: 24-27).

The early Church was not a large organization – some scholars estimate that by the year 100 there were perhaps 8 to 10 thousand Christians in the world, comprising a network of local household churches where people came to know each other personally as brothers and sisters. But even as local congregations grew larger, there always remained a conviction that prosperous members in the Body of Christ were bound to share their wealth with its needy members. The insight of the Roman prophet Hermas in the early 1st Century would be repeated for decades: “The salvation of the rich is the prayers of the poor.” Those rich Christians who had ample resources were convinced they would gain access to God’s Kingdom mainly through the thankful prayers of their friends in Christ who were recipients of their generosity.

From your knowledge of the story of Francis and Clare I hope this reflection has helped you understand how the first Franciscan men and women viewed their way of life as a recovery of radical Gospel values. Some of those values had become eclipsed within the Church due to massive cultural and sociological changes that occurred in the Fourth Century. With Constantine, the Church began a transformation from a persecuted sect of true believers who viewed themselves as an alternative to the larger ‘world’ to the official established religion of society itself. As the values of that larger world – especially the desire for status, pleasure, and material gain – began to infiltrate even the leadership of the Church, zealous men and women protested, literally ‘dropping out’ of society, withdrawing from life in the world (and in a worldly Church!) in what we call the monastic movement. Then, in the Middle Ages, with the stratification of Western society in the feudal system, many monasteries themselves became infected with the virus of wealth and power. This led some monastic reformers and also lay visionaries like Francis and Clare to initiate new movements that would reclaim the radical values of the Gospel.

What we now call the Franciscan movement itself had a wide variety of expressions in terms of material poverty. Francis and his brothers, Clare and her sisters totally rejected property ownership and wealth of any kind, living by the work of their hands, turning for support, like other poor people, from benefactors. On the other hand, a diverse group of lay people of Franciscan inspiration who came to be known as the “Order of Penitence” generally maintained their normal occupations; they chose to express their conversion to God through a disciplined use of material goods and compassionate solidarity with the less fortunate. Today, you Missionaries of the Kingship are among their descendants.

You describe your commitment in these words: “With the promise of poverty. . . the Missionary undertakes to live in conformity with the poor Christ, following the example of St Francis and St. Clare. She accepts her creaturehood with joy; and, with complete trust in God, she abandons herself to His paternal and maternal providence, neither seeking human securities nor tending to store up treasures on earth. While retaining the ownership and use of whatever she possesses, the Missionary considers herself the steward of goods belonging to God” (*Constitutions*, art. 18). These words articulate a beautiful Franciscan view of material possessions. For what do a cloistered Poor Clare in Italy, a friar doing pastoral work in the Congo, and a Missionary who is a nurse in the United States have in common? They have very different expressions of Franciscan life, but all share a distinctive common vision of the good things of this world.

A clue to that vision is revealed in the way Francis describes the vow of poverty: “The rule and life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, *without anything of their own*, and in chastity” (RB 1.1). What must we do if we commit ourselves to follow Jesus? He tells us (in the quotation we cited at the beginning of this presentation): “Let us refer all good to the Lord and acknowledge that every good is *His*. . . *To Him all good belongs*, He who alone is good.” If all good things belong to God, then how can I say something is “my own”? Sin, according to Francis, is when we appropriate (claim as “mine”) the good things of this world which belong to God alone.

Indeed, Francis claims (Admonition 2), that self-appropriation is the *original* sin. He comments on the one tree in the Garden of Eden whose fruit Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat, but Satan tempts them, “No, God knows that if you eat it, you will become like God.” And so they ate, attempting to do something on their own to become divine. This primal act of our first parents is paradigmatic of all sin, Francis says: “By appropriating to himself his own will,” a person turns the tree of the knowledge of good into the fruit of the knowledge of evil. As Br. Robert Karris, OFM explains: “The Good God showers us with gifts. We turn them into objects of sin when we, through God’s marvelous gift of free will, exult in them as if they were our own.”

In our desire to accumulate the good things of the earth for ourselves, we human beings try to hold on to things that ultimately we cannot possess, and so we must painfully learn how to be dispossessed. Leaving behind possessions for the sake of experiencing the richness of God’s

gifts reorders our attitude toward everything, and so we find what it means to be happy (this is Clare's praise for her "holy exchange"). Since the time of the Roman philosopher Seneca, even worldly wisdom has said there are but two ways you can make persons happy: add to their possessions or subtract from their desires. We either strive for more and more (consumerism, greed, envy) or we reorder our covetousness, seeking only the one thing necessary - the good that is God.

"Poverty, deepest wisdom, you are slave to nothing, and in your detachment you possess all things." (Jacopone of Todi). Let us hear Jesus' words to us: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom! (Lk 12:32).

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