

+BENEDICTINE POVERTY

Class Notes Mar. 1 2024

The practice of poverty is one of the most challenging aspects of monastic living today. To give an honest witness to poverty in our world is not easy when we live in an affluent society, where our very means of livelihood depend on the interest to a middle class way of living. It is so easy to become a part of a consumerism that so easily serves a comfortable and pleasurable way of life.

Might a fresh emphasis on simple living, reducing our needs, seeing where we can reduce our consumption, save on fuel, have only what we really need, be a great attraction for young people seeking to follow Christ more closely?

Augustine Roberts opens this chapter on poverty with a quote from the Rule of St Benedict that hits the nail on the head so let's read the first paragraph this chapter with the quote from the Acts of the Apostles.

Roberts also sees our commitment to living a chaste life as closely related to our sense of the real meaning of poverty. On p. 137 he tells of how giving up sexual relations and the bearing of children: "shows how virginity can be a sign of deep human poverty which nevertheless prepares the heart for the spiritual fruitfulness of the risen Christ." There are many levels on which we can move away from possessiveness into that self-emptying of Christ that makes our lives so fruitful before God.

Contemporary writings address these different levels so let us read the 2nd paragraph on p. 138. The practice of the different religious communities will depend on the circumstances of their religious calling. For each of them, however, there is a constant need to evaluate the authenticity of their witness. I must say that when I look at the life of Christ, read the gospels, I am becoming more and more aware of the intensity of Christ's witness to simplicity and His continual readiness to rely on the loving care of his heavenly Father.

Roberts goes into a careful study of St Benedict's own words where the call to poverty, of being free of any attachment is in evidence. Let's read the 3rd and 4th paragraphs on p. 139. Benedict is severe when it comes to punishing for any instance of private ownership and yet, at the same time, he insists on distribution being made to anyone in need. I find myself in a similar situation in the infirmary where the needs are real but not wanting to encourage a

pleasure seeking that would be harmful to one's monastic commitment. His quote of Benedict on p. 141 brings home what he wants to bring about through the practice of poverty. Benedict challenges me in my work with the quote on the bottom of p. 141 and he addresses the huge problem in our world today where there are so many poor people, pilgrims, refugees and forsaken.

There are both the personal and communal aspects in our practice of poverty as is covered on pp. 142-3. Let's read first the 3rd paragraph on p. 142. Only by our sense of a call to personal poverty that opens our hearts entirely to Christ, will we effectively contribute the community's witness to the gift of itself to Christ. Let's read the 2nd paragraph on p. 143.

Roberts then gets into what he calls **RESPONSIBILITIES**, which are personal and "communal poverty according to one's position in the community." He gives us some very practical criteria of personal poverty in the last paragraph on p. 144 and first paragraph on p. 145 so let's read them. Real poverty starts at home, by our personal observance of it. In a real way we live in a society "at war with the poor Christ." As he says in the following paragraph, so much depends on our ability to distinguish between what is useful and what is superfluous. To be able to distinguish one from the other is the result of prayer, hearing Christ guiding us from the depths of our own hearts. Often the people of poorer countries do far better than those of richer ones as is brought out in the last paragraph where he says:

"The poorer classes in these countries often have cultural values such as family life, hospitality and the art of living together, which are superior to those of richer nations."

Effective poverty in a monastic community is the work of love as is nicely stated in the 2nd paragraph on p. 146 so let's read it and the following one.

There are forces that militate against a life of poverty and it is good to be aware of these, especially in an age like our own where individualism is so common. Let's read the 2nd paragraph on p. 147 with the quote from the Holy Rule. In a real way, the first Cistercians were reacting to the abuses of poverty that were taking place at Molesme where they had been living. This is summarized in the last paragraph on p. 148 so let's read it. At the same time, our life differs from that of The Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus founded by Charles de

Foucauld or the Missionaries of Charity founded by St Teresa of Calcutta. As Roberts puts it:

“The monastic vocation is not ordered to this type of witness and the Church does not expect it of us. Our most authentic witness will be the double one of the primacy of prayer over other human activities and the humble joy of common life. It will be the example of Christ at prayer and Christ with his disciples.”

The early Cistercians also put a strong emphasis on simplicity in the Liturgy as expressed in the 1st paragraph on p. 150 so let's read it. The real heart of the matter is expressed in the last paragraph on the same page well worth our reading. It is all about a total self-surrender to God, letting Christ govern the whole of our lives.

A whole lot of factors enter into our practice of poverty and it is good to be aware of them. A quick overview of these is expressed in the 2nd and 3rd paragraphs on p. 152. Read these. We are really part of one human family and the quote from the Vat. II document *Gaudium et Spes* at the bottom of the same page brings this home.

Our own community has had a long and close relation with the poor in our area. The importance of this is well stated in the 2nd paragraph on p. 153 so let us read this. As Roberts points out in the 2nd paragraph on p. 154 the example of our way of life has become all the more important in our world today where poverty and destitution have become more rampant than ever before. While we don't involve our lives directly with the poor like the Missionaries of Charity, we do want to be aware of those suffering nearby because of poverty or from the lack of the basic necessities of life.

Roberts concludes this chapter with **TOWARD A MATURE POVERTY**. The movement is summed up very well in the 2nd paragraph on p. 157 and then the 2nd paragraph on p. 158 so let us look at these two paragraphs. Finally, the last two paragraphs at the bottom of p. 159 and top of 160 sum up the chapter.