

# TO BE POOR AS JESUS WAS POOR?

By ALOYSIUS PIERIS

THE ECUMENICAL Association of Third World Theologians has made repeated appeals that the universal Church focus her attention on the plight of the poor as the pole of reference in her theology, by making it first the point of departure as well as the point of arrival in her spirituality since God's concern for the poor is the axial theme of the bible as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Their whole thesis on spirituality can be contracted into a three point formula: a Christian is a person who has made an irrevocable option *to follow Jesus*; this option necessarily coincides with the option *to be poor*; but the 'option to be poor' becomes a true 'following of Jesus' only to the extent that it is also an option *for the poor*. Christian discipleship or 'spirituality', is therefore, an overlapping of all these three options.

The (theo)logical force of this argument is derived from two biblical axioms: the irreconcilable antagonism between God and wealth, and the irrevocable covenant between God and the poor, Jesus himself being this covenant. These two principles imply that, in Jesus, God and the poor have formed an alliance against their common enemy: Mammon. This is what justifies the conclusion that, for both Jesus and his followers, spirituality is not merely a *struggle to be poor* but equally a *struggle for the poor*.

## *Spirituality as a struggle to be poor*

The irreconcilable antinomy between God and money (Mt 6,24) or more precisely between *Abba* and *Mammon* (to use two emotionally loaded and therefore untranslatable aramaic words which the synoptics place exclusively on the lips of Jesus) is the vital nucleus of the gospel message as expanded in the Sermon on the Mount. Growing intimacy with the One and constant repudiation of the other characterize the whole mission of Jesus on earth. He is our covenant with God. Whoever has a pact with Mammon is excluded from fellowship with his Father 'For no one can serve two masters'. The rich person is asked to be poor before becoming his disciple (Mt 19,21).

The Kingdom he preached, that is the salvation he offered, is not meant for the rich (Lk 6,20 and 24) or, is at least, too difficult for them unless God's miraculous intervention help them renounce their possessions and enter his Kingdom (Mk 10,25-27). If this was his conviction, is it surprising that he resorted to physical violence at the mere sight of money polluting the religion of his day (Jn 2, 13-17)?

In christian ascetical literature, both the exterior renunciation of goods and the interior resignation to God are normally conveyed by the word 'poverty'. St Ignatius of Loyola seems to have epitomized the whole spirituality of Jesus in that single word. In his vocabulary the surrender of one's wealth to the poor and the surrender of one's will to God appear as 'actual poverty' and 'spiritual poverty' respectively (Exx 98;146;147). If taken in the dynamic sense of a spiritual struggle, rather than in the hellenistic sense of a static virtue, 'poverty' is by far the most comprehensive term that can describe the ethos of the 'Jesus event'. It recaptures for us Christ's own attitudes, options and pattern of behaviour, all of which together make up the human texture of his redemptive mission on earth. To understand this is to know him; to practise this is to follow him.

Poverty, however, is not merely a material rejection of wealth, because Mammon is more than just money. It is a subtle force operating within me, an acquisitive instinct driving me to be the Rich Fool that Jesus ridicules in the parable (Lk 12,13-21). Or again, Mammon is what I do with it and what it does to me; what it both promises and brings when I come to terms with it: security and success, power, and prestige which are all spiritual acquisitions that make me appear privileged before God and people. It makes me seem to possess a special gift for leadership. I may even experience an irresistible satisfaction of being revered and sought after as a guide and guru; of being chosen to exert great influence over others, obviously for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

It was precisely this model of leadership that occasioned a crisis in Jesus's faith in the Father, especially when he became conscious of God's power surging from deep within him, when his touch began to heal, his words seemed to vibrate with authority and the tumultuous crowds flocked behind him. Was he not *the* teacher of Israel, *the* leader of the people, *the* prophet of God, and, who knows, the long awaited Messiah?

Furthermore, this image of the charismatic leader had been distorted beyond recognition by many pretenders who, according to Flavius Josephus, claimed that God would vindicate their messianic

election by working prodigies in the presence of their enemies as God surely did when Moses spoke on his behalf before Pharaoh. There was also a current of popular enthusiasm which readily welcomed this exhibitionist kind of 'prophetic' ministry.

Note, therefore, that when tempted by the Pharisees and the Sadducees to produce a sign from above to prove his divine election, Jesus spurns the suggestion, calling the tempters 'an evil and adulterous generation' and insinuating, by means of an allusion to Jonah, that his authority will be vindicated only after he has been thoroughly humiliated before his enemies (Mt 16,1-4)! For, by that time, Jesus has passed through what is called the 'galilean crisis'; his popularity waning and his loneliness deepening, he has come 'to realize that he has failed in his mission as he had previously understood it' and has successfully overcome the opposite temptation to withdraw into himself by way of over-reaction.<sup>2</sup>

He has now abandoned all hope of seeing immediate success in his mission. Unless he himself dies as a victim of the existing mammonic order, there is no way for God's new order to dawn. And so he begins to speak of the cross openly, not only as his personal destiny but as the only path open to those who dare to walk with him to the Kingdom. The new humanity will not be achieved by means of power and prestige, but through weakness, failure and humiliation. The image of the popular leader of Israel yields place to that of the suffering servant of Yahweh. 'What is thought of highly by men is loathsome in the sight of God' he reminds the Pharisees 'who loved money' and 'laughed at him' for what he taught about God and Mammon (Lk 16,13-15).

This new vision needed to be reaffirmed and this option had to be renewed several times during his life (Mt 20,20-28; Mk 8,31-33; Lk 9,51-55; Jn 6,15;18,36; etc.) and particularly during the last decisive hours of his earthly mission (Mk 14,32; Mt 26,52-53) when he had to re-surrender his will to *Abba* his Father. For he strove to steer clear of even the semblance of pseudo-messianism.<sup>3</sup>

Hence the question: could one really fathom the quality and the intensity of Jesus's allegiance to the Father except by monitoring his recurrent conflicts with Mammon, that is to say, his many 'temptations' which he himself was not ashamed to speak about (Lk 22,28)? His poverty was indeed a painful growth in grace and wisdom through a process of continuous discernment of God's will in the face of these many temptations which some theologians would not hesitate to call 'crises of self-identity',<sup>4</sup> crises provoked by new

demands from the Father and the changing tactics of Mammon.

Poverty, then, was Jesus's characteristic posture towards God and Mammon, which, however, his closest associates could not comprehend even after the resurrection (Acts 1,6) until they received the Spirit. For only a divine initiative could make them 'know the Son' (Mt 11,27). Once his Spirit was given to them, that is, when they acquired a connaturality with the spirit of the Master, they were not slow to recognize the conflicts that shaped Jesus's spirituality. By means of a clever literary device they presented this life-long struggle against Mammon in the form of a three-act drama with the desert as the stage and his messianic investiture at the Jordan as the immediate contextual background (Mt 4,1-11 and parallels). This pericope on 'Jesus's triple temptation in the desert' was meant not only to recall, by contrast, the temptations that overpowered the first messianic people in the desert when they lost confidence in Yahweh and preferred to make a god of gold, but also to educate the new messianic people — the nascent Church — in the ways of the Master as she, too, was now beginning to meet the very same temptations that her founder once faced.

What is strange, then, if the Church too is continuously led by the Spirit to the desert to be tempted? Poverty after all is a spirituality of struggle. There is never a dearth of crises, so long as Mammon is a power to reckon with. But each new temptation brings with it a new motive and a new way 'to be poor as Jesus was poor'.

When, for instance, very early in her history, the Church changed from a powerless people to an influential force in imperial Rome, the exodus of Christians to the desert in search of the true spirit of Christ challenged her triumphalism and threw her into a crisis of identity which men like Basil and Benedict resolved partially by bringing the desert experiences from the periphery of the Church to its centre, so that the monk came to stay as an orthodox symbol of christian poverty.

Similarly when western medieval society was being disoriented by incipient mercantile economics and growing urbanization, the Waldensians initiated a centrifugal force within the Church through their justifiable quest for 'Jesus Poor' outside the ecclesiastical structures, a quest which received a centripetal impetus in the franciscan movement. In these mendicants, the Church recovered for herself and for society in general, a new framework for christian poverty.

When Ignatius stepped into the ecclesiastical world, Paul III had

already appointed a Reform Commission in 1536. Its memorandum, contrary to expectation, showed no preoccupation with schisms, heresies or lapses in celibacy, which were at most symptoms and not the disease. The real malaise, according to its diagnosis, was the abuse of wealth in the Church, nepotism and simony, and the existence of an 'ecclesiastical rabble' accounted for by the prevalence of a parallel class of wealth-accumulating clerics. The Ignatian Exercises are not without allusions to these problems.

What Ignatius offered the Church was not 'reform', and much less 'counter-reform' (a task left to the Council of Trent), but a 'renewal' from below. He summoned the rank and file of the Church to anchor themselves in Jesus's own spirituality, that is, at least in spiritual poverty if not also in actual poverty.

Unfortunately, the theology he had learnt did not help him to see that poverty (both actual and spiritual) was meant to be the basic spirituality of *all* Christians and not an 'evangelical counsel' like celibacy, which is a charism given to the few; and that even in the case of ministers, the policy of 'obligatory celibacy and optional poverty' was the exact converse of what Jesus intended for them. Nonetheless, Ignatius would have unhesitatingly concurred with Theo Van Asten's famous intervention at the Synod of 1971:

Why does the Church demand that priests should renounce founding a family and not demand *also* that they renounce honours and titles, even ecclesiastical ones as well as the pursuit of worldly goods? Because after all there does exist a scale of values in the gospels to be respected.<sup>5</sup>

In the gospels, God's opposite number is not sex or marriage but Mammon. Hence it is poverty, not primarily celibacy, that guarantees one's 'undivided devotion to God'. Both celibacy and sex can lose their relativity and sacramentality and thus degenerate into objects of an idolatrous cult. Both can be vitiated by Mammon.

Even in Indian cultures where the renunciation of marriage is a supreme sign of sanctity, no celibate is reckoned a man of God if he is also a man of means. Gandhi, on the other hand, was the founder of a family of four when he was virtually 'canonized' by the Indian masses for having renounced all material goods and comforts for God and the people. The masses were illiterate and could not have read his *Harijan* where he did admit that, after the fourth child, he and his wife vowed sexual continence. But even the few who read

that confession had no difficulty in believing him. What rendered him credible were his other visible forms of renunciation, namely his 'actual poverty'. For chastity can never be seen except in its fruits which it can never produce unless it is cross-fertilized with evangelical poverty. Celibacy minus poverty is comfortable bachelorhood or convenient spinsterhood! Was this not also St Ambrose's grouse against vestal virgins?<sup>6</sup>

Ignatius never confused Mammon with its shadow. He fought no futile wars against an imaginary enemy of God (such as 'matter' or 'the world', 'marriage' or 'the woman') as did the encratites before him or the Jansenists after him, these who were reputed to have been as pure as angels and as proud as devils. At the most decisive moment in his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius confronts the would-be follower of Christ with two irreconcilable alternatives (or Standards as he calls them): either riches, the anti-God which demolishes the Kingdom through *pride* that issues from vainglory; or poverty, the anti-Mammon which builds up the Kingdom through *humility*, the fruit of humiliations (Exx 135-147). The 'big is ugly and the small is beautiful' is neatly contrasted in his graphic description of Lucifer in Babylon advertising the first alternative and Jesus in Jerusalem pleading for the second. These were the policies at work in the Church and the society of his day. But they were also the two models of messianic leadership which confronted Jesus in subtle guises throughout his entire desert of his life and death.

Here, in view of what we are about to discuss in the second part of this article, we do well to draw a couple of lessons from what has been said so far. Note first that Ignatius, neither a theologian nor an exegete, has nevertheless acquired an accurate grasp of Jesus's spirituality which modern exegesis confirms almost to the letter.<sup>7</sup> The secret lies in his *method*. In his contemplation he tried to *know* Jesus in order to follow him and in his poverty he *followed* him in order to know him.

Secondly, Ignatius has preserved for us the ancients' way of regarding spirituality as poverty, and poverty as a *struggle* without falling into a manichean dualism, for, even in his mythological framework of demonism, the concrete choice is between riches and poverty, and even there, victory is assured for those who make the second option. Ignatius also refined this idea of the struggle in his Rules for Discernment in which the subtle manoeuvres of 'the enemy of human nature' as they occur in the finer areas of the human spirit are exposed with an introspective acumen unsurpassed in the history

of christian spirituality. But these rules cover only the battlefields within the intra-human sphere. At the inter-human level, we have all succumbed to the enemy. Mammon, whom some (western, not latin american) theologians have aptly nicknamed Capital,<sup>8</sup> interferes with God's Kingdom not merely as a psychological drive but as a gigantic sociological force alienating us not only from God but from one another in and through a social order that can thrive only on the co-existence of waste and want. New skills are required to discern how to decrease the wastefulness of the affluent (struggle to be poor) and how to eliminate want (struggle for the poor).

*Spirituality as a struggle for the poor*

Any discourse on 'poverty' can be confusing if the polysemous nature of the word is not respected. Leonardo Boff assigns at least five meanings to it.<sup>9</sup> I submit that in the final analysis there are only two basic concepts to be distinguished: *voluntary poverty* which we have been discussing so far, and *forced poverty* which engages our attention here. The first is the seed of liberation and the second is the fruit of sin. The Kingdom of God can be viewed in terms of a universal practice of the one and *consequent* elimination of the other.

Emphasize *consequent*. The rich man in search of eternal life, that is, in search of God is asked to give up Mammon in such a way that the poor would benefit by his renunciation (Mk 10,21). Voluntary poverty is an indispensable prerequisite for the just order of society wherein forced poverty has no right to exist: such was the kingdom Jesus preached. In fact his precursor, in preparing the people for his coming, invited them to share their *extra* clothes and food with those having none (Lk 3,11). If, indeed, Lazarus remained hungry till his death, was it not because of a rich man's wastefulness: his refusal to share even his *excess* goods 'the crumbs falling from the table' (Lk 16,19-31)? Poverty thus forced upon a brother or a sister is an evil, the removal of which is a burden Jesus laid at the door of the rich. In other words, the affluent are called to be poor so that there be no poor around.

Wealth is therefore an evil only when accumulated. Bread too is a 'sin against the Body of the Lord' if consumed by a few while others starve (1 Cor 11,21-27). But when broken and shared, it is *his* body that we consume and become. If wealth, too, is distributed 'according to need' so 'that there be no needy person' (Acts 4,34-35), it ceases to be Mammon. It becomes sacramental. Hence the seemingly outrageous doctrine of the Fathers (Chrysostom,

Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine): if some are poor it is because some others have acquired or inherited 'more', and this 'more' remains a stolen property till it is shared with the poor.<sup>10</sup> If this is so then Boff's observation 'Poverty can be cured by poverty'<sup>11</sup> has deep roots in the christian tradition.

We are glad that this message is also the 'secular gospel' preached from the I.L.O.'s International Institute for Social Studies in Geneva. Its director, Albert Tévoédjré, in a curiously entitled book, *Poverty: wealth of peoples*,<sup>12</sup> evidently a rejoinder to Adam Smith's classic, defines poverty as the 'state of someone who has what is necessary and not the surplus' and suggests that only such poverty can eradicate present inequalities provided, of course, that the poor nations form a solidarity contract in view of this struggle.

Economics apart, there is also a *christological basis* for this doctrine. We are not speaking of a sociological dream or a purely ethical principle, but of a specifically christian spirituality which requires of us a leap of faith.

There is, in other words, a 'christic factor' by which 'poverty' (giving up of the 'more') is intrinsically oriented towards the liberation of the poor. For, God himself who has *opted* to be *born* poor in Jesus his Son (2 Cor 8,9; Phil 2,6-8), has gathered as his Body a new people comprising these two categories of poor: the poor by 'option' who are the *followers of Jesus* (Mt 19,21), and the poor by 'birth' who are the *proxy of Jesus* (Mt 25,31-46). In other words, the struggle to be poor cannot be a recognizably christian spirituality if it is not inspired by each of these motives: to *follow Jesus* who *was* poor then and to *serve Christ* who *is* in the poor now.

One clear implication of this 'christic factor' is this: the few who renounce their possessions are not 'founded and rooted in Christ Jesus' if the many who have no possessions to renounce are not the beneficiaries of that renunciation. This again is an interpretation of evangelical poverty with ancient roots and conserved for us by a line of saints that vigorously resisted all temptations to the contrary.

Already the anchorite tradition, as exemplified in the *Vita Antonii* and based on the call narratives (specially Mt 19,21), never advocated any renunciation of wealth which was not made in favour of the poor. It was the pachomian *cenobia* that introduced the dangerous custom of allowing the candidates to donate their belongings to the community they were joining. Not only did the poor not benefit by their renunciation, but the 'renouncers' themselves came to be cushioned by an institutional security. Even



manual labour, initially introduced to ensure a poor life-style, soon ended up with an accumulation of a surplus, thus defeating the very purpose of such experiments. St Basil's remedy was the small community earning its bare needs, for, as he rightly held, what is owned by those dedicated to God belongs to God and *therefore* it must be given to the poor.<sup>13</sup>

Here the oft-quoted Jerusalem experiment (Acts 4,32-37) could be as misleading as it is inspiring. No doubt it was a symbolic effort like so many others that followed it in the subsequent centuries. Even if that experiment had failed, we still say, it was an experiment worth failing. Small efforts at creating 'sacraments of the Kingdom' wherein 'No one claimed for his own use anything that he had as everything they owned was held in common' (Acts 4,32) must recur in history countless times before they can make a dent in the human consciousness.

But this experiment by no means justifies a collective ownership of wealth which is exclusive to the membership of a community and which does not accommodate the rights of the needy outside that community into its policy of sharing. The appeal to individual and spiritual poverty at the expense of collective and actual poverty (is it possible?) is a futile attempt to follow Jesus Poor without ministering to Christ in the poor. Francis of Assisi who held these two ideals together, 'changed the vow of sharing goods to a vow of poverty which was binding on the whole group and not merely on the individual'.<sup>14</sup>

This is in fact the ignatian method we alluded to in the first part of the article. It is the dialectics of knowing Christ and following Jesus in and through the practice of poverty.

This is also the 'hermeneutical circle' between theory and praxis that animates the numerous grass-root communes that spring up on the fringes of the Church especially in the Third World. There is, however, one difference that sets them apart from traditional religious communities in the Church. As paradigms of the future which they announce, these communities project an image of chosen poverty that stretches far beyond the symbolic level of their own experiment to the level of international justice. They perceive Mammon to be more than inordinate affections, to be detected only by introspective discernment, because they regard the colossal scandal of poverty as the fruit of institutionalized greed. Ignatius himself, in his meditation on the Two Standards, did not fail to register the seductive manner in which the mammonic system is

advertised in 'all the world not omitting any provinces, places, states, nor any persons in particular' (Exx 141) and, should we add, all institutions religious and secular?

This was the question that brought monks from east and west together at the Benedictine Centenary Congress in Kandy in 1980 and their verdict was unanimous. Though it is primarily in contemplative prayer that the cry of the poor is heard, there exists the 'need to undertake serious, even scientific analysis of the causes of poverty and of the various mechanisms which produce it'. This is because poverty 'is the fruit of sinfulness, oppressive social structures, of corruption in certain countries and of an unjust international economic order'.<sup>15</sup>

Self-analysis alone is therefore inadequate to discern the contemporary strategies of Mammon; social analysis must complement it. This is a contention difficult to refute when history records so many instances of individual ascetics living complacently in a socially sinful situation. The Buddhists provide us with an example which has many parallels in christian history. The mongolian Lamasaries practised a common ownership of so much land that, despite their disciplined life within the cells, they did not perceive the incongruity of their economic power until the Marxists, so to say, forced them to practise 'voluntary' poverty in order to alleviate the *real* poverty of the country's peasants!

This is not the only instance in history when a religious group, bound by a vow of poverty, waited for a violent turn of events to begin practising what common sense and their own religious instinct had always enjoined on them. One reason is that a *sociological perception* of poverty, be it poverty voluntarily embraced or poverty structurally imposed, has not been sufficiently assimilated into the religious traditions of humankind, not to speak of the Church's own traditional understanding of 'spirituality'.

This is not to say that the magisterium has not made any attempt to integrate the 'struggle to be poor' with the 'struggle for the poor'. In his *Evangelica testificatio*, Paul VI moved along this direction when he declared that evangelical poverty carried with it the obligation to awaken human consciences to the demands of social justice by a commitment to and solidarity with [the struggle of] the poor (no 18) and also the obligation to call upon the rich to act responsibly towards the needy (no 20).<sup>16</sup>

Whoever defines spirituality as a search for God (and we agree) must not lose sight of the two biblical axioms mentioned at the

beginning of this inquiry. If the God-Mammon antinomy is perceived within God's covenant with the poor, that is his partiality to the oppressed who [according to the Rules for Discernment of Sinful Structures] are the waste product of this earth's wealth accumulating plutocracy, then a neutral God is unjust as he would violate his own covenant. Rather he is a God who assumes the struggle of the poor as his own so that it becomes his struggle for the poor, the struggle he has launched against the proud, the powerful and the rich (Lk 1,51-53). We *become one with God* (is this not the aim of all mysticism?) to the degree that our poverty drives us to appropriate his concern for the poor as our own mission.

Even here, let Jesus's temptations be our guide. Let us purge our minds of the exhibitionist model of social messianism whereby we become heroes of altruism at the expense of the poor. Far from being the subjects of their own emancipation, they remain perpetual objects of our compassion thanks to our organized charity, or instruments of our self aggrandisement thanks to our 'organized struggles'. Here a symbiosis of psychological and sociological approaches to discernment is imperative. An introspective analysis should make us question the honesty of our social involvement in the light of a social analysis of the structures that so easily allows us to exploit the poor for our personal fulfilment. The source once again could be the monies that flow in 'for the poor'!

Whoever dares to be with God on the side of the poor must renounce all hope of being a hero. It is the criminal's fate — the cross — that Jesus holds out as the banner under which victory is assured. The disciple is not greater than the Master. If the Master is the victim-judge of oppression (Mt 25,31-46), the disciple too must become the victim of the present order or else he or she has no right to denounce it. The struggle for the poor is a mission entrusted only to those who are or have become poor.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf Wiedenmann, L. (ed.): *Herausgefordert durch die Armen: Dokumente der Oecumenischen Vereinigung von Dritte-Welt-Theologen 1976-1983* (Freiburg, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Sobrino, Jon: *Christology at the crossroads* (New York, 1978), p 93.

<sup>3</sup> Ellacuria, I.: *Freedom made flesh* (New York, 1976), pp 54-60.

<sup>4</sup> Rahner and Duquoc quoted in Sobrino, *op. cit.*, p 97; p 141, n 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Tablet* (30 October 1971), p 1060.

<sup>6</sup> Epistola XVIII, nos 11-12 (P.L., 16, 975).

<sup>7</sup> Cf Lyonnet, Stanislaus: *The meditation on the Two Standards and its scriptural foundation* (Burke, T. A.: Programme to adapt the Spiritual Exercises [Jersey City, no date]).

<sup>8</sup> Scott, R. B. Y. and Vlastos, G. (eds): *Towards the christian revolution* (London, 1937), p 104.

<sup>9</sup> Boff, L.: 'Pelos pobres e contra la pobreza', in *Convergencia* (May 1979), pp 232-37.

<sup>10</sup> For quotations, references and comments, see Miranda, J.: *Marx and the bible* (New York, 1974), pp 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> Boff, *loc. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1978.

<sup>13</sup> Lozano, J. M.: *Discipleship, towards an understanding of religious life* (Claret Center for Resources in Spirituality, Chicago, 1980), pp 173-74.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p 177.

<sup>15</sup> From the Final Statement, *Dialogue* (N.S., Colombo), vol vii, no 3 (September-December, 1980), p 121.

<sup>16</sup> *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, LXII (1971), pp 497-526.