

THE POVERTY OF THE GOSPEL COMMUNITY

By JAMES WALSH

AN APOSTOLIC community will normally hope to find a substantial measure of its identity in what we call its poverty; if only because currently, much self-doubt about the authenticity of christian vocation centres around the meaning and practice of gospel-poverty. Guilt-feelings notoriously erode self-assurance, and it would seem that guilt, for one reason or another, plays a large part in the concern of many committed Christians for third-world deprivation. The question here is how to identify the charism of evangelical poverty in the average apostolic community in the western Church.

Francis of Assisi believed that he saw the shape of gospel-poverty clearly revealed in Crib and Cross: and this not so much in terms of symbol, but of relationship — the total interdependence of Jesus and Mary. The jesuit poet and martyr caught a glimpse of the same reality, lyrically and mystically, when he wrote:

Behold the father is his daughter's son,
The bird that built the nest is hatched therein. . . .¹

At the beginning of Luke, Our Lady's relationship with the Father is in terms of the Child she is going to bear. She even interprets the reality and status of her personal deprivation as a positive mark of her relationship with the Father which is realized in Christ her Son. Poverty thus begins as a contradiction of negative and positive elements: barrenness and fruitfulness. The painful surrender of what I have and possess is the response to divine presence and the potential fruitfulness it promises. This is typical of the initiation of covenant, as the prophetic experience in the Old Testament reminds us.² Mary's covenant-existence begins with the experience of deprivation: with her uncertainty, with her perplexity, above all with the implied rejection of the physical and psychological promise of womanhood.

¹ St Robert Southwell: *The Nativity of Christ*.

² E.g. Exod 3, 11; Jos 1, 9; Jer 1, 6-7.

The experience is again scripturally foreshadowed in the extraordinary episode of Jephthah and his daughter in the Book of Judges, where the father, unknowingly, had 'dedicated' his daughter, his only child. If Yahweh delivers the Ammonites into his hands, the first person to meet him at the door of his house as he returns in triumph will be sacrificed to Yahweh. It is his daughter whom he first meets, as she comes out of the house dancing, to celebrate his victory. And she accepts the dedication; but she asks to go into the mountains for a while, 'to bewail her virginity', that she has not borne a son. 'She had never known a man'.³ Here deprivation follows the plenty, death follows life. In Luke, Simeon sees Christ as a sign of contradiction; and prophetically, Mary becomes a sign of contradiction for Christ — his 'dedication'. Yet this deprivation heralds the fruitfulness, the fertility of the Church, which is to be realized in spiritual motherhood.

The first mark of evangelical poverty would seem to be the deprivation inherent in the virginity of Mary. Yet its immediate consequence is the dynamic, enriching presence of the Spirit: a presence itself proclaiming a degree of dependence scarcely perceptible before Incarnation. God has been present to his people in the Old Testament, as a consequence of the Covenant, as their sign and their direction.⁴ But his presence is not the fulfilment, not the promised land: except occasionally for the Psalmist at the summit of contemplation.⁵ In the infancy gospel, however, the overshadowing by the Holy Spirit proclaims and effects the *kairos*, the very moment of Incarnate presence, the full and final indwelling. In Mary it is exemplified in the ancient title 'Ark of the Covenant', the place where God's power dwells and his glory shines: 'the glory of the only-Begotten of the Father'.⁶ If the Indwelling in its mutuality is the foundation of life in the Spirit, its environment and atmosphere, it begins here in the resolution of opposites: feast and famine, growth and sterility.

The awareness of dependence, expressed in Mary's *fiat*, proclaimed and demanded by the mysterious invasion of the Spirit, is enhanced in the mystery of the Visitation: 'And how should this happen to me that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?' (Lk 1, 43) The awareness of being endowed, of being the recipient of the gift, is the root of true dependence. Elizabeth's is an utterance out of

³ Jg 11, 29-39. ⁴ Cf Exod 13, 21-22.

⁵ Cf Ps 73, 23-26. ⁶ Jn 1, 14.

human poverty, a recognition of her basic human need for God. It is a repetition of Mary's own proclamation: 'let it happen to me' (Lk 1, 38). 'Let this overshadowing take place. May I be totally and absolutely aware of my dependence on my God. May this manifest itself in my life. May whatever he would have, come to pass'.

This disposition of mind and heart is endemic to spiritual poverty; there is no gospel-poverty without it. Again it proclaims this overshadowing of the Spirit, the reality of the Indwelling, the awareness in faith of its mutuality; so that the response to involvement in the mystery itself signals my total dependence, my radical need. It is very probable that there has been an over-concentration in the christian tradition on the actual material poverty of the birth of Christ, and a recurring anxiety to share the poverty of destitution, in order to be a more authentic follower of Christ. The precise nature of this material poverty is no more than adumbrated in the gospel-text; whilst modern exegetes have done their best to reduce the event to the mythological, stripping it of every vestige of actuality. Whether they are right or wrong is perhaps irrelevant. It is better that we neither glamorize nor minimize the actual deprivation. The reality of Christ's poverty at Bethlehem has little or nothing to do with the material. What is central is the manifestation of mission, one which Paul will emphasize in his appeal for the famine-stricken Christians in Jerusalem, when he writes to his Corinthians: 'Remember the generosity of the Lord Jesus; how when he was rich he became poor, that you might be enriched out of his impoverishment' (2 Cor 8, 9). This is the sign that Christ is born, that he is become fully human. The gospel presentation of the fact may be enshrined in a literary context which differs vastly from the modern conception of historical truth. The fact itself is, for Paul and for every believer, indisputable: 'When the fulness of time was come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law' (Gal 4, 5). The embellishments are beautiful, consoling, profitable: the material for many a spiritual and moral lesson. The consideration of cold, or hunger, or the warm breath of ox and ass may or may not enhance the fact, depending on the particular devotional culture. But it is faith which establishes it in the heart and mind. Here is God-made-man; the fulness of time comes, God sends his Son, born of a woman, born under the law. Here is a human child, subject wholly to the human conditions of birth, growth and death. God sends his Son, the heir, who is destined to be beaten and put to death (cf Mt 21, 33-39). The real poverty of the Christ of Bethlehem is found in his passion; his birth and its circum-

stances proclaim that he is a man-child, due to live a man's life, and due to go to his death as a man.

The relationship between Our Lady and Jesus: it has proved all too easy to be sentimental about it, to write about its sorrows and joys, to elaborate on the few scraps of information we possess. Yet all that we have, after the birth-events of the Baptist and of Jesus himself, are the brief references to the Circumcision, and the two temple episodes narrated by Luke. The Fathers of the Church have always seen in the Jewish ritual of circumcision a glimpse ahead to the time of passion, death and resurrection; it is the sign, until Christ comes, of the reality of covenant: the shedding of the blood. In terms of the proffer, since the incarnate Christ is unable to offer himself, it is his mother who offers him. And this is her poverty. Out of her poverty, she offers. In pain, she offers. Again, we have the contradiction: out of the pain the covenant is sealed, with its promise of joy and fulfilment.

But the mystery of the Presentation of Christ entering into his temple in glory as the Eastern Church has always underlined it: this is Luke's main statement about evangelical poverty. We can take this on a material level, if we are so inclined. The people who come to offer in the temple are classed according to income. Ordinary folk make the offering of two turtle doves or two young pigeons. It manifests the straitened means of the less than well-off. The social class of the Holy Family, of Jesus and Mary, is that of working-class people. They are not the wealthy, but neither are they the destitute who have nothing to offer. Christ never counted himself among the materially destitute. 'The poor you always have with you . . . ' (Jn 12, 8).

The whole emphasis here is on the relationship of poverty to expectation. Both for Anna and for Simeon, theirs is the poverty of expectation and of hope: the poverty that is associated with waiting for the coming of the Lord, and the realization that without him I can do nothing, I have nothing and am nothing. Faced with these attitudes, which reflect the maturity of Christ's manhood, the anxious pre-occupations of religious whose education and intelligence, if not the accident of their birth, stamp them as inevitably middle-class, can be real obstacles in the search for the kingdom of God and his justice: 'What shall we eat, what shall we drink, how shall we dress . . . ?' What is vital is the recognition of our need for God, and a blazing conviction that the need is even now being fulfilled. And because we possess with him, in him and through him, we have that

which we can give. We can endow and enrich others. This enrichment of the other must always be our impoverishment, even as it is his and his mother's: a mutual impoverishment, but also a mutual enrichment. So poverty of spirit is indeed happiness, because we are in a position to enrich others; so in possessing the all, we have nothing except his poverty of expectation, this habitual recognition of a need to be filled.

'Behold this Child': the child whom Simeon proclaims as the light for the revelation to the gentiles and the glory of Israel: Israel the Son, Israel whom God has called forth, whom God has named, whom God has longed for. Here is the whole of the heritage, the fulfilment which God has promised. Here is the way in which God's faithful promise is kept: in the witness of the helplessness of this Child, of absolute dependence on the divine Parent, revealed at this moment, the fulness of time, in the woman who is his human parent.

And, as though this were not a fully satisfactory declaration of the poverty of the people of God, of the *anawim*, we have a further expression, the promise of further pain, of further deprivation: this child is a sign to manifest the rise and fall of many, not simply in himself, but also in his mother. They are together the type of the *anawim*, God's chosen. There is involved a fall and a diminishment: the rejection of the Messiah by his poverty-stricken people. There is no greater, no more absolute impoverishment than impoverishment for nothing: the impoverishment of oneself for oneself alone through the fear of loss of security, reputation or life. To reject the enrichment because it is quite other than one's expectation, because the first sight of it disappoints: here is a poverty which is opposed to God's Kingdom and his justice: the ultimate, over against which material destitution is nothing. Further, there are people in the world who are the poor behind the poor of God: the poor for whom God cares, who live in the perpetual shadow. It was for these poor and in response to their cry that Christ came and comes again, rather than for the poor who are chosen; not the 'poor of God' whom we identify as the new *anawim*, those who in their poverty are richly endowed. These are the real poor, as Christ insists: 'I came not to call the just but sinners to repentance' . . . 'to preach the gospel to the poor'. Many of these are indeed the materially destitute. But the word of God is not primarily a statement about social justice or the exploitation of the 'have-nots'. It is a statement about the deprivation of God, about the poor who are poor because the Good News is not preached to them: 'the tidings of great joy' which alone will ultimately enrich them.

This is not to say that inhumanity, exploitation of the weak or

indifference towards the less well-off, are not the vices which make modern society radically unjust and therefore godless: a godlessness which touches us all, despite every appearance to the contrary. It is simply that gospel-poverty speaks first and consistently of the riches of Christ, and not of material affluence, which is as relative as it is evanescent. It is his riches that we have ultimately to offer; and they carry within them the seed of contradiction: 'and your own soul a sword shall pierce' (Lk 2, 35).

'To experience the effects of evangelical poverty' is a phrase which found its way in some form or other into most religious rules; and it was normally referred exclusively to material deprivation. But it was not so with the covenant into which Mary entered: 'And your own soul a sword shall pierce, that out of many hearts the truth may be revealed'. We must look rather to her relationship with all those who came into contact with her Son, with those who were in some way responsible for his ultimate self-emptying, his death. It applies particularly to the responsibility which the Apostles have to take and experience, in their awareness of his dereliction, the dereliction of abandonment and death. They must share the responsibility for it; and in this way they share also the dereliction. Here again we touch the main nerve of Christ's poverty. If we are to 'endure with him', we have to ask for this experience of being derelict, of being abandoned. It is true that such experience can be acquired more easily in the materially destitute situation: in the inner city, on the Skid Rows of this world, than in the climate of 'respectable' apostolates. Yet the actual material dereliction remains but the sign and gesture of the inner dereliction. We know that if we are going to relieve the inner dereliction, we must set about relieving the outer dereliction. And yet it is eminently true that the relief of the outer dereliction is that we might preach the Good News to the poor.

The impoverishment of Mary, as it is told in the lucan gospel of the Infancy, is intensified in the mystery of the loss and the finding in the Temple, where she is seen to lack, for the time, that understanding of her Son's mission which might have consoled her. The extent of her desolation is delineated in the dialogue: 'Son, why have you done this to us? See, your father and I have sought you in sorrow'. 'How was it that you sought me? Did you not know . . . ?' (Lk 2, 48-50) Equally, there is the realization for Jesus himself that in the positive choice he makes in response to his Father, there is the infliction of pain. To accept this is the ultimate impoverishment. The more we understand and love the other, and when we are

truly detached from ourselves, the more intolerable the thought of inflicting pain on those we know and love. This kind of diminishment is a frequent occurrence in the apostolic life; we must needs accept it in the spirit in which the Lord, on the brink of adulthood, had to accept it. From that moment on, so much of what he did involved Mary's participation in his suffering diminishment.

It is worth noting that every religious is called to share in some measure in this diminishment: in the separation from family, and then in a multitude of separations involved in the single-minded following of the Lord. Here is a necessary and very mysterious aspect of evangelical poverty, which seems to be typified in the call of the patriarchs and prophets: 'Leave your country, your family and your Father's house' (Gen 12, 1). It belongs to the movement of Christ's poverty to exchange stability for pilgrimage: 'The foxes have holes, the birds of the air have their nests . . .'. John hints at this pain-filled separation in his account of the marriage at Cana; and it is endemic to every call to the apostolic life. This gesture of poverty signifies the rejection of flesh-and-blood security; yet even in the case of a Francis of Assisi, who thrust his rich apparel into his father's arms, the material deprivation is always secondary. The rejection of family and of its spiritual as well as its material patrimony is the exchange of a new identity for an old; and this, in its way, is the death to self involved in evangelical poverty. The movement, however, must be completed. There is no gospel-impoverishment without a corresponding enrichment: and this for each one in the relationship—as well as for the relationship as a whole. Jesus repeatedly speaks very starkly of this separation from the securely familiar, the instinctively dear; and his consistent human experience of it, from infancy to manhood, is his relationship with his mother (cf Lk 8, 20-21). It is humanly impossible for him to say these things — 'to leave father, and mother, house, children' (Lk 14, 26) — without experiencing again the pain involved in being deprived of the basic human security of identity — of being loved and cherished for oneself alone. And the impoverishment has the profound poignancy of mutuality: the infliction of the pain of loss on the other. For some it appears to be a pain whose roots are never healed except at the expense of a withering, the growth of a carapace, an extra thick skin of spiritual callousness. There is a constant feeling of non-communication in every visit, in every renewed contact: a whole area in my life which has grown and developed, and has nothing to do with those to whom my blood calls. This deprivation, this inability to share with those

for whom I was formed to share life and love from the very beginning, the very first dependent heartbeat: this is a permanent in the apostolic life which is at the heart of spiritual impoverishment. It belongs to the reality of self-diminishment for mission. It has nothing to do with how often we visit our families or dearest friends of old, or what their immediate needs for my physical presence are, or how often I strive to make myself present to them, 'touch' them. None of this affects the core of the impoverishment, the failure of mutual understanding and the consequent mutual wounding.

This was the precise situation in which Christ our Lord frequently found himself. Mary had no more clue to what he was about in his life of itinerant preacher than she had in his seemingly off-hand repudiation of her in the Temple. There she is, outside, wanting to see him, with the relatives, who, for various motives, equally experience rejection: 'why do you do this to us?' John's account of Cana similarly stresses that she is deliberately rebuffed and rejected: what price flesh and blood now? The deep feeling for covenant, for the reassurance of the heart, may raise more questions than it answers. Why must the new life, which seems to be his alone, be the death-knell to a relationship whose reality can never be broken — only ignored and repudiated? The gospel merely indicates in her an enduring faith in the covenant and a growing hope in its enduring quality. How or why it should be is not revealed. All that we can do is reverently to accept the words of Luke: everything that happened to him and to her, she takes and ponders in her heart (Lk 2, 52). This is and always will be the type of the Church growing in contemplation, in spiritual intelligence. Faith says that the christian life is affected by what he reveals of himself in this assiduous reflection in the heart of Mary. 'Your mother and your brethren are outside seeking you'. 'Who is my mother and who are my brothers?' (Mk 3, 33-34). Here is a proclamation, a response to the inspiration of the Spirit; this is communication and identification with the Father; but it brings the infliction of pain upon Mary and manifests the reality of their mutual diminishment, with only a hint of consequent enrichment.

Elsewhere we have traced the path taken by John as he develops, with endearing love as well as with breathtaking theological precision, these contemplative hints at Cana.⁷ The covenant between Christ and Mary turns out to be, like the love lauded in the Song of Songs, 'as strong as death, a flash of fire, a flame of Yahweh himself; a love no

⁷ Cf 'Behold your mother', in *The Way*, vol ix (January 1969), pp 51-58.

flood can quench, no torrents drown' (Cant 8, 6-7). So the *kenosis*, the impoverishment, is seen at the last to be that mutual single-minded sacrificial love, which suddenly becomes the riches with which all the children of the God-man, Jesus, and of his mother, are endowed. 'And Jesus said to his mother: Woman, this is your Son' (Jn 19, 26).

It is not that there ceases to be a highly individual quality for the Christian who welcomes the impoverishment in the gift of the mind and heart of Christ who 'emptied himself . . . even to accepting death' (Phil 2, 7-8). Yet it is not only demonstrated, but given an undreamt of depth and substance in relationship. The *kenosis* of Jesus, humanly, radiates outwards from Mary, just as hers takes its substance, divine as well as human, from his.

We cannot express gospel-poverty with things. It has, in fact, very little to do with things. It has to do with people, and their hearts' responses: not what they have or have not in their hands. Again, it is not that we wish to disassociate time-honoured or newly-found symbol or gesture with this radical poverty of spirit. But any sign which does not indicate the total gift, the being absolutely for others, will end by being no sign at all. This said, I myself, and all that relates to me, things as well as people, in so far as they are freely for me, and freely mine, are at the disposal of others. At this point poverty is closely linked with virginal consecration, and equally closely linked with obedience: the obediential stance of Christ (in whom the Father is) and Mary in mutual relationship. This has nothing to do with the unfortunate historical accident by which 'religious' poverty was associated with infantile obedience and permissions, in what eventually became the trivialization of relationship between subject and superior. In the concrete, it is the acceptance, firstly, to have the whole of one's free self available; and, secondly, never to dispose of oneself, except in terms of the other and under the guidance of the Spirit. This is gospel-poverty.

Among the many examples which the Lord uses to instruct us about this poverty, one which is most affective as well as effective, is his relationship with Peter. Eventually, he tells him: 'When you were young, you went where you liked and you were your own master; but not any more' (cf Jn 21, 18-19). It is the same symbol, the same gesture of the emptying of self, of the stripping; the same finality, the same inevitability, the total availability in self-giving of the disciple.

Finally, there is but one compelling example: the cross is what poverty says; and nothing else can say gospel-poverty. Nor is it necessarily the manner, the details of the symbol or the gesture,

which in christian art and literature is Christ stripped and naked. Rather it is the effective and affective word of self-surrender: 'Into your hands I commend my spirit' (Lk 23, 46). 'Let it happen'. 'Whatever the consequences, let it happen'. This is the availability which involves us in the sort of witness, the sort of martyrdom which Mary embraced, unknowingly, in her *fiat*. It is integral to God's truth that without the presence of Our Lady, the manifestation of Christ's *kenosis* would be curiously incomplete. He must surrender all who are his own, 'those whom the Father has given me as my own': and no one more his own than his mother. Hence the last gesture of giving away, first, her whom he holds most dear; and then, and only then, himself. Her having had to give him is complemented by his final desperate need to strip himself, to empty himself. The last and the most precious gift-possession is offered, and given: the final impoverishment for the eternal enrichment of risen glory. 'If we endure with him, we shall also reign with him'.⁸

⁸ This article originated in a talk given to the American Sisters of Jesus and Mary in their house of prayer, Highland Mills, N.Y.