

## CHRISTIAN POVERTY

In this seminar on Christian Poverty it will be our task, as I understand it, to examine the reality of poverty in the world today with a view towards proposing a Christian interpretation or attitude towards poverty. In my introductory remarks, I have ranged far and wide, including various considerations which will bear more or less directly on the problem. Many of the sentences in this paper end with a question mark, since I feel that it is my role here to propose problems for discussion rather than to terminate any interchange of ideas on the problem at hand.

The two main sources to be considered this afternoon are scriptural and the recent contributions of the social sciences. Since I believe that we can presume a considerable familiarity with the scriptures on this point, I will not expand this aspect of the problem at any length. It may be sufficient to indicate that the scriptures point out a dual-faceted view of poverty. On the one hand we find Christ living as a poor man, identifying himself with the poor (Mt. 25), indicating the danger of riches to salvation (Lk. 18:25), and how the rich have already received their reward (Lk. 5:27). The story of Dives and Lazarus is well known, as well as the exhortation of St. James that we show no favoritism to the wealthy, but that we equally see Christ in the poor (Jas. 2:1-7).

However, the possession of some degree of wealth, and at least a tacit approval of this condition, can be deduced from such texts as "For I was hungry and you gave me to eat, thirsty and you gave me to drink, a stranger and you took me in . . ." (Mt. 25:35ss.), or, "He who has the goods of this world and sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him? My dear children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (I Jn. 3:17-18).

Obviously, some degree of wealth is supposed by these texts, and is not condemned, unless there is failure to come to the assistance of one's neighbor who is in need. Moreover, this assistance can be seen as a testimonial of love, the greatest of the commandments.

On the subject of poverty and wealth, then, an ambivalent attitude emerges from the scriptures. The traditional teaching on the necessary development of one's talents (Mt. 25:14-30) should also be noted in this context. We are given a positive command to develop what God has entrusted to our care.

If we are to utilize the scriptural praise of poverty, we must do so with full awareness of the findings of modern empirical science, weighing carefully our statements so as not to appear ridiculous in the face of known realities. When speaking of poverty in the world today, it is imperative that we understand clearly the reality of which we are speaking. To those engaged in the "War on Poverty," it can hardly be considered to be an admirable, desirable condition. Poverty is seen as a way of life, a sub-culture or even a culture itself which may permeate entire sectors of a society, or, in the case of some countries of the world, reflect the life-style of the majority of the people.

Oscar Lewis, an anthropologist from the University of Illinois, has provided us with an illuminating analysis of the culture of poverty in his studies of Mexican family life. He distinguishes economic, as well as social and psychological characteristics of this culture.

The economic traits which are most characteristic of poverty include the constant struggle for survival, unemployment and underemployment, low wages, a miscellany of unskilled occupations, child labor, the absence of savings, a chronic shortage of cash, the absence of food reserves in the home, the pattern of frequent buying of small quantities of food many times a day as the need arises, the pawning of personal goods, borrowing from local money lenders at usurious rates of interest, spontaneous informal credit devices organized by neighbors, and the use of second-hand clothing and furniture. Some of the social and psychological characteristics include living in crowded quarters, a lack of privacy, gregariousness, a high incidence of alcoholism, frequent resort to violence in the settlement of quarrels, frequent use of violence in the training of children, wife beating, early initiation into sex, free unions or consensual marriages, a relatively high incidence of abandonment of mothers and children, a trend toward mother-centered families and a much greater knowledge of maternal relatives, the predominance of the nuclear family, a strong predisposition to authoritarianism, and a great emphasis upon

family solidarity—an ideal only rarely achieved. Other traits include a strong present-time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification and plan for the future, a sense of resignation and fatalism based upon the realities of their difficult life situation, a belief in male superiority which reaches its crystallization in Machismo, or the cult of masculinity, with a corresponding martyr complex among women, and finally a high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts.<sup>1</sup>

In his preface to another of Mr. Lewis' books, Oliver LaFarge makes the following observations:

To me among the striking things about these families are their general malaise, the rarity among them of happiness or contentment, the rarity of affection. Demonstrative affection, except during a relatively brief courting and initial mating period, or what we usually mean by "love" are rare among the poorer, simpler peoples of the world. Above all, where hunger and discomfort rule, there is little spare energy for the gentler, warmer, less utilitarian emotions and little chance for active happiness.

The malaise I am discussing extends over the whole world. A portion of the dynamics of poverty, at least, belongs to it, for in many, many instances an old, physically satisfactory, *primitive* existence is replaced by an unsatisfactory, *impoverished* existence as peoples become caught in the economic web that is inseparable from the extension of the Age of Technology.<sup>2</sup>

In his powerful book, *The Other America*, Michael Harrington indicates some of the elements which must be included in a definition of poverty.

Poverty should be defined in terms of those who are denied the minimal levels of health, housing, food, and education that our present stage of scientific knowledge specifies as necessary for life as it is now lived in the United States.

Poverty should be defined psychologically in terms of those

<sup>1</sup> O. Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. xxvi.

<sup>2</sup> O. LaFarge, Foreword to *Five Families*, by O. Lewis (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Science Edition, 1962), p. ix-x.

whose place in society is such that they are internal exiles who, almost inevitably, develop attitudes of defeat and pessimism and who are therefore excluded from taking advantage of new opportunities.

Poverty should be defined absolutely, in terms of what man and society could be. As long as America is less than its potential, the nation as a whole is impoverished by that fact. As long as there is the other America, we are, all of us, poorer because of it.<sup>3</sup>

What is poverty then? How are we to understand it? Père Gauthier in his beautiful little book, *Christ the Church and the Poor*, offers us the following suggestion:

The poor really means all men, all humanity, in the sense that all are lost by sin and called to salvation in Jesus Christ. And in an even more exact fashion the poor are all those men who realize their own human and spiritual misery, and acknowledge themselves sinners and necessitous before God, their creator and savior, even if they are culturally and materially rich. But the poor are, above all, those who have at the utmost just the bare necessities, or perhaps not even that—the ordinary people, the small men, the laborers, the exploited, the oppressed and, in the extreme, the starving.<sup>4</sup>

Are we for poverty then, or against it? I will leave this question to be discussed by the group later on. It seems to me that we are against poverty, but very much for the poor. In a real sense, the Church should be the Church of the poor. But we may well ask if this is indeed the case. Père Gauthier takes a rather dim view of the situation.

The words of Pius XI are full of profound significance: 'The scandal of the twentieth century is that the Church has lost the working class.' In fact, however, the Church has not lost the working class, because this new class was never inside the Church, never having been won from within. And beyond the working class are all those poor peoples, peoples who are determined to work hard to emerge from their poverty, and all

<sup>3</sup> M. Harrington, *The Other America, Poverty in the United States* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 175.

<sup>4</sup> P. Gauthier, *Christ the Church and the Poor*, trans. by E. Fitzgerald (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1965), p. 55-56.

those poor nations which have not yet received the light of the Gospel from the Church.

The hierarchy is established pretty well everywhere geographically but not sociologically, in which respect it seems restricted and attached to that part of the world in which men eat their fill and are clothed and housed without moiling and toiling. This world is foreign to and different from that in which two-thirds of humanity live, in which they have not bread enough either for their bodies or their souls, in which they must work hard and with very little return.

Jesus gave as a sign of his messianism that 'the poor have the good news preached to them' (Lk. 7:22). Is this same sign sufficiently obvious in our day? . . . what in fact we are talking about is the poor and the rupture between them and the Church's outward appearance. Poor people do not feel themselves at home in the Church.<sup>5</sup>

Though Père Gauthier wrote with the European and Near Eastern situation specifically in mind, do his words not apply also in our own society? Is there not a growing sociological identification of the Church with the middle and higher social classes? We must search our practices to determine if this is not becoming more and more the case. What about our Catholic schools? Are they open to all, rich and poor alike, or does the tuitional cost impede the poor from even dreaming about attending our schools in many sections of the country? This is not intended as a criticism of the schools necessarily, but rather as a statement of fact—the identification of the Catholic Church in this country is becoming more and more that of a middle class Church. This is especially true of the clergy. We must recognize this in the attitudes which we bring to the pulpit and to the confessional, to the lecture room and the parlor, to our seminary classrooms and centers of graduate study. We must recognize that the young candidate for the priesthood or religious life of today represents the middle class American, not the poor immigrant of yesteryear.<sup>6</sup> It becomes increasingly more difficult for the middle class to hear, much less to understand or have compassion for, the

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> J. Fichter, *Religion as an Occupation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961), p. 63.



cries of the poor and the oppressed. The middle class seeks the peaceful maintenance of the *status quo*—why not, all is going along fairly well for them! The poor seek change, anything but what they have. Yet they are caught up in the complex of interacting forces which render inefficacious their desires and aspirations.

Similarly, the very forms which the Church utilizes in its ministry are so frequently adapted to the middle or higher classes rather than to the poor and uneducated. Up until recently, for example, the form of worship employed almost universally throughout the Church precluded the poor from really understanding the ceremony. Most of the poor throughout the world are illiterate. It is difficult to conceive of how the poor could have understood the entire ceremonial of the Mass which was conducted in a foreign language, Latin. The language itself was a medium best understood by the educated classes thereby excluding the poor.

May I appeal once again to the powerful phrases of Père Gauthier for his views on this identification of the Church with the higher classes:

The Church of Jesus Christ continues to compromise herself with the upholders of a civilization of power and riches, whilst the labouring masses are building up a different civilization through the action of the working-class movement. Labour will be re-valued in that civilization, and working men will take the place rightly due to them in the country and in the world. Will the Church of Christ be present there to fulfill her mission of justice, unity and love, and ensure that this stream shall remain as unsullied as possible? Or will she swim against the stream with the upholders of the established order, with those who are satisfied with things as they are?

This cleavage represents a real schism, a wound in the body of Christ, a separation of the two objects of his single, divine love. This schism has become a heresy, just as in the sixteenth century the break-away of the Western countries, scandalized by the riches of the Renaissance Rome and the traffic in indulgences, was bound up with the Protestant heresy. Today the heresy is more directly connected with the mystery of poverty, which is being profaned by Marxism's idolatry of the proletariat in compensation for the contempt and injustices shown by a society that called itself Christian towards the poor worker of the nineteenth century. Marxism

has exalted the proletariat and cut the bond between the poor and the Church, between the poor and Christ. What is at stake is the identity of Jesus with the poor, and of the Church with the poor and with Jesus.

Now this identity is not only insufficiently visible, but we must ask ourselves whether it is being properly treated as an essential aspect of the mystery of Christ, in modern spirituality or in modern theology. It is not easy to find spiritual works which present the mystery of Jesus the carpenter, Jesus the poor man, as a profound subject for contemplation. And it is even more difficult to obtain a definite theological answer to the question: what is exactly the identity of Jesus with the poor, and the identity of the Church with the poor? In the meantime the poor and the working people, who represent two-thirds of humanity, are still awaiting both the Gospel and the breaking of bread—both the bread of the body and the bread of the soul. They are still awaiting a gesture of friendliness from a world that calls itself Christian, and a hope of emerging from their misery.<sup>7</sup>

If the relationship between the Church and the poor is somewhat shrouded in obscurity, we must recognize that it is perhaps even more difficult to pinpoint responsibilities and obligations towards the poor. The rapidly increasing complexity of modern society makes it extremely difficult for an individual to know what he must do, and how he is to go about it.

Since poverty is at least partially an economic situation, some understanding of the complexity of economic life today is essential to the theologian if he is to adequately discharge his function of serving as a guide to souls. The simple one-to-one relations discussed by the medieval moralists, or individual-to-the-state relations which serve in varying combinations as the basis for discussions of commutative, social and distributive justice, are looked upon as somewhat naive in the modern context.<sup>8</sup> Interrelations become ever more complex after the manner of expanding concentric circles when one considers, for example, the individual, the family, groups of individuals and groups of families, the small town or suburban community, neighborhoods within a larger city, larger groupings of citizens in

<sup>7</sup> Gauthier, *op. cit.*, p. 79-81.

<sup>8</sup> St. Thomas, *S.T.*, IIa, IIae, 61, 1.

counties, or states, and then into countries. Within this context we find an unending series of associations, trade unions, business groups, interstate commerce, inter-urban developments, inter-state programs, federal-local programs, state-federal disputes and alliances, etc. Where is to be found in this maze a consistent, workable set of principles which will clearly spell out for the individual what he should do, and how he should do it, and through which medium he must operate? Extending this analysis a bit further, we come to the national and international level—alliances and blocs, free trade associations, tariffs, nascent industries and outmoded industries, the development of synthetic products which compete on world markets with raw materials which may well provide the entire sustenance for some countries or regions of the earth—we could go on and on in this fashion. The net result is a complexity that staggers the imagination.

Many people see in this complexity a concatenation of forces almost beyond human control—certainly beyond their control at a given moment. Many feel that they must follow these general developments or go under. The proposal that these changes and transformations can actually be directed is viewed as pure fantasy, and who is to say that they are wrong. The individual sees himself more and more as only one small part in a vast complex whole. At different levels within this whole are differing degrees of influence over the course of progress of that whole. But the precise points of demarcation are blurred. How much control pertains to individuals as such? How much to groups of individuals? How much to associations? How much to government? To which branch or phase of government? How much to what may be called super-government (United Nations, OAS, etc.)? We must honestly admit that no one knows. The popes have attempted to establish some guidelines in their social encyclicals, but admittedly these are only the beginning.<sup>9</sup> Even after winning assent to such a principle as subsidiarity, there are still a thousand and one questions which must be answered before definite steps can be taken to assist the poor and to work for a more equitable distribution of the goods of this world.

<sup>9</sup> Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, trans. by W. Gibbons, S.J. (Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1961), p. 23ss.



In the field of justice, for example, how far has our thinking progressed? Have we been able to encompass the full range of social and economic developments of recent years to provide clear guidelines for the moral decisions of our people? What is the position of the large corporation, for example, with regard to distributive justice? What obligations does the individual or group have towards *society* apart from his obligations to the *state*? Are such functions as the payment of taxes sufficient for an individual to discharge his duties to society? If not, what more is required, and on what principles do we base our conclusions? If I see a poor man on the street, living nearby, or someone I may happen upon while traveling in another part of the country, or in another country, what is my obligation to him? Is there one? Can I simply turn my back on him and go my own way? Can I suppose that society will assist him, and since I am a taxpayer, am I relieved of any further obligation? What if society is not taking care of him? What must I do? If I decide that there is an obligation to help him, then what must I do? Take him into my own home? Buy him a meal? Provide him with work? Work with some of my neighbors to influence the political authorities or business leaders to take some action in behalf of the poor? How great is this responsibility? What must I sacrifice to discharge it? The questions roll on and on. All too frequently we don't even bother to ask them after the first couple, because we wind up with a big question mark—we simply don't know. Much as I detest entering into detailed specifics in such matters, I am personally convinced that it is because we do not successfully examine these questions that our people do not take more definite action. A *general obligation* is all too frequently seen as *no obligation*.

To further complicate the matter, not only is it difficult to determine wherein lie our obligations, but it is extremely difficult to figure out ways to successfully fulfill them. How does one go about helping the poor? If their culture is somewhat self-contained, how does one penetrate it? If a gulf exists between them and the Church, how do we bridge this chasm? When large masses of people are living what is considered by others to be a sub-human life, do the others have the right and/or duty to interfere, with or against the wishes of the poor? On the international level, can or must a country

intervene in the affairs of another country in an effort to "help the poor"? Are there techniques available to guarantee that this intervention will be successful? Andrew Shonfield in his book, *The Attack on World Poverty*, offers us the following observation.

In 1959/60, when I was doing a round of visits to the international organizations concerned with development, the "educate 'em first" school was in the ascendant. In New York, in Geneva, in Paris, and in the outposts of the United Nations in Bangkok and Santiago, I kept hearing the same story; people in the underdeveloped countries were just not ready to use large amounts of additional capital in an effective way. Of course they would, if you offered them a lot of foreign exchange, be able to spend it. The question was, after spending it, how substantial would be the permanent gain in their productive power? In only a few cases was there a clear prospect that the gain would be sufficient to create a new economic momentum in these societies with sufficient force of its own to continue even after the special aid from abroad had lapsed.<sup>10</sup>

Does the obligation to assist the poor also imply a prolonged search for the means by which the poor can be reached and helped? And what is to be said of the aspiration level of people? Is it Christian to seek for a better way of life? If one lives in a society which is generally poor, would this condition the response to that question? May I legitimately aspire to a better way of life when those around me are plunged in misery and degradation? Am I then betraying the poor? Can a country which has been long classified as underdeveloped aspire to be ranked among the dominant nations of the world? Are sheer numbers to be weighed in this decision, or degree of advancement in culture, or what standard? What gives the poor man the "right" to be heard in society, to make his presence felt? What gives the nation that same "right"? How far does competence extend in this regard? If an individual is technically unqualified, he is frequently ignored. Is this Christian respect for the individual? Extend this problem to the national and international level. What is the Christian view of this? Does the businessman have the obligation to train the poor, as well as to hire him? Does a

<sup>10</sup> A. Shonfield, *The Attack on World Poverty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p. 3.

government have the obligation to technologically advance another country? What about the side-effects on the culture of the people? How much responsibility must be assumed for the sometimes far-reaching consequences of technological change on a society?

The sociologist uses the term "social mobility" to indicate the "process by which individuals move from one position to another in society—positions which by general consent have been given specific hierarchical values."<sup>11</sup> High rates of social mobility seem to be characteristic of modern industrialized societies.<sup>12</sup> What is the Christian view of this? Does this involve too close a dependence or interest in the things of this world?<sup>13</sup> Yet, if a person is to maintain the position that he has, he must strive mightily to advance, since only by advancing can one maintain his present position in this modern world. Again we revert back to the parable of the talents. What judgment is to be made of this highly complex phenomenon? May a man legitimately strive to escape the life of poverty? At what cost? Under all circumstances? May he legitimately aspire after honors and higher positions in life? At what cost? In what circumstances? Are others obliged to assist him in his upward struggle when this may very well involve their descent? Are nations obliged to assist other nations to advance when this may be in some way prejudicial to their own "best interests"? International cooperation is a recent entry upon the world scene. What are the moral rules governing its birth, development, administration and goals? These are new realities with which we must contend. This is the problem of poverty in its fullest dimension. How much does one nation owe to another in justice? How much in charity? How are these norms established? By geographic propinquity? By degree of need?<sup>14</sup> By availability of funds and other resources? By affilia-

<sup>11</sup> S. Lipset and R. Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-75.

<sup>13</sup> J. Leclercq, *Christianity and Money*, Trans. by E. Smith (New York: Hawthorn Books), esp. pp. 86ss. His distinction between poverty and destitution is a valid one, but currently passing out of common usage, and therefore tends to confuse rather than clarify the situation. It also tends to be somewhat idealized, not rooted in the reality of the situation.

<sup>14</sup> A. McCormack, *World Poverty and the Christian* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), p. 119ss.

tion with international organizations? By acceptance of certain political or economic systems? By adherence to certain religious beliefs? What vehicles exist to implement these decrees of the virtues? How does one country go about assisting (or paying her debt to, if you will) another country? Must it erect the structures through which this assistance is to be carried out? How can this best be done? Through unilateral or bilateral agreements? Through group operations, through private enterprise systems, or through governmental operations? Does it make any difference morally? Or is this a purely "technical" matter, to be solved at the discretion of the economists and planners without any reference to moral values?

I believe that the time has come to bring this part of our seminar to a close. May I summarize some of the principal points which I wished to convey to you.

- (1) Scripturally, we find a dual view of poverty. On the one hand it is recommended to us, while on the other hand it is seen as a challenge, something to be alleviated, a stimulus to our justice and charity.
- (2) Poverty must be seen in modern life as a culture, a way of life. The full reality of this culture must be grasped so that our statements about poverty will be meaningful and relevant to the real life situations in which people find themselves.
- (3) Social class distinctions in modern society must be recognized, particularly in terms of the identification of the Church with one or another of these classes. In particular, churchmen should be well aware of their own social class position which may strongly influence their thinking processes, their attitudes, and eventually their entire apostolate.
- (4) The complexity of modern society, especially in the social, economic and political orders, has placed a great strain on our traditional expositions of the virtues of justice and charity. The development of a whole series of relationships beyond the family and intermediate to the state, as well as problems of the relation of individuals and groups to both the local and higher forms of government, not to men-

tion a developing awareness of the need for super-governments such as the United Nations, OAS, etc., demands a far more detailed and highly intricate set of moral principles and applications than are now available. Obligations are not seen clearly, partly because the situations are relatively new, but also because theology has yet to develop, along with the complex society, a set of principles adequate to guide it.

- (5) How is the increasingly widespread process of social mobility viewed by theology? Whether considered on the level of individuals or of groups or nations, is it good, bad or indifferent? What limitations, if any, are to be set to the desire which individuals or groups may have to improve their level of living in this life?
- (6) Implicitly throughout this paper I have been stressing the need of the theologian to benefit from the immense labors of the human sciences to work toward a more adequate explanation and application of God's revelation to the reality of human life.

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