Poverty

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Words of Spirituality
by ENZO BIANCHI
The primacy of the Kingdom drastically reduces the priority of wealth. Jesus asks his followers to be on their guard against wealth, which can take possession of the heart

Any Christian discussion on the subject of poverty requires extreme caution. The topic is easy to manipulate: certain Gospel texts, if removed from their contexts, can be used to justify a form of severity that is radical and impracticable, and therefore unreal. At the other extreme, the current exaltation of the 'market' has led some to go so far as to search for (and claim to find) a foundation for the capitalist system in the Gospel. I want to recognize, on the one hand, the misleading character of the various forms of demonization of the 'market,' the 'enterprise,' etc., that we sometimes encounter in ecclesial environments. I also want to recall the fact that the judgments made in ecclesial environments with regard to economic issues and situations are often inaccurate, totally incompatible with reality, based on archaic stereotypes that have little or nothing to do with today's economic situations, and therefore ideological or simply useless. What I would like to do here is reexamine the issue of poverty on the basis of the Gospel and New Testament message, in order to bring forth from the New Testament message some indications for our life today. If we consider the Gospel as a whole, we find that its message regarding poverty has meaning only if we refrain from isolating it, and instead contextualize it within the focal center of Jesus' life and preaching: the announcement of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God, and the revelation that in Jesus God visits his people. The primacy of the Kingdom, which becomes the primacy of Christ and of his call to discipleship, structures our relationships with all other human realities in such a way that they remain relative to the central reality of the Kingdom. This is why the drawing near of the Kingdom, present in the Messiah sent to the poor, makes the poor blessed (Luke 6:20-26). They are proclaimed blessed not because they are poor, but because in the Messiah they are given the pledge of an end to their poverty: the Kingdom that God will establish fully belongs to them.

At the same time, as he acknowledges the reality of a negative and multifaceted poverty that includes evil, illness, sin and death - in summary, everything that damages the fullness of human life and from which men and women must be liberated - Christ asks for inner poverty, poverty in spirit (Matthew 5:3), which concerns not what we have but who we are. Poverty in spirit is the attitude of faith and humility that belongs to those who do not trust in themselves, their own possessions or their own strength, but in the Lord. The primacy of the Kingdom drastically reduces the priority of wealth for Christians. Jesus asks his followers to be on their guard against wealth, which can take possession of the heart and become an idol ('mammon'), thereby taking the place of God and dehumanizing the person. Well before Jesus, Aristotle had already called the attitude of those who seek happiness by accumulating possessions 'against nature:' possessions or wealth can only be a means, not an end. Poverty has an anthropological dimension that we absolutely must incorporate into our lives, as part of our obedience to the calling we have received as created beings, namely, the calling to become who we are. The savage criticism of wealth and the invective against the rich we find in the Letter of James certainly do not exhaust the New Testament message regarding poverty and wealth, but they reveal a prophetic and critical stance that the church should maintain in every age, even if this leads to collisions between the church and secular authorities.

In fact, one of the ways Jesus expresses the Gospel requirement of poverty is in terms of freedom from power. "Among you it shall not be so" (Luke 22:26) is his categorical command, which defines the church as a Eucharistic community that should be structured in a way that sets it apart from secular, worldly powers. Here poverty is placed in opposition to power. A Christian community, since it acts as a reminder of the values of the Gospel, has a counter-cultural function, a responsibility to assume a critical position with regard to the dominant power. This capacity, however, is active only when the church defines authority not as power but as service. If we reduce poverty to a private virtue, we lose part of its evangelically critical potential. It is significant that when the late medieval church failed to assume a critical position with regard to the economic evolution then taking place in society, it removed poverty from its canonical ideal of holiness. Not until Vatican II was there again an effort to speak of the church as 'poor' and 'of the poor,' and not only 'for the poor' or 'with the poor.' We are rediscovering the Christological foundation of poverty: "Christ, though he was rich, for your sake became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9). This Christological foundation makes it clear that poverty is a requirement of the Gospel that is essential for all Christians, and not a suggestion reserved for some.

The Gospel requirement of poverty, however, is not a law that specifies the forms poverty should take in different social circumstances. The New Testament itself presents many different forms of poverty: selling, sharing, or abandoning one's possessions, renunciation, collections for poor churches, etc. The Christological foundation of poverty becomes Trinitarian if we realize that Christ is poor because he receives from the Father all that he has, says and does, according to the fourth Gospel. This inter-Trinitarian relationship of mutal listening and receptivity between the Father and the Son becomes communication with humanity through the gift of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who awakens Christians' creativity in

every age and guides them toward obedience to the eternal Gospel in each new historical context. The Christological and Trinitarian foundation of poverty should lead the church to examine itself regarding at least two aspects of its own poverty, which together represent a challenge Christianity will face in the coming years. First, the church's missionary activity should be poor - that is, it should adapt Jesus' extremely strict standards regarding the poverty of disciples sent on mission to today's missionary environments (cf. Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-16). Only a missionary initiative that is itself poor can approach those who are poor without contradicting the Gospel it announces, which is 'the word of the cross.' Christ made himself poor to the point of giving himself on the cross, and this giving is the fullest expression of his poverty. The church also needs to think of poverty not simply as a personal virtue but as a dimension of community and ecclesial life. This will only be possible if the church regains consciousness of its eschatological horizon, and if it allows this awareness to shape ecclesial institutions and influence the way the church situates itself in the world. Thinking of poverty as an ecclesial and community reality also means listening to the voices of the millions of poor who cry out to God for justice.

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