

It is reported that the Church Commissioners of the Church of England are devising some complicated financial arrangements to do with the large amount of valuable church plate in the possession of parish churches. The news reminds us of the whole question of church wealth. We shall not enter such deep and murky waters as those of the Vatican finances or church investment in southern Africa, but it may be interesting to look again at an old question of principle: should a Christian institution possess more wealth than the bare minimum necessary for its survival and work? For some institutions, those specifically committed to witness through poverty (the Friars for example), the answer is clear enough; but it does not follow that their poverty, any more than their celibacy, is appropriate to all.

It is one of those complicated questions in which the symbolic and the practical are confusingly twined together, moreover there are arguments in terms of symbolism on both sides. On the one hand, an obvious way of expressing the sacred is by the use of precious and beautiful things, and any movement that challenges the secular present world deals in one way or another with the sacred—in the case of Christianity in quite specific sacramental ways. It is mere evasion to argue that chalices, vestments and the like can be just as beautiful when they are made of cheap materials—so bishops should all wear wooden crosses instead of gold ones. If these things really are beautiful they will have a market value regardless of their material—nobody supposes that an Elizabethan Communion cup would fetch the same price if you melted it down. On the other hand, expensive church furnishings can be an affront to the poor—and that is the really good reason for not wearing gold crosses. It is a question whether your symbol speaks more clearly of the separation of the sacred from the secular or of the rich from the poor. This is not always easy to discern, especially in an unfamiliar culture.

When we move from the area of the symbolic (what your doing says) to that of the practical (what your saying does) there are again complications. Does the preaching of the gospel involve you in giving away any surplus wealth you have to the first poor man you meet? Obviously yes, in certain cases. However sacred your chalice, it must be profaned, put on the market, if that is the only way to save a starving man. But once we move beyond this simple case there arise problems about the best way of preventing malnutrition or any other suffering.

In practical terms, the real question is not the value of your altar-linen, but how far you are engaged in the struggle of the poor for a decent life. The catch is that in an exploitative society such as ours, this is inevitably, in part, a struggle against the rich. Of course there are other kinds of struggle as well, the efforts of scientists to conquer debilitating disease or to control population, the efforts of

technologists to cope with problems of food-production, transport and housing. It is with such 'non-controversial' struggles where, at least at first sight, the enemy is always either non-human or plainly ignorant, that Christians have, for the most part, felt at home. But the struggle cannot stop there. As we see from the dismal failure of one UNCTAD conference after another, the wealthy nations propose to remain wealthy at the expense of the poorer ones, and meanwhile within the affluent nations themselves a similar gap widens between rich and poor. In all their efforts to achieve a humane existence the poor have, in the end, to take account of the exploitative dimension, to face the fact, in other words, that the rich are on the other side, will give way as little as they can and have to be defeated.

In some abstract sense the world does not have to be like this, but in fact it is. There really is a choice to be made, not between silk and nylon chasubles, but between solidarity with the poor in their struggle, which involves challenging the rich, and not doing so, which involves colluding with the rich. Jesus, who spoke no more (and, as most would say, knew no more) about the science of society, the class-struggle and social change than he did about nuclear physics, was nonetheless quite explicit about the gulf between poor and rich. Matthew goes so far as to make it the only question on the Day of Judgment: Did you recognize Christ in the poor? Luke has that very chilling parable in which a man is damned for no other reason than that he was rich and there was a poor man at his gate.

Instead of bothering about minor ecclesiastical pomp and finery we should be asking how far we acquiesce in the domination of the poor by the rich, how far we regard the economic divisions of society as somehow 'natural' or anyway a technical matter of no immediate relevance to the gospel. We should look, for example, at the theology behind a prayer recommended by all the British Christian Churches for use during the Unity Octave: 'Lord our God, we commend to you our whole world, all nations and races, both young and old, rich and poor'. Of course, it is susceptible of a benign interpretation and of course we should pray for the rich as well as the poor (and for all sinners), but the clear and probably unconscious suggestion is that as Christ does not discriminate between nations or races or ages so he makes no difference between rich and poor. Or it is if you are sensitive to these things; Christians should be.

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