

Poverty: The Christian Response

by Alban Weston, O.P.

Theological Dictionaries are a valuable asset for any preacher. They can usually provide a helpful bibliography or perhaps the germ for preaching or lecturing on most theological topics. The *Sacramentum Mundi* article on Poverty¹ is no exception; not however, because of its theological profundity, but because of the response evoked by the badness of parts of the section on the moral theology of poverty. Here are some of the offending passages :

In the Western world only isolated individuals lack the bare necessities of life. The understanding of poverty has largely disappeared from these countries. Instead of material poverty we often find other forms of poverty—desolation of heart, a sense that life is meaningless, anxiety, isolation—which must be interpreted as a kind of longing for redemption and love. A Christian who finds these things in himself or in others must accept them in the spirit of Christ as a means of encountering God.

Poverty must first be recognised by the sufferer as a fact. By nature every form of poverty demands admission of one's own inadequacy. It is part of the human condition that distress can never be altogether abolished, whatever our efforts. . . . Certain privations are thrust upon us.

I think the passages quoted are bad, firstly because of the factual errors they contain, but more seriously because they show a misunderstanding of what Christians understand by poverty and what underlies the Christian's response. 'In the Western world only isolated individuals lack the bare necessities of life. The understanding of poverty has largely disappeared from these countries.' That may be a convenient myth reinforcing the mistaken belief that the Western world is on its great march of progress, but it muffles the truth about the real situation. Certainly the work of people like Peter Townsend, Richard Silburn, Ken Coates, Des Wilson, The Child Poverty Action Group, Shelter, has shown the extent of real poverty in Britain. It isn't all that many months ago that Britain had one million unemployed (and there doesn't seem any reason why that figure shouldn't be reached again, or even topped). Sigismund Verhey (the author of the *Sacramentum Mundi* article, and presumably a German) surely cannot be totally unaware of the scandalous poverty and squalid living conditions of the so-called Gastarbeiter in Germany. Has he really never heard of the poverty in Southern Italy, parts of Spain and France, Northern Ireland, the West of Ireland? However, it isn't so

much the factual mistakes in the article that concerns me here as the misunderstanding of the nature of poverty and hence the Christian's response and reaction.

'Poverty must be accepted as a fact. By nature every form of poverty demands the admission of one's own inadequacy. It is part of the human condition that distress can never be altogether abolished, whatever our efforts. . . . Certain privations are thrust upon us.' What saves those remarks from whiffing of heresy is that presumably the author believes that poverty is in the same class of unpleasant events as an accident—the tragic aftermath of an earthquake or car-crash, say, or falling and breaking one's leg. Poverty, that's to say, is something out of human control, like an accident: it is unpredictable and therefore unavoidable and should it occur one can only endeavour to make the best out of the wreckage. However, I want to say that poverty, as part of the fabric of society is in no sense like an accident. No doubt, should an accident happen, we would expect a Christian, like any other feeling person, to rush forward to help, but that would not be the kind of response that poverty should evoke from a Christian. I doubt if one can make a theological response to an accident, *qua* accident, but I want to assert that one can make a theological response to poverty. Why is that? And what is the difference?

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein remarks, 'A child has much to learn before it can pretend. (A dog cannot be a hypocrite, but neither can he be sincere)'.² For my purposes here I would like to rephrase the sentence written in parenthesis: dogs cannot be poor, but neither can they be rich. What Wittgenstein presumably meant was that hypocrisy and sincerity are pieces of behaviour which are unique to human beings. The ability to be hypocritical or sincere is one of the defining characteristics of man, part of what we mean when we say that man is a linguistic animal and a dog is not. It is one of those aspects of man which defines him over against the biological world. The same is true of poverty and riches: 'dogs cannot be poor, but neither can they be rich'. Dogs can of course starve—many do—but they cannot be poor. Starving isn't a sufficient or even necessary condition of poverty. One of the reasons why the myth has grown and flourished that poverty has been eradicated in Britain is that there have been few people who have died of starvation. Peter Townsend, however, in a paper published in 1964, estimated that there were something like 7½ million people living in poverty in the Britain of 1960, a figure which had nearly doubled since 1953 and was likely to go on increasing. As recently as March 18th of this year, Des Wilson in an *Observer* article claimed accuracy for the statistics that over a million homes were now unfit for human habitation and that about 30,000 people had been taken into hostels for the homeless, many thousands more were forced to stay in one room, and at least 3,000 children were separated from their parents and 'in care'.

If few people died of starvation in 1960 what does it mean to say that there were nevertheless over seven millions living in poverty? I would refer the reader here to the Ken Coates and Richard Silburn Penguin Special, *Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen*, (1970), and particularly to the chapter 'But What is Poverty?'. There Coates and Silburn quote an interesting paragraph from Professor Galbraith's book *The Affluent Society*:

people are poverty-stricken when their income, even if it is adequate for survival, falls markedly below that of the community. Then they cannot have what the larger community regards as the minimum necessary for decency; and they cannot wholly escape therefore, the judgment of the larger community that they are indecent. They are degraded, for, in a literal sense, they live outside the grades or categories which the community regards as acceptable.

Those remarks have important theological implications, but here we cite them simply to show that poverty, far from being accidental or freakish like a car-crash or earthquake, is a function of the quality of life in a particular culture or society. It is a function of the structure of that society. As someone else remarked elsewhere: 'to have one bowl of rice in a society where all other people have half a bowl may well be a sign of achievement and intelligence, to have five bowls of rice where the majority have a decent, balanced diet is a tragedy'. Only human beings can be *poor* because only human beings can be *rich*.

The social category *poor* exists because there is a social category *rich*—poverty entails some people being rich, and vice-versa. Contrary to what some would like to believe, poverty in our society does not result from the existence of groups we like to label as problem families or shiftless, lazy, ne'er-do-wells, but from the structure of that society; a structure which is a sign of an unredeemed world. The poor, as a social group, are part of a society waiting for redemption. Poverty (it seems to me the Christian wants to say) is a social sin, one of the results of that condition of Fallen Man which we call Original Sin.

Unlike poverty, it would seem that accidents, *as such*, are theologically uninteresting. Their results, in the sense of how the human responds to them may of course have theological significance, but not of themselves, *qua* accidents. Presumably that is why they are called accidents—they do not reveal or articulate some truth about the human condition. Poverty, on the other hand, discloses itself as one of the results of that dislocation or brokenness in the personal being of man which we call Original Sin.

We are perhaps familiar now with the idea that the revolution in the biological world, which we call the creation of man, gave to him a unique freedom: a freedom which allows man to transcend the fixed limits of his biological nature and, to a certain extent, to create his own

world instead of being inextricably rooted in the givenness of his biological nature.³

No longer confined in the predictable rhythms and instincts of his biological nature, man is free to discover the world (nature) as something from which he can distance himself, on which he can work, bring under his control and use for the extension of his world and the growth and enrichment of his life. He is not only the centre of his world, he is also, to a large extent, the creator of his world, his history. The source of man's creativity, this ability to transcend and distance himself from his biological limits, is presumably what is involved in the traditional doctrine that man is not simply a body, but a unity of body and soul: the soul being, as it were, the creative aspect of his total life. This freedom in man is, however, double-edged, for as well as being the source of man's creativity, it can also be the source of human destructiveness if man uses it for personal self-aggrandisement at the expense of all or some of the members of his community. Instead of using his freedom to transcend and transform the biological linking he has with the rest of humanity onto a higher, integrated level of human community, he can choose to disregard his radical connection with other men and reach out for an illusory self-fulfillment at the expense of other men, at the cost of fragmenting the total community. In other words, man is free to build and develop the human community in concert with his fellow humans (i.e. live a life of shared love), or to go it alone and to disregard other men or even use them for his own purposes.

By Original Sin, Christians understand that this possibility of exploiting other people for one's own gain is built into every human relationship; that it is a constant fragmenting and alienating possibility of human life both on the inter-personal and political level. Human freedom has limits or boundaries of expression which cannot be broken without damage to the human community as a whole. Such a boundary or limit is ruptured when we use, manipulate or enslave another for personal pleasure or gain, or to accumulate power, position or wealth. Clearly we can do this on the inter-personal level when we murder, cheat, lie or rape—we call it sin. It also seems clear, however, that if the very structure of our society—the way wealth and power is distributed and held—is of such a nature that the maintenance of that structure depends on some members of it being exploited, manipulated, perhaps destroyed for the benefit and gain of, for the accumulation of wealth and power for, those members who control the wealth and power, then what we have is a social sin; an expression of that society's fallenness and need for conversion and redemption. There are some glaringly obvious instances of societies living in sin:—Nazi Germany was a society living in sin, South Africa is a society living in sin, so is Rhodesia or any society structured on racist principles. But are we prepared to confess that our society and cul-

ture—our capitalist society— is living in social sin? Surely the answer should be yes, if our society's opulent depend for their riches on some-members of the community being poor, not only the millions of poor in Britain, but the many more millions of poor of the Third World exploited by us. If the maintenance of the structure of our society depends on pushing millions of people out onto its margins in the sense spoken of by Galbraith, then our society is sinful and poverty is no accident.

Those Christians who sacrifice much of their time prising out peddlars of pornography in Soho and writing reports on them, show considerable bravery in doing so, though in a way that is too easy since individuals can be pointed to as being responsible. Can we show now a similar bravery and confess and denounce social sin, not principally (for a change) because it is sexually permissive and exploitative—though probably one would want to say that too—but because this society of ours has millions of people living in poverty? Perhaps if we attacked social sin on its more glaring level then we might carry a little more credibility when we turn to other matters.

That poverty is a social sin of a society needing conversion and repentance ought to be the basis of any Christian response. For to believe, with the *Sacramentum Mundi* article, that poverty is one of those unfortunate accidents or facts of life which we have to make the best of, sounds like saying that any personal sin we discover in ourselves is just a fact of life too which we can't do anything about. It is a kind of quietism which fails to take seriously the Incarnation. It is to neglect our belief that in the death and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ we have the commencement of a new human community which has overcome and transformed the ambiguities residing in fallen, sinful man, and has emerged as the community which is *genuinely* free, sustained by the Holy Spirit of freedom: 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor. 3:17). We believe that we are the bearers of the Spirit of that new human community founded on the risen body of Jesus; we claim that the Church is its sign and instrument in our world. This is what we celebrate in our liturgy, particularly in the Eucharist, when we share as equals in the risen life of Jesus, and, by sharing, celebrate our becoming members of the New Creation in His Body, a life of shared love in which there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bondman nor free.

The Christian response to poverty must be different from that described in the *Sacramentum Mundi* article, because the Christian must be aware that in facing poverty he is facing no accident but something in our society which is evil. He is confronted by sin which has to be overcome in the Spirit of Christ. The response starts in locating in the structures of our society, what it is that brings about poverty. Which is another way of saying that we have to tell the world the truth about itself—preach the gospel in fact.

One of the truths that the doctrine of Original Sin teaches us is that our world, this nexus of social and political relationships, is not (as the frothy optimism of secularizing theologians would have us believe) free. It is a world that needs conversion and redemption. By the fact that they are squeezed out to live on or outside the fringes of our society and culture, degraded and rejected by that culture, the poor are a sign of our society's unredeemed condition. By being the casualties of our society they articulate that society's failure to create genuinely free human community, and hence, if they are taken notice of, they offer our society the possibility of its own transformation, renewal and growth. That is why they are a special possession of God in the Old Testament: that is why they are called blessed by Jesus: that is perhaps why Jesus told his disciples 'the poor you always have with you'. The poor are a constant reminder to the Church of her mission to be the sign and instrument in our world of the genuinely free human community of the kingdom of God. We lose credibility if we fail to be the instrument, while at the same time trying to be the sign. By working for the poor the Christian is working for the salvation of man, he is preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹*Sacramentum Mundi* edited by Karl Rahner and Cornelius Ernst, vol. 5. Burnes and Oates, 1968.

²*Philosophical Investigations* E.T. 2nd edition, Blackwell, Oxford, 11xi p.219e.

³For a more thorough discussion of this theme see *The Body as Language* Terry Eagleton, Sheed and Ward, 1970, or *Law Love and Language* Herbert McCabe OP, Sheed and Ward, 1968.

Glaucou's Question reconsidered: A reply to Mr. Hugo Meynell

by William P. Frerking

In a recent article in *New Blackfriars* ['Glaucou's Question', Vol. 53, No. 621 (February 1972), pp. 73-82.] Hugo Meynell raises again the famous question posed to Socrates by Glaucou and Adeimantus in Plato's *Republic*: What is the use, to oneself, of being good? What is the benefit, not to others, or to society, but to oneself, of being virtuous? Is the good man, just in virtue of being good, and regardless of any considerations, somehow more fortunate, better off, more blessed, happier, than any bad man? ' "Let us take a stark and extreme case," ' says Meynell's Glaucou, ' "the contrast between a bad man, with all