

Voluntary Poverty

One of the most striking things about CW communities is often their voluntary poverty. Ordinary, respectable, educated Americans have, in various degrees, given up their possessions in favor of a life of material want. This was one of Maurin's chief recommendations as a way to blow the dynamite of the Church. He liked to call people's attention to St. Francis, the great saint espoused to "Lady Poverty", and he often cited the Popes' modern encyclicals calling both single and married people to join the "Third Order" of St. Francis – an order for lay people committed to approximating Francis' own total renunciation of wealth.

The most obvious reason for Peter's emphasis on voluntary poverty is Jesus' example and teaching. Jesus talks about money more than any other topic. This may surprise you, since, if you think about morality in a Church context these days, there is a good chance you are thinking about sex. But far and away, Jesus has the sharpest words for the rich, telling the Church it is *our* job to care for the poor *personally*, and that the best thing would be to become voluntarily poor ourselves. "Woe to you rich," he says, "for you have had your reward" (Luke 6:24). "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20). "'If you want to be perfect, sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come and follow me.' But the rich man went away sad, because he had many possessions" (see Matt 19:21-2). A man built a barn for himself, to store all his excess goods, "Fool!" Jesus said, "Today your life is demanded of you!" (Luke 12:20) "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth but treasures in heaven. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt 6:20-21). "Don't worry about having enough for tomorrow. Look at the birds. They don't work at all, and God gives them what they need" (see Luke 12:23-8). "Give to everyone who begs from you, and if someone wants to borrow, don't refuse, and don't expect repayment" (see Luke 6:29-35). Jesus tells parables implying that if you do not forgive any debts others owe you, God won't forgive your sins (Matt 18:21-35). He tells a story about a rich man who was sent to hell and a poor man who went to heaven (see Luke 16:19-31). Jesus himself was voluntarily homeless, he "had no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:58), as were his disciples, who "had given up everything to follow" him (see Matt 19:27). Because he was homeless, it made sense for him to say to his disciples that "whatsoever you do to the poor, the homeless, the sick, or the imprisoned, you did to *me*:" he literally was a poor, homeless man.

This aspect of Jesus' teaching has perhaps been most marginalized by our age. Again, it is said that it is only "natural" to want comfort and security, and so we should leave that *super-natural* poverty stuff to the monks or priests. Most of us, the usual line goes, ought to live as middle-class Americans and are not called to such extremes. And so Peter's message was simply that both Jesus' and the Pope's call to voluntary poverty was meant for all Christians. The Sermon on the Mount was addressed to crowds of all sorts, and the Franciscan Third Order was aimed *particularly* at the laity.

Because of this, it's important to say that voluntary poverty does not mean destitution. It does not, for most, mean giving away everything and going to live on the street or in the woods. There is, in fact, no one picture or standard of what being voluntarily poor looks like. It will be different for the family than it will for single people, and different in the city than the country. What it probably does mean for all is to try to live a very simple life, with as little beyond the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter as you can manage. And it means that, whenever there is some left over, it is put in the service of others, rather than saved for a rainy day or spent on

vacations. The poor can't do these things, and so to be voluntarily poor is not to do them either. This is a sort of vague baseline definition, but it's enough to indicate what Peter had in mind.

And the point, of course, was not to demand one more sacrifice, much less to impose an unnecessary rule, but rather, to relieve what can be one of the greatest burdens of this life. "St. Francis", Maurin wrote, "wanted us to live as free as the birds", and not to be tied down by material concerns. It is this freedom from the chains of the thousand worries that wealth brings that voluntary poverty offers. And once again Peter was not saying anything more radical than the Church had always said: to live for Christ we must be *internally* detached from material things, and the best way to foster this is to be *externally* detached from them. So, in a hyper-materialistic environment like modern America, where we have been taught from youth that it is *good* and *virtuous* to always worry about tomorrow, this message is more important than ever. Most of us are so chained to our creature comforts we don't even know what this freedom might be.

This is why Peter emphasized that this voluntary poverty could not just be "spiritual": it must be evident, material divestiture of things. This was because, as he would point out, the Gospel calls us to spiritual poverty – true humility and dependence only on Christ. But those, he said, who pursue only spiritual poverty often end up without any kind of poverty at all. This very practical freedom gave to Catholic Workers the ability to spend time on the practical things of God – prayer and the works of mercy – whereas those concerned to keep up a higher standard of living would have trouble finding the time, even if they wanted to. There's also an obvious element of solidarity with the poor here: not just serving them from an ivory tower, as if their poverty were a bad thing, or something to be eliminated. Poverty, for Catholics, is not itself evil, since the Son of God himself chose it and dignified it. So solidarity with the poor is really just solidarity with Jesus Christ who was born in a manger, had no place to lay his head, and relied on the hospitality of others.

An overlooked element of voluntary poverty is its ability to increase our faith. We stockpile wealth because we live in fear. Intentionally courting the precarious life that poverty brings is a refusal to let this fear determine our lives. Even in the face of that fear (since it might not ever go away) it can be a wager that what God says is true – that if you give all to him, including giving up possessions, he will supply your want. Poverty invites God to act tangibly in your life, and a statement that you're ready, eyes open, looking out for it. Daring God to provide by following his commandments and then watching small miracle after small miracle is one sure way make the Gospel come alive. It also sums up much of the history of the Catholic Worker. It is an abandonment to divine providence.

Voluntary poverty can also be a method of not participating in certain evils of our age. No one needs convincing today that society is shot through with what are sometimes called "systematic injustice:" oppression, inequity, unjust wages, violence, racism, war, want, classism, and the rest. Listing them like this of course risks domesticating their horror, which is real, profound, and often not appreciated by those who benefit from it most. But go spend an hour with the people at your local homeless shelter and you'll see the results. Most of the comforts that make up my life come at an unbearable cost to other, real, flesh and blood, persons. Our social fabric has long been one that depends on us all having this blood on our hands, and either being blind to it, refusing to acknowledge it, or intentionally forgetting about it. The "systemic"

part of this is that, of course, it is all connected – it's not just the military-industrial complex anymore, as people used to say to describe the way that business and war-making went together. Now it's the military-industrial-information-technology-multinational-corporation-agrobusiness-big-pharm-medical-educational-and-everything-else-complex.

Catholics have been and should be worried about their own participation in particular aspects of this “apparatus.” Just a few examples: a large portion of all American tax dollars pays for ongoing wars the Church has consistently condemned as unjust; the products of agrobusiness juggernauts empower the continual desolation of rural communities, small farms, and the created order; the staggering (and increasing) number of homeless, destitute, and wage slaves is driven by winner-take all free-trade practices that pay most in our society barely enough to get by, many nothing at all, and all as little as possible; usury – the lending of money at high levels of interest – is in some ways the fabric that makes up all of this, at the base, as it is, of everything from credit card purchases to home mortgages to trading stocks. This same trade, at home and abroad, hand in hand with ongoing wars that are at the same time for democracy and free markets, form one imperial economy that in a century has remade the world in the image of Walmart and Amazon.

These are just to mention a few. Nor can Catholics dismiss all this as the ranting of a conservative, or a liberal, soap-boxing on pet issues. No: each of these evils has been explicitly condemned by the Church; each of them touches countless real people; each of them is a sin against the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. To be a faithful Catholic is to be concerned with them. Yet it is not just that these things are harmful to our neighbors, they are harmful to each of us. They deform our souls, weaken our spiritual defenses, make us more prone to sin, and then tempt us *to* sin. This is the Christian definition of oppression. The really demonic and tricky thing about this World is that just as you inch your way from the destitution that stands at the bottom (in some ways the great unnamed fear always somewhere in the back of our minds), you find yourself trapped in serving exactly this Apparatus. We can only achieve economic security at the cost being plunged into what you might call a different kind of poverty – modernized poverty. We are not on the street, but we are just as dependent on the dole of bureaucrats and technocrats to manage all our affairs as the homeless person on the corner.

No one, perhaps, in our century, has had a keener sense of this interconnectedness of all things than Dorothy Day. In the February 1937 edition of the *Catholic Worker* she related how [e]very morning now about four hundred men come to Mott Street to be fed...the hosts of unemployed men, by no means derelicts, who are trying to keep body and soul together while they look for work. It is hard to say, matter-of-factly and cheerfully, “Good morning,” as we pass on our way to Mass. It was the hardest to say Merry Christmas, or Happy New Year, during the holiday time, to these men with despair and patient misery written on many of their faces. One felt more like taking their hands and saying, “Forgive us—let us forgive each other! All of us who are more comfortable, who have a place to sleep, three meals a day, work to do – we are responsible for your condition. We are guilty of each other’s sins. We must bear each other’s burdens. Forgive us and may God forgive us all!

In light of our interconnected world, voluntary poverty appears as an eminently *practical* council of the Gospel. It not only teaches spiritual detachment, it is also a method (perhaps the

only one) of non-participation. How not to contribute to unjust war taxes? How, at least for your part, to protest the destruction of small communities by big business? How not to put forth at least your own hand to replace ethnic diversity with plastic American monoculture? How to avoid paying unjust wages? How to stand with the Church against the regime of usury? How to avoid the straightjacket of modernized poverty? The answer to all these questions is, in one way or another, voluntary poverty.

Yet there is no way, of course, especially for those of us living in cities or suburbs, to *eliminate* our participation in these evils. It goes without saying that there is no clean money. Indeed, part of the diabolical nature of our age is that it conscripts entire nations, willy-nilly, into fighting battles against our fellow man. We do this merely by being alive. The frightful thing is that we are all guilty, and we will all have to give an account. Yet this is not something, it seems to me, that the Gospel did not account for, and the Catholic Worker has a history of exemplifying this. “Make friends for yourself,” Jesus says, “with sinful wealth, so that later they may receive you into eternal homes.” “Give alms, and all things are clean for you.” “Forgive people their debts, and our Father in heaven will forgive you yours.” The rich tax collector Zacchaeus – rich as we all are by means of exploiting others – gave half his wealth to the poor, and returned to those he exploited four times what he took – he took on, in other words, voluntary poverty. And Jesus said to him “today salvation has come to this house.”

There is a posture, in other words, that we can strike with our money, that is pleasing to God, even if there is no way to extricate ourselves from the evils associated with living in a devastated world. It is a posture that makes a concerted effort not to exploit others, and in a spirit of penitence to have open hands with what we do use. And if this is a world in which we are all likely to find ourselves Zacchaeuses, there is every reason to take what he did seriously. And taking what Zacchaeus did seriously means, like he did, repenting of the evil in which he was involved by renouncing his wealth to a degree which, let’s be clear, must have hurt.

This is what Peter Maurin did, and what he preached, to all of us. But, here as elsewhere Peter is giving us, quite frankly, just the Christian take on things: wealth is not bad in itself but it quickly involves all of us in bad things. To an extent unimaginable in Jesus’ day, today this involvement is simply coextensive with having money. And yet the divine solution remains the same: strip yourself of all that you have that you do not need; learn to live with much, much less; give what you have left over to the poor; refuse, in what you do spend, as far as possible, to support evil causes (this will cost more, and make you poorer!). And finally, because, even after we have done all of this, we still have all sorts of blood on our hands, bind yourselves in sacrificial friendship to the wounded: house the homeless, feed the hungry, visit the sick and the imprisoned.

But it is perhaps best to let Dorothy have the last word:

Love of brother means voluntary poverty, stripping one’s self, putting off the old man, denying one’s self, etc. It also means non-participation in those comforts and luxuries which have been manufactured by the exploitation of others. While our brothers suffer, we must compassionate them, suffer with them. While our brothers suffer from lack of necessities, we will refuse to enjoy comforts. These resolutions, no matter how hard they are to live up to, no matter how often we fall and have to begin over again, are part of the vision and the long-range view which Peter Maurin has been trying to give us these past

ten years...And we must keep this vision in mind, recognize the truth of it, the necessity for it, even though we do not, can not, live up to it. Like perfection. We are ordered to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, and we aim at it, in our intention, though in our execution we may fall short of the mark over and over. St. Paul says, it is by little and by little that we proceed. (CW, December 1944)