

## Chapter Thirteen

# POVERTY: SOLIDARITY AND PROTEST

For some years now we have seen in the Church a recovery of a more authentic and radical witness of poverty.<sup>1</sup> At first this occurred within various recently founded religious communities. It quickly went beyond the narrow limits of "religious poverty," however, raising challenges and questions in other sectors of the Church. Poverty has become one of the central themes of contemporary Christian spirituality and indeed has become a controversial question. From the concern to imitate more faithfully the poor Christ, there has spontaneously emerged a critical and militant attitude regarding the countersign that the Church as a whole presents in the matter of poverty.

Those who showed this concern—with John XXIII at the head—knocked insistently at the doors of Vatican II. In an important message in preparation for the opening of the Council, John opened up a fertile perspective saying, "In dealing with the underdeveloped countries, the Church presents herself as she is and as she wants to be—as the Church of all men and especially the Church of the poor."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, from the first session of the Council the theme of poverty was very much in the air.<sup>3</sup> Later there was even a "Schema 14," which on the issue of poverty went beyond "Schema 13" (the draft for *Gaudium et spes*). The final results of the Council, however, did not correspond to the expectations. The documents allude several times to poverty, but it is not one of the major thrusts.<sup>4</sup>

Later, *Populorum progressio* is somewhat more concrete and clear with regard to various questions related to poverty. But it will remain for the Church on a continent of misery and injustice to give the theme of poverty its proper importance: *the authenticity of the preaching of the Gospel message depends on this witness.*<sup>5</sup>

The theme of poverty has been dealt with in recent years, especially in the field of spirituality.<sup>6</sup> In the contemporary world, fascinated by a wealth and power established upon the plunder and exploitation of the great majorities, poverty appeared as an inescapable precondition to sanctity. Therefore the

greatest efforts were to meditate on the Biblical texts which recall the poverty of Christ and thus to identify with Christ in this witness.

More recently a properly theological reflection on poverty has been undertaken, based on ever richer and more precise exegetical studies. From these first attempts there stands out clearly one rather surprising result: poverty is a notion which has received very little theological treatment and in spite of everything is still quite unclear.<sup>7</sup> Lines of interpretation overlap; various exegeses still carry weight today, even though they were developed in very different contexts which no longer exist; certain aspects of the theme function as static compartments which prevent a grasp of its overall meaning. All this has led us onto slippery terrain on which we have tried to maneuver more by intuition than by clear and well-formulated ideas.

## AMBIGUITIES IN THE TERM "POVERTY"

Poverty is an equivocal term. But the ambiguity of the term does nothing more than express the ambiguity of the notions themselves which are involved. To try to clarify what we understand by *poverty*, we must clear the path and examine some of the sources of the ambiguity. This will also permit us to indicate the meaning we will give to various expressions which we will use later.

The term *poverty* designates in the first place *material poverty*, that is, the lack of economic goods necessary for a human life worthy of the name. In this sense poverty is considered degrading and is rejected by the conscience of contemporary persons. Even those who are not—or do not wish to be—aware of the root causes of this poverty believe that it should be struggled against. Christians, however, often have a tendency to give material poverty a positive value, considering it almost a human and religious ideal. It is seen as austerity and indifference to the things of this world and a precondition for a life in conformity with the Gospel. This interpretation would mean that the demands of Christianity are at cross purposes to the great aspirations of persons today who want to free themselves from subjection to nature, to eliminate the exploitation of some persons by others, and to create prosperity for everyone.<sup>8</sup> The double and contradictory meaning of *poverty* implied here gives rise to the imposition of one language on another and is a frequent source of ambiguities. The matter becomes even more complex if we take into consideration that the concept of material poverty is in constant evolution. Not having access to certain cultural, social, and political values, for example, is today part of the poverty that persons hope to abolish. Would material poverty as an "ideal" of Christian life also include lacking these things?

On the other hand, poverty has often been thought of and experienced by Christians as part of the condition—seen with a certain fatalism—of marginalized peoples, "the poor," who are an object of our mercy. But things are no longer like this. Social classes, nations, and entire continents are becoming aware of their poverty, and when they see its root causes, they rebel against it. The contemporary phenomenon is a collective poverty that leads those who

suffer from it to forge bonds of solidarity among themselves and to organize in the struggle against the conditions they are in and against those who benefit from these conditions.

What we mean by material poverty is a subhuman situation. As we shall see later, the Bible also considers it this way. Concretely, to be poor means to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others, not to know that you are being exploited, not to know that you are a person. It is in relation to this poverty—material and cultural, collective and militant—that evangelical poverty will have to define itself.

The notion of *spiritual poverty* is even less clear. Often it is seen simply as an interior attitude of unattachment to the goods of this world. The poor, therefore, are not so much the ones who have no material goods; rather it is they who are not attached to them—even if they do possess them. This point of view allows for the case of the rich person who is spiritually poor as well as for the poor person who is rich at heart. These are extreme cases that distract attention toward the exceptional and the accessory. Claiming to be based on the Beatitude of Matthew concerning “the poor in spirit,” this approach in the long run leads to comforting and tranquilizing conclusions.

This spiritualistic perspective rapidly leads to dead ends and to affirmations that the interior attitude must necessarily be incarnated in a testimony of material poverty. But if this is so, questions arise: What poverty is being spoken of? The poverty that the contemporary conscience considers subhuman? Is it in this way that spiritual poverty should be incarnated? Some answer that it is not necessary to go to such extremes, and they attempt to distinguish between destitution and poverty. The witness involves living poverty, not destitution. But then, as we have said, we are not referring to poverty as it is lived and perceived today, but rather to a different kind of poverty, abstract and made according to the specifications of our spiritual poverty. This is to play with words—and with persons.

The distinction between evangelical counsels and precepts creates other ambiguities. According to it, evangelical poverty would be a counsel appropriate to a particular vocation and not a precept obligatory for all Christians. This distinction kept evangelical poverty confined incommunicado for a long time within the narrow limits of religious life, which focuses on “the evangelical counsels.”<sup>9</sup> Today the distinction is only another source of misunderstandings.<sup>10</sup>

Because of all these ambiguities and uncertainties we have been unable to proceed on solid ground; we have wandered along an unsure path where it is difficult to advance and easy to wander. We have also fallen into very vague terminology and a kind of sentimentalism which in the last analysis justifies the status quo. In situations like the present one in Latin America this is especially serious. We see the danger, for example, in various commentaries on the writings of Bossuet regarding “the eminent dignity of the poor in the Church”; or in symbolism like that which considers the hunger of the poor as “the image of the human soul hungering for God”; or even in the expression “the Church

of the poor,” which—in spite of the indisputable purity of intention of John XXIII—is susceptible to an interpretation smacking of paternalism.

Clarification is needed. In the following pages we will attempt to sketch at least the broad outlines. We will try to keep in mind that—as one spiritual writer has said—the first form of poverty is to renounce the idea we have of poverty.

## BIBLICAL MEANING OF POVERTY

Poverty is a central theme both in the Old and the New Testaments. It is treated both briefly and profoundly; it describes social situations and expresses spiritual experiences communicated only with difficulty; it defines personal attitudes, a whole people's attitude before God, and the relationships of persons with each other. It is possible, nevertheless, to try to unravel the knots and to clear the horizon by following the two major lines of thought that seem to stand out: poverty as a scandalous condition and poverty as spiritual childhood.<sup>11</sup> The notion of evangelical poverty will be illuminated by a comparison of these two perspectives.<sup>12</sup>

### *Poverty: A Scandalous Condition*

In the Bible poverty is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God.

This rejection of poverty is seen very clearly in the vocabulary used.<sup>13</sup> In the Old Testament the term which is used least to speak of the poor is *rash*, which has a rather neutral meaning.<sup>14</sup> As Gelin says, the prophets preferred terms which are “photographic” of real, living persons.<sup>15</sup> The poor person is, therefore, *ébyôn*, the one who desires, the beggar, the one who is lacking something and who awaits it from another.<sup>16</sup> He is also *dal*, the weak one, the frail one; the expression *the poor of the land* (the rural proletariat) is found very frequently.<sup>17</sup> The poor person is also *ani*, the bent over one, the one laboring under a weight, the one not in possession of his whole strength and vigor, the humiliated one.<sup>18</sup> And finally he is *anaw*, from the same root as the previous term but having a more religious connotation—“humble before God.”<sup>19</sup> In the New Testament the Greek term *ptokós* is used to speak of the poor person. *Ptokós* means one who does not have what is necessary to subsist, the wretched one driven into begging.<sup>20</sup>

*Indigent, weak, bent over, wretched* are terms which well express a degrading human situation. These terms already insinuate a protest. They are not limited to description; they take a stand.<sup>21</sup> This stand is made explicit in the vigorous rejection of poverty. The climate in which poverty is described is one of indignation. And it is with the same indignation that the cause of poverty is indicated: the injustice of oppressors. The cause is well expressed in a text from Job:

Wicked men move boundary-stones  
and carry away flocks and their shepherds.  
In the field they reap what is not theirs,  
and filch the late grapes from the rich man's  
vineyard.

They drive off the orphan's ass  
and lead away the widow's ox with a rope.  
They snatch the fatherless infant from the breast  
and take the poor man's child in pledge.  
They jostle the poor out of the way;  
the destitute huddle together, hiding from them.  
The poor rise early like the wild ass,  
when it scours the wilderness for food;  
But though they work till nightfall,  
their children go hungry.  
Naked and bare they pass the night;  
in the cold they have nothing to cover them.  
They are drenched by rain-storms from the hills  
and hug the rock, their only shelter.  
Naked and bare they go about their work,  
and hungry they carry the sheaves;  
They press the oil in the shade where two walls meet,  
they tread the winepress but themselves go thirsty.  
Far from the city, they groan like dying men,  
and like wounded men they cry out; . . .  
The murderer rises before daylight  
to kill some miserable wretch [Job 24:2-12, 14].

Poverty is not caused by fate; it is caused by the actions of those whom the prophet condemns:

These are the words of the Lord:  
For crime after crime of Israel  
I will grant them no reprieve  
because they sell the innocent for silver  
and the destitute for a pair of shoes.  
They grind the heads of the poor into the earth  
and thrust the humble out of their way  
[Amos 2:6-7].

There are poor because some are victims of others. "Shame on you," it says in Isaiah,

you who make unjust laws  
and publish burdensome decrees,

depriving the poor of justice,  
robbing the weakest of my people of their rights,  
despoiling the widow and plundering the orphan  
[10:1-2].<sup>22</sup>

The prophets condemn every kind of abuse, every form of keeping the poor in poverty or of creating new poor. They are not merely allusions to situations; the finger is pointed at those who are to blame. Fraudulent commerce and exploitation are condemned (Hos. 12:8; Amos 8:5; Mic. 6:10-11; Isa. 3:14; Jer. 5:27; 6:12), as well as the hoarding of lands (Mic. 2:1-3; Ezek. 22:29; Hab. 2:5-6), dishonest courts (Amos 5:7; Jer. 22:13-17; Mic. 3:9-11; Isa. 5:23, 10:1-2), the violence of the ruling classes (2 Kings 23:30, 35; Amos 4:1; Mic. 3:1-2; 6:12; Jer. 22:13-17), slavery (Neh. 5:1-5; Amos 2:6; 8:6), unjust taxes (Amos 4:1; Jer. 22:13-17), and unjust functionaries (Amos 5:7; Jer. 5:28).<sup>23</sup> In the New Testament oppression by the rich is also condemned, especially in Luke (6:24-25; 12:13-21; 16:19-31; 18:18-26) and in the Letter of James (2:5-9; 4:13-17; 5:16).

But it is not simply a matter of denouncing poverty. The Bible speaks of positive and concrete measures to prevent poverty from becoming established among the People of God. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy there is very detailed legislation designed to prevent the accumulation of wealth and the consequent exploitation. It is said, for example, that what remains in the fields after the harvest and the gathering of olives and grapes should not be collected; it is for the alien, the orphan, and the widow (Deut. 24:19-21; Lev. 19:9-10). Even more, the fields should not be harvested to the very edge so that something remains for the poor and the aliens (Lev. 23:22). The Sabbath, the day of the Lord, has a social significance; it is a day of rest for the slave and the alien (Exod. 23:12; Deut. 5:14). The triennial tithe is not to be carried to the temple; rather it is for the alien, the orphan, and the widow (Deut. 14:28-29; 26:12). Interest on loans is forbidden (Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:35-37; Deut. 23:20). Other important measures include the Sabbath year and the jubilee year. Every seven years the fields will be left to lie fallow "to provide food for the poor of your people" (Exod. 23:11; Lev. 25:2-7), although it is recognized that this duty is not always fulfilled (Lev. 26:34-35). After seven years the slaves were to regain their freedom (Exod. 21:2-6) and debts were to be pardoned (Deut. 15:1-18). This is also the meaning of the jubilee year of Lev. 25:10ff.<sup>24</sup> "It was," writes de Vaux, "a general emancipation . . . of all the inhabitants of the land. The fields lay fallow: every man re-entered his ancestral property, i.e. the fields and houses which had been alienated returned to their original owners."<sup>25</sup>

Behind these texts we can see three principal reasons for this vigorous repudiation of poverty. In the first place, poverty contradicts the very meaning of *the Mosaic religion*. Moses led his people out of the slavery, exploitation, and alienation of Egypt<sup>26</sup> so that they might inhabit a land where they could live with human dignity. In Moses' mission of liberation there was a close relationship between the religion of Yahweh and the elimination of servitude:

Moses and Aaron then said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, because he has heeded your complaints against him; it is not against us that you bring your complaints; we are nothing." "You shall know this," Moses said, "when the Lord, in answer to your complaints, gives you flesh to eat in the evening, and in the morning bread in plenty. What are we? It is against the Lord that you bring your complaints, and not against us" [Exod. 16:6-8].

The worship of Yahweh and the possession of the land are both included in the same promise. The rejection of the exploitation of some by others is found in the very roots of the people of Israel. God is the only owner of the land given to people (Lev. 25:23, 38); God is the one Lord who saves the people from servitude and will not allow them to be subjected to it again (Deut. 5:15; 16:22; Lev. 25:42; 26:13). And thus Deuteronomy speaks of "the ideal of a brotherhood where there was no poverty."<sup>27</sup> In their rejection of poverty, the prophets, who were heirs to the Mosaic ideal, referred to the past, to the origins of the people; there they sought the inspiration for the construction of a just society. To accept poverty and injustice is to fall back into the conditions of servitude which existed before the liberation from Egypt. It is to regress.

The second reason for the repudiation of the state of slavery and exploitation of the Jewish people in Egypt is that it goes against *the mandate of Genesis* (1:26; 2:15). Humankind is created in the image and likeness of God and is destined to dominate the earth.<sup>28</sup> Humankind fulfills itself only by transforming nature and thus entering into relationships with other persons. Only in this way do persons come to a full consciousness of themselves as subjects of creative freedom which is realized through work. The exploitation and injustice implicit in poverty make work into something servile and dehumanizing. Alienated work, instead of liberating persons, enslaves them even more.<sup>29</sup> And so it is that when just treatment is asked for the poor, the slaves, and the aliens, it is recalled that Israel also was alien and enslaved in Egypt (Exod. 22:21-23; 23:9; Deut. 10:19; Lev. 19:34).

And finally, humankind not only has been made in the image and likeness of God; it is also *the sacrament of God*. We have already recalled this profound and challenging Biblical theme.<sup>30</sup> The other reasons for the Biblical rejection of poverty have their roots here: to oppress the poor is to offend God; to know God is to work justice among human beings. We meet God in our encounter with other persons; what is done for others is done for the Lord.

In a word, the existence of poverty represents a sundering both of solidarity among persons and also of communion with God. Poverty is an expression of a sin, that is, of a negation of love. It is therefore incompatible with the coming of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of love and justice.

Poverty is an evil, a scandalous condition,<sup>31</sup> which in our times has taken on enormous proportions.<sup>32</sup> To eliminate it is to bring closer the moment of seeing God face to face, in union with other persons.<sup>33</sup>

### Poverty: Spiritual Childhood

There is a second line of thinking concerning poverty in the Bible. The poor person is the "client" of Yahweh; poverty is "the ability to welcome God, an openness to God, a willingness to be used by God, a humility before God."<sup>34</sup>

The vocabulary which is used here is the same as that used to speak of poverty as an evil. But the terms used to designate the poor person receive an ever more demanding and precise religious meaning.<sup>35</sup> This is the case especially with the term *anaw*, which in the plural (*anawim*) is the privileged designation of the spiritually poor.

Repeated infidelity to the Covenant of the people of Israel led the prophets to elaborate the theme of the "tiny remnant" (Isa. 4:3; 6:13). Made up of those who remained faithful to Yahweh, the remnant would be the Israel of the future. From its midst there would emerge the Messiah and consequently the first fruits of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:26-28). From the time of Zephaniah (seventh century B.C.), those who awaited the liberating work of the Messiah were "poor": "But I will leave in you a people afflicted and poor, the survivors in Israel shall find refuge in the name of the Lord" (Zeph. 3:12-13). In this way the term acquired a spiritual meaning. From then on poverty was presented as an ideal: "Seek the Lord, all in the land who live humbly by his laws, seek righteousness, seek a humble heart" (Zeph. 2:3). Understood in this way poverty is opposed to pride, to an attitude of self-sufficiency; on the other hand, it is synonymous with faith, with abandonment and trust in the Lord.<sup>36</sup> This spiritual meaning will be accentuated during the historical experiences of Israel after the time of Zephaniah. Jeremiah calls himself poor (*ébyôn*) when he sings his thanksgiving to God (20:13). Spiritual poverty is a precondition for approaching God. "All these are of my own making and all these are mine. This is the very word of the Lord. The man I look to is a man down-trodden and distressed, one who reveres my words" (Isa. 66:2).

The Psalms can help us to understand more precisely this religious attitude. To know Yahweh is to seek him (9:11; 34:11), to abandon and entrust oneself to him (10:14; 34:9, 37:40), to hope in him (25:3-5, 21; 37:9), to fear the Lord (25:12, 14; 34:8, 10), to observe his commandments (25:10); the poor are the just ones, the whole ones (34:20, 22; 37:17-18), the faithful ones (37:28; 149:1). The opposite of the poor are the proud, who are the enemy of Yahweh and of the helpless (10:2; 18:28; 37:10; 86:14).

Spiritual poverty finds its highest expression in the Beatitudes of the New Testament. The version in *Matthew*—thanks to solid exegetical studies—no longer seems to present any great difficulties in interpretation. The poverty which is called "blessed" in Matt. 5:1 ("Blessed are the poor in spirit") is spiritual poverty as understood since the time of Zephaniah: to be totally at the disposition of the Lord. This is the precondition for being able to receive the Word of God.<sup>37</sup> It has, therefore, the same meaning as the gospel theme of spiritual childhood. God's communication with us is a gift of love; to receive



this gift it is necessary to be poor, a spiritual child. This poverty has no direct relationship to wealth; in the first instance it is not a question of indifference to the goods of this world. It goes deeper than that; it means to have no other sustenance than the will of God. This is the attitude of Christ. Indeed, it is to him that all the Beatitudes fundamentally refer.<sup>38</sup>

In Luke's version ("Blessed are you poor" [6:20]) we are faced with greater problems of interpretation.<sup>39</sup> Attempts to resolve these difficulties follow two different lines of thinking. Luke is the evangelist who is most sensitive to social realities. In his Gospel as well as in Acts the themes of material poverty, of goods held in common, and of the condemnation of the rich are frequently treated. This has naturally led to thinking that the poor whom he blesses are the opposite of the rich whom he condemns; the poor would be those who lack what they need. In this case the poverty that he speaks of in the first Beatitude would be *material poverty*.

But this interpretation presents a twofold difficulty. It would lead to the canonization of a social class. The poor would be the privileged of the Kingdom, even to the point of having their access to it assured, not by any choice on their part but by a socio-economic situation which had been imposed on them. Some commentators insist that this would not be evangelical and would be contrary to the intentions of Luke.<sup>40</sup> On the opposite extreme within this interpretation are those who claim to avoid this difficulty and yet preserve the concrete sociological meaning of poverty in Luke. Situating themselves in the perspective of wisdom literature, they say that the first Beatitude opposes the present world to the world beyond; the sufferings of today will be compensated for in the future life.<sup>41</sup> Extraterrestrial salvation is the absolute value which makes the present life insignificant. But this point of view implies purely and simply that Luke is sacralizing misery and injustice and is therefore preaching resignation to it.

Because of these impasses, an explanation is sought from another perspective: Matthew's. Like Matthew, Luke would be referring to *spiritual poverty*, or to openness to God. As a concession to the social context of Luke there is in this interpretation an emphasis on real poverty insofar as it is "a privileged path towards poverty of soul."<sup>42</sup>

This second line of interpretation seems to us to minimize the sense of Luke's text. Indeed, it is impossible to avoid the concrete and "material" meaning which the term *poor* has for this evangelist. It refers first of all to those who live in a social situation characterized by a lack of the goods of this world and even by misery and indigence. Even further, it refers to a margined social group, with connotations of oppression and lack of liberty.<sup>43</sup>

All this leads us to retrace our steps and to reconsider the difficulties—which we have recalled above—in explaining the text of Luke as referring to the materially poor.

"Blessed are you poor for yours is the Kingdom of God" does not mean, it seems to us: "Accept your poverty because later this injustice will be compensated for in the Kingdom of God." If we believe that the Kingdom of God is a

gift which is received in history, and if we believe, as the eschatological promises—so charged with human and historical content—indicate to us, that the Kingdom of God necessarily implies the reestablishment of justice in this world,<sup>44</sup> then we must believe that Christ says that the poor are blessed *because* the Kingdom of God has begun: "The time has come; the Kingdom of God is upon you" (Mark 1:15). In other words, the elimination of the exploitation and poverty that prevent the poor from being fully human has begun; a Kingdom of justice which goes even beyond what they could have hoped for has begun. They are blessed because the coming of the Kingdom will put an end to their poverty by creating a world of fellowship. They are blessed because the Messiah will open the eyes of the blind and will give bread to the hungry. Situated in a prophetic perspective, the text in Luke uses the term *poor* in the tradition of the first major line of thought we have studied: poverty is an evil and therefore incompatible with the Kingdom of God, which has come in its fullness into history and embraces the totality of human existence.<sup>45</sup>

### AN ATTEMPT AT SYNTHESIS: SOLIDARITY AND PROTEST

Material poverty is a scandalous condition. Spiritual poverty is an attitude of openness to God and spiritual childhood. Having clarified these two meanings of the term *poverty* we have cleared the path and can now move forward towards a better understanding of the Christian witness of poverty. We turn now to a third meaning of the term: poverty as a commitment of solidarity and protest.

We have laid aside the first two meanings. The first is subtly deceptive; the second partial and insufficient. In the first place, if *material poverty* is something to be rejected, as the Bible vigorously insists, then a witness of poverty cannot make of it a Christian ideal. This would be to aspire to a condition which is recognized as degrading to persons. It would be, moreover, to move against the current of history. It would be to oppose any idea of the domination of nature by humans and the consequent and progressive creation of better conditions of life. And finally, but not least seriously, it would be to justify, even if involuntarily, the injustice and exploitation which is the cause of poverty.

On the other hand, our analysis of the Biblical texts concerning *spiritual poverty* has helped us to see that it is not directly or in the first instance an interior detachment from the goods of this world, a spiritual attitude which becomes authentic by incarnating itself in material poverty. Spiritual poverty is something more complete and profound. It is above all total availability to the Lord. Its relationship to the use or ownership of economic goods is inescapable, but secondary and partial. Spiritual childhood—an ability to receive, not a passive acceptance—defines the total posture of human existence before God, persons, and things.

How are we therefore to understand the evangelical meaning of the witness

of a real, material, concrete poverty? *Lumen gentium* invites us to look for the deepest meaning of Christian poverty in Christ: "Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and under oppression, so the Church is called to follow the same path in communicating to others the fruits of salvation. Christ Jesus, though He was by nature God . . . emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave (Phil. 2:6), and being rich, he became poor (2 Cor. 8:9) for our sakes. Thus, although the Church needs human resources to carry out her mission, she is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim humility and self-sacrifice, even by her own example" (no. 8). The Incarnation is an act of love. Christ became human, died, and rose from the dead to set us free so that we might enjoy freedom (Gal. 5:1). To die and to rise again with Christ is to vanquish death and to enter into a new life (cf. Rom. 6:1-11). The cross and the resurrection are the seal of our liberty.

The taking on of the servile and sinful human condition, as foretold in Second Isaiah, is presented by Paul as an act of voluntary impoverishment: "For you know how generous our Lord Jesus Christ has been: He was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). This is the humiliation of Christ, his *kenosis* (Phil. 2:6-11). But he does not take on the human sinful condition and its consequences to idealize it. It is rather because of love for and solidarity with others who suffer in it. It is to redeem them from their sin and to enrich them with his poverty. It is to struggle against human selfishness and everything that divides persons and allows that there be rich and poor, possessors and dispossessed, oppressors and oppressed.

Poverty is an act of love and liberation. It has a redemptive value. If the ultimate cause of human exploitation and alienation is selfishness, the deepest reason for voluntary poverty is love of neighbor. Christian poverty has meaning only as a commitment of solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer misery and injustice. The commitment is to witness to the evil which has resulted from sin and is a breach of communion. It is not a question of idealizing poverty, but rather of taking it on as it is—an evil—to protest against it and to struggle to abolish it. As Ricoeur says, you cannot really be with the poor unless you are struggling against poverty. Because of this solidarity—which must manifest itself in specific action, a style of life, a break with one's social class—one can also help the poor and exploited to become aware of their exploitation and seek liberation from it. Christian poverty, an expression of love, is solidarity with the poor and is a protest against poverty.<sup>46</sup> This is the concrete, contemporary meaning of the witness of poverty. It is a poverty lived not for its own sake, but rather as an authentic imitation of Christ; it is a poverty which means taking on the sinful human condition to liberate humankind from sin and all its consequences.<sup>47</sup>

Luke presents the community of goods in the early Church as an ideal. "All whose faith had drawn them together held everything in common" (Acts 2:44); "not a man of them claimed any of his possessions as his own, but everything was held in common" (Acts 4:33). They did this with a profound unity, one "in

heart and soul" (ibid.). But as J. Dupont correctly points out, this was not a question of erecting poverty as an ideal, but rather of seeing to it that there were no poor: "They had never a needy person among them, because all who had property in land or houses sold it, brought the proceeds of the sale, and laid the money at the feet of the apostles; it was then distributed to any who stood in need" (Acts 4:34-35). The meaning of the community of goods is clear: to eliminate poverty because of love of the poor person. Dupont rightly concludes, "If goods are held in common, it is not therefore in order to become poor for love of an ideal of poverty; rather it is so that there will be no poor. The ideal pursued is, once again, charity, a true love for the poor."<sup>48</sup>

We must pay special attention to the words we use. The term *poor* might seem not only vague and churchy, but also somewhat sentimental and aseptic. The "poor" person today is the oppressed one, the one margined from society, the member of the proletariat struggling for the most basic rights; the exploited and plundered social class, the country struggling for its liberation. In today's world the solidarity and protest of which we are speaking have an evident and inevitable "political" character insofar as they imply liberation. To be with the oppressed is to be against the oppressor. In our times and on our continent to be in solidarity with the "poor," understood in this way, means to run personal risks—even to put one's life in danger. Many Christians—and non-Christians—who are committed to the Latin American revolutionary process are running these risks. And so there are emerging new ways of living poverty which are different from the classic "renunciation of the goods of this world."

Only by rejecting poverty and by making itself poor in order to protest against it can the Church preach something that is uniquely its own: "spiritual poverty," that is, the openness of humankind and history to the future promised by God.<sup>49</sup> Only in this way will the Church be able to fulfill authentically—and with any possibility of being listened to—its prophetic function of denouncing every human injustice. And only in this way will it be able to preach the word which liberates, the word of genuine fellowship.<sup>50</sup>

Only authentic solidarity with the poor and a real protest against the poverty of our time can provide the concrete, vital context necessary for a theological discussion of poverty. The absence of a sufficient commitment to the poor, the margined, and the exploited is perhaps the fundamental reason why we have no solid contemporary reflection on the witness of poverty.

For the Latin American Church especially, this witness is an inescapable and much-needed sign of the authenticity of its mission.

**GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ**

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