6.

Who Are the Poor in Spirit and Why Are They Blessed?

Who are the poor in spirit? The simplest answer to this question, as many of us are aware, might be that “poor in spirit” refers to those who, while not materially poor, are inwardly detached from whatever wealth and privilege they enjoy. This explanation has the advantage of softening the blow of Luke’s version of the first Beatitude with its straightforward “Blessed are you [who are] poor.” Luke’s version seems to exclude those who cannot honestly number themselves among the economically poor but who earnestly want to follow Jesus just the same. Matthew’s way of putting the blessing leaves the door open for another way to be poor.

Those of us who have wrestled over the years with the meaning of the first Beatitude know how easy it is to dodge the challenge of Jesus’ words in Luke’s Gospel. We may have taken a vow of poverty, but how visibly do we live it? Interior detachment, following the lead Matthew provides, is no quick and easy achievement, and precisely because of its invisibility one needs to exercise constant vigilance. One thing we have learned, however, is that living with evangelical freedom in the matter of material resources and social privilege requires the regular infusion of a special grace. Without steady and meaningful contact with people who are actually poor we risk losing our spiritual edge, our sensitivity to the underlying business of the Gospel and Jesus’ mission. For the Gospel above all is supposed to be glad tidings for the poor.
Living in solidarity

I prefer to interpret the phrase *in spirit* in the sense of solidarity: Blessed are those who live in solidarity with the poor. Solidarity renders interior detachment a lot more public and practical. Detachment, that is, Gospel freedom across the length and breadth of one’s life, is much easier to examine and to assess when I think of it in terms of being ready and willing to be part of the world of men and women at the bottom of society.

Of course, solidarity that originates in prayer as the experience of communion ordinarily leads to action on behalf of those who are deprived, disadvantaged, or pushed to the side; and conscience rests content when we are actually doing something. But sometimes what matters is less what we do for others than what we are for them. Perhaps, therefore, the examination of conscience with respect to inner freedom and detachment could be formulated this way: “Do I have friends who are poor? Am I embarrassed to be seen in their company?” If I can reply yes to the first question and no to the second, then my conscience lets me sleep.

Religious poverty certainly expresses itself in the way we approach material goods while living in a consumerist culture, but it also shows itself in the readiness of religious to befriend the ones who would probably never be invited into the homes of the rich and righteous: “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (Luke 14:13). We are unlikely to invite such people to join us at table if we have not first invited them into our awareness and affection.
Poverty has more than one meaning

In addition to investigating the meaning of the phrase “in spirit,” religious writers have likewise devoted a great deal of effort to understanding the word “poor.” In a very real sense all human beings qualify as poor because whatever we have, we have received it from God. But this sort of poverty—the absolute or elementary poverty of human existence—is not what most people immediately think of when they hear the word “poor.”

There is also the poverty of spirit we associate with people who are almost totally lacking of any moral or religious sensibilities. Maybe they should be called the spiritually destitute. Such people probably would not think of themselves as poor, but in the eyes of those whose minds and hearts have been awakened to the things of God, they embody an impoverishment as devastating and grotesque as one finds in the most wretched slums. There is no reason for blessedness in this form of poverty, however.

The economically and socially poor could be considered blessed because they are going to receive the kingdom. The poor in spirit could be considered blessed because, for one reason, they have joined themselves in solidarity and friendship with those who are actually poor and will therefore be allowed to share the kingdom; and, for another reason, because they have discovered the freedom of living in this passing world with their hearts set on the world that will never end (to echo the Church’s prayer).

There may even be something blessed about the elementary poverty of the human condition itself, provided, of course, that people accept the reality of that poverty and are willing to live under its discipline. It has to be said, after all, that God created
us poor and, by sharing life with us, placed us eternally in his
debt. Existential poverty (what Johannes Baptist Metz referred
to in his book *Poverty of Spirit* as “our innate poverty as human
beings”) belongs to our original blessing. Which is why Metz
could go on to write: “The unending nature of our poverty as
human beings is our only innate treasure. We are unlimited
indigence since our very self-possession, the integrity and
lucidity of our coming-to-Being, spring not from ourselves but
from the intangible mystery of God.” Some ancient Christian
writers, reading the Song of Songs as an allegory of the
relationship between the individual and God, described the
human experience of this relationship in affective terms as
being wounded by love.

**What sort of blessing is this?**

The indigence of which Metz speaks—“love’s wound”—is
well known to religious. In fact, the lifelong incompleteness that
lies at the center of our being makes the presentation of the
vows most of us received when we joined religious life sound
all the more preliminary and introductory. Even before they are
shaped and colored by the Gospel and the example of Jesus, the
vows spring from a thirst deep within us. They give expression
to each human being’s constitutional relatedness to God, the
chief signs of which are the desires and longing that make us
who and what we are and point us toward transcendence.
Whatever it is about our nature and whatsoever happens in our
lives that draws us closer to the source of all life and goodness
are purely and simply a blessing.

So far, so good. There are many times, however, when
poverty of spirit hardly comes across as living under a blessing.
Instead, being poor in spirit can lead to extreme discomfort,
comparable to the distress we feel when, inhale as we might, we
cannot fill our lungs fully with air. Emptiness of soul is something a person who seeks God is bound to experience at one time or another. In fact, the deeper the emptiness, the more intense the search.

Now while it would be plainly untrue to insist that all human beings are equally concerned about things of the spirit, I think it is safe to say that unless a critical mass of men and women had made looking for God the central business of their lives, then there would be no Church. It can even be argued that unless at least some men and women had allowed the poverty of their spirits to guide and direct their lives, then the whole human race would suffer grievous harm. To lose one’s taste for transcendence is to change and deform one’s nature. Thus the fact that there are people living among us who have centered themselves fully and unambiguously on the mystery of God prevents the soul of our common humanity from disappearing. What sort of state would the human race be in, without men and women who are friends of God?

For religious, poverty of spirit can assume a terribly disconcerting form. Others in the Church frequently turn to religious for advice and direction in matters of prayer and contemplation, discernment, the ways of God, and the meaning of the Gospel. What happens, however, when religious come face to face with the limits of their understanding of God? What happens if they should reach a point in their own spiritual life when they can no longer tell the difference between knowing God and not knowing God? What happens when they become unsure of their own ascetical practice and moral progress, or when the difference between religious accomplishment and mere accommodation becomes elusive?
To be sure, there are certainties in our life that are born of faith; but those certainties never cancel out the not-knowing which lies at the heart of our relationship to the divine mystery. In short, religious learn, just as countless believers before them have, that they are indeed poor in spirit. And the experience of being poor in spirit arises after they have come to know God. From this perspective, things seem to get worse rather than better over time! The lives of many Christian mystics bear eloquent testimony to this curious turn of events in the interior life.

What, then, is the blessing that corresponds to this form of poverty? First and foremost, poverty of spirit gives rise to reverence and humility in our unfolding relationship with God. One learns not to attempt to speak for God or presume an unwarranted certitude about the divine mystery. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways” (Isaiah 55:8) and “no one shall see me and live” (Exodus 33:20) are two texts that merit ongoing meditation. Such humility is liberating, since we are set free from thinking that we have to take responsibility for others in their dealings with God and their search for the transcendent. It is also a source of wonder, for we never know from what corner the mystery of God will impinge upon our lives or upon the lives of the people whom we care about.

A further blessing attached to poverty of spirit is that we are less likely to forget the ardent, though often confused searching for God that pervades innumerable lives, or the sense of groping in spiritual darkness that may ensue as that search progresses. For while many seek, not all stumble upon a trustworthy way of letting that desire guide and inform their lives. Consciousness of the blind alleys, the maze of paths, and
conflicting signals that can derail a person’s first, tender efforts to find God gives birth to unfailing compassion. Why have we found God while so many others have not? The question does not lead to boasting but to wonder, thanksgiving and praise. Compassionate oneness with all human beings, growing out of a humbling awareness of the religious and moral complexities of the human condition, is an unmistakable mark of holiness and unequivocally a blessing. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the evangelist might have written, for they have learned to see the world as God does.