

I PROMISE TO BE TRULY POOR

In the Gospel of St. Mark (Mark 10: 21, 22), we read the story of the rich young man who asked Jesus for a formula of perfection: What must I do to be perfect?

Jesus' initial response, that he should obey the commandments, did not satisfy him. He emphatically stated that he had followed the commandments from youth. This claim was apparently true because the gospel account tells us that Jesus looked upon him and loved him. This rich young man obviously had incorporated the commandments in his life, which made him pleasing to God. However, just keeping the commandments did not satisfy him; he wanted something more; a greater perfection.

Isn't this the situation of most of us in seeking admission into formation in the Secular Order of Carmel? We want to go beyond the Third Mansion. We are saying it is not enough for us to simply obey and keep the commandments, to avoid sin and to be what most people regard as good Catholics. We feel a desire for a deeper union with God, for an intimate relationship with Him. After two and a-half years of consideration and formation, we decide that this way of Carmel is the way of following Jesus into greater perfection, and so we make at first a temporary and then a final commitment to tend to perfection in the spirit of the evangelical counsels and of the beatitudes according to the Rule of Life given us by our Carmelite order.

In considering at the counsel of Poverty, we regard that rich young man to see what proved to be the obstacle that kept him from walking with Jesus into deeper union with the Father in the Spirit.

When Jesus told the young man that in order to achieve the greater perfection he was seeking he should sell all that he had and then follow Him, the young man walked away sad for he had many possessions. What proved to be the obstacle to that young man in following Jesus, at least at that time, was a spirit of possessiveness about what he owned. He lacked the spirit of poverty necessary to respond to Jesus' call.

The call to poverty we answer as secular Carmelites is not the radical poverty that is practiced by those called to the religious life. As Secular Order members we are not making a promise of poverty as a religious makes a vow of poverty. When a religious makes a vow of poverty he/she makes a solemn commitment to voluntarily give up the right to ownership to anything. The religious may have use of temporal goods as the Order provides, but cannot claim them to be for his/her exclusive use absolutely. Obviously, as people living in the world we cannot ordinarily make that kind of commitment. Some individuals can and do, but it cannot be a requirement because it might violate the nature of our vocation as Carmelite seculars.

Nevertheless, we are promising to follow Christ in our state of life in the world according to the spirit of poverty required by Christ in order to be perfect, that is, to be through and through His, to belong thoroughly to God and have God Alone as our sole possession. So the question we continually have to ask ourselves in following Christ in this spirit of Poverty prescribed by the

Good News, the Gospel, is this: what is our relationship to the goods of this world which we now have in our possession? We continually need to test our spirit in regard to material possessions, and continually be on guard against an inordinate acquisitive and possessive spirit.

In Chapters 1 and 2 of St. Teresa's WAY OF PERFECTION, we find Holy Mother giving reasons for reforming the Order and providing a definition of the Carmelite Vocation. In Chapter 2, she takes up the question of poverty. In doing so, she emphasized the importance of being poor in spirit. She noted:

...although I had professed poverty, I was not only without poverty of spirit, but my spirit was devoid of all restraint. Poverty is good and contains within itself all the good things in the world. It is a great domain - I mean that he who cares nothing for the good things of the world has dominion over them all.... and what do...honors [of kings and lords] mean to me if I have realized that the chief honor of a poor man consists in his being truly poor. (41-42)

Obviously, for Teresa, to be truly poor means to be POOR IN SPIRIT.

As Carmelites we commit ourselves to live a life of perfection according to the evangelical counsels and the beatitudes. Being poor in spirit, of course, is the first BEATITUDE. This beatitude is one of those referred to by spiritual writers as an "antidote beatitude." An antidote is something one takes to counteract a poison of some kind. Being poor in spirit is the antidote against the poison of possessiveness. Looking back at that rich young man in the Gospel, we said that the obstacle that prevented him from following Jesus was his attachment to his possessions - his possessiveness. By possessiveness of course we mean a grasping, a holding on to something, whether it be a material good or a spiritual good as if we possess it by right, by dominion, by an ownership. This is contrary to St. Paul's realization, later emphasized by Therese among others, that ultimately everything is gift. When we view everything as implicitly or explicitly a gift, then we have the perspective that fosters the spirit of poverty.

When we are poor in spirit, we have this attitude of detachment toward possessions of any kind, material or spiritual. For you see, having possessions is not the real problem. What is the problem is how possessive we are about what we have. I think that is the heart of St. John of the Cross' teaching about detachment, which is not always understood or appreciated.

In ASCENT, Book I, Chapter 3, St. John is describing how detachment is like a night to the soul and he says:

We are not treating here of the lack of things, since this [the mere lack of things] implies no detachment on the part of the soul if it has a desire for them; but we are treating of detachment from them with respect to taste and desire, for it is this [detachment from desire] that leaves the soul free and void of them although it may have them.

Remember what Teresa said - "...he who cares nothing [that is, controls his desire] for the good things of the world has dominion over them all." True freedom does not necessarily mean being without things, but having control over our desire for these things. We are not free by the mere

fact of material poverty. It is not enough to simply give up possessions, if after the renunciation of the superfluous, the comforts and the conveniences of life, we still remain attached to them by affection. For as St. John reminds us again in Chapter 3:

It is not the things of this world that either occupy the soul or cause it harm, since they enter it not, but rather the will and desire for them, for it is these that dwell within it.

After the rich young man walked away sad, because he had many possessions, Jesus commented: How hard it is for the RICH to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

The rich, those who possess a great deal, have difficulty not because of what they have; they have difficulty because it is so difficult for them not to be inordinately possessive about what they have. Those who are materially or physically poor can have the same problem: they may not possess much, but they may desire much.

When Jesus told his disciples, for example, that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved. He certainly did not mean that a person rich in worldly goods could not be saved. His point was that salvation or the possession of divine life could not be had at all, by rich or by poor. To be saved, to share in God's life is impossible for man, period. God alone can save us and give us a share in his very life. EVERYTHING IS A GIFT.

So you see what is at stake in being truly poor is our attitude toward possession itself and the perspective in which we view the material and spiritual goods we have. We can be materially rich or poor by circumstance or by luck, but we can only be truly poor, poor in spirit, by will, by desire, by intention and really only by Grace.

To be truly poor in spirit means to live according to the truth of who we really are. To develop this sense of reality, which is the basis of a true spirit of poverty, we need that Gift of the Holy Spirit, which is Knowledge. This Gift enables us to know God and know ourselves in TRUTH. Such knowledge provides us with the true perspective and sense of reality. It is the science of the saints. When we truly know who God is and who we are in relation to God, how can we help but be left with a spirit and attitude of poverty? How truly poor we are even at our best and most beautiful in comparison to One who is so infinitely and supremely perfect. As Jesus tells us, even when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say: we are useless servants; we have done only what we ought to have done.

In the realization of our poverty, the virtue that sustains us is the theological virtue of hope. How can we, poor creatures that we are, attain to the God Whom we believe to be so pure and good, so infinitely perfect and supreme! The realization of who He is and who we are could only lead to despair if we were not empowered by the virtue of Hope which enables us to have trust and confidence in attaining to the perfection of our calling as children of God in and through the merits of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

When Jesus pointed out to the disciples how difficulty it was for a rich man to be saved, they rightly replied in exasperation: then who indeed can be saved. And Jesus' answer was: NO ONE

- no matter how rich they were in earthly power or heavenly power, that is virtue, no one has the power to save him- or herself and gain the kingdom on his or her own.

We speak of the Carmelite way of following Jesus as an apophatic way, the *via negativa*. We mean that it is the way to God through negation, stripping away of delusions / illusions about God in preparation for the truth or self-revelation God makes of Himself to us, the illumination of our minds and hearts by the Spirit. It is the way of NADA, "nothing." St. John of the Cross advises us: "In order to possess everything (TODA), desire to possess nothing." (Ascent I, 13,11) You see, the NADA of John of the Cross is not a sterile emptiness, but a preparation for the TODA, the ALL. God replaces our ideas, our concepts, our images we have of Him, always doomed to be imperfect and untruthful even at their best, with Himself, in so far as He desires to reveal Himself to us. We seek to be poor, to be empty, not for the sake of emptiness, but so that we can be filled with God.

The spirit of poverty requires then a complete, humble realization of our dependency upon God. Above all we must be empty of any confidence in ourselves relative to spiritual progress. God does not lead us into a higher spiritual life, nor deeper intimacy with Himself until we lose all vestiges of confidence, even the most subtle, in our own strength, initiatives, knowledge or virtues.

The direction to the spirit of poverty is the direction God took in becoming man: kenosis: self-emptying. We read a number of times in the Divine Office that passage from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 2:

*Though he was in the form of God,
Jesus did not deem equality with God
something to be grasped at.
Rather, he emptied himself
and took the form of a slave,
being born in the likeness of man.*

If we wish to be united to God, we must do exactly what the Word did to become united to man. Just as Jesus was willing to let go of his divine status (not his divine nature) in order to become man, so we must be willing to let go of any status we may acquire as man in order to become like God. Because we are in reality so poor, that is, so dependent upon God in the order of the supernatural and its end, intimate union with God, we can only desire to strive for such an attitude of poverty. However, in cultivating such a desire to follow Jesus on this path of humility toward nothingness, we take hope in the teaching of Drs. John of the Cross and Therese who taught that we would not have such a desire if God did not plan to fulfill it. This assumes that it is truly a desire and not just wishful thinking or daydreaming. We pray for an efficacious desire characterized by perseverance in striving "to seek not the best of temporal things, but the worst..." and a striving, for God's sake, "to desire to enter into complete detachment and emptiness and poverty with respect to everything that is in this world." (Ascent I, 13.6)

The spirit of poverty involves such an emptying of all ego claims to status and loss of confidence in our own power. Such emptiness must be in regard to both material and spiritual acquisitions.

We always must be willing to let go of what we consider to be pleasing to God for the sake of being truly pleasing to Him, as He desires us to be.

The Carmelite way of poverty is the way of "no-gain". When a novice sighed about her lack of virtue and progress in the spiritual life, and bemoaned how much yet she had to gain, Therese answered: "No, rather so much yet to lose!"

In practicing poverty what do we need to lose? That is the question! Certainly, we must strive to lose the spirit of acquisition. We want to be empty so that we can be filled with God. Make "room in our inn" for God! What more do we need to lose? We must lose too a spirit of possessiveness about even those things we need to have in order to live simply in our particular state of life in the world. We must strive for a sense of simplicity by acquiring only what we need, and by losing any sense of possessiveness about even those goods.

What an ideal! And as in the case of all ideals, we must view this one with the spirit of poverty, recognizing that all we can do is "endeavor to be inclined always towards" fulfilling such an aspiration. An important part of the way to this perfection of spiritual poverty is the "way of imperfection." It is our failures and deficiencies that make us realize how truly poor we are and dependent upon God. God truly then becomes our sufficiency as St. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians: 3, 5. When we are emptied of confidence in ourselves and filled with trust and confidence in God, then we are disposed for total conversion. St. Teresa confessed in her LIFE (chapter 8) that what prevented her from overcoming the last obstacles was really a remnant of confidence, which she had sustained in herself. She wrote: "I must have failed to put my whole confidence in His Majesty and to have a complete distrust of myself."

After we have done all that we have been commanded, as that rich, young man could say, and then have left everything behind in terms of acquisition and possessiveness to follow Jesus; after we have done all this and can say with sincerity: I am a useless, an unprofitable servant; then we are on the WAY. The final word, after our admission of poverty must be: O God, I place all my trust and confidence in you. And not only say it, but live it.

Our confidence in God can never be excessive or exaggerated. Blind, unlimited hope in God is what will sustain within us a genuine spirit of poverty. It is so pleasing to God that St. John of the Cross teaches: "The more the soul hopes, the more it attains." (Ascent III, 7,2) And Dr. Therese, who lived her life according to this spirit of poverty based on hope practiced as boundless trust and confidence in God, made this thought of St. John her own and wrote: "We can never have too much confidence in the good God who is so powerful and so merciful. We obtain from Him as much as we hope for."

As a final word, we go back to the response of Jesus to the rich, young man in answer for his request for a formula for following Him perfectly -

Jesus told him that perfection consisted in selling all he owned, giving the profits to the poor and then come and follow Him.

Our model in a way of understanding what this might mean for us is Therese. Over the years in

her spiritual journey, her life was a process of "selling all that she had" As a religious, materially speaking, she did this in a more radical way than most of us can do in our state of life as secular Carmelites. But she was a model to us in living out the spirit of poverty to its fullest and in a real way adhering to what Christ asked: that we not only sell all that we have, but we give to the poor what we earned from this selling. Therese came to the point where she prayed to be dispossessed of any and all merits she may have earned by her practice of virtue, and to have all these merits given to the "poor," those souls in need. She wanted to come to God completely stripped, with empty hands, without any merits accrued for herself, but all merits used for the sake of sinners.

Our personal sanctification as Carmelites is not a dead-end street; if it is, then it truly is a way that ends in death to true sanctification. Initially, we may need to make our sanctification paramount, but the closer we come to God and the more we participate in God's life, the more effusive we become in our concern about others. We truly thirst with Christ for souls: their salvation and sanctification. And so we become like Therese willing to appear before God with empty hands, having given away what "we may have acquired" through our ascetical and virtuous practices for the sake of others.

To reach such an attitude of poverty is something worth hoping and praying for.