

Toward a Spirituality of Poverty

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A SPIRITUAL approach to poverty? Is this not just a sorry attempt of an “elitist” Church to dismiss the terrible injustice suffered by the poor? In pointing to the spiritual or redemptive meaning of their suffering are we not simply burying our heads in the sand and awaiting the eschatological kingdom that “evidently” has nothing to do with this valley of tears? In opting for a “gentleman’s conversation” focusing, for example, upon “Lady Poverty,” the queen of St. Francis, the *nada* of St. John of the Cross, or the terrible trials of faith endured by St. Therese of Lisieux, might we not be guilty of ignoring our own responsibility toward the poor? Is not our own guilt and our need to act more obviously apparent in the dirty faces of barefoot and ragged children searching through garbage cans in the tourist districts of Latin America? If, on the other hand, we were to remove from this painful picture the shadow of the Cross of Christ, what remains is—pardon the expression—just plain “hell”!

The theological challenge of poverty—the challenge that poverty presents to theology—is, it seems to me, that of bringing a certain unity between the terrible sufferings, often of injustice, which form an integral part of this “valley of tears” and the immolated Lamb of God who is forever victorious over sin and death and whose open wounds constantly give new life to the Church, his body-bride. This is not simply a question of making sense of unjust human suffering, especially those caused by the unequal distribution of the earth’s resources, and still less of justifying or excusing the often decadent living that characterizes contemporary western (and dare I say “Christian”?) society. It is, however, an authentic attempt to promote true and lasting justice through the practice of Christian charity.

Christian, or spiritual, poverty is, I will argue, a share in the poverty of Christ that is at the service of redemption: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). The *admirabile commercium*, the wonderful exchange of sin and grace proclaimed by the fathers of the Church, is a communication of divine gifts that simultaneously break down the barriers of our resistance: grace (healing, redemptive) preparing the way for grace (edifying, sanctifying). Hence spiritual poverty will be presented in parallel with spiritual wealth, as that which allows the spiritual enrichment of the human person by Christ. This enrichment is, however, preceded by its absence, by a lacking of the spiritual treasure of grace, and more properly by the need of redemption, whereby spiritual poverty may be considered in terms of sin (Section I). It is, however, more properly understood—especially within the context of redemption—as a sort of dispossession, a liberation, a yielding, or a letting-go (II). This act of self-emptying (*kenosis*) in view of the divine possession, this act of making place for the Lord within our hearts, invites an analysis of spiritual poverty also in terms receptivity (III). In the final analysis, spiritual poverty is, we will see, a share in Christ’s own poverty, his receptive obedience vis-à-vis the Father and his generous outpouring upon the world (IV). For this reason, I will argue that sanctity cannot be separated from generosity nor spirituality from social justice (V).

I. Two Contrasting States of Spiritual Poverty: Sin and Redemption

Viewed theologically, the terrible cycle of poverty that scars the lives of so many of the earth’s inhabitants can only be understood against the backdrop of the still more vicious cycle of sin that requires the gift of redemption.

“When I pick up a person from the street, hungry, I give him a plate of rice, a piece of bread,” explains Mother Teresa of Calcutta who perceived her mission as a service to Christ in the poorest of the poor. “But a person who is shut out, who feels unwanted, unloved, terrified, the person who has been thrown out of society—that spiritual poverty is much harder to overcome. And abortion, which often follows from contraception, brings a people to be spiritually poor, and that is the worst poverty and the most difficult to overcome.”¹

¹ Mother Teresa of Calcutta, “Spiritual Poverty and the Breakdown of Peace,” speech at the National Prayer Breakfast (February 3, 1994), *Origins* 23.35 (February 17, 1994): no. 23, 617.

Giving a very different, even contrasting, definition to spiritual poverty than that which I will present in what follows, the holy woman of Calcutta thus presents two categories of persons who qualify as being spiritually poor: Those who, even with adequate material resources, are shunned by family, friends, and society—those whom John Paul II includes within the category of the “newer patterns” of poverty²—and those who, for lack of charity or just plain selfishness, are guilty of bringing others to this horrible state. In both cases, the spiritual poverty in question is, humanly speaking, almost impossible to overcome. At best, there is temporary relief but no long-term solution; for the suffering that stems from injustice cannot be obliterated by the best of human intentions and material resources. No amount of food, clothing, shelter, and health care—not even excellent education and career opportunities—can purify memories hardened by pain, root out bitterness from hearts broken by sorrow, and bring forgiveness from the agonizing soul of one whose self, family, and nation have been betrayed for the glory of another’s ego. Worse still is the impact that this first form of spiritual poverty (the privation of love) has upon the second (the poverty of sin) and vice versa. History has proven time and again that today’s victim is tomorrow’s persecutor. As a negative counterpart to the communion of saints, we can thus speak of a *communion of sin* whereby, in the words of John Paul II, “a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the Church and, in some way, the whole world.”³

² These “newer patterns” are often encountered, he explains, in “financially affluent sectors and groups which are nevertheless threatened by despair at the lack of meaning in their lives, by drug addiction, by fear of abandonment in old age or sickness, by marginalisation or social discrimination.” (Apostolic letter, *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, *Novo millennio ineunte* [January 6, 2001], The Catholic Truth Society, trans., no. 50). Similarly, the U.S. bishops in their 1986 pastoral letter on the economy wrote: “For poverty is not merely the lack of adequate financial resources. It entails a more profound kind of deprivation, a denial of full participation in the economic, social and political life of society and an inability to influence decisions that affect one’s life.” *Economic Justice for All* (November 1986), no. 188.

³ John Paul II, post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *On Penance and Reconciliation*, no. 16. Similarly, Walter Kasper in *Jesus, the Christ*, argues: “[E]very sin produces consequences which the sinner cannot estimate or arrest and thus becomes the cause of further sin, since it conditions the action of others negatively from the outset. . . . Thus there is an almost ‘natural’ momentum belonging to the history of sin: it becomes increasingly enclosed within a vicious circle. If nevertheless there is to be any salvation, it will require a new beginning, someone who will enter into this situation and break through it.” Walter Kasper, *Jesus, the Christ*, V. Green, trans. (London/New York: Burns & Oates/Paulist Press, 1976), 204–5.

When flame meets flame, all is ablaze. He alone, however, who is most deeply affected by sin—the Lamb of God without blemish whose whole life is an unconditional gift made manifest in vulnerability (from the vulnerability of the holy infant of Bethlehem and to that of the helpless victim of Calvary)—can experience the whole destructive force of sin and death: “He who knew no sin became sin for us” (2 Cor 5:21). This perfectly innocent One, and he alone, can extinguish the flames of our hateful passions, destroying them within the infinite depths of his own heart, passionate with love for all humanity.

From this perspective, sin is, so to speak, absorbed into Christ’s human body, which is to say that all that this body suffers—every blow, every fall, every thorn, and nail mark—remains without retaliation. Far from the popular search for justice in precisely those terms (the retaliation of sin)—hatred building upon hatred and blood upon blood—Christ’s plea for pardon marks a new beginning to human history: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). The “mediator of a new covenant” sealed with “the sprinkling of blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel” (cf. Heb 12:24)—Christ gives new meaning to innocent blood: “For this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out in behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:27). Vengeance is replaced with pardon, hatred with love.⁴ When sin meets love—authentic love, not just feigned acceptance or benevolent good wishes that come without the cost of real self-sacrifice—the result is forgiveness: “not seven times but seventy times seven” (Mt 18:22). The whole flood of pain and sorrow occasioned by sin, which, throughout the many centuries of human existence had become a roaring river, is reversed by the forgiving plea of Christ. Drawing into his own flood of grace all who acknowledge their need for this gift of pardon, he definitively reverses the tide of sin and death, installing a new order: that of redemption.

The desire for profit, the thirst for power, and even the “structures of sin” themselves are, the pope teaches in his encyclical on social concern, “only conquered—presupposing the help of divine grace—by a *diametrically opposed attitude*: a commitment to the good of one’s neighbor with the readiness, in the gospel sense, to ‘lose oneself’ for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to ‘serve him’ instead of oppressing him for one’s own advantage (cf. Mt 10:40–42; 20:25; Mk 10:42–45; Lk 22:25–27).”⁵ Vice

⁴ See Gn 4:9–11; 37:26; Ez 24:6–8; Is 26:21; Jb 15:18–19; 2 Chr 24:22; cf. Dominique Barthélemy, *God and His Image* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 177, 162.

⁵ John Paul II, encyclical, On Social Concern, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 83. “And so it is very important for us to realize,” argues Mother Teresa of Calcutta, “that love, to be true, has to hurt. I must be willing to give whatever it takes not to harm

must give way to virtue, which is to say that the spiritual poverty of sin must yield to still another form of spiritual poverty: that interior disposition (that we will treat in what follows), which permits the entry of grace. In contrast to the spiritually poor or blind—those who are slaves to sin—are thus the *spiritually rich*: those who, by the power of Christ's grace, are rich in virtue.⁶

II. Spiritual Poverty as Dispossession: Making Room for God

Nearly all anthropologies, notes the orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov, are in agreement with the presentation of the human person as “‘a being who aspires to self-transcendence,’ a being tending toward that which is greater, toward the ‘totally other.’ Since man is both a child of wealth and of poverty, what is ‘poor’ in man can reach out to what is ‘rich.’”⁷ In Augustinian terms, we are made for God and “our hearts are restless until they rest in him.”⁸ Not only is man in search of God. God, in Christ Jesus, is also in search of the sinful man who has hidden himself from God (Gn 3:10). Born in the “likeness of man” (Phil 2:7), who is himself the image of God, the Creator is impoverished so as to enrich his creation. The generous, even total, outpouring of divine life in the Person of the Son (*kenosis*) takes on such horrendous proportions, those of suffering and death (cf. v. 8), precisely because those to whom it was destined “received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1:11–12).

Salvation, then, is about God making place for himself in our hearts. This means that objective redemption is not easily distinguished from subjective redemption whereby the merits of Christ's life and passion are appropriated by the human person, with the result that everything is “grace,” as St. Thérèse of Lisieux was fond of saying. Indeed, riches and poverty are one and the same in God's Kingdom, and a pure heart—a heart that is “poor”—is more fundamentally God's gift to the human person than that of the human being to God. This is not to deny one's freedom with respect to his own salvation. When, for example, St. Augustine

other people and, in fact, to do good to them. This requires that I be willing to give until it hurts. Otherwise, there is no true love in me and I bring injustice, not peace, to those around me.” Mother Teresa, “Spiritual Poverty,” no. 6, 615.

⁶ “These poor people maybe have nothing to eat, maybe they have not a home to live in, but they can still be great people when they are spiritually rich.” Mother Teresa, “Spiritual Poverty,” no. 22, 617.

⁷ *Woman and the Salvation of the World: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women*, Anthony P. Gythiel, trans. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 55.

⁸ Cf. The Confessions, I, 1.

argues that “He who created you without you will not justify you without you,” this may be understood as “not without you disposing yourself to receive grace.”⁹ This introduces the theological significance of spiritual poverty in its most proper sense: the absence of all that hinders our communion with God and neighbor. “[I]nto an impure soul God’s grace does not steal,” exclaims St. Clement of Alexandria. “An impure soul is that which is rich in lusts and in travail with many worldly affections.”¹⁰ Hence the renunciation and selling of all possessions recommended by the Lord to the rich young is, he comments, to be understood as spoken of the passions of the soul.¹¹ Indeed, “it has proved no great gain then for him to be poor in possessions when he is rich in passions . . . while depriving himself of what is serviceable he has set on fire the innate material of evil by the lack of outward things.”¹² He, on the other hand, “is truly and nobly rich . . . who is rich in virtues.”¹³

Corresponding to these two types of poverty are two sorts of riches that help to bring out the proper sense of spiritual poverty. Liberating the mind and heart from attachment to material goods, bodily pleasures, terrestrial glory, and even other persons—which *in se* are all very good and desirable objects—spiritual poverty facilitates our attachment to the Lord whom we are commanded to love “with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind” so as also (consequently) to love “our neighbor as ourselves” (cf. Lk 10:27; Dt 6:5; Lv 19:18). For this reason, Christian self-denial is only secondarily negative. “[T]o be Christian it must,” insists Giorgio Buccellati, “affirm in the first place the relation with Christ rather than the relation with the self (as with Paul: ‘if I gave my body up and had no charity . . .’)”¹⁴ “I yield to affirm.”¹⁵ If the

⁹ See Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 28, a. 8, ad. 6.

¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria, “The Rich Man’s Salvation,” no. 19, in *Clement of Alexandria*, G. W. Butterworth, trans., Loeb Classical Library, vol. 92 (London/Cambridge, MA: Heinemann/Harvard, 1919, 1979), 309.

¹¹ “So let a man do away, not with his possessions, but rather with the passions of his soul.” *Ibid.*, no. 14, 299.

¹² *Ibid.*, no. 15, 301.

¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 19, 309.

¹⁴ Giorgio Buccellati, “Religious Vows and the Structure of Love,” *Communio* 23 (1996): 562. See 1 Cor 13:3. “Concretely, asceticism is not stoicism (which takes pride in its self-generated detachment), not victimism (which wallows in the feeling that others ought to pity us); not masochism (which savors some aspects of self-inflicted wounds), even less suicide (which is the climax of despair). In other words, it is the positive splendor of personal interaction with the risen Jesus that entails, by default, as it were, the letting go of certain attachments.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 577.

religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience tend to quiet the mind from outward solicitude, this, then, is in view of perfect charity to which all are called: the love of God above all the goods at our disposal (material, corporal and spiritual, including the memory, the intelligence and the will).¹⁶ While poverty as an evangelical counsel (religious poverty) aims at detachment, and thus interior freedom with respect to material goods, spiritual poverty aims at the actual dispossession of the self so as to belong entirely to God.¹⁷ “To be poor in spirit means,” explains Meister Eckhart, “that as the eye is poor and deprived of color, and is able to apprehend every color, so he is poor in spirit who is able to apprehend every spirit, and the Spirit of all spirits is God.”¹⁸

Simply speaking, spiritual poverty is not just a detaching of oneself from riches, a sort of voluntary impoverishment; it is also and especially a liberation of the heart and spirit which permits and even promotes a universal love, and this love is necessarily expressed as concern for the poor, the sharing of one’s resources and charitable giving. This—the act of giving to the poor—is, in turn, a means of facilitating the actual dispossession that makes room for grace such that giving disposes one to receive. The very act of letting go out of love—voluntary impoverishment or simple solidarity with the poor—is by its very nature an opening to grace: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Lk 12:34). “What splendid trading!” proclaims St. Clement of Alexandria, “What divine business! You buy incorruption with money. You give the perishing things of the world and receive in exchange for them an eternal abode in heaven. Set sail, rich man, for this market, if you are wise.”¹⁹

Spiritual poverty is thus a gift of self to God: the gift of availability in virtue of which one stands in service of love; the spiritually poor man or woman is given to love, filled with love and thus “equipped” to love.

¹⁶ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 186, a. 7.

¹⁷ Although St. Thomas argues that the vow of obedience includes the other vows (poverty and chastity) but not vice versa (*ibid.*, a. 8), it would be worth considering chastity and obedience within the context of spiritual poverty whereby the human person offers to God not only all the worldly goods at his disposal, but also all of his corporal and spiritual goods as well.

¹⁸ “The Book of ‘Benedictus,’” *The Book of Divine Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, Edmund Colledge, OSA, and Bernard McGinn, trans. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 220.

¹⁹ Clement of Alexandria, “The Rich Man’s Salvation,” no. 32, 339. See the *First Letter of Saint Clare of Assisi to Agnes of Prague* (no. 15): “O blessed poverty, who bestows eternal riches on those who love and embrace her!” (*Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, Regis J. Armstrong, OFM.Cap, ed. and trans. [New York: Paulist Press, 1988], 36.)

III. Spiritual Poverty as Receptivity: Welcoming the Divine Guest

In this sense, spiritual poverty is not primarily an *absence* (whether of constraint or of material goods), but an opening to a *presence*: to that, most especially, of God himself. “For it is no great or enviable thing to be simply without riches,” claims St. Clement of Alexandria, “apart from the purpose of obtaining life.”²⁰

Spiritual poverty is, as it were, a “letting go” to “let God”: not in the sense of simple resignation (*laissez faire*), but as a preparation for his divine and “divinizing” visit, for his sanctifying presence within one’s own soul, a presence which quickly employs all the resources at our disposal, including our very persons, for the important work (or mission) of charity.

The term *receptivity* might be evoked here, but with an important precision. To receive someone, a guest for example, is popularly understood as offering him or her hospitality, welcoming him into one’s home, sharing what one *has*; but there is also a deeper, more intimate meaning that aims at an authentic communion of persons. In this second sense, one may be said to communicate who one *is*, to give one’s very self, but in such a way as to simultaneously welcome the other’s self-gift, as when a woman is said to “receive” in the sexual embrace the man who loves her in giving himself. When this “other” is the Lord, the receptive act implies both *surrender* and *devotion* as are simultaneously evoked by the German term *Hingabe*. In Scripture, the two forms of receptivity are perhaps best modeled by Martha, the busy hostess, and Mary, the quiet contemplative who has chosen “the one thing needful,” “the better part” (Lk 10:42).²¹ Like that other Mary, most “blessed among women,” she receives Christ, not merely as visitor but as Lord; not just in her home, but in her heart.

Conceiving Christ in her mind before conceiving him in her womb, as St. Augustine teaches,²² the Virgin-Mother simultaneously realizes

²⁰ Clement of Alexandria, “The Rich Man’s Salvation,” no. 11, 293.

²¹ For the sake of precision, the two forms can, according to a certain exegesis, certainly be attributed to both women, even if the emphasis is different for each.

²² Christum prius mente quam ventre concipiens. (*Sermo* 215, 4: “In redditione symboli,” PL 38, 1074.) Angelus nuntiat, virgo audit, credit, et concipit. Fides in mente. Christus in ventre. Virgo concepti miramini: virgo peperit, plus miramini: post partum, virgo permansit. (*Sermo* 25. *In Natali Domini*, XIII, PL 38: 1019.) Plus est Mariae, discipulam fuisse Christi, quam matrem fuisse Christi. Plus est felicius discipulam fuisse Christi, quam matrem fuisse Christi. . . . Plus mente custodivit veritatem, quam utero carnem. Veritas Christus, caro Christus. Veritas Christus in mente Mariae, caro Christus in ventre Mariae.” *Sermo* 25, 7: PL 46: 937–38.

herself and her mission: "By faith she believes, by faith she conceives."²³ She is the "poor Virgin," proclaimed by St. Claire of Assisi, who "embrace[s] the poor Christ."²⁴ In "complete harmony" with his fiat of obedient love—"Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God" (Heb 10:7)—is her own fiat of loving obedience: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Hence, "*in Mary's faith*, first at the Annunciation and then fully at the foot of the Cross, an *interior space* was reopened within humanity which the eternal Father can fill 'with every spiritual blessing.' It is the space 'of the new and eternal Covenant,' and it continues to exist in the Church, which is Christ is 'a kind of sacrament of sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind.'"²⁵

IV. Spiritual Poverty as a Share in Christ's Salvific Poverty

Marian poverty in the form of receptive obedience—complete availability for God—is, of course, consequent upon the Son's own poverty of *kenosis*, his generous bestowal of divine gifts upon human nature in the Incarnation and the Paschal Mysteries. This, in turn, is consequent upon his own receptive availability vis-à-vis the Father: openness to receive his being from the Father and availability for his mission from the Father. To be sure, the New Adam does not merely receive the gift of life that the first Adam refused by his disobedience. He actually gives this life (Jn 5:21, 6:33; 17:2) and even identifies himself with it (14:6; cf. 5:26; 6:35, 48; 1 Jn 1:2). His mission in the world, his gift of self for the salvation of humankind, is however the Father's own gift (cf. Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 5:11). It is a gift that is first *received* before it is communicated further. "Thou (Father) hast given him (the Son) power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him" (17:2). The Father is glorified in the Son (Jn 17:4; cf. 14:31) in the very act whereby that glory—the glory of the eternal Son in the Father's presence (cf. 17:5; 1:14)—is communicated to the world: "The glory which thou hast given me, I have given to them" (Jn 17:22). "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me; and

²³ Fide credit, fide concepit. Idem., *Sermo* 25, 7: PL 46:937.

²⁴ Second letter of St. Claire to St. Agnes of Prague, no. 18, in *Claire of Assisi: Early Documents*, 41. Cf. her third letter, nn. 24–26: "As the glorious Virgin of virgins carried [Him] materially, so you, too, by following in her footprints (cf. 1 Pt 2:21), especially [those] of poverty and humility, can, without any doubt, always carry Him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body, holding Him by whom you and all things are held together (Wis 1:7), possessing that which, in comparison with all other transitory possessions of this world, you will possess more securely." Ibid., 45.

²⁵ John Paul II, encyclical, *Mother of the Redeemer, Redemptoris mater* (March 25, 1987), no. 28.

this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day" (Jn 6:38). Christ's mission and obedience are so perfectly coordinated that what comes from the Father as a "command" (Jn 10:18; 12:49) returns to him as the Son's entreaty: "May they all be one; even as though, Father, art in me, and I in thee" (Jn 17:21). There is thus a perfect parallelism in John's Gospel between the objective and paternal perspective of redemption (Jn 3:16–19), on the one hand, and the subjective and filial one (Jn 12:46–49), on the other. Ultimately this means that Christ's gift of himself for the world is the temporal form of his eternal love for the Father, which is to say that the *pro nobis* of salvation is, in fact, a revelation of his *pro patre*. Hence, while the creed explains the meaning of his death as being "for us and our salvation;" the synoptics, "for you" (Lk 22:19–20) or "for many" (Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24); and Paul, "for us" (Rom 5:8); John recognizes Christ's final surrender as a gift of love for the Father: "I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (Jn 14:31).

Granted, this verse is often cited as demonstrating the obedient nature of Christian love. More profoundly, however, it manifests that love, by its very nature, is communicative; it simply cannot be contained. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you" (15:9–10). By the same disposition of loving availability, Christ is given without reserve to the Father and to the world alike, thereby setting a precedent for his disciples whom he commands to love the brethren as an expression of their love for God (cf. 1 Jn 4:21). By refusing to hold onto the glory that was his from all eternity in the presence of the Father (cf. Phil 2:6; Jn 1:14), by giving his Spirit without measure (Jn 3:34) and by offering his own body as bread "for the life of the world" (Jn 6:51), Christ brings to perfection the new commandment of love through the communication of his own sonship that is the Father's gift. The inseparable unity of the love of God and the love of neighbor is thus attested to by Christ in the culmination of his mission on the "cross of our redemption (cf. Jn 3:14–15), the sign of his *indivisible love* for the Father and for humanity (cf. Jn 13:1)." ²⁶

V. Sanctity and Generosity: Spirituality and Social Justice

Spiritual poverty, then, is fundamentally and ultimately a share in the Son's own receptive availability, an availability that is revealed as an absolute gift of self to the Father for the salvation of the world. "The

²⁶ John Paul II, encyclical, *The Splendor of Truth*, *Veritatis Splendor* (August 6, 1993), no. 14.

Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand" (Jn 3:35), and the Son's hands, like his arms, are ever open, outstretched on the Cross from whence he gathers all humanity to himself (12:32) so as to present us to the Father. Breathing his Spirit into our hearts (cf. Rom 5:5), which are "dispossessed" out of love for him, he draws us into his communion with the Father, into his own sonship. As bearers of his Spirit, we are not only integrated into the Trinitarian embrace, however; we are also drawn into the Son's mission of introducing others into the same. The man or woman who has really allowed him- or herself to be penetrated by the love of God—who has (slowly) let fall the obstacles of resistance (the fear of rejection, of disappointment, of further abuse and pain, of all that is commonly known as vulnerability), who, by faith, has permitted an entry for the divine love—is unable to contain it.

Faith that is openness to receive is also faith that, viewed from still another angle, is willingness to give: It is availability for others. Hence those who in the early Church, "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" had, we are told in Acts, "all things in common; they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need" (2:42, 44–45; cf. 4:32). The connection between the communion of believers—the mystical body of Christ—and the sacramental communion, or participation, of the same in the historical body of Christ that is "given up for you" (Lk 22:19; cf. 1 Cor 11:24)—the Eucharist—is so intimate that to sin against the one is to sin against the other. When, for example, Paul tells the Corinthians that they are eating and drinking judgment on themselves by not "discerning the body" (1 Cor 11:27–32), he is, of course, referring to the body and blood of the Lord in the Eucharist. Commentators are careful to note, however, that the sins to which he makes reference are sins against the community: divisions (even factions), self-indulgences, and a lack of consideration for the poor (vs. 17–22). Hence the body that is not discerned is also interpreted as being the body of the community.²⁷ It is thus no surprise that St. John Chrysostom chides those who dishonor this union:

You have tasted the Blood of the Lord, yet you do not recognize your brother, . . . You dishonor this table when you do not judge worthy of sharing your food someone judged worthy to take part in this meal. . .

²⁷ See Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 346. "To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must," as the Catechism teaches, "recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren." Cf. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1397.

God freed you from all your sins and invited you here, but you have not become more merciful.²⁸

In Catholic terms, justification renders the human person “just”: Through his participation in God’s own justice, revealed by Christ as mercy, he has the capacity to act justly, even mercifully.²⁹ “Be gods for the poor, in imitating the mercy of God,” proclaims Gregory the Nazianze, for “man has nothing more in common with God than the faculty of doing good.”³⁰

“Jesus died on the Cross,” says Mother Teresa, “because that is what it took for him to do good to us—to save us from our selfishness in sin. He gave up everything to do the Father’s will—to show us that we too must be willing to give up everything to do God’s will—to love one another as he loves each of us. If we are not willing to give whatever it takes to do good to one another, sin is still in us. That is why we too must give to each other until it hurts.”³¹

Simply stated, generosity cannot be separated from sanctity, nor the communion of goods from the communion of saints. Concretely this means transposing the material to the spiritual. Obviously members of the body ought to share their material possessions with one another (as the first Christians who “had everything in common,” Acts 4:32) and even with those outside the confines of the Church; beyond this is the willingness to lovingly dispose even of one’s spiritual treasure (cf. Mt 19:21). In popular Theresian terms, this is expressed as “empty hands”:³² hands which have disposed of their “own” merits for the sake of those arriving empty-handed at heaven’s door.

If I had been rich, I would have found it impossible to see a poor person going hungry without giving him my possessions. And in the same way, when I gain any spiritual treasures, feeling that at this very moment there are souls in danger of being lost and falling into hell, I

²⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *Hom. In 1 Cor.*, 27, 4: PG 61, 229–30; cited in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1397.

²⁹ See Thomas Aquinas, *ST I–II*, q. 100, a. 12.

³⁰ 14th discours, PG 35, 857–909, “De l’amour des pauvres,” in *Riches et pauvres dans l’Eglise ancienne*, ed. France Quéré-Jaulmes (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1982), 123–24 (nn. 26–27).

³¹ Mother Teresa, “Spiritual Poverty,” no. 6, 615. See *Mother Teresa: A Simple Path*, compiled by Lucinda Vardey (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 99.

³² See Thérèse of Lisieux to Brother Simeon, January 27, 1897, in *St. Thérèse of Lisieux General Correspondence II*, John Clarke, trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1988), 1054.

give them what I possess, and I have not yet found a moment when I can say: Now I'm going to work for myself.³³

Without merits of their own, these "poor" souls depend upon the generosity of those who have surrendered all things for Christ and who, in turn, trust in his generosity for their own salvation: "For having nothing, I shall receive everything from God," concludes St. Therese.³⁴ At the extreme are those who, like St. Paul, are willing to forfeit not only their merits for others, but their salvation as well: "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race" (Rom 9:3).

This overabundant generosity can, of course, only be understood as an act of love for him who thirsts for souls and who communicates this same thirst to those who are already given to him.

"Jesus," Mother Teresa explains, "is thirsting for our love, and this is the thirst of everyone, poor and rich alike. We all thirst for the love of others, that they go out of their way to avoid harming us and to do good to us. This is the meaning of true love, to give until it hurts."³⁵

VI. Conclusion

Giving until it hurts is hardly an easy response to the theological challenge of poverty: material poverty, of course, but also the new forms of poverty that characterize affluent western society such as the neglect of the elderly and children, the rejection of the mentally and physically handicapped, and even the refusal of life itself by abortion, euthanasia, and suicide. Sacrificial giving is, however, the only adequate response for one who, in spiritual poverty, is so intimately joined to the poor Christ as to share in his redemptive mission of enriching others (by way of the *admirabile commercium*). The gift of self to Christ in the form of receptive readiness, which permits, so to speak, his generous impoverishment to enrich us, is necessarily a gift of self to neighbor. Our incorporation into the body of Christ sets us in relation to all to whom he has given his life. The communion of life, of desire, and of suffering is, for the philosopher Jacques Maritan, a more fundamental order than that of social and political activity. Thus he recommends as superior to the category of *acting for* (*agir pour*) or *acting with* (*agir avec*) that

³³ Idem., "The 'Yellow Notebook' of Mother Agnes" (July 14, 1897), in *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations*, John Clarke, trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1977), 96.

³⁴ Ibid., June 23, 1897, 67.

³⁵ Mother Teresa, "Spiritual Poverty," no. 9, 615.

of *existing with* (*exister avec*) and *suffering with* (*souffrir avec*).³⁶ Theologically, the formula can be pushed even further to *existing for* and *suffering for*, such that sacrificial love takes the place of simple solidarity. The effort to promote social justice is thus transposed within the context of an authentic Christian spirituality to the level of charity whereby Christ is loved in one's neighbor and the neighbor is loved in Christ, that is, by the power of his love. 

³⁶ "Exister avec le Peuple," in *Raison et Raisons: Essais détachés*, vol IX of *Oeuvres complètes* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1990), 379.