

# Another View on Religious Poverty

[Bella Harding](#)

*A response from Bella Harding (LAMB Community) to Br James' article in last month's Lasallians.*

I have some sympathy with the wife quoted who questioned the understanding of poverty in the Brothers. I have the most immense respect for the charism of the Brothers, and for their personal integrity. Nevertheless it seems that poverty is a very strange way of describing their life.

I have likened the Brothers' communities to Gentlemen's Clubs, with comfortable conditions in a usually elegant house, and where the Brothers do not experience any kind of privation or anxiety as regards their personal needs for transport, holidays, sabbaticals or equipment. The Brothers are able to be available to others, because they are thus free of personal anxiety. A Brother friend claims that this is the most important part of the vow of poverty. To their credit, this is pre-eminently the case, and they are also free of all temptations of the world towards conspicuous consumption. This is very good, and yet it would appear to be more the lifestyle of socially aware aristocratic first born sons, who are free from concern for their own needs because they will be met, and are therefore free to donate time and resources to others.

I would add that the other evangelical counsels are also applied metaphorically rather than literally. For example chastity is far more strictly applied in marriage, where a single exclusive relationship has to be nurtured, whereas the religious can have multiple, intimate but neither sexual nor exclusive relationships. (This comment may get me in trouble, but consider whether this is not the case.) Obedience is also less onerous in an institution which is committed to one's personal development, as I believe the Provincialate is, compared with the average wage slavery outside.

I have a problem finding this wrong, but add the following comments in that I, as a married lay woman, have struggled with the meaning of poverty as a religious attitude and an expression of faith and commitment to the kingdom of God. Unless this meaning can be found, there is no point in simply suffering privation for privation's sake, because let us be clear, poverty is diminishing, degrading and life-shortening.

Poverty as a religious attitude means firstly dependence on God. If I don't seek to provide what I need, but try to be part of the Kingdom, God will supply my needs. Bristol boasts a remarkable man called George Muller, who decided to collect no

salary as a minister, but to be dependent on the generosity of his parishioners. He later set up an increasingly large orphanage, all on the basis of prayed for funds, and supported numerous missionaries abroad, and in his life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is thought to have touched 1½ million pounds at 19<sup>th</sup> century values. There are stories of his facing difficult times, when there was nothing to give the children for breakfast, and so they prayed, and the local baker turned up along with someone with an excess of milk. The Brothers have such a reverence in their Founder for the role of Providence, I was surprised in this article to find no reference to it at all. It does not mean I should put God to the test, by behaving irresponsibly, but that the practice of poverty is discovering the love of God as providence. I have experienced this somewhat when visiting Brothers in the San Miguel schools for example.

Poverty means solidarity with the poor, so that I place myself on a level with those who are suffering. Again I see this in the work of the Oxford Brothers in Blackbird Leys, but the challenge is that the church has always had its officers emulate the power structures of the day, in order to gain the ear of the rich and powerful. In Sri Lanka, it seemed to me the Brothers lived in great poverty, but theirs was absolutely nothing to the poverty of those who were serving their needs in cooking and washing. They also had an eminent reputation to maintain. But surely poverty means an end to snobbery and class distinctions which are irrelevant to people's intrinsic worth.

Poverty means a challenge to the value system which sees only riches as worthy.

De La Salle said we should treat the children before us as if they were the children of the king but I wonder what that means. It obviously does not mean that you are in terror of them ordering your head to be chopped off, as the children of the king no doubt could. But it means that we need to see their infinite value, apart from any material income, and their infinite potential, and take as much care of them as if they were infinitely precious. It inverts social values and snobbery, for which he got into trouble, and I also wonder if his conscientisation was in part responsible for the overthrow of the corrupt ancient regime, if not for the barbarity of the French Revolution.

Poverty means humility, that I do not set myself above anyone in anything, but always see their

richness compared to my own weaknesses, although it is ingenuous to deny my own gifts.

Poverty means not wanting to draw attention to myself. I believe De La Salle asked Brothers to be like water, invisible except by its effects, a bit like the Holy Spirit.

Poverty means a political statement that stimulates the conscience of the rich, therefore to see the need to help others. Religious sometimes are so busy helping others professionally that they find it difficult to admit their own need for anything from anyone. As if their institution prevents them ever being vulnerable or needy. Yet how can we be in solidarity with the poor when we never know the anxiety they live with all the time.

Poverty means living simply, as lightly as possible on the earth, with a value for whatever I touch, where it has come from and where it goes to after I have finished with it. Thus poverty means not wasting anything.

Poverty means a challenge to think more widely about values.

Poverty is to assert the dignity of the poor.

Poverty is freedom.

Poverty is a kind of escape from structural sin.

The problems of the excessive practice of poverty, as the Brothers may have done in the past, are that they lead to an unhealthy self-denial, and rejection of our own giftedness, a rejection of the beauty of the world and the opportunities it offers, a rejection of power that leads to a feeling of powerlessness, and an attitude of others of condescension, an undue pliability in the face of aggression, a cultivated assumption that others will help me, must help me. Poverty risks being a failure to stand up for my own and others' dignity.

Poverty is not in the original vows of the Brothers, and although riches tend to corruption in religious life, I can't help thinking that in looking at the professional church, apostolic poverty must make God laugh it is so rarely practised.