

# Some thoughts on Religious Poverty

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Great efforts are made by the churches to eliminate poverty, whereas members of religious congregations make a vow to practise it, so perhaps the word "poverty" has different meanings.

Whatever the case, I recently received a letter from a life-long friend, who wrote:

..... And now a matter of scandal for you to comment on. Whenever my wife goes to a De La Salle establishment, she comes away with the following question: "Where is the poverty? They live in such grand surroundings, so comfortable". I try my best to explain to her that property is always "ours" and not "mine", and there is such a thing as detachment, and they can be moved at short notice from a palatial lifestyle in the Mother House to the nether regions of Eccles. She counters that places she has visited with me all smack of a gentlemen's club. She would be more satisfied always to see evidence of sackcloth and ashes, and not just now and then. Do you think you could put together a well-thought-out explanation of how you do practise poverty?

An answer to my friend's and his wife's remarks did not readily come to my mind in a coordinated way, chiefly since I suspected some truth in them, and secondly because a satisfying commentary on the matter would need a book full of either logical arguments or of casuistry. I decided that my "defence" would not be to give examples of how I imagine I have had to put up with whatever the vow of poverty has inflicted on me, but to list a set of heterogeneous thoughts that immediately came to mind at the moment. My answer therefore contained the following jottings.

I have no answer to your poverty questions, other than the one that you yourself could conjure up with hesitant conviction. I am not sure whether "vow of poverty" should be translated literally as living in dire straits, or as a desire to keep worldly goods in their proper perspective. It is true that more than once in the past, I have been shunted off elsewhere by an undiscussible edict, just when I thought I was settling in. And those were the days when a bedroom for us meant precisely that: a place for a bed, and a chair to put your pyjamas on. To think of the time I wasted trying to read or correct essays in a compulsory communal room, where everyone was having a roar of a time or at least a conversation! It was not unreasonable to lift that restriction, but then followed putting a few photos in one's room, then an armchair: what were we coming to?

My friend's wife mentions the luxury of the Mother House. Yes, it is rather big; I worked there for a year and

a half and couldn't get out quickly enough. Mind you, its size was for when our congregation, now reduced to 6000, was 20,000 strong, and was thought up in 1935 by an American Brother, whose country had just built the Empire State Building. In those days of course and much later, we in England lived in schools, above the shop, and they were by their nature bigger than the average family home. However, yes, such remarks are mere palliatives: the monk should be detached from worldly goods to concentrate on things important. Our Founder made his group of teachers into a religious congregation, or popularly "monks", to ensure stability in the supply for the schools; I'd like Alfred to correct any error in that statement. Whatever the case, we are now a religious congregation, and will remain so until an unlikely decision reverses present arrangements. Another item worth weighing is that if we were all married, we would probably feel the pinch more than now, because we'd have to share what goods we had with several others of our household. Taking that argument further, one could ask whether the vow of celibacy could lead to a self-centred avoidance of physical poverty, even if we vowed, as we do now, never to possess, but only to use certain goods. For administrative reasons, de La Salle's first and only official vow was of "Obedience". After all, one could not run a school if all the teachers did not pull together, and if there was not someone to decide which way to pull. If the early brothers stayed with our Founder, as most did not, they did not marry, but neither did they make a vow of chastity or of celibacy. Are comparative comfort, about which my friend's wife has a query or two, and marriage in a kind of balancing act? In any case, I doubt whether weighing the one with the other for personal comfort would be a likely motivation of the average applicant to our or any other order.

In the past, before the age of state services, our church was the organiser of whatever social work was done, and had it done by persons dressed in strange garments and possessing a certificate confirming they had the vow of poverty,.. which is not to demean that good work.

Which wanderings being said or written, I must confess that I still wonder why God planted me in England, where recently several thousands pounds of tax-payers' cash have been lavished by the NHS to save my life. My fellow-humans elsewhere are dying in their thousands, when a fraction of the sum ploughed into me could cure them.

As well as geographical, there are also time factors. My friend and I are products of the depression years, and at

that time I was a layman, admittedly a rather little one, and I went without more than I do in these my "holy" days; the casuist would of course argue that a few convenient inventions have been made since then. In the thirties the "poverty" of my and my friend's Mothers consisted in being careful in case our Fathers might be

out of work the following week. Whether there is much holiness in that thought is another matter, but my Father and Mother practised more poverty than ever I do now. However, conveniently they never joined an order or I would not now be writing this.