

Religious Poverty: A Further Perspective.

[Brother Terence Kay](#)

The recent interesting articles in the Newsletter on the subject of religious poverty stirred me into submitting a few thoughts of my own to add to the debate.

The situations Brother James presented in his article are familiar to me: I have also heard similar comments about the apparently, rather grand places in which Brothers sometimes find themselves living.

In spite of our vow of poverty not being self-evident, I think the question of what image we convey with respect to the vow is important. It is a pity when it has to be explained rather than being obvious. In the case of those who know the Brothers well, I have noticed that its meaning seems to become understood by a sort of absorption over time without conscious effort. Ours is certainly not the romantic image of "Lady Poverty", where outward sign is important for identity and purpose. A monastery is usually immediately identifiable as such. Because of changed circumstances we can find ourselves living in premises, which may now be considered grand but which were acquired with no idea of aggrandisement in mind but rather the needs of our mission.

In the past when working as vocations director I sometimes felt that the surroundings in which we live may have had a negative effect on recruitment. I remember meeting with a potential candidate whose father came along as well and I recall thinking to myself when will this gentleman stop talking about what a beautiful house this is, so that I can get on to talk to his son about the Brother's vocation. But I had to respond to his remarks, to attempt an explanation of why we were living there. I found it difficult and I'm not sure that my words were all that convincing.

On occasions when I met up with university students they might discuss the religious life with interest but it was usually in the context of a room in the Union building or Chaplaincy with a mug of coffee in hand. I wondered whether they would they have been able to make sense of the religious life in the comfortable surrounds of our communities? Their idealism seemed to me to call for something different. There was nothing wrong with the

community's sofas and carpets but a leap too far for them I suspect, to understand that this could still be religious life, in spite of the sofas. Would they in any case have seen it as an exciting challenge?

Working in the third world one is aware of the attraction that religious life can hold as a means of assuring material security. One congregation, whose charism was a simple life-style, with poverty being the principal virtue, found that they were recruiting new members who really could see no sense at all in poverty as a virtue and through the steady supply of cash from the west, set about amassing possessions, which set them apart from those around them. This situation was fundamentally so at odds with the spirit of the congregation that recruiting was suspended. Part of the blame must rest with the congregation not assessing the culture accurately in the first place. The problem is not new. I have in mind Browning's humorous and I suppose, cynical description of the monk Fra Lippo Lippi.

As I see it, religious poverty is concerned with detachment from material possessions, which in turn bestows the freedom to live the Gospel message more fully. This freedom is associated with a simple, untrammelled existence bringing its own reward as has been discovered by some cult groups. This is worthwhile in itself but I think that the poverty we profess makes perhaps more sense in today's world as a statement that we do not go along with the consumerist society and its culture of acquisition: a culture, which implies that it is what we possess that brings happiness.

Religious poverty reminds us that we are not defined by what we buy as advertising would like to convince us otherwise we become inseparable from commodities. In an article, Timothy Radcliffe states: "Poverty is the renunciation of the status which comes with income, the ability to be someone who buys and sells." This is important in my opinion as it points away from the "I buy, therefore I am" and "I am what I buy" mindset. Poverty is allied with simplicity of life, with being oneself and not seeking external props to create an image.

It has become clichéd now to hear those returning from having shared life with 3rd World people talking of their surprise to see so many smiling faces and of how they experienced genuine affection and generosity from those who possessed so little. It is interesting to note that Brothers speaking of pioneering times, for example, when we took over the school at Brighton, regarded them as halcyon days, although money and materials were in short supply. There seems to be some principle at work here: that difficult circumstances commonly shared open the door to co-operation and sharing. Conversely in times of affluence people close in on themselves. In an interesting book "Beyond Forget" by Mark Abley the author contrasts the "closed" behaviour of shoppers in the West Edmonton Mall (one of the biggest in the world), who barely acknowledge each other, with the friendliness and spirit of co-operation, which character-

ised the early settlers of the Canadian Prairies. As Brothers we presumably feel pledged to eliminate poverty and would want schools for instance to be as well equipped as money can make them, but can we go too far along this road and thus diminish communal spirit and creativity? I suppose the answer would be that making sure the spirit of the place is got right is more important than the bricks and mortar.

Consumerism, concentrates on the here and now and is not unduly concerned with the provenance of goods nor of the manner in which they were obtained nor of what might happen in the future as a consequence of our buying them. Religious poverty takes the long view and is concerned with the past, present and the future. It sustains a culture of respect for material things and our environment and reminds us of our duty as good stewards to be sensitive to the welfare of our planet.

Letter to the editor of *Lasallians*

Dear Editor,

The fact that Mrs. Harding has commented in *Lasallians* on something printed in a previous issue gives hope that the monthly magazine is at last showing signs of life.

Mrs Harding deals with the Brothers' vow of poverty and although she admires our charism she fears that we are like socially-aware aristocratic first-born sons who lack nothing required to be charitable.

The list of virtues supposed, according to Mrs. Harding, to accompany our vow of poverty, would, if true, cause some of us to wonder what we had let ourselves in for. She considers these virtues so lacking in the professional church that God laughs.

We might be tempted to think that the mention of professional church lets us Brothers off the hook, since we are not professional church ie clerics, but laymen. But brushing aside mere terminology, Mrs. Harding is commenting on us.

If a person, evidently so sympathetic to our Brothers' work as Mrs. Harding, is able frankly to express how she sees our practice of poverty, then it were no bad thing for us to examine whether we practise what we profess and to consider what the poverty we profess really implies.

Yours faithfully,

James Connolly FSC