

Religious Poverty: A Historical View

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The classic debate about Poverty took place in the 14th Century and involved an Englishman, William of Ockham and a whole host of Franciscans. (There is an eating place just as you turn South onto the A3 from the M25 called *Ockham Bites* which would make an excellent title for a talk on Ockham's ideas.)

St. Francis was a strict adherent to evangelical poverty (Lady Poverty) so much so that even the buildings that the Franciscans used did not belong to them, but to their Benefactors or the Papacy. In 1323 Pope John XXII decreed that in future the Papacy would not accept ownership of things given to the Franciscans. The idea that the Papacy can own something of which the Franciscans have permanent use is incompatible with the Roman law principle that ownership and use cannot be permanently separated. Ownership, John XXII argued, permanently separated from use would be 'simple' or 'base' and useless and the Franciscans' lack of it would not constitute poverty. In respect to things consumed by use, such as food, there is no separation, even temporary, between ownership and use. Property is essential to human existence and exists by divine law. Ockham however, argued that to use things justly a legal right under human law is not required; a moral right is enough. Ockham's thesis is that property did not exist in the Garden of Eden and is an institution of human law. This was held by theologians, including Aquinas, as the standard view. John Dun Scotus mentions that the

capitalist system (although the word *capitalism* had not been coined then) is a result of the Fall, because before the Fall it would be inconceivable that anyone should be destitute and hungry and not looked after by all.

The dispute, as usual, became very intellectual, each side trying to score points over the other. It also became acrimonious Ockham calling John XXII's document 'heretical, erroneous, silly, ridiculous, fantastic, insane and defamatory, contrary to orthodox faith, good morals, natural reason, certain experience, and fraternal charity'. No wonder Ockham was later excommunicated, but not over this issue or because of this vituperation!

When asked to-day about poverty, Franciscans, like FSC's, own their own property. But the overriding reason for poverty is not to lack things but to free us from our attachment to the material things of this world so we can concentrate on loving God with generosity and freedom of spirit. In this sense we are all called to poverty, after all Our Lord's words are addressed to all His followers not just religious. There are things we cannot have or do because we cannot afford them. This is not poverty, for evangelical poverty must actively seek to be weighed down with no material things.

And finally, St. Francis had the cell he occupied redecorated, and on being told by one of the brothers 'Your cell is ready' replied, 'I can't go back now . . . I own nothing . . . it is not *my* cell!'