

Experiencing God in the Poor

By Theodore Wiesner

Spiritual writers have described growth in the spiritual life by means of such analogies as the castle, the ladder, and the ascent of a mountain. St. Thomas used the analogy of the stages of human development from childhood to adolescence to maturity. These gave rise to the concept of the three ages or way of the spiritual life described in manuals of ascetical theology. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange in his *The Three Ways of the Spiritual Life* (Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1938) outlines this growth as the Purgative Way of beginners, the Illuminative Way of proficient, and the Unitive Way of the perfect. At the threshold of each way is a transition or crisis, called respectively First Conversion, Second Conversion, and Third Conversion. With some variations in terminology, this process has been the traditional description of spiritual growth. However, the treatises develop this theme of ages or ways with almost exclusive reference to prayer (meditation, affective prayer, contemplation) and virtues (moral, theological, gifts of the Holy Spirit, etc.). Only passing reference is made to more active or apostolic forms of spirituality. Garrigou-Lagrange, for example, when speaking of the illuminative life says: "It appears under two normal forms: the one definitely contemplative, as in many saints of the Carmel; the other active, as in a St. Vincent de Paul, a contemplation which by the light of the gifts of wisdom and counsel, constantly sees in the poor and abandoned the

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suffering members of Christ" (p. 73). Then he proceeds to describe the characteristics of this way but without developing the active form of it.

Many people today find themselves striving to live a spiritual life that "sees in the poor and abandoned the suffering members of Christ," that seeks peace and justice, that tries to live in solidarity with the poor. The purpose of this article is to sketch this kind of spiritual growth. The model used is the classic one mentioned above of the three ways or ages, each entered into by means of a transition or conversion. In preparing this article I have found two articles particularly helpful. One is not about the poor at all, but about prayer. It is an article written by Beatrice Bruteau entitled "Insight and Manifestation: A Way of Prayer in a Christian Context" (*Contemplative Review* XVI, Fall 1983, 18-37). The other is a talk given by Father Albert Nolan at the Annual General Meeting of the Catholic Institute for International Relations in London on June 29th, 1984. Father Nolan is a former provincial of the Dominicans in South Africa and continues to work there. His talk is about growth in one's option for the poor and appeared in the newsletter of the Irish Missionary Union for July-August, 1984.

First Conversion

The moment we enter upon a spiritual process that sees the poor in Christ and Christ in the poor is the moment of First Conversion. It is, however, often difficult to know when this occurs, except in retrospect. Sometimes it is through some contact with the poor, suffering and abandoned; sometimes it is the result of a retreat or workshop; sometimes some experience of oppression or suffering within oneself. In any event, we see the initiative and invitation of God in the experience, the first aspect of conversion. Then we make a decision, the second aspect of conversion, to direct our life toward the poor in some way, to make an option, however tentative, for the poor. Once this decision is acted upon, we are able to reflect on our experience in such a way that an event or series of events are seen as a turning point. We also see the action and initiative of God in the midst of this experience, so that it can be seen as a grace of conversion. Thus we enter upon the first age or way, which I shall call the Way of Appreciation.

Way of Appreciation

The first characteristic of this way is the experience of the poor. We observe their suffering, hear their cry, study their character, actions and situation. This exposure is essential to the development of this stage of the spiritual life. It is our response to the grace of First Con-

version. This contact may be serving in a soup kitchen, visiting a hospice for the dying, a trip to some Third World country, or prison ministry. Whatever form it takes, it is important for us, since we so easily protect ourselves from the harsh realities of hunger and oppression, from the smell of the slums, the potential violence of the night. We can, of course, experience some of this through books, films, and the like. But there is no substitute for immediate contact.

This experience leads to compassion, or at least can lead to compassion if we allow it to develop. We need to avoid putting obstacles in the way of compassion, by seeing the poverty and suffering of the poor as the result of laziness or ignorance, by washing our hands of the problem, or by claiming helplessness in the face of it. We need to nourish the sense of compassion by feeling with the poor as deeply as we can, by seeing compassion as God's attribute, the way God feels about the world. Here reflection on St. Luke's Gospel can help develop this compassion for what we have seen and heard of the sufferings of the poor. Christian compassion opens up to the mystery of the identity of Christ and the poor, and allows us to see the face of Christ and hear his voice in those who are suffering.

As the virtue of compassion develops, it results in acts of mercy. At this point we begin to go to the poor in their need, not merely to observe and experience their suffering. We act on their behalf to express our compassion and to help them in some way. The help may be as simple as distributing food, clothing, or money, or as complex as involvement in urban renewal or international famine relief.

Compassion also leads us to simplicity in our way of living. We begin to sense the need to live more simply, to let go of many superfluous possessions, to examine the way we live in contrast to, and often at the expense of, the way the rest of the world lives. The Quaker, Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline* has an insightful and practical chapter on simplicity. He speaks of three inner attitudes that characterize simplicity: to receive what we have as a gift from God; to know that it is God's business, not ours, to care for what we have; and to have our goods available to others. Then he goes on to speak of the outward expression of simplicity and lists ten controlling principles that are excellent guidelines for developing a simple lifestyle. They are: buy things for their usefulness rather than their status; reject anything that is producing an addiction in you; develop a habit of giving things away; refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry; learn to enjoy things without owning them; develop a deeper appreciation for creation; look with healthy skepticism at all "buy now, pay later" schemes; obey Jesus' instructions about plain, honest speech; reject anything that will breed the oppression of others; and shun whatever would distract you from your main goal.

Each of these characteristics of the Way of Appreciation—experience, compassion, acts of mercy, simplicity of lifestyle—is impor-

tant for spiritual growth toward solidarity with the poor. Indispensable as they are, however, they are only a beginning, a part of any truly Christian life. Although they are concerned with the poor, they are directed toward improving the self. The poor are treated as the object of our efforts. The poor are talked about, but rarely talked to; we work for the poor but rarely with them. Our stand in life remains over against the poor; they are something other than what we are. These remarks are not made to criticize this Way of Appreciation, but merely to point out that it is a beginning. What is important is that we recognize this and move from there.

Those who are in this beginning way, as well as those who may direct them, need to realize that an experience of the poor that is as broad and deep as possible is essential to spiritual growth at this stage, but it is not enough. To it must be added reflection on the experience and on the experience of Jesus in the Gospel. Then there must be fervent prayer for a heart of compassion, that Jesus may be discovered in the midst of the poor and on their faces.

Second Conversion

St. John of the Cross showed that the transition from the Purgative Way to the Illuminative Way is marked by a night of the senses, which is a second conversion. Signs of this night are such things as lack of consolation in prayer and an inability to meditate in a discursive way. In a similar way we whose spiritual life is centered on finding God among the poor pass through a crisis or second conversion. As a result of our ministry to the poor we come to experience poverty not only as an individual problem but also as a structural one. Poverty is the result not so much of the lack of talent or drive of individuals as it is of conscious political and economic policies. Poverty is seen as the deliberate exploitation of people and whole countries for the economic or military advantage of others. Poverty becomes a matter of injustice and oppression, and not just an unfortunate but unavoidable situation. Poverty is a structural problem, a problem of unjust and oppressive institutions and systems, and we are a part of it.

Our first reaction to this heightened awareness is that of anger, anger against the rich, the powerful, the huge corporations, the politicians, the governments. This anger becomes a part of the crisis of the Second Conversion. We need to acknowledge and express it in appropriate ways. We are challenged to expand the virtue of compassion to include not just those who are unjustly oppressed, but also those who are the cause of the oppression and against whom we experience such strong feelings of anger.

As we become aware of the systemic nature of poverty, some of us at this point become completely frustrated. What began as the simple act

of Christian goodness toward some poor people who came for bread and soup because they were hungry, unfolds before us as the complex structural problem of world hunger. We do not know where to turn; the problem overwhelms us. We do not know how to channel the tremendous energy tapped by our anger, and it turns to feelings of guilt. We become paralyzed. Or we become very active and devote enormous amounts of time and energy toward social and political change in the hope that it will transform the structures and systems that cause poverty. It is precisely here they we may falter. We give way to the paralysis we feel, give up the struggle, perhaps retreat into some form of quietism. Or we give in to the temptation of activism and find ourselves burnt out and exhausted. It is truly a night of the senses, but as we work our way through it, or as God leads us through it, we enter into a second stage of growth, the Way of Dialog.

Way of Dialog

I have called this stage the Way of Dialog because persons at this stage enter into a new kind of relationship with the poor. In the Way of Appreciation the poor were talked about the acts of mercy were performed for them. Now we begin to develop a more personal relationship with the poor. Names are exchanged; friendships are formed. We seek the person of Christ in the person of the poor. This is quite different from observing the poor, studying reports about poverty, analysing their struggles, devising strategies on their behalf. It is rather the experience of entering into their personal world, as though we had asked the poor "Where do you live?" and they had answered "Come and see." We see the poor 'at home,' get a sense of the rhythm of their lives, an experiential understanding of the roots of their poverty. We begin to feel yoked with them and pulling as one in the same direction.

Our activity in this Way of Dialog is more often work for social change. We are more interested than before in devoting our energy to work with the poor for structural change. The emphasis is more on acts of justice than on acts of mercy on behalf of the poor, even though the latter are always a part of the Christian life. The focus of the activity is less on ourselves and the deepening of our own experience and more on what can be done for and with the poor. We enter more intensely into the life of the poor. We do not necessarily think in the same way or have the same opinions and views as they do, but our actions on behalf of justice are united with the action of the poor. Even though our activity may be intense, the emphasis is more on *being* with the poor than on *doing* for them.

Through entering into the world of the poor and touching the vital core of their lives, they touch the vital core of ours. We then come to a

profound realization, the realization of our own poverty. It is a kind of experiential enlightenment, not precisely acquired by reasoning to it but granted by God's grace. It begins with the awareness that the poor are the subjects of their own liberation, not the object of the efforts of conscientised, middle-class people and leaders. We discover that we have been considering the poor as the needy, and that we must somehow reach out and save them. We may cooperate with the poor, or teach them to help themselves, or empower them, but fundamentally we have treated them as the needy. Now we discover that the poor are perfectly capable of solving their own problems, know what to do and how to do it, and in fact are in a better position to effect structural change than we are. We learn that these needed changes in systems and institutions will come only from the poor themselves, from the oppressed, from the Third World itself. We realize that we are not needed in the way we thought, that rather we must learn from the poor, learn their wisdom, be evangelized by them. The Lord "has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, has put down the mighty" (Lk. 1:51-52). The Lord has chosen the poor as instruments and in Christ uses them to save us all. In dialog with the poor and with God in prayer we begin to experience God in a new way. God is not only present in the poor seen as the object of our compassion and mercy. Nor is God seen only as Christ on the faces of his suffering members. In the poor God is experienced as a God that is present in them and acting through them to save us all. But this very realization, this very image of the poor, has within it the seed of a new crisis of growth. Perhaps even without realizing it, we are at the threshold of a third conversion. But first a word about lifestyle.

In this Way of Dialog we continue to identify ourselves with the poor in our way of living: we continue to simplify our lifestyle. We also become engaged in the struggle for social change. This usually leads to involvement in such things as protests, boycotts, demonstrations, actions of resistance, even civil disobedience, arrest, imprisonment. We often become a part of what is sometimes called a resistance community, a network of persons with similar ideals and goals. As a result of this involvement, we experience the fact that others—friends, relatives, family, members of our community—simply do not comprehend what we are about. We feel misunderstood, alienated, criticized, even persecuted. These experiences, in addition to our efforts to live more simply, become a part of our way of living.

Third Conversion

Just as the transition from the way of affective prayer and acquired contemplation to the Unitive Way of infused contemplation is marked by a purification or dark night of the spirit, so also the transition from

the Way of Dialog is marked by a third conversion. In the Way of Appreciation we tend to see ourselves as coming to the aid of the poor by our acts of compassion. We thus unconsciously place ourselves above the poor in the position of helper. We need to be brought down from our pedestal in order to enter into a relationship of genuine dialog with the poor. Then, in the course of the Way of Dialog we tend to place the poor themselves on the pedestal. The poor are idealized, romanticized, seen as God's favored ones, endowed with an almost innate wisdom. If they happen to come from a Third World country, they are automatically an expert on world oppression, economics and social analysis. This romantic notion of the poor leads to the crisis of this transition period. We soon realize that the poor do not measure up to our ideal. They are seen as people with feet of clay. They may be as selfish and greedy, as lacking in commitment and political insight, as weak and sinful as their middle class brothers and sisters. We reach a crisis at this point, a crisis of disappointment and a crisis of belief. When we realize that the poor simply have not lived up to our expectations, we become disillusioned and discouraged. They are not the Christ-like figures we imagined them to be; they are not endowed with a special wisdom. Then we face the crisis of belief. Are they indeed God's favored ones? Can we continue to experience God in such imperfect images of his presence? We need to pass through this crisis of disillusionment and again come to see God, now in the vessel of clay that is the poor.

At this point we wait. As Saint Thomas says that sight, touch, and taste fail us when confronted with the reality of the Eucharistic Bread, so here our senses fail us and we wait upon the grace of faith. With it we see the mystery of God's love for the poor, the fact that the very clay itself is a thing of value to God. It is much like the grace of infused contemplation; we may desire it, pray for it, but fundamentally we await God's gift of prayer. St. Vincent de Paul has said: "We should not judge the poor by their clothes and their outward appearance nor by their mental capacity, since they are often ignorant and uncouth; on the contrary, if you consider the poor in the light of faith, then you will see that they take the place of God the Son, who chose to be poor." As we are illumined more and more by this gift of faith, and work our way through this transition, we enter the third stage, the Way of Solidarity.

Way of Solidarity

Damien du Veuster had worked on Molokai for twelve years. When, in 1885 at the age of 45, he began his sermon not with the usual 'my dearly beloved', but with 'we lepers,' he entered into a new relationship with his people. In a similar way we enter into solidarity with the poor

when the distinction between we and they no longer applies. The distinction breaks down and we are the poor, one among them. We have, it is true, differing talents, life experiences, but the fundamental point is that we stand together as one, of one mind and heart in the midst of the political, economic, and social structures that oppress. We approach the world with the same outlook. We approach it aware of our different backgrounds and roles, aware of our sinfulness, limitations and weaknesses, but with mutual love and a common cause.

The experience of God in this Way of Solidarity is the experience of the justice of God. We are in solidarity with the God of the poor in Christ Jesus. We have freed ourselves from our superiority, our illusions, our discouragement and disillusionment, our guilt, and our romantic notions of the poor. In addition, we have freed ourselves for, opened ourselves to, Christ in the person of the poor. It is truly the gift of God, much as contemplation is the gift of God. It does not mean, as contemplation does not mean, that we pass beyond our struggles, sufferings, or are protected from misunderstanding and even persecution. But it does mean that we experience God saying to us: Blessed are you poor . . . for you shall see God.

We continue in the same work with the poor. Our activities remain much the same in this Way of Solidarity. We may be helping to prepare and serve food in a soup kitchen, or working for some urban housing project, or trying to influence policies in some multinational corporation toward the Third World. These acts of mercy and justice remain a part of our lives. What has changed is our relationship to the poor, our stance with them, and through them our relationship with God has changed. Like the enlightened one of Buddhism, we have returned to the market place. We experience a solidarity with the poor and with God. We may experience this only occasionally as a unity and peace at the core of our being, or we may be aware of this oneness more or less habitually. It is what directs our lives and actions, gives us energy, and expresses itself in an inner peace that is the consequence of a reconciliation within ourselves with the poor and with God of the poor. Reflection on the Gospel continues to be a part of our prayer, but we more often pray about Gospel incidents from the point of view of the poor and less often from the point of view of the one who ministers to their needs. We may also either desire to live among the poor or actually do so as a further expression our solidarity. Solidarity becomes the motive force of how we view the world and live within it, and of how we experience God.

Conclusion

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Spiritual writers caution us not to interpret too exactly the progress a person makes from the Purgative to the Illumi to the Unitive.

Way. In actual practice people move from one to the others more freely than suggested by the descriptions in ascetical theology. So here the movement from stage to stage should not be interpreted too rigidly. This description of the three ways of experiencing God in the poor should rather serve as a model. Through it, experiencing God in the poor is seen as a process of spiritual growth. The model can help us understand those who are a part of this process of growth. We realize that we are not all at the same stage of development. It can also assist us by giving us some idea of the development of our own spiritual journey, and some awareness of the dangers and problems to be faced.