

Poverty As A Theological Category

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Poverty: a term that gets thrown around a great deal in conversations of economics, social justice, and even theological conversations about the poor and a preferential option for these members of our society. The problem, however, is that this term is normally considered just an economic status or category, basing itself squarely as a matter of how much wealth one owns. This can be problematic, as Gustavo Gutiérrez pointed out in his April 2015 lecture here at Marquette, because there is a theological dimension to poverty that we, as theologians, are not discussing and exploring. The goal of today's presentation is twofold: first, I shall attempt to lay out the major points from Gutiérrez's lecture for what is at stake with the theological concept of poverty. Second, I will provide three ways Lonergan and Doran's theological framework can provide avenues for exploration: the integral scale of values as a way to understand how poverty extends material goods; a Christological reflection on the poor as human beings worthy of dignity; and using the Divine Relations as a model for charitable social relationships and how poverty disrupts this model.

To begin, we must first try to define poverty as a theological concept. Gutiérrez called poverty, in its simplest terms, an unjust death. Men and women are dying well before their time, without the opportunity to share their gifts with the rest of our human family. This death, however, is not only a physical death. It is also a cultural death, destroying communal ties and cultural traditions in a struggle to merely survive. Gutiérrez goes on to make a point that biblically, the poor are considered to be non-persons; they are dehumanized and forced to stand apart from the rest of society. This reading gives new meaning to Deuteronomy 15's command "there must be no poor among you": all are to be welcome in the society of the Hebrews, and the

Hebrews are not to allow any person to be dehumanized by their society. One element I would add, given Gutiérrez's emphasis on the dehumanizing nature of poverty, is that poverty also entails a spiritual death via a loss of hope. This loss of hope allows one to be crushed under the weight of one's circumstances, and prevents any sustained resistance to the loss of dignity and other oppressive forces.

The most tragic element of poverty is that it is the work of human hands. For Gutiérrez, poverty is the act of human beings upon other members of the human family. It is not some abstract force at work in the universe. It is not a necessary part of the market that just happens for a working economy. Poverty is a stripping of human dignity on material, cultural, and spiritual levels. Gutiérrez went on to criticize those who call poverty "a gift from heaven." Poverty is the failure of God's plan as creation is the gift of life--poverty destroys that gift.

While Gutiérrez made poignant arguments grounded in the scriptures, the notion of poverty as a theological concept needs to be developed to see how it fits within a greater theological system. Seeing the importance of poverty within the context of other systematic theological concepts can highlight the major point Gutiérrez is trying to make: the care for the poor is an essential aspect of the Christian faith, and intimately intertwined with our major theological suppositions.

The first, and perhaps easiest, point to make is seeing the theological heft of poverty in a discussion of a social and moral theology. Fortunately, Fr. Doran's *Theology and the Dialectics of History* provides us with an opportunity to see how the concern for poverty fits within the context of a theological view of society. Following Lonergan's structure for levels of consciousness, Doran develops a scale of values, moving from vital values to social values to cultural values to personal values to religious values. As one transcends one level of value to

another, there is creative action, which leads to a healing of the levels of value below. For example, when cultural values dictate a concern for the well-being and health of all citizens of a nation, this leads to a healing influence on social values and the distribution of vital goods.

The unfortunate corollary of Doran's structure is that a corruption of values can lead to a destructive effect on lower values. The systemic causes of poverty, which was defined earlier as a phenomena dealing with more than the maldistribution of vital goods, reside in the corruption of social order, meaning, and conscious intentionality. Doran's structure allows us to take Gutiérrez's statement and develop it to find the root causes of poverty and find ways to fix them. We can posit cultural attitudes of the primacy of profit and individualism over communal welfare, and the faulty conception of economics as a value free science; that our economic decisions do not have moral impact. While we could spend hours debating the merits of neoliberal globalized capitalism, I will simply maintain Gutiérrez's position that this economic phenomenon contributes to poverty not only on the material level, but culturally as well. Here we have the first part of our synthesis, and perhaps the easiest to derive.

The second aspect I will discuss today is Christological. The significance of our theological category of poverty can be rooted in our Christology. The first aspect I will discuss comes from Lonergan's *Early Latin Theology*, which deals with the fittingness of the incarnation, by reaching back to Question 1 of Thomas' *Tertia Pars*. In his discussion of the topic, Lonergan writes: "Finally, the fundamental act of the will is love. But to love is to will good to another. And the one to whom a good is willed is the *finis cui*, the "end-for-whom." Besides, since love is measured according to the good willed to the beloved, the degree of love is equal to the degree of good willed." (19:527) The relevance is, following the Thomistic line, that God loves humanity so much that he would send Jesus Christ to save us from death. Since God is

the source of all love and goodness, any act of God, such as the incarnation, is fitting as it is greatest good willed. This notion of love will come up again in the section on Trinitarian theology, but this is as far as we need to go for now.

This Thomistic theological point moves us to a new question. Following the logic, the Incarnation of the divine Logos into Jesus the Nazarene is the act with the most good willed. If this is the case, what makes this form the most good that could be willed? From historical-critical research on the Gospels, we know that Jesus was described as the son of a carpenter, and followed in Joseph's footsteps. The word in the Greek used is τεκτον, which is translated by some scholars as day laborer. Perhaps the better modern analogy would be Jesus as an unskilled laborer with more in common with a fast food worker than a modern carpenter. Regardless of translation, Jesus was not a wealthy man according to the Gospel accounts. He was among a lower social class of an oppressed people in the Roman Empire. Jesus had no political or social authority within the structure of the Empire or Jewish society under Roman rule. If Jesus was sent to bring good news and save humanity, why would it be most fitting to be born without power or authority in the world?

One possible answer is this systemic poverty. Christ came to save humanity in part by restoring hope to the hopeless, and to show God's love to the poor. God showed this love in the most powerful way by becoming one of the powerless and partaking in the experience of their lives. This moment of encounter with the poor in the incarnation serves as a model of the Church's mission: to bring hope and love to those society has forgotten and forsaken, and to establish a culture of genuine charity. Lonergan makes a very similar point in "A New Pastoral Theology," writing: "God spoke first in the prophets, he spoke in his Son, he still speaks today in scripture and tradition, in the biblical movement, the liturgical movement, the catechetical

movement, the ecumenical movement. First and foremost, he speaks to the poor, to the poor in the underdeveloped nations, to the poor in the slums of industrialized nations. And if the word of God is not preached to the poor, then the church has failed.” (17:226)

Using the above argument about the life of Jesus and the visible mission of the Word, we have a strong case for an Christological root for this theological category of poverty. If there is a Christological root, that means there should be some way to root this category within classical Trinitarian theology as well. This final section of the presentation will attempt to develop this Trinitarian root using insights from Lonergan’s four-point hypothesis.

For the purposes of this presentation, I won’t go too deeply into the fined-tuned metaphysics of the hypothesis. I will, however, quickly review a few important notes. First, according to chapter 2 of *De Deo Trino Pars Systematica*, there are three distinct relations: paternity, filiation, and active spiration. Second, the divine relations are conceptually different distinct from the divine essence, but really identical with it. Third, a piece of scriptural wisdom from 1 John 4:8: “Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love.”

At first glance, this does not appear to help us very much. However, reflecting on the divine relations in light of 1 John 4:8 opens up a brand new way of understanding the Trinitarian relations. The Father eternally speaks the Word out of love. The Father and the Son breathe the Spirit out of love. The Son listens, and in turn speaks, out of love. The Spirit enacts the mission as advocate out of love. In short, all divine action is performed in love. The divine relations, which are identical to the divine essence, are rooted in love. The persons of the trinity act giving from plentitude to plentitude, from the essence of all love to the essence of all love.

This insight into the Trinity provides us with a social model: we are all to act out of love to one another. This isn’t by any means a revolutionary idea, nor is it intended to be. It is a

simple truth of Christian praxis. Our capacity to love of our own free will is our greatest gift and greatest responsibility. This genuine *charitas* is selfless, nurturing, and life giving. It sees all people in light of their human dignity, and helps them reach their fullest potential, even when they fail. God's love is how we overcome our sinfulness and rise, through grace, to become the best people we can be.

The question that follows is what happens when we fail to imitate this model where *charitas* is the motivation for our acts in society? The answer is poverty. When one is cut off from this *charitas*, one fails to develop and never experiences the hope and life-giving love God intended for human beings. All one needs to do is look around impoverished areas, or third world countries to see these crucified peoples, to borrow a phrase from the martyr Ignacio Ellacuría, are without hope, without the opportunity to grow and flourish, and are without the help necessary to get up from the falls. The most tragic element of this is not that these people are suffering, but that they are suffering by human hands and human acts of free will. When we put profit and comfort above the well-being and flourishing of others, we cut our fellow human beings off from this *charitas* that is necessary for human fulfillment. It is a given that as fallen creatures, we will fail, without a doubt. The problem is when we look the failure right in the face, in all its horror and injustice, and let it continue without even providing the effort to stop it. Without love, we fail ourselves and our fellow human beings.

This statement is both awesome and terrifying. Human freedom is so powerful that it can create societies that leave entire segments of the population without hope and the ability to flourish. We can give way not only to physical death, but to cultural and spiritual death as well. It's a horrifying thought, but it calls attention to the responsibility to reach out to those society

has forgotten. As quoted above, Lonergan says that when the Church does not reach out to those stricken with poverty, the Church has failed.

What I've just said over the last few minutes shouldn't be all that revolutionary. The Trinity provides us a social model of how to act: out of *charitas*. This is not a different conclusion from John 13:34 (Love one another as I have loved you) or the way the early Christian communities acted as described in Acts. The benefit of this Trinitarian model is that it allows us to define poverty in a way that is intimately connected to the Christian understanding of God as three persons. The unique importance of the Trinitarian element is that it fosters the notion that all aspects of the faith: liturgical, philosophical, ethical, are intertwined. One cannot be done in good faith without the others. This method grounds the concern for poverty in way that its importance cannot be denied without denying central principles of Trinitarian theology.

By way of conclusion, there is one question that stands very close to the heart of my discussion of poverty: if poverty is as horrendous as I've made it out to be, then why would people like St. Francis of Assisi and Pope Francis choose to live in poverty? The answer is that is in the imitation of the divine love. By willingly entering into poverty, one chooses of one's own free will to live utterly dependent on God. With this choice, it is a sacrifice that models Christ's own sacrifice on the cross, bringing God's hope and *charitas* to those that have none, even if it means giving up comfort, and ultimately, one's own life. It is the act that aims to rectify the creation of poverty by making room for God's love in the lives of those who struggle merely to survive and have so little to hope for.

To bring this to a close, this model provides us with an important insight: it is possible and necessary for us to love the poor without loving the fact that they are poor. We love the poor because they need our love the most. Thank you.