

Bishop Paul Otsuka's Pastoral Letter for New Years 2015
Blessed Are The Poor In Spirit

~Living the Poverty of God: Part 2~

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The Call of Pope Francis

Pope Francis, who displayed a fervent spirit of devotion to helping the poor in his native country of Argentina, called us to be "A poor church for the sake of the poor." The foundation of missionary endeavor, the gospel that the missionary himself/herself proclaims, is his/her own faithfulness to the mandates of the Gospel. The Holy Father himself by that brilliance that gushes out of the fountain in the depths of his soul, which is founded on a profound humility and manifested in the simplicity of his lifestyle, as well as his approachability, is a silent testimony to the message.

The Holy Father deplores the present generation of Christians who, even though the world is facing dire poverty, "ignore the poor and seem to be satisfied that only they will be saved." The very name that the Holy Father has chosen, Francis, connotes the idea that he is instigating in the Church a missionary spirit of renewal to be at one with the poor and simple by approaching them in simplicity. What is more, the Holy Father is calling on us to be an outgoing community that brings the joy of the gospel to all people. This calls us to be ready to launch out and embrace all. We Christians must have the courage to give up the comfort of our bailiwicks and bring the light of the gospel to those cornered in some dark recess through the forces of oppression. (Evangelii Gaudium 20)

Responding to Pope Francis' call we in the Kyoto Diocese, with empathy for the circumstances of the poor, must review our vision of the Church's spirituality. Last year we considered the material poverty of the poor. This year we will consider the mental and spiritual poverty of the needy.

Let us make an effort to read the Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation "The Joy of Evangelization" (2014 Katorikku Chuuou Kyougika).

1. Relying on God in the midst of poverty

In the sense of character

"Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5.3) The people gathered on the shore of Lake Galilee to whom Jesus was speaking when He said "Blessed are the poor in spirit" were people who had to survive, stricken not only by material poverty, but also oppressed by the feeling of helplessness in circumstances where there was no hope of outside help. Socially they were considered the weak, the defeated, those with nothing to rejoice in, people without a dream or even hope. They had no space to breathe. They never considered themselves to be blessed in any way. These were the poor everyday farmers and fishermen who, putting their hopes for a better life on Jesus, had gathered around Him on the shore. In the original text it says that "Jesus cried out, 'Oh, how happy they are! The poor of spirit.'"

The word "happy" is a translation of "Blessed by God. Graced by God." From the human standpoint these people could hardly be considered "blessed." Even so, Jesus was able to cry out with emotion, "Oh, how blessed you are by God!"

The majority of Jewish people, who were helpless because of the overpowering oppression of the Roman Empire, considered these people to be without hope of salvation because they did not observe the Law strictly as the Pharisees and lawyers demanded. Thus these people, who had been convinced that they were without hope of salvation, were rightly astounded to hear that they were being blessed by God.

In the text of the Sermon on the Mount according to Matthew where it says that "the poor are blessed" the Kyoudouyaku translates "blessed are the poor," to say, "poor in heart." Actually the original Greek texts could be translated as, "poor in spirit." Thus the meaning would be "spiritually poor." The Franciscan translation is, "Those who know their own poverty." In the corresponding verse in Luke (Luke 6, 20-26) the significance of the verse conveys the idea that the materially impoverished people are blessed, in contrast to the wealthy who are not. Matthew's verse is trying to bring out the element of spirituality in the poor. Is Jesus saying to the people who, in lieu of the material comforts that the wealthy enjoy, must depend on God, and therefore are consoled and animated in accordance with their faith in God? By this Jesus means, "That is okay. Even this is okay, because in this way you are putting your complete confidence in God the Father. In this way Jesus is consoling and encouraging people to put their complete confidence in the divine mercy. In this way their material impoverishment will be mutated into positive and healthy spiritual poverty. I would like people to dwell on this poverty of the heart that it may deepen holy dependence on God.

2. Becoming aware of our powerlessness.

In the sense of discovery

At the time of Jesus the people who were satisfied with the existing structures did not accept Jesus' teachings. For those who were blessed with wealth and status there was no feeling of powerlessness and necessity of humbly depending on God, and for that reason it was almost impossible for them to accept the teachings of Jesus. "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'In truth I tell you, it is hard for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Yes, I tell you again, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven.'" (Matt. 19, 23-24) For those who are attached to money and wealth, this becomes the foundation of their way of life on which they depend and makes their existence meaningful. And in this way wealth also becomes an obstacle to their eternal salvation.

From the Crucifix of the chapel of San Damiano Francis of Assisi heard the words, "Francis, rebuild my Church." So with his father's fortune he set about to rebuild the chapel. But later he realized what God was calling him to do. He came to realize that his calling was not repair an edifice, but to restore happiness to the poor. In the end the very meaning of his existence was a complete dependence on God. Once he had admitted this he faithfully submitted his all to the gospel and lived unimpeded by worldly wealth. By imitating the radical poverty of Christ he was able to live completely dedicated to the poor.

The attitude by which people refuse to face up to the powerlessness of human beings before God in order to be saved is a negative approach to spiritual poverty

and to be avoided. We must become aware of spiritual poverty. The person who becomes aware of this is happy. What Jesus asks of us is that through our intimate association with God we become conscious of the depth of our spiritual poverty. We submit to the fact that we can do nothing with our personal power to bring about our own salvation, and in humility we humbly place our complete confidence in the hands of God.

3. We do not justify ourselves.

(Conscious sense)

Through facing up to our own poverty and putting our complete trust in God we realize how miserable we are, and in need of God's help. In order to admonish those who were proud of being just and despised others Jesus taught the parable of the Publican and Pharisee: I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 19, 9-14) He also praised the unwavering faith of the poor widow who put two copper coins into the offering box. In spite of the fact that she herself had almost nothing to live on, without reluctance she put her entire earnings into that collection box. (Luke 21, 1-4) The true meaning of poverty is to avoid being like the Pharisee who for no other reason than that he was caught up in the illusion of being justified was self satisfied, and imitate the Publican who in humility could in no way justify himself, and confronted his own spiritual poverty.

Paul explained that the true humility of Jesus was most evident when incarnate Christ completely emptied of Himself by his sacrifice on the Cross. (In Greek: Kenosis) " Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross."

(Philippians 2, 6-8) So for us sinners, how shall we imitate Christ who emptied Himself (Kenosis)? That is by being one with Christ. We must admit that we are weak slaves of sin, and plead, "Lord, have mercy on us," and we sinners must offer up ourselves leaving everything else to the Lord. It is not by our willing it that we become empty, but by becoming empty with Christ. In that way, without being haughty before God, without justifying ourselves, we plead for humility.

4. Learning the abundance of Christ through poverty

(Christological Sense)

As Jesus Himself has taught us there is no other way to cultivate the virtue of humility except through Christ." "Come to me, all you who labor and are overburdened and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matt. 11,28-29)

Jesus let go of his glory as the Son of God. Although He was rich, He became poor for our sake so that we may become rich. (IICor.8,9) This is God's option for poverty. We may say that He was filled because He emptied Himself. By being united to His Heavenly Father He had the awareness of being loved and thus was conscious of belonging to Him. He had no need of external supports to shore

up His self. In other words, what bolstered His internal world was nothing like earthly power or material possessions, but the possession of His true self.

Therefore, Jesus' "poverty" consisted in this: thorough submission to the will of the Father, and thus completely emptying of Himself (poverty) as a sacrificial oblation offered in love of neighbor, he found his abundance in the possession of His real self. This is God's richness. We can say that this is the spirituality of poverty that Jesus professed and realized. The awareness of God's love and protection underpinned His determination to submit to radical poverty. We, too, learn poverty and experience this richness through imitating Jesus in His meekness and humility.

5. Sharing our abundance that cannot be seen.

(Sacramental sense)

We learn humility through imitating the deliberate acceptance of poverty, We must not forget the solemn injunction of Jesus, "No one can be the slave of two masters: he will either hate the first and love the second, or be attached to the first and despise the second. You cannot be the slave both of God and of money." (Matt 6, 24: Luke 16,13). Jesus is not saying "You must not," but, "You cannot." In other words, we cannot serve God and at the same time serve mammon. The Greek word "mammon" conveys the idea that it will be an obstacle on the road of serving Christ. We can say that Jesus' spiritual poverty puts us in direct opposition to mammon. "Mammon" can be extended to include seeking security, success, political power, and fame. Anything that urges us to present ourselves as being a superior being before God and man would come under the definition of "mammon." "For what is highly esteemed in human eyes is loathsome in the sight of God." (cf. Luke 16, 13-15)

But there is a way of turning that wealth into something that is not mammon. Paul explains that it is not wealth itself that is the root of all evil, but it is the hunger for fortune that is the root of evil. (cf. I Timothy 6, 10) Amassing wealth becomes evil, but if shared in love "mammon" transmutes itself from being evil to become a source of spiritual benefit. For instance, Paul admonished the Corinthians concerning the manner in which they conducted the sacred meal. Some of the members were stuffing themselves with bread while others were going hungry. In this way they were sinning against the Body of Christ. (I Cor. 11, 17-34) On the other hand, if we share this bread equally this becomes the Body of Christ. In other words, by sharing this bread that is indispensable for us as human beings it becomes the means of confecting the "sacrament of love." A sacrament is, after all, a visible sign thought which we bring about the grace of God that we cannot see. Let us all share in the spiritual abundance that we cannot see with the naked eye by sharing in love with all people the material wealth that is visible.

6. Stop greedy desires to possess yet more wealth

(In the executive sense)

We are not the exclusive owners of our possessions, but managers. We must not look at our possessions as being solely under our own proper jurisdiction, but by using them for the wellbeing of our neighbor we serve God's providence. (cf. The Church in the Modern World 69) In principle the universal purpose of material possessions is its social value. (Catholic Catechism, 2402-2406) Therefore, possessing material goods in this world is not sinful, But it must be understood that by the very fact that we possess material goods we are under an obligation to use them for the betterment of society. Saint John Chrysostom said that "If there are people living in poverty that is because there are other people who have an overabundance of this world's goods. And as long as they do not share this abundance with the needy their wealth should be considered stolen property. The superabundance of the rich in justice belongs to the poor. In other words, is should be considered as goods stolen from the poor. (Catholic Catechism, 2446) God is looking severely at the injustice of the growing gap between the rich and the poor in the world today.

By his nature mankind seeks success and pleasure. He/she seeks to possess more and more, until it becomes like a fetish under the illusion that one can fill up the vacuum in his/her soul with material goods. Ultimately this escalates to the point where the greedy person becomes completely enslaved to the goddess of wealth, no longer having the freedom of suppressing the lust for material possessions. We practice Christian poverty by suppressing the desire for unlimited wealth. Lao Tsu has said it well: "They are blessed who know when they have had enough." This can be said to mean: "Even though they be materially poor, those who know when they have had enough are spiritually blessed with wealthy."

" For wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be too." (Matt. 6, 21) For those who have conquered their attachment to wealth, the desire to have yet more, will by the same token free them from a vision of things from the standpoint of their vanity and self-centeredness. There will be a place in their heart for the poor and weak, and they will see them as brothers and sisters. "Everyone should give preference to others," (Phil. 2, 3) This humble feeling will come welling up from the depths of the heart. Believers must always be cautious of the tendency to feel that we can be satisfied with the things of this world.

7. Give rather than receive

In the sense of salvation

When the wealthy young man came up to Jesus and asked "Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied, " You need to do one thing more. Go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." (Mark 10, 17-21) Jesus did not respond to the question, "What should I do to be saved." What we can do is accept the Kingdom of God as the treasure of grace. The only condition is that we resolve that attachment to wealth.

Our Christian conversion starts when we become aware that, "there is something missing in me." This awareness of our emptiness transcends the dimension of

obligation, and brings us the plateau of an awareness of our longing for liberation. Love is never fulfilled with earthly things. Nor does love evolve from any earthly pressure of obligation. Rather love evolves from the joyful willingness to sacrifice oneself. Surely the wealthy young man in the story above upon seeing the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was able to comprehend what it meant to live in the world of love.

The Christians in the era of Takayama Ukon were well versed in the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. They were well imbued with the concept of spiritual poverty as the offering of their possessions to the poor in the true spirit of poverty through holy abandonment. (Ignatian Spiritual Exercises 98, 146, 147) We feel a certain attraction to the simple life of poverty as being exemplified in the childlike acceptance of the Kingdom of God. This is the kind of soil from which martyrs are born.

Paul says, quoting Our Lord, "There is more happiness in giving than in receiving." (Acts 20, 35) We must learn to follow these words that He has left to us. We, too, must learn to put our emphasis on giving, whether it be great or small, rather than trying to get something out of life.

8. Accepting anxiety in life.

In the integrated sense

Would we be happy without anxiety? Jesus said, "That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and what you are to wear. Surely life is more than food, and the body more than clothing!" (Matt. 6, 25) We are always naturally concerned about everyday things. There isn't anyone who does not experience anxiety. By the very fact that we are alive we live in the midst of worry, and to resist this anxiety we may choose from several strategies. Since anxiety is by its very nature fearsome we may choose simply to ignore it. Or, we could blank it out, or try to avoid the circumstances that could cause anxiety. Christians, far from trying to become oblivious to anxiety, accept it as a way of life. Rather than fret about anxiety we appreciate its value.

Here we recall another saying of Jesus: "Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they are?" (Matt. 6, 26) The human is a very precious being in the eyes of God. The true source of calmness in the face of anxiety comes from this confidence in God's love for us. We can see this confidence reflected in the face of Blessed Mother Teresa. We, too, can discover the joy of living under the mantle of God's protection by accepting anxiety in our daily lives with the confidence that God will support us even if we lack the external, material security that this world purports to provide us with.

9. The faith that lives for the poor

(In the critical sense)

Post-War Japan has survived the desolate situation after the war, and the intoxication of a bubble economy, only to become a society focused mainly on the economy. This has resulted from people in being imbued with a worldly, materialistic mindset that erodes the heart and leaves modern people unable

to see the value of leading a fugal life. Thus people crave for ever more pleasure, strive for success with ever more unscrupulous means, and trample other people underfoot to gain advantage for oneself. As a result people wallow in the swamp of selfish opulence. In such an environment of extreme self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, and greed, people know no other religion than to rely on God for things of this world. We who have faith find it our duty not to let our faith be contaminated by such worldly infestation.

When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the desert He was encouraged to become a worldly redeemer. In the face of such a temptation Jesus replied, "Scripture says: Human beings live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matt. 4.4) In the midst of disbelief and insult, Jesus showed what it is to live genuine poverty. This was Jesus' pitched battle with the Devil. It showed in reality what it meant to live a life of poverty.

Spiritual poverty is not a passive retreat from the battle with evil forces, but a head-on duel with the devil. What it means for the Christian to voluntarily live a life of poverty is to face a challenge. This is an important challenge. It means that we not only pick up the challenge that Jesus presents to us, but that it be focused on the poor. Pope Francis has called on us to be a "poor Church." He is asking each one of us to live a life of faith dedicated to the poor.

10. To be united with others in poverty

In the sense of community

What we are is different from what we have. But contrary to that many people claim to be what they have rather than what they are. For instance a person may be poor, without any possessions to speak of, but he/she can still give himself/herself. In such a case the person is giving none other than what he/she is. And in such a case poverty can bind us together in community through this mutual support. If a person has personal possessions he/she can offer that to others. But a person who has nothing has nothing to give except himself/herself. Truly in such a situation we find genuine love, because this person is offering, not something, but himself/herself. On the other hand when a person gives "some-thing" this forms a gap between the giver and receiver. In other words, in this case the receiver is put into a position of inferiority because it makes him/her dependent on the giver. This just shows that the person who endows the other with something is more powerful than the beneficiary. By giving in the midst of poverty we become equally united with the other person. Our solidarity is confirmed in poverty.

In the primitive Church, we hear: "And all who shared the faith owned everything in common." (Acts 2, 44-45) The little material goods they had, because they were shared graciously in a spirit of love, gave testimony to the spiritual poverty they had elected. Whether it was for the sake of individual or the community as a whole, the material paucity of the group became meaningful. To become poor the community of the church, as well as of the monastery, the members of the parishes should elect to live evangelical poverty.

11. Praying for humility to the Holy Spirit

In the sense of pneumatology

"The love of money is the root of all evils' and there are some who, pursuing it, have wandered away from the faith and so given their souls any number of fatal wounds." (I Tim. 6, 10) Paul has seen that those who give into avarice soon lose their faith. Augustine said, "If the rich person does not possess God, what then does he own? And if the poor person possesses God, how can you say that he has nothing? In the eyes of God wealth has no value at all. Rather before God the poverty of the poor person is his treasure. "The spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord." (Luke 4, 18) Jesus felt that His mission was to proclaim the good news to the poor. Through the urging of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us we are called to carry the good news to the poor, thorough embracing evangelical poverty with joy. What means can be chosen in this earthly life for each people to pursue the spirit of poverty? The call to poverty is not a commandment handed down by God from above, but an urging from within us by the Holy Spirit. Without fail the Holy Spirit will awaken us to the presence of Christ among us in the poor, and in order to follow Christ to abandon our worldly possessions, and with them to abandon our idolatry of the goddess of fortune, give up sinful wastefulness, and choose a life of restraint. Then the love and peace that only God can give will be bestowed upon us. For that reason we must imitate Christ in His humility, and pray to the Holy Spirit, that without relying on our own knowledge and experience, we may live the life of poverty always with a new heart and mind.

The Canticle of Mary

No word so understandably connotes the attitude of Jesus, His choice of action, and explains His conduct as much as "poverty. "And the words "Blessed are the poor of heart" are founded on our intimacy with God, and draw us ever closer to His beloved poor. There is a close relationship between the apostolate and poverty. God desires a poor Church that appeals to the poor. Apostolic poverty is foundational for the spread of the Kingdom. Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation Evangelii Gaudium emphasizes that only through spreading the joy of the modern evangelization can this mission be accomplished. The joy of the gospel is the joy of the works of God and wells up surprisingly out of the heart of poverty. "And Mary said: 'My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; because he has looked upon the humiliation of his servant. Yes, from now onwards all generations will call me blessed.'" (Luke 46-48) Mary's Canticle (The Magnificat) is the song of people who live the Beatitudes. Mary is the mother of the poor, the Star of the New Evangelization. With her help we can live the joy of the gospel, and seek happiness with courage.

January 1, 2015 The Feast of the Mother of God