Toward a Spirituality of Justice

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The Patristic writers we have identified present an important insight that can help us as we identity the rudiments of a spirituality of justice. These early Christian writers, whom Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox venerate, all recognize a link between the spiritual well-being of believers and their generosity toward the needy. Athanasius ranked care for the poor as a spiritual discipline on the same level with watchfulness in prayer, purity of the fast, and study of the Scriptures.[1] John Chrysostom considered almsgiving an act of worship, a spiritual exercise of the Christian experience.[2] He viewed almsgiving as an expression of the love commanded by Christ to love our neighbor. It was a demonstration that we served God, not mammon. In light of the wisdom of the Patristic writers, we contend that it is in the link between care for the poor and spiritual well-being that we have a spiritual foundation for an ethic of justice-making that ensures care for the poor and inclusion of the marginalized in community.

Those of us from the Protestant tradition, with its emphasis on the notion of justification by grace through faith, do not take lightly the step of connecting care for the poor with spiritual well-being. Reflecting upon the Church in history, we recognize that at various moments within that history, new circumstances and different pressures have sometimes come to bear which have called for shifts in our theological perspectives on time-honored traditions, including the relationship between care for the needy and our spiritual well-being. Such a shift occurred in the Western Church in the Middle Ages. As Europe underwent urbanization and vast numbers of poor and near-poor were making their way into urban areas, the Church's system of poor relief was being overrun. Along with those who had undertaken voluntary poverty (such as members of the mendicant orders), and those who were genuinely impoverished through harsh economic conditions, there were too many "sturdy beggars" – those who chose to make their way into the system under false pretenses.[3] As a result, old distinctions, which had surfaced even in the early Church, between the deserving and undeserving poor, received a fresh hearing. Protestant reformers, such as Martin Luther, had concerns that almsgiving or care for the poor would be linked to a "piety of achievement."[4] Luther and John Calvin and other theologians from the Reformation period affirmed the place of good works as the *fruit* of our justification by grace

through faith in Christ, not its cause. In his treatise *The Freedom of Christian*, Martin Luther observes that the Christian should "be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor."[5] The spiritual freedom to do so arises out of justification by grace through faith. Luther notes that in Ephesians 4:28, the Apostle Paul "commands us to work with our hands so that we may give to the needy…."[6] Luther elaborates on this text from Ephesians, as follows:

> This is what makes caring for the body a Christian work, that through its health and comfort we may be able to work, to acquire, and lay by funds with which to aid those who are in need, that in this way the strong member may serve the weaker, and we may be sons of God, each caring for and working for the other, bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ [Galatians 6:2]. *This is a truly Christian life*. Here faith is truly active through love …[7]

Luther reiterates this link between faith and works of love in his own commentary of the book of Galatians:

> Because thou hast laid hold upon Christ by faith, through whom thou art made righteous, begin now to work well. Love God and thy neighbour, call upon God, give thanks unto him, praise him, confess him. Do good to thy neighbour and serve him: fulfil thine office. These are good works indeed, which flow out of this faith and this cheerfulness conceived in the heart, for that we have remission of sins freely by Christ.[8]

Notwithstanding Luther's concern over the possibility of the development of a "piety of achievement" in the context of the sacramentalism of the medieval church, Church historian Carter Lindberg has argued that Luther was in the forefront of the development and implementation of new structures for addressing poverty in a new socio-economic context.[9]

C. F. Dumermuth, a former missionary based in Switzerland, affirmed the strength of John Calvin's concerns regarding the social conditions of his day as he encountered Scripture. Despite the danger of the possibility of a "piety of achievement," Calvin pressed forward in his concern for the impoverished. This can be seen in a quotation that Dumermuth provides from Calvin: "The mansions of the rich are the slaughter-houses of the poor." Dumermuth offers another glimpse of Calvin's perspective, which is taken from a sermon Calvin delivered in Geneva in 1555. In this quotation, Calvin makes a particularly sharp indictment of the affluent

of his day: "The sin of resignation, indifference, egoism tries to divert attention from the blatant fact of poverty by thousand and more things."[10]

Dumermuth rightly maintains that Calvin's view of the proper Christian response to poverty was to assume responsibility for the alleviation of that poverty: "If someone is rich it is easier to see what kind of person he is than if he is poor, because a rich person has the means to do harm. If he treats his neighbour without brutality he shows wisdom. Wisdom means realizing that God provokes in the poor the love of the rich for his neighbour. God tests our love. If a rich person is generous, if he tries to do good to the needy and does not lift himself up in haughty pomp and arrogance he makes a good grade in the exam."[11] For Calvin it would be a grievous error for the rich to remain indifferent to the cries of the poor, because he saw a unity between the poor and the wealthy and an inextricable spiritual connection between the two groups.[12] Out of this theological framework, Calvin wrote:

> We must see: They are our poor, our needy ones. Our Lord offers them to us as if he intended to say: 'I want that the rich mingle with the poor, that they meet and have fellowship, that the poor receive and the rich give and thereby get honored by both alike. If a rich person is in a position to act benevolently and the poor person realizes that he receives in my name, then both will praise me.'[13]

Despite whatever concerns the Protestant reformers might have had over the social welfare system and the Church of their day, they repudiated social practices which impoverished members of society. Even those of us who might be cautious about beliefs and practices which could encourage a return to a spirituality of "works righteousness," we must acknowledge a genuine relationship between our relationship to God and our relationship to one another. Obedience to the biblical command to love God and love our neighbor compels us through the activity of the Holy Spirit in memory of Jesus Christ. The responsibility to obey places a demand upon us that we pay attention to the link between our care for the poor and our spiritual well-being. Again, this link is the foundation for an ethic of justice-making.

There have been numerous examples in the history of the Christian church where individuals and/or groups understood this foundation for an ethic of justice-making. Adherents to the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant traditions can identify such examples within their particular expression of Christianity. One exemplar who continues to enjoy popularity from diverse traditions within Christianity is Francis of Assisi (1181/82-1226). The witness of this

medieval figure whose vital, Christ-like spirituality continues to attract admirers from various traditions and from people from all walks of life is especially pertinent for Christians today who are searching for a spirituality which recognizes the connection between the spiritual life and social justice.

Unfortunately, the word "spirituality" has been used promiscuously in our contemporary context. For our purposes, we define spirituality as the beliefs *and* practices that support us in living a life of faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

There are three elements of Franciscan spirituality which are important to emphasize as we articulate the rudiments of a spirituality of justice in our own time: 1) love for a vulnerable God, 2) imitation of Jesus of Nazareth, and 3) compassion for the poor. When these aspects of the Franciscan tradition are combined with attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer, we have a Trinitarian foundation for spirituality which is conducive to a manner of discipleship which can enable us to serve the poor around us effectively.

Love for a vulnerable God

What evoked adoration from Francis was that God blessed humanity by the act of divine self-emptying as exemplified in the Incarnation, whereby God who is above all and responsible for all deigned to express this love by becoming human. The Incarnation was a voluntary descent into poverty and weakness. This act of God in Christ led Francis to identify with that which is weak and impoverished. For Francis, God's act of love compels us to love that which is weak, despised, and vulnerable; for in doing so, we love what God loves. Such imitation of divine love enables us to see the presence of grace in those things which God loves. Because of our connection to the world as creatures, the world becomes a precious place where the Incarnation represents God's chosen embeddedness in the physical world. In Franciscan spirituality, the kenosis of God in Christ also helps to deepen our awareness of suffering in the world and empowers us to do something about it.[14] This "love of God who made and loves the world enables us to grow in love of the world."[15] In following the example of Francis, who was obedient to the divine commandment to "love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds,"

(Matthew 22:37), we can "ent[er] into fuller knowledge of the world, particularly through standing alongside those who suffer in it, and this can enable us to know and do God's will."[16]

Imitation of Jesus of Nazareth

The kenosis of God in Christ Jesus was not just an act of God that drew Francis' adoration. Out of his love for this vulnerable God, Francis wanted to imitate Jesus and he taught his own followers to live a life of lowliness and voluntary poverty because that is what Jesus did.[17] Francis' spirituality was one which focused on God's self-revelation in poverty and human vulnerability, as most clearly represented in the Incarnation of Christ.[18] As Mark Galli observes, the imitation of Christ represented a link between obedience and poverty. For Francis, poverty was not simply the absence of material goods. This poverty included a divestment of both external and internal impediments to complete obedience to the divine command to love and serve one another. Thus, poverty meant a life of self-denial, humility, and service.[19] Obedience meant following the teachings of Christ and was a foundation for humility.[20]

The challenge for us in the twenty-first century is to discern how we might incorporate this insight into our own expression of the disciplined life of a follower of Jesus Christ, given that a simplistic imitation of Jesus (or even Francis) are impractical in our time. Whatever Francis and his followers may have done, and whatever we do insofar as we imitate Jesus, can only be done by divine grace. The practice of responsible stewardship, self-denial, humility, and service requires the work of the Holy Spirit in us. The insights of Latin American Catholic theologian Jose Comblin offers language from his spiritual tradition which helps to illustrate how the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer leads to that conformity to the image of Christ that the Apostle Paul spoke of long ago: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you…. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family." (Romans 8:10-11, 29)

Comblin reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the source of faith.[21] This faith constitutes wisdom or a higher knowledge in which the Spirit allows us to penetrate into the secret of the

words and deeds of Jesus.[22] The mystery of God that the Spirit reveals with regard to Christ is God's option for the poor. As Comblin explains, "The Son [Jesus Christ] became poor, 'taking on the condition of a slave.' The Father became like the poor by giving his Son over to poverty. As a result, it is in the poor that we see the face of God; it is in the poor that the Spirit shows us the face of Christ."[23] If we truly see the face of God in the poor, as a result of the work of the Spirit in us, then our care for them will be more than superficial. As Comblin contends, "accepting [the poor], living together with them, working alongside them in the same poverty … require[s] a wisdom that can come only from continual enlightenment by the Spirit."[24] Francis undoubtedly understood this and lived his life accordingly.

Comblin maintains that the progress of Christian life includes a struggle against the evil that dwells within a person. The Holy Spirit guides this struggle, known as ascesis; the goal of which is the liberty from self-indulgence and freedom for service to others.[25] To those who entrust themselves to the Spirit, they will be led to appropriate ways of living their lives in conformity to the image of Christ. The Holy Spirit can help us to meet the challenge of living our lives in conformity to the image of Christ in our time and under the circumstances that we find ourselves in today. Those of us who have much in the way of material resources are called upon to examine how we use the material goods we have. This involves attention to solid principles of responsible stewardship of our goods and resources. This examination of stewardship will require a practice of avoidance of ostentation or conspicuous consumption.

There are those among us, however, who find it difficult to meet the needs of our family. Although not utterly impoverished, we may find ourselves one step away from financial disaster. As Comblin observes, the poor and those who could become poor may feel that their lives already seem like one long ascesis because they find themselves in a constant state of physical self-denial.[26] However, the poor and near-poor remain susceptible to the trappings of riches. In that case, their self-denial may be required at a different level from that of the more affluent. Comblin's point is to remind us that there is none, rich or poor, who are exempt from the need for the work of the Holy Spirit to conform us to the image of Christ that we may serve our neighbor in love.

Without the Holy Spirit, we cannot pray.[27] Without unceasing prayer, we cannot begin or sustain the path that leads to imitation of Jesus. Scholars and devotional writers familiar with the life of Francis of Assisi consistently note the role of prayer in his life.[28] Prayer was his chief

discipline. Prayer was the means by which Francis knew and expressed love to God. His devotion to God freed him from the temptations and impediments to service to others and strengthened him to give unreservedly to the poor. His spirituality was dialectical: movement between involvement in God and involvement in society. His experiences of society fed into his life of prayer, and in turn led him back into society.[29]

Prayer for divine guidance is certainly necessary for the kind of decision-making designed to lead a life in conformity with Christ. The temptation to make our decisions pragmatically with little attention to divine guidance may be quite strong. It takes time to become attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We must not only be well-informed on the issues related to justice, but also pay attention to the interior movements and exterior signs of the guidance of the Spirit. This process is often referred to as discernment. Discernment has both a *personal* dimension (How is the Spirit speaking to me?) and a *communal* dimension as well (How is the Spirit speaking within the community?). The process of discernment should involve personal and communal prayer and dialogue with others. At its best, a discernment process leaves all who participate with a sense that the decision is God's work and not merely our own.

Compassion for the poor

The third dimension of Franciscan spirituality we would emphasize is compassion for the poor. Compassion for the poor is more than sympathy. It is solidarity that refuses to use more than needed to avoid robbing from those without. It recognizes that our existence is tied up with theirs and with the whole environment. Compassion recognizes a real kinship with the rest of creation. Anything that thwarts our harmony with one another and with all of creation gives us a holy restlessness. We cannot be content with disharmony that arises out of unequal access to and distribution of the resources that enable all of us to live the abundant life.

Through their love for the self-emptying God, which led to their commitment to imitate Jesus – the Incarnate One – Francis and his followers were motivated to serve and enter into solidarity with the poor. Their motivation for service was derived from compassion, not mere sympathy. With sympathy we give charity, but remain unmoved by the plight of those who suffer. We give, if at all, out of our excess. But with compassion, we are moved; we suffer with others and their pain becomes our pain. We are moved to act in sacrificial ways.[30] With Francis

and his companions this compassion meant a *commitment* to suffer with those who suffer. It involved fellow-feeling; particularly with persons in distress.[31]

In his study of Franciscan spirituality, Terry Tastard raises a central question that we would all do well to ponder: *How can [we] believe in Jesus Christ and let things stay as they are?* [32] Reflection upon the spirituality of Francis of Assisi may lead us to ponder that God freely chooses vulnerability, not as a way to support the status quo, but in order to meet our needs and transform our lives. Our spirituality and praxis ought to do the same. God can speak to us through the needs of the poor.[33]

Francis identified with the marginalized of society and sought to create an understanding of community that was inclusive.[34] Francis' "preferential option for the poor" was in service of facilitating the creation of a new, inclusive community. To clarify an unfortunate misunderstanding, Leonardo Boff explains that God's option for the poor is not an exclusive option, but rather preferential.[35] As Boff states, "this does not deny the Church's essential universality, but defines the place from which it would like to begin to realize that catholicity, that is, from the poor, and afterward, the others."[36] As we reflect upon Francis' struggle for Christ-like holiness we are reminded of his battle to shed his aversion to the stench and deformity of the lepers he encountered – the quintessential outcasts of his day. This reminder leads us to contemplate, "Who, we may ask, are the lepers of *our* lives?"[37] As Boff so eloquently states, "What makes poverty inhuman is not only that it impedes the satisfaction of basic needs. It is scorn, rejection, exclusion from human life together, the permanent brainwashing of a negative and unqualified image of the poor, developed by non-poor classes. The poor end up thinking of themselves as abject and despised."[38]

The inner life and the pursuit of Justice

In a sense, the spirituality of Francis is holistic in that it is conscientious in maintaining continuity between the inner and outer life. It is a *lived* spirituality. For Francis, his experience of life among the most wretched of society was a fundamental influence in his whole commitment to God.[39] There was a continuity between the inner life and the contribution to harmony of society, which we must seek to emulate.[40] His piety is linked with a profound love of God that extends to a love for the world which God has created. Tastard, reflecting upon

Franciscan spirituality maintains, that we need a social involvement that flows from a strong personal spirituality.[41] Therefore, what is essential is a strong prayer life to nourish such deep social concern and ability to suffer with the suffering.[42] A strong prayer life is "a fundamental form of action," it builds up in us a disposition for action; it should keep us focused on *people*."[43] As the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, an admirer of Franciscan spirituality, observed, the importance of solitude, silence, and stillness are tools that help us "recuperate spiritual powers that may have been gravely damaged by the noise and rush of a pressurized existence."[44]

Both Francis and Jesus underwent seasons of intense spiritual isolation before engaging in tireless and selfless activity for the world.[45] Their prayer time was spent in submission, searching, and renewal of dependence upon God.[46] They combined solitary intimacy with God and selfless service to God's people.[47] Mystical union with God is part of the preparation for selfless service to the world.[48] How many of us, in the busyness of our lives, schedule our days around activities or around periods of prayer and meditation?[49] For Francis, time alone with God made the periods of service meaningful and productive.[50]

Conclusion

Tastard notes the spirituality of Francis inverted the categories of society: this spirituality was inclusive rather than exclusive, one of giving rather than grasping. It eagerly sought the outcast rather than marginalized them, stressed relinquishment rather than accumulation, embraced self-emptying rather than self-aggrandizement, turning society's conventions upsides down.[51] Our engagement in the struggle for just societies should arise out of a deep experience of the love of God as the underlying reality of the world.[52] Our concern for the world, and for those who suffer in it, arises out of our love of God who made the world and loves the world; that we may come to grieve as God grieves for it.[53] Like Terry Tastard, what we can hope for is that our awareness of the world will feed our prayer, and in turn, our praying will lead us back into the world.[54] A spirituality of justice encompasses an active inner life of faith and prayer that can sustain us in our work of service to others. It also requires consistency in our theology and our praxis. To paraphrase the words of Jesus to his disciples in the Upper Room before his arrest, "If you know these things, you are blessed if you *do* them." (John 13:17)[53]

Notes

[1]David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 189.

[2]R. A. Krupp, *Shepherding the Flock of God, The Pastoral Theology of John Chrysostom* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 152-153.

[3]See Lee Palmer Wandel, "Social Welfare," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, General Editor, Hans J. Hildebrand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 77-83.

[4]I am indebted to Carter Lindberg for this phrase. See Lindberg, "The Liturgy After the Liturgy: Welfare in the Early Reformation," *Through the Eye of a Needle, Judeo-Christian Roots of Social Welfare*, ed. Emily Albu Hanawalt and Carter Lindberg (Kirksville, Missouri: The Thomas Jefferson University Press at Northeast Missouri State University, 1994), 177ff.

[5]Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," John Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther, Selections from his Writings* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 73.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid, 74. Emphasis added.

[8]Martin Luther, "A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians," Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 111-112. John Calvin affirms this connection between faith and works. For example, in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, chapter xiv, para. 8, Calvin reiterates the Reformation insight that good works are a by-product of faith, when he writes, "They have spoken very truly who have thought that favor with God is not obtained by anyone through works, but on the contrary, works please him only when the person has previously found favor in his sight." Passage quoted from *Calvin's Institutes, A New Compend*, ed. Hugh T. Kerr (Louisville, Kentucky/John Knox Press, 1989).

[9] See Carter Lindberg, "The Liturgy After the Liturgy: Welfare in the Early Reformation," *Through the Eye of a Needle, Judeo-Christian Roots of Social Welfare*, ed. Emily Albu Hanawalt and Carter Lindberg (Kirksville, Missouri: The Thomas Jefferson University Press at Northeast Missouri State University, 1994), 177-191; Lindberg, "Reformation Initiatives for Social Welfare, Luther's Influence at Leisnig, in *The Annual Society of Christian Ethics*, ed. D. M. Yeager (Knoxville, Tenn.: Society of Christian Ethics, 1987), p.79-99; and Lindberg, "Luther on Poverty in *Lutheran Quarterly*, vol. xv, no. 1, Spring 2001, 85-101.

[10] C. F. Dumermuth, "The Holy Spirit, Calvin and the Poor," in *Asia Journal of Theology*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1994, p.408.

[11]Dumermuth, "The Holy Spirit, Calvin and the Poor," 408.

[12]Ibid, 409.

[13]ibid.

[14] Terry Tastard, *The Spark in the Soul, Four Mystics on Justice* (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 5.

[15]See Tastard, *The Spark in the Soul*, 5.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid, 18, 20.

[18]See Tastard, 17.

[19] Mark Galli, *Francis of Assisi and His World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 142.

[20]Ibid, 84, 85.

[21] Jose Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 131.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid, 132.

[24]Ibid, 133.

[25]Ibid, 134.

[26]Ibid, 135.

[27]Ibid, 136.

[28] The literature on Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan tradition is exhaustive. For just a few examples of books which address the role of prayer in the life of Francis, see William J. Short, OFM, *Poverty and Joy, the Franciscan Tradition* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999); Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Francis of Assisi, Performing the Gospel Life* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004; Paul Sabatier, *The Road to Assisi, the Essential Biography of St. Francis*, ed. Jon M. Sweeney (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2003); Terry Tastard, *The Spark in the Soul, Four Mystics on Justice* (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, 1989); Mark Galli, *Francis of Assisi and His World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002); John Michael Talbot with Steve Rabey, *The Lessons of St. Francis, How to Bring Simplicity and Spirituality into Your Daily Life* (New York: Plume, 1997).

[29]Tastard, 16.

[30]See Tastard, 24.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Tastard, *The Spark in the Soul*, 2.

[33]Ibid, 22.

[34]Ibid, See Tastard, 20.

[35]From Puebla, nos. 1134, 1165 in "The Final Document," in John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, eds., Puebla and Beyond (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis 1979), quoted in Leonardo Boff, *Saint Francis, A Model for Human Liberation*, trans. John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 58.

[36]Boff, *Saint Francis, A Model for Human Liberation*, 58.

[37] John Michael Talbot with Steve Rabey, *The Lessons of St. Francis, How to Bring Simplicity and Spirituality into Your Daily Life* (New York: Plume, 1997), 88.

[38]Boff, *Saint Francis, A Model for Human Liberation*, 76.

[39]Tastard, *The Spark in the Soul*, 16-17.

[40]See Tastard, 34.

[41]Ibid, 2.

[42]See Tastard, 25.

[43]Ibid, 29.

[44]Talbot, *The Lessons of St. Francis*, 59.

[45]Ibid, 236.

[46]Ibid, 237.

[47]Talbot, *The Lessons of St. Francis*, 233.

[48]Ibid, 233.

[49]Talbot, *The Lessons of St. Francis*, 238.

[50]Ibid, 234.

[51]Tastard, 20, 21.

[52]Ibid, 6.

[53]See Tastard, *The Spark in the Soul*, 5.

[54]Ibid, 16.

[55]Emphasis added.

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