



THE POOR AND THE LOVE OF THE POOR

Posted on May 1, 2022 by Marion Duvauchel



"Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are in the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy... And you shall go out through the breaches... you shall be cast forth..." says the Lord" (Amos 4:1-4).

Beyond all the various humanitarian trappings that have been used to dress up Christian charity, the idea of the "preferential option" for the poor, which is widely accepted in the official Catholic Church, is not without similarities to a phenomenon that occurred in the fourth century, in the history of the Roman Empire. In this respect, a close analysis can help us to better understand the abstract and ideological character of this option for the poor that has contributed in the transformation of the Church into a mega NGO, with all the great waste of money that we know well—the insistent letters asking for donations, various forms of communication, cheesy postcards accompanied by useless objects—all designed to force the recipient of all this revolting prose to give. Some NGOs actually hide commercial activity under the humanitarian envelope. Father Ponchaud in Cambodia, where he has been living for 60 years, has described this deception very well.

The concern of the early Church began with helping the faithful in need, welcoming newly arrived co-religionists from other cities, and protecting the widows and orphans of Christian families (a very clearly Judaic heritage). On both sides of the Euphrates (Roman and Greco-Latin East), the development of the Church in the first centuries took place under Roman domination; and this was not without consequences.

From the second century onwards, the universal penal code of the Roman Empire made only one distinction, between *honestiores* and *humiliores*, i.e., between the rich and the humble. The problem with these two categories is the gap between them. Beyond a certain threshold, it is justice that is compromised; and justice is the cement of peace.

But in the fourth century, things changed. The growing importance of the Church contributed to notable social transformations. The Christian representation of the role of the Church in Roman society (unprecedented at the time) was supported by great combativeness in the proclaimed will of the Christian bishops to act according to this "love of the poor." This theme began to exert a force of attraction that could be considered out of proportion to the actual action of Christian charity at that time.

Have things changed that much?

For the Roman Empire, as for any state, the problem of poverty was closely linked to that of social peace. It was necessary to ensure that the inhabitants of the cities, and particularly the populations of the great metropolises of the Eastern Mediterranean, kept their peace. However, the poor, as we know when we have looked at a little history or sociology, can become restless—especially when they are hungry. In the city, in particular, hunger-riots, clashes between competing religious groups and later fights between circus factions, were regarded with relative indifference. Except in rare cases, these riots did not turn into a general insurrection.

In the end, things didn't change much in this respect either. Sports stadiums have replaced the circus games.

Civic peace was thus the Achilles heel of the traditional municipal elites of 4th century Rome. They had to face a rival: the Church. The latter proclaimed the inanity of the privileges of the system of elite training (the *paideia*). The urban notables regarded themselves as the summit of a social pyramid encompassing all the active members of the city.

In contrast, the Christian bishop (often from the educated social class) based his claim to authority on a social vacuum. Indeed, the *demos*, the "civic body" did not include all the inhabitants of the city. To belong to the *demos*, one had to come from a family of citizens and be a member of a recognized civic group. It was vital for the city's representation of itself that it not be made up exclusively of poor people. And it was vital for the real city, too, that it not be made up exclusively of the so-called poor. These poor people defined themselves by not belonging to an urban group. Not belonging to any group, they remained on the margins of the attention given by the great to the city as a whole. They were not fed by anyone. Indeed, the homeless and destitute were excluded from the *demos*.

Have things changed that much?

In the fourth century, the number of poor people seems to have increased considerably in many cities of the Roman East. The cities of the late Empire were characterized by massive unemployment. Immigration also increased. Metropolises traditionally tended to absorb wealth and populations from secondary provincial centers. Not all of these immigrants were necessarily destitute, but they were

"poor," in the sense that they were foreign to the city. Their mass eroded the clear distinction between members of the demos, many of whom were poor, and the bulk of the lower classes, who, while not poor in the strict sense of destitute, were nonetheless vulnerable and eagerly sought a group to which to attach themselves.

In the fourth century, the notion of the poor broadened its range while taking on the colors of the Old Testament (the complaint of the righteous found in certain psalms). The lower classes were no longer considered fellow citizens but as disadvantaged people, entitled to demanding justice from the new patriarch, the bishop. And it was then that the lower classes as a whole, and not only the poor on the Church rolls, helped to ensure the election of certain bishops.

If we do not know, region-by-region, what the Christian Church actually did for the urban poor at the end of the Empire, we do know how crucial this assistance had become as a component of the Christian representation of the bishop's authority over the community. Even if it was still in the minority, compared to the polytheists and the Jews, this Church, which reached the furthest fringes of society, "spectacularly embodied by the poor," to use [Peter Brown's expression](#) (his is the only study, to my knowledge, of poverty), established for the future its moral right to represent the whole community. Hence the concern for the monopoly of almsgiving. Not only was the bishop supposed to know well those in need, but a mystical bond was even supposed to unite him with the city's poor. The actions of the Christian bishop resulted in making the poor more visible. Food was distributed in the churchyards. By being visible, the poor were also easier to control. By becoming the poor of the Church, they were stabilized. Constantine encouraged this action by the bishops by ordering that the distribution of food and clothing to the poor be organized by the bishops alone.

This foray into history invites us to take a closer look at the question that should be examined with some care: "Who are the poor today?"

If we follow the Old Testament, the poor are the ones who are the object of iniquity. They are the ones who cry out to God. It is on them that the rich man fattens himself like those cows of Bashan of the prophet Amos. When Jesus is asked about the identity of the neighbor (who is my neighbor?" Luke, 10-25, 37), it seems impossible to ask "who is poor to me?"—except to recall Jacques Brel's atrocious and brilliant song about lady bosses, who "knit everything in goose-poop hue, which lets you recognize your poor on Sundays at high mass."

In the light of this analysis, what can be said about the "poor" today and about the love for them that is so much sung in parishes and echoed by secularized NGOs?

Beyond a wide range of poverty, it is difficult to distinguish in this complex sphere between the religious and the profane, the Christian and the political. On the side of the values of the Republic, we observe the obsession that the poor not to be excluded from the "demos." But in order to vote, that shining sign of belonging to the citizenry, one needs a home, preferably a somewhat stable one (and not a hotel room). The problem is even more difficult with migrants and the whole mass of men and women (mostly single and men) who cross the porous borders of Europe. The right of asylum brings them into the "demos." They are usually not rich; but they also transcend the category of the poor as we understand it in the light of this analysis (if we admit that it is still valid today).

As in the fourth century in the Roman Empire, this entire mass of migrants erodes the distinction between the class of poor and destitute "citizens" within this broad spectrum of modern poverty and the non-citizens. The group-affiliation of the Muslim majority that crosses our borders is religious. There is nothing egalitarian about the Muslim world. Woman is a sub-group; the younger brother obeys the elder who obeys the father. The Islam of the Maghreb is not that of Central Asia. But all the followers of Mohammed obey a concept that is not well known to Europeans, but which is formidably operative: the Ummah.

And the Church? It vaguely maintains the idea of the poor of the Old Testament. But it is like a kind of *appogiatura* that it plays from time to time, with all the piping, in a deafening symphony about the "poor," of which the Bishop of Rome makes himself, here and there, the badly inspired singer. However, today, this is a reality amplified by the revolting iniquity of which many small people are victims, in a society that has abolished the very idea that founds the concept of justice—any fault requires reparation.

The figure of the poor in the Gospel is recognizable: the blind, the paralyzed; in short, the invalids who are dependent on their families. For illness deprives a family not only of the strength of the sick person, but also of the person or persons who are supposed to take care of them. Double punishment.

The paradigm of the traditional opposition between the rich and the poor is provided by the parable of Lazarus, this man who camps on the threshold of a rich man, dressed in bissus (an extremely expensive fabric) and linen, and who banks daily without even distributing the remains of his feasts. The poor man

dies and ends up in Abraham's bosom; the rich man dies and ends up in a place where flames burn him. This is not Hell. For a simple reason: he can still see and he can hear. And he has not forgotten because he does not ask Lazarus directly to come and ease his suffering—he calls "Father Abraham." So, there is possible communication between the two spheres (or the two states of the soul). But Lazarus is not allowed to come and ease the suffering of the rich man. "A great chasm has been established between you and us, so that those who would pass over to you cannot, and from there also they cannot cross over to us."

Only the prayer of the living can alleviate the sufferings of the souls in Purgatory, a dogma that Vatican II suppressed with the stroke of a pen.

We thus have here a figure of these states of the soul, symbolized by Hell and by purgatory. The ultimate characteristic of Hell is the radical absence of communication, when not only is it not allowed to be refreshed by the prayers of the living, but where no communication is possible—neither by sight nor by sound. This has a name—the punishment of the damned.

The inhabitants of the great metropolises, harassed by all forms of begging poverty, do not dress in bissus; they do not feast every day; they usually have a family to support; sometimes a sick person to support... No, they are not rich in the sense of the Gospel. Those who dress today in bissus and linen and feast every day live carefully protected lives; they have bodyguards; armored doors, gated villas. They travel in five-star hotels where beggars are not allowed to come near.

The official Church seems to have forgotten this great figure of Lazarus, a paradigmatic figure of poverty, who is also a figure of the virtue of strength; this virtue which is also a breath of the Spirit and which consists in enduring. Lazarus has known suffering here on earth; he knows consolation in the bosom of Abraham. The rich man did not console, did not relieve; he gorged himself in insolence. Now he knows suffering.

Nothing says that it is eternal.

The rich man has five brothers. He would like to warn them, because they too will undoubtedly behave like his older brother. But it is not possible to warn them either: they have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.

The message is clear; and it comes from the mouth of the Lord himself. Do we hear it echoed in our parishes, in our Christian structures?

Is there a mystery of poverty? Yes, and it is linked to the mystery of iniquity that reason cannot face, without the risk of breaking down; that sin of the world which increases with the weight of history, as St. Augustine saw. So, there will always be poor people; and the Christian soul remains inconsolable. And if the soul can find, in a night of prayer, some strange and enigmatic answer to this mystery, only the cross can give a full account.

Marion Duvauchel is a [historian of religions](#) and holds a PhD in philosophy. She [has published widely](#), and has taught in various places, including France, Morocco, Qatar, and Cambodia. She is the founder of the Pteah Barang, in Cambodia.

[Featured image](#): "Charity," or "The Indigent Family," by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, painted in 1865.

