

KENDUANYI: *External Goods and Happiness: On the Difficulties of Practising High Virtue without Abundant Means*

EXTERNAL GOODS AND HAPPINESS: ON THE DIFFICULTIES OF PRACTISING HIGH VIRTUE WITHOUT ABUNDANT MEANS

Mirabel Nagei KENDUANYI*¹

Abstract

The discourse on the relationship between religion and politics is a pertinent one for Christians. State-Church relations affect the practice of the Christian life. Politics is concerned with political leadership and the material development and distribution of resources. Religion is concerned with issues of faith and moral; the life of virtue in society. To live lives of holiness and the practice of the virtues, people need a certain amount of external goods. These external goods are secured through good governance, good leadership and authentic development. Aristotle teaches us that the possession of external goods is necessary to the happy life. He says ‘a certain prosperity is by moral fitness, not by logical necessity, attached to the happy man.’ He is certain that ‘it is impossible’ or ‘not easy’ to practice the high virtues without an abundance of means. The reason being that ‘many good deeds are done by the instrumentality of friends, wealth and political power; and of some things the absence is a cloud on happiness.’ It is therefore necessary that Christians be fully involved in politics so that they can permeate politics with the spirit of the beatitudes and ensure that resources are used in a way that promote the flourishing of the Christian life.

Keywords: Faith, *Oikonomia*, Industry, Happiness

1. Introduction

Faith and wealth are interconnected and the Church’s dealing with the economic and social order needs attention at all times. This is the opinion of Justo L. Gonzalez, who tells us how his interest in the subject of wealth as it relates to faith developed. In his own words, Gonzalez writes, ‘I have become increasingly convinced that such matters, far from being tangential to the life of the early Church, were central to it, and that without a proper

^{1*}**Mirabel Nagei KENDUANYI**, Dominican University, Ibadan, Email: Kenduanyi.m@dui.edu.ng Tel: +2348120523856.

understanding of them we have a truncated view of that life.² In his opinion, the ‘crucial questions on the economy are questions of ethics and faith. These are the ideas he explores in his work *Faith and Wealth; A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*. In the book, he discusses the ideas of the Church Fathers on wealth. We find references in the work from The *Didache*, Pseudo-Barnabas, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, The Cappadocian Fathers, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. John Chrysostom and many others. It is our intention in this paper to explore what the Ancients had to say about faith and wealth as understood in their expositions on *Oikonomia*. Secondly, we shall follow the Church’s thoughts on the relationship between faith and economics and how these impacts on the day to day lives of Christians. We shall also consider the relationship between economics and the social order, and the relationship between the rich and the poor in the Church. There is also the awareness that there exists a complex relationship between wealth and social conventions in many societies. The resources at our disposal includes the writings of the Church Fathers, the social doctrines of the Church and the thoughts of some prominent theologians on the subject.

2. The Terms *Oikonomia* and Economy

The words *Oikonomia* and economy may sound very secular to the average Christian, but they are deeply theological. Reflections on wealth has a long history in the church. The Church Fathers used the expression *Oikonomia* which is relatively different from the modern term of *economics*. The word *Oikonomia* in the works of the Church Fathers meant ‘organization,’ or ‘management.’³ When they talked of wealth, it was really meant practical and ethical advice on management of a household. The word *Oikonomia* was also used to refer to the ‘organization of a poem.’ Tertullian is said to have used the expression to refer to ‘God’s Self-management’⁴ of Himself. What is being emphasized here is the fact that the word ‘*oikonomia*’ as used by the ancients embodies elements of today’s ‘economics’ even

² Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth; A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (San Francisco: HapersanFrancisco, 1990), xii.

³ Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth; A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*, xiv.

⁴ Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth; A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*, xiv

KENDUANYI: *External Goods and Happiness: On the Difficulties of Practising High Virtue without Abundant Means*

though there exists a significant difference in the activities indicated under each. The connection between the two terms is here described:

If the ancients had no word for our modern concept of economic, it was because they also lacked the concept. As we shall see, they did have definite ideas about how the society should be ordered—for instance, whether they should be private property or not. They also understood the connection between the availability of commodities and price fluctuations. They speculated on why money is valuable and the connections between monetary values and societal conventions. What they did not do was link all these together in a coherent view of economic phenomena and their behavior. Much less did they see any connections but the most obvious between government policy and economic order. Not until the time of Diocletian did the Roman Empire have anything that even remotely resemble a budget. Even then, they apparently had little understanding of the connection between inflation and money supply. Thus, while rulers were often concerned about the plight of the poor—for the threat they posed, if for no other reason—their only remedies were stopgap measures such as doles...the early Christians possessed no better understanding of the workings of the economy than did the rest of their contemporaries. They knew—and often experienced—the gap separating the rich from the poor, and they saw that gap deepening as time progressed. But they lacked the instruments of social and economic analysis that usually associate with the term economics.⁵

The bishops and pastors in the early Church were very much aware of economic disparities among Christians and the consequences on Christian living. Excerpts from their homilies is proof that they were concerned with such matters and addressed them, at least from the pulpit. Gonzalez provides us with an excerpt from a homily by Gregory Nazianzus attributing the cause of a drought and famine which affected Cappadocia in 382 to the people's attitude towards the poor.

⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth; A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*, xiv.

One of us oppressed the poor, taking his lands and moving the boundaries... as if he alone were to inhabit the earth. Another polluted the earth with interests and rents, reaping where he did not sow...not tilling the soil, but exploiting the suffering of the needy...Another had no mercy for the widow and the orphan, and did not feed the hungry... It is for these reasons that God's wrath is unleashed upon the children of unbelief, and the heavens have either remained closed or they open only to our hurt.⁶

This excerpt and many others prove that the Church Fathers addressed concerns related to means of acquisition of wealth and the relationship with the poor. The Church's concern about wealth has never been about wealth for wealth's sake. The primary concern has always been how wealth contributes to happiness and a healthy lifestyle for Christians.

We may then ask, is there a connection between external goods and happiness? Is it possible for a Christian to practice high virtue without an abundance of means? Christian thinkers have expressed different opinions on the subject. John Henry Newman states it clearly that it is difficult to practice high virtue without an abundant means. Meanwhile, the famous English writer Samuel Johnson has this to say:

Poverty takes away so many means of doing good, and produces so much inability to resist evil, both natural and moral, that it is by all virtuous means to be avoided. Consider a man whose fortune is very narrow; whatever be his rank by birth, or whatever his reputation by intellectual excellence, what good can he do? Or what evil can he prevent? That he cannot help the needy is evident; he has nothing to spare. But, perhaps, his advice or admonition may be useful. His poverty will destroy his influence: many more can find that he is poor, than that he is wise; and few will reverence the understanding that is of little advantage to its owner.⁷

⁶ Gregory Nazianzus, *Oratio XVI*, 18 cited in Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth; A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*, 177.

⁷ James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 492.

KENDUANYI: *External Goods and Happiness: On the Difficulties of Practising High Virtue without Abundant Means*

What advantages does riches accrue? On riches, Johnson adds ‘of riches, it is not necessary to write the praise. Let it, however, be remembered, that he who has money to spare, has it always in his power to benefit others; and of such power a good man must always be desirous.’⁸ From the foregoing, the idea is that wealth in itself is a ‘power for good’ and secondly that Christians should be desirous of wealth, in as much as it provides opportunities of doing good. The Church herself count works of charity among its greatest virtues, and it knows how difficult it is to meet the needs of the poor without the financial support of benefactors. Without money, works of charity carried out by the church will be greatly hindered or altogether impossible. Of course, God does provide, sometimes, perform miraculously, but in the natural order of things, God has provided enough natural and human resources and blessed humankind with talents and skills to transform the world through human industry. An elaborate discourse on money should not make us underestimate or negate the value and respect for the ‘the vow of poverty’ professed by religious. Gonzalez quickly points it out when he says the Mendicant Orders only succeeded in their missions because they were financially supported by more stable communities and the generosity of benefactors.⁹

3. Christians and Industry

The image of the *bee* is employed in Christian liturgy during the Easter liturgy, in the *Exultet*, to illustrate the industry and fecundity of God’s creatures. We sing asking God to accept the candle, the product of the mother bee and his servant’s hands. So too Scripture is replete with messages calling humans beings to imitate the industry of other lower creatures. Human industry is fruitful in work. While the birds, animals and the fish are feed by Mother Nature and they make their habitats such as ‘the bird’s nest’ and ‘the ant’s hill’ instinctively, human beings on their part employ reason in their work. It is fitting here to say that work has always been a condition associated with human existence. In the very beginning, man is made a steward of God’s creation. And after the Fall, he is punished with work.¹⁰ In the Fall, the human person is condemned to

⁸ James Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 492.

⁹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth; A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*, 77.

¹⁰ Biblical references are from the New Jerusalem Bible.

till the earth, to toil in order to provide for his family (Gen. 3:17). In Scripture still, the Jews are to work for six days and to rest on the Sabbath day, even as the Lord rested from his work (Gen. 2:2, Moses 3:2-3; Exodus 20:11). Most important still, many of the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets had professions before they were called and employed in the service of the Lord. In an interesting essay titled ‘The Many Reasons Why We Work’¹¹ the author explores the benefits of work, socially, morally and financially. James V. Schall also intimates us that the Jews did not really like work, neither did the Greeks. He says historical facts reveal that the Greeks relied on slave labour, and the early Christians did manual labour as punishment. He opines that St Joseph and St Benedict with his motto of *Ora et Labora*, ought to be credited for the renewed dignity of labour. And he concludes ‘whoever discovered work...’ Through the ages, the Church has concerned herself with the topic of labour in her social doctrine and in different encyclicals such as *Rerum novarum*, *Populorum Progressio* has enunciated principles on: common good, subsidiarity, solidarity and human dignity which fosters the theology of dignified work.

Human industry brings about material development among other types of development. John Henry Newman defines as material development as the art of developing nature and adapting it for the purposes of utility and beauty. This is his definition:

Nor have we to consider material developments, which, though affected by human contrivance, are still physical; as the development, as it is called, of the national resources. We speak, for instance, of Ireland, the United States, or the valley of the Indus, as admitting of a great development; by which we mean, that those countries have fertile tracts, or abundant products, or broad and deep rivers, or central positions for commerce, or capacious and commodious harbours, the materials and instruments of wealth, and these at present turned to insufficient account. Development in this case will proceed by establishing marts, cutting canals, laying down railroads, erecting factories, forming docks, and similar works, by which the natural riches of the country of the country may

¹¹ James I Brown, *Reading Power: Alternate Edition*, (Massachusetts, D.C Heath and Company, 1978), 271-278.

KENDUANYI: External Goods and Happiness: On the Difficulties of Practising High Virtue without Abundant Means

be made to yield the largest return and exert the greatest influence. In this sense, art is the development of nature, that is, its adaptation to the purposes of utility and beauty, the human intellect being the developing power.¹²

The development of nature and adapting it to different purposes falls within the vision of the Church. Human fulfilment is partly achieved through industry and is grounded in the ability to actualize the potentials of human persons and the transformation of created things. The parables in Scriptures teaches us that that God wishes us to employ our time, energy and skills in productive work. The parable of workers in the vineyard (Math: 20:1-16), the parable of talents (Math: 25:14-30) and other passages shows that ‘common utility and the common good’ are achieved through human labour, sanctified and blessed by God. Bernard Lonergan is of the opinion that the human good comprises many elements such as skills, values, beliefs, faith etc.¹³

The Church’s Continued interest in economic and social affairs of peoples is revealed in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council, we find elaborate discussions on the social and economic order. The document considered the interdependence between personal betterment and the improvement of society, taking into account the nature of man¹⁴ and his circumstances in the modern world. It also considers the characteristics of economic life today, man’s growing domination of nature, the closer and keener relationships between people through economic interactions. The Church affirms human industry and fruitfulness in the economic and social spheres, and is very much concerned about the conditions under which people work and live.

The Church’s concern for the financial wellbeing of Christians and the poor especially is based on the fact that; without the basic necessities of life;

¹² John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (New York, Image books, 1960),64.

¹³ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis Colleg), 27-54.

¹⁴ Vatican Council II, Volume 1, *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (New Delhi, St Pauls, 1975) *Gaudium Et Spes*, No. 25.

without securing the fundamentals of physical existence, no man can pray well, or ‘practice the high virtues.’ This is the opinion of Pieper, and though Pieper was writing about the condition of the philosopher, what he says equally resonates with Christians. He says:

Let us recall the things that today dominate man’s workday, our workday; it requires no special feat of intellectual exertion to imagine them: we stand very much in the midst of the workday. There is, first of all, the daily running and chasing after the bare necessities of physical existence, after foodstuffs, clothing, shelter, warmth; then, transcending the cares of the individual (and at the same time conditioning them), come the demands of the new political order and of reconstruction, particular in our own country, but in Europe and the world generally. Power struggles in competition for the goods of this earth, conflicts of interest on a large and small scale. We find extreme tension and stress everywhere, only apparently mitigated by hastily enjoyed distractions and pause: newspaper, cinema, cigarette. I need not describe this in further detail; we all know from our life together what this world looks like. It is, however, not necessary that we consider only those crisis-like extremes that manifest themselves today; that to which I am referring corresponds simply to the everyday of work, in which one must put one’s back into what one is doing, in which extremely concrete objectives are carried through and realized-objectives that must be kept in view with fixed eye toward what is next and nearest. And it is far from being our intention to deprecate this workday world from putatively superior standpoint of philosophical festiveness. It would be superfluous to point out that even in this world of work, the fundamentals of physical existence must first be secured, in the absence which no man can philosophize.¹⁵

St Paul was the first to say that the lazy man should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10). Jesus himself on many occasions said his Father was always at work. (Jn

¹⁵ Josef Pieper, *For the Love of Wisdom, Essays on the Nature of Philosophy*, (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, ed. Berthold Wald, Trans. Roger Wassermann, 2004. 31-32.

KENDUANYI: External Goods and Happiness: On the Difficulties of Practising High Virtue without Abundant Means

5; 17-18). The basic needs of Christians are met through human industry sanctified by God's blessings. But also, through the application of good economic policies. These include economic policies on: agriculture, industry, trade, taxation and remuneration and safe working conditions.

4. The Church as a Financial Institution

The Church like any other living institution runs on money. In a wonderful book entitled *The Vatican Empire*¹⁶ Nino Lo Bello, discourses the wizardry of the Vatican financial mechanism. He talks of moving to Rome with his wife and children to fulfil his duties as a business news correspondent, only to realize when he was faced with a household water crisis that the water company *Acqua Marcia* belonged to the Vatican.¹⁷ He later discovered also that the telephone and the gas companies also belong to the Vatican. And to his amazement, he was to discover that the building in which he lived was operated by a front company operating for the Vatican.¹⁸ Lo bello says in the book that 'like millions of other Roman Catholics, I had never given any thought to the Vatican and its commercial affairs. But perhaps I should have realized that earlier that the Church was indeed a financial institution.' Gonzalez also mentions the efforts by many 'to reconstruct the economic life of the early (Christian) community'¹⁹ as proof of the fact that many people are showing more and more interest in the Church as a financial institution.

Nino Lo Bello reflections on Vatican Finances made him remember the eighteen months his uncle who is a priest spent as an adjunct assistant pastor with a Catholic Church in Brooklyn during his visitation to the United States. He said his uncle, 'after officiating at masses on Sundays, he would return to our house, where he would stay, and place his week's pay-a sack of coins-under the bed for safekeeping. By the time he was ready to return to Italy, the floor under his bed was completely covered with bulging sacks.' And he concludes 'I should have realized the importance of money to the clergy, but at that time I was too young.' In

¹⁶ Nino lo Bello, *The Vatican Empire*, (New York: Trident Press, 1968), 12.

¹⁷ Nino Lo Bello, *The Vatican Empire*, 9.

¹⁸ Nino le Bello, *The Vatican Empire* 10-11.

¹⁹Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth; A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*, 71.

exploring the book, one is amused and yet moved at the financial wizardry of the Church and the historical and providential circumstances leading to the establishment of the financial wisdom of the Church. Nino Lo Bello talks about his curiosity to get answers to questions like ‘how rich is the pope? Or ‘how much money does the Roman Catholic Church has? And wondered if it could be stated with precision how much the Vatican State earned each year. At the end of his research, he was able to assert that ‘this venerable organization was one of the greatest fiscal powers in the world’ and he concludes that the reasons why many people are ignorant of the Church’s finances is because ‘it still keeps its financial operations carefully hidden behind a veil of obscurity.’²⁰ And when he talks of Vatican finance, he makes distinction between what he calls Vatican Wealth and the Church’s Patrimony. He states:

As employed here, the term ‘Vatican wealth’ should not be confused with the so-called Church patrimony, which consists of churches, ancient buildings, and art treasures. The Church’s art treasures, many of which are in the Vatican Museum, include literary thousands of masterpieces-paintings, sculpture, tapestries, and maps-to which no amount of dollar can be assigned. Priceless indeed are such works as Michelangelo’s *Pieta* in St. Peter’s, the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, and the paintings by Raphael in the apostolic palace. One could also mention the Church’s invaluable collection of antiquities, -gold and silver crosses, Byzantine Jewelries, altar pieces, furniture, chalices, and other vessels. The five hundred aged volumes and sixty thousand manuscripts in the Vatican Library are also part of the Church’s patrimony. Because of these treasures will ever be put on the market, it is folly even to hazard a guess as to the cumulative worth of these items. But conceivably, they could bring a billion under an auctioneer’s gavel.²¹

Nino Le Bello clarifies in his book that he was not out ‘to expose the Church as an economic dinosaur or a hand-rubbing collection of money lenders. Still less is the book intended to be an attack on either the papacy or the Church itself in the traditional and predictable manner of the

²⁰ Nino Le Bello, *The Vatican Empire*, 12.

²¹ Nino le Bello, *The Vatican Empire*, 13.

KENDUANYI: *External Goods and Happiness: On the Difficulties of Practising High Virtue without Abundant Means*

anticlericalists.’ His sole aim was to explore the ‘Vatican’s relationship with the sign of the dollar, a symbol as powerful today’s world as that of the cross,’²²

The Church has always had ‘financial wizards’ among its members. Both lay and the clergy. Nino le Bello was to discover that in his research. He had wondered whether the Vatican had a right to engage in financial activities. And his response was ‘the Vatican has every right to engage in activities from which revenue can accrue.’ And if anyone should think the clergy ignorant of money, the response of bank teller in a Vatican City Bank who once said, ‘everybody knows a lot about money’ (which definitely includes Priests and Religious) should suffice. Again, Lo Bello justifies the Church’s interest in finances in the words of an elderly churchman, described as a millionaire himself who said ‘ours is a dilemma indeed: if we give the image of being too rich, people won’t lend us their support; if we appear too poor, we lose their respect.’ The church as an institution has the duty to maintain some form of respect, economically.

Still talking about the Church’s finances, is it possible to make a distinction between the Pope’s wealth and the Church’s wealth? While the Church may be described as rich, individual Popes have often spoken plainly about their personal finances. Pope John XXIII in his *Journal of a Soul* talks about his poverty. He maintained that he was born poor but God had provided for all his needs.²³ And in his Will, he did bequeath his few earthly possessions to his relatives and to some of the institutions he had worked with. But he was always clear about the fact that some of his earthly goods were gifts from his family. On another occasion, he said he did not really know the difficulties of being burdened financially by others. He specifically mentioned the difficulties with which some priests in Greece carried out their ministries—often burdened by relatives. He avers that excessive attachment to one’s family which goes beyond the limits of charity would be a hindrance to the apostolate.²⁴ Pope John Paul II too talked of his humble beginnings, and so too Pope Benedict the XVI. It is

²² Nino Lo Bello, *The Vatican Empire*, 13.

²³ John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, John XXIII, *The Journal of a Soul*, (New York: McGRAW—HILL BOOK COMPANY, 1964), 343.

²⁴Cf. John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, 251.

evident while the Pope are Sovereigns of the Vatican State and head of the Church, they are always able to separate or distinguish what is distinctly theirs and what belongs to the people of God as manifest in their last wills.

Following Le Bello take, if the Vatican therefore stands out strong as a financial empire, it as a result of the Lateran Treaty signed February 11 1929, between the Church ratified by Pope Pius and Benito Mussolini. And the creation of the 'Prefecture of economic Affairs of the Holy See' created in 1968 by Pope Paul VI, which serves as an equivalent ministry of Finance elsewhere. Referring to the Lateran Treaty, Pope Pius XI is reported to have said 'Mussolini was the man sent by providence.' Le Bello himself writes 'Mussolini never believed in God, nor, except for political convenience, did he ever call himself catholic...yet no man did more for the Vatican than did the Italian dictator.'²⁵ He goes on to mentioned the specific features of the treaty. He explains that 'The 1929 treaty was actually a unity of three separate agreements; the Lateran Pact, which provided for the creation of the new state of Vatican City: the Financial Convention, which granted payments to the Church for the loss of temporal powers; and the concordat, which gave the Vatican powers and privileges to administer his own special affairs.' And it is said that very day the treat was ratified, Pope Pius created Holy See's special administration to watch over the large sum of money granted to the Vatican by Italy and it was at this time that Bernardino Nogara, a relative of a certain Archbishop of Udine was appointed to watch over the money. This layman would later become a bulwark in the history of Vatican finance 'steering the financial ship,' making wise investments for the church, exploiting the economic clauses in the treaty that benefited the church in terms of taxes and ecclesial institutions. Described as 'a specialist in gold' yet described as 'Nogara is a man who never speaks to anybody, nor does he tell the Pope much, and I would guess, even very little to God-yet he is a man worth listening to.'²⁶

It is stated that among the Vatican officials, some have been known to have financial expertise, even among the clergy. Particular reference is made to Francis Cardinal Spellman and his business know-how. In a joke on the Cardinal, it is said 'St Peter was giving a stately dinner, though all

²⁵ Nino Le Bello, *The Vatican Empire* in, 63.

²⁶ Nino Le Bello, *The Vatican Empire* in, 29.

KENDUANYI: External Goods and Happiness: On the Difficulties of Practising High Virtue without Abundant Means

distinguished guests had been assigned to tables, Cardinal Spellman could not locate his place. So, he asked St Peter. But St. Peter couldn't find it either. He looked among the seats reserved for cardinals. Then St. Peter remembered. 'Oh, excuse me, your eminence!' he apologized. 'In the seating plan, I had you placed with the businessmen.' This joke and many more reveal the giftedness of the Vatican financial experts. Apart from the business savvy of the clergy, 'Peter's pence' is also said to be the Vatican's most lucrative source of income. Given that 'June 29 is usually the day on which the money—donated in the name of St. Peter and St. Paul—is collected in Catholic Church's everywhere. The accumulated money from Peter's Pence, is given to bishops on their personal visit to the Pope to support pastoral work in their dioceses.

Lo Bello then concludes by saying that 'at every time in history, the Church has had a golden touch and has protected its investments wisely in almost every field of economic endeavour not only in Italy but also in several other countries, including the United States and Canada.'²⁷ He describes the Vatican's

The Ostensible wealth of the 108.7-acre enclave inside the sturdy Leonine Walls—the magnificent Church buildings, the land, the many thousands of art treasures and precious manuscripts—serves only as the visible tip of the financial iceberg. The largest chunk of the Vatican's empire lies below the surface. There it continues to grow, in spite of changing currents. Once, after World War I, the Vatican nearly went bankrupt.²⁸

5. The Church on Riches, Poverty and Virtue

Poverty is both material and intellectual. Schall quoting John Paul II, who defines intellectual poverty as 'ignorance of the whole truth about man'²⁹, differentiates it from material poverty as the 'absence of material wealth.' In the Church, money has value but there are other higher things with value

²⁷ Nino Le Bello in his book *The Vatican Empire*, 18.

²⁸ Nino Le Bello, *The Vatican Empire*, 18.

²⁹ James V. Schall, *On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs: Teaching, Writing, Playing, Believing, Lecturing, Philosophizing, singing, Dancing.* (Delaware, ISI Books), 200.

more important than money. It is with this understanding that Mother Theresa of Calcutta often said the worst kind of poverty is sometimes to be found among the richest people.

The gospel message, the message of salvation is meant to be preached to the rich and the poor. They both stand in need of salvation. The rich and the poor are both sinners. The call to holiness is directed to all. The sacraments of the church are made available to all. But, since the Church as a human and divine institution exist in the world, it is very much affected by the wants and needs that accompany human existence. Though our Lord teaches us to pray for our needs when we say ‘give us this day our daily bread’, Christians are called upon to work and take care of their needs and to care of the needy among them. Jesus himself told his disciples ‘You will always have the poor with you.’ The Lord did not condemn riches, but he made it known that ‘it is difficult for a rich man to enter heaven.’ While riches can become a god to some people, it also possesses a power for good. Thus, the rich man who is poor in spirit does not have much to fear. ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall see God.’

What then constitutes the difference between ‘being poor in spirit’ and being ‘intellectual poor?’ Schall has discussed the notion of intellectual poverty. Intellectual poverty is distinguished from material poverty-although material poverty to a great extent can attributed to intellectual poverty. Intellectual poverty has been described as not knowing the whole truth about man. It is about rejecting the higher things-especially God. It is about concentrating all on alleviating physical poverty while forgetting the things of the Spirit. Schall blames educational systems which design whole curriculums ‘designing entire university curriculum aimed at eradicating poverty’ while neglecting the liberal and the gratuitous-the higher questions of existence.

Poverty in the Church is said to be one of the causes liberation theologies according to Gonzalez. Whether in Latin American liberation theology, African liberation theology, feminist liberation, he thinks theology has often made the connection between oppression, injustice and poverty. That’s why in this current of theologies God is presented as a God of the oppressed and the poor. He says:

KENDUANYI: External Goods and Happiness: On the Difficulties of Practising High Virtue without Abundant Means

The most important factor leading to this awareness—at least in my case—has been the development of liberation theology. In Latin America and other parts of what is commonly known as the Third world, Christians involved in the struggle for social justice are claiming that the issues in which they are involved are theological issues, deeply rooted in Christian doctrine and Christian tradition. With sound scholarship and cogent arguments...³⁰

6. Conclusion

The Church as a community and its individual members have often benefited from the generosity of the rich. But the money poured in by benefactors is often reverted to the poor. In a prayer of gratitude for a benefactor, Johnson wrote this wonderful prayer:

Almighty God, father of all mercy, help me by thy grace, that I may, with humble and sincere thankfulness, remember the comforts and conveniences which I have enjoyed at this place; and that I may resign them with holy submission, equally trusting in thy protection when thou givest, and when thou takest away. Have mercy upon me, O Lord, have mercy upon me. To thy father protection, O Lord, I commend this family. Bless, guide, and defend them that they may so pass through this world, as finally to enjoy in thy presence everlasting happiness, for Jesus Christ's sake.³¹

But, Johnson himself also reminds us of what he terms 'burden of gratitude.'³²—especially if the church owes such gratitude to politicians who may sometimes want to sway the church's teachings on account of their generosity. Gratitude can sometimes be burdensome.

An abundance of means to Christians makes it easier to practice high virtue. An abundance of means coupled with a good will makes us benefactors of mankind. But an abundance of means must be accompanied by 'a poverty in spirit' for without poverty of spirit, there is no virtue.' and our abundance of means might just carry us away from God like the rich

³⁰ Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth; A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*, xii.

³¹ James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, p. 494.

³² James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, p. 66

young man in the gospels. Also, the good management of wealth is a necessary condition of making it grow. Johnson was of the opinion that ‘frugality the basis of wealth.’ He says:

Make an impartial estimate of your revenue, and whatever it is, live upon less. Resolve never to be poor. Frugality is not only the basis of quiet, but of beneficence. No man can help others that wants himself; we must have enough before we have to spare.³³

³³ James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, p. 465