

Poverty: A Mother and a Wall

If we want to reflect on what poverty means for us, where do we start?

The Spiritual Exercises

I'd like to begin with the *Spiritual Exercises*. We could start earlier than that, with Ignatius' own life story, and his significant experiences of poverty before he gets to the point of writing the *Exercises* or founding the Society with his companions. But I'd like to look at the *Exercises*, for two reasons: first of all, they're the distillation of Ignatius' own spiritual experience and practical wisdom. They're a sort of 'conversion in miniature', where he picks up the ways that God has been working with him, and hands them on to us. And, second of all, they're a touchstone experience for us, too. Whenever and however we have experienced them, they bring us back to our 'founding moment', to that encounter with Jesus which is decisive for us and for the whole direction of our lives.



The point of the *Exercises* is to bring us to a point of encounter, where we experience the Lord's particular invitation to us, and make our response. They reflect, I think, Ignatius' own experience, and the particular invitation he received, and perhaps nowhere more than in the parts that touch on poverty. Ignatius' *Autobiography* tells us that 'up to the age of twenty-six, he was 'enthralled by the vanities of the world'. In the focus on spiritual poverty in the *Exercises*, we can see just how much the Lord's invitation to Ignatius challenges him – just how deep the conversion has to go. And Ignatius turns that inner experience around, and offers it to us. He wants us to feel, to see, how deep the desire for riches, glory and a good name go in us, too, because these are not just Ignatius' desires. This is not just a particular story about the desires of a young man hankering for glory in battle and a place at court. It's a general story about our broken, sinful desires in a broken, sinful world.

In the First Week of the *Exercises*, we bring those broken desires into the light, so that Christ can heal and free us. It's painful. Then we hear the 'Call of the Earthly King', and in the Second Week, Ignatius starts to set out for us what answering that call will mean. In the Meditation on the Two Standards, Ignatius sets out the choice facing us, so that we can see it with complete clarity: on the one hand the horrifying apparition of Satan, sending demons to tempt people to riches, honours and pride; on the other, Jesus 'beautiful and attractive', sending people out to call people to *poverty* – first the highest spiritual poverty, and then actual poverty, and to a desire for insults and contempt, and to humility. On one side power, riches, pride; on the other, poverty, insults, humility. That is the Lord's invitation to Ignatius and, through him, to us. It is the way of Jesus, and it goes against the grain of so much that is in us. So Ignatius shows us the choice, and then we pray for the grace of poverty and humility, we ask for it, intensely. As we come up to 'making a choice about a way of life', Ignatius is asking us to hold up this fundamental choice in front of us, like a map, as we consider the direction of our lives.

The Constitutions

How does this experience, this spirit, take flesh in the *Constitutions*?

In the *Constitutions* we can see how much Ignatius wants to preserve the spirit of poverty that we have seen from the *Exercises*, and how much he wants to preserve poverty as a part of our fundamental choice for Christ. He presents it to us very early on – it's in the *Examen*, so in the very first things that are put before potential candidates for the Society:

'It is likewise very important to bring this to the attention of those who are being examined, emphasising it and giving it great weight in the sight of our Creator and Lord, to how great a degree it helps and profits in the spiritual life to abhor in its totality and not in part whatever the world loves and embraces, and to accept and desire with all possible energy whatever Christ our Lord has loved and embraced. Just as the men of the world who follow the world love and seek with great diligence honours, fame, and esteem for a great name on earth, as the world teaches them, so those who proceed spiritually and truly follow Christ our Lord love and intensely desire everything opposite...' *Constitutions* §101.

So the *Constitutions* preserve that sense of poverty as a fundamental choice for Christ. That choice has to be free, it has to come from within – in one sense, it can't be legislated. Ignatius knows that, if we preserve the spirit of poverty, then poverty of life -our own poverty, our closeness to the poor- will follow. He also knows that, if we *lose* that spirit of poverty, no amount of rules about external behaviour can substitute for it. We know from Ignatius' *Spiritual Diary* that the poverty of the Society was profoundly important to him (he spends months praying and weeping about it!), but he does not give a mass of hard-and-fast regulations about what how poverty should be lived. What he does give us are two important images, both of which concern our attitudes towards poverty:

- Talking about life in the novitiate, he says that 'All should love poverty as a mother...' (§287) Something to be cherished, respected, regarded as an authority... something that grows or nurtures something in us... something that is fundamentally for our *good*, for our life and flourishing. This is how he wants us to experience poverty.
- At the end of the *Constitutions*, he talks about poverty as 'like a wall of religious institutes' (§816). Something that protects... something that keeps certain influences out, or preserves and defends something precious that is inside... (St Ignatius knew all about unsuccessfully defending walls!)

We'll take time in a moment to pray with those images and then to discuss them, but for now I just want us to notice that they're about preserving a *spirit* of poverty.

The spirit has a body

I've been talking a lot about the spirit of poverty, because I think it's so profoundly important for Ignatius. We can't think about material poverty without starting in that place of call, decision, radical conversion –it all starts with and flows from our decision to follow

the poor Christ, and to enter on that way of spiritual poverty, whether or not God chooses us for material poverty as well. It's that spirit that Ignatius wants to preserve in the *Constitutions*.

But I think it's important to emphasise the 'body' as well as the spirit. We distinguish between spiritual poverty and material poverty, and we often reflect in quite metaphorical or creative ways about our poverty. I remember Cecilia telling me that 'your poverty will find you', and it does: we experience spiritual poverty in all kinds of ways, from the weakness of illness or age, to humiliations, to poverty of time. But while it's really important to look for the 'spirit of poverty', and see how it is that the Lord is inviting us to experience it and enter into it in our daily lives, it's also important to look at the body – at how that spirit takes shape in concrete and material ways.

We know that the material poverty of the society was profoundly important for Ignatius. We know from his *Spiritual Diary* that he spent months praying about it, and that the poverty of the society was a source of intense consolation for him.¹

I want to make three points about the 'body' of material poverty as Ignatius sees it.

First, it has a particular shape, and that is the body and example of Jesus. When Ignatius is asking us to discern a way of life in the *Spiritual Exercises*, it's not a discernment where everything is equal. Ignatius wants us to follow Jesus, to imitate Jesus – Jesus who chose to be alongside and to serve the poor. Jesus chooses to spend his time with the peasants, with the social outcasts, with the sick, with women. This isn't just one example of poverty among others: it has some kind of claim on us.

Second, it takes shape in our personal poverty. There's an exquisitely tactful letter Ignatius writes to Gian Petro Carafa in 1536. Carafa was the founder of the Theatines, and both he and some of his congregation were known for their lavish lifestyles. In the letter, Ignatius emphasises just how important our personal, material poverty is: it is a witness to our following of the poor Jesus, it is a witness to the society around us, and it is essential for the health and growth of the congregation to which we belong.

Third, it takes shape in concrete closeness to the poor. The Carafa letter also mentions the importance of the works of mercy. This is from the most recent Jesuit General Congregation, GC36:

'The poverty of life and proximity to the poor of the First Companions in Venice must mark our lives too, that poverty that engenders creativity and protects us from what limits our availability to respond to God's call.' §6

¹ 'While I prepared the altar, Jesus came into my thoughts and I felt impelled to follow Him, for to my mind it seemed that since He was the head of the Society, He was a greater argument than all other human reasons [for poverty]...' *Spiritual Diary* 22

‘It is critical to emphasize the continuing relevance of the real closeness of the First Companions to the poor. The poor challenge us to return constantly to the Gospel, to what really gives life, and to recognize that which merely burdens us.’ §15

Notice in that first quotation the words ‘engenders’ and ‘protects’: a mother and a wall. Remaining close to the grace of poverty means remaining close to the poor. You might remember that there’s a theory about Mary Ward’s tombstone, that it’s a coded message – so the first line means, ‘To love the poore Jesus...’ Well, in a sense, for Ignatius there isn’t a choice to make here: to love the poor and to love the poor Jesus are two sides of the same coin. Loving the poor Christ is the spirit; loving the poor is the body.

Questions for prayer

1. *Poverty as a mother.* Can I think of an occasion when I experienced poverty, whether material or spiritual? What did this experience nurture in me?
2. *Poverty as a wall.* Can I think of an occasion where I have experienced poverty as a wall, something I have really banged into? (e.g. ill health, failure, hardship) Was that a ‘head down’ experience, in which I just focused on negotiating the difficulty, getting round it somehow? Or was a ‘head up’ experience, and did hitting the barrier of poverty make me look up towards God in a new way?

PART II

Jean Vanier, ‘How to Lose Power’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raKH76eweYU>

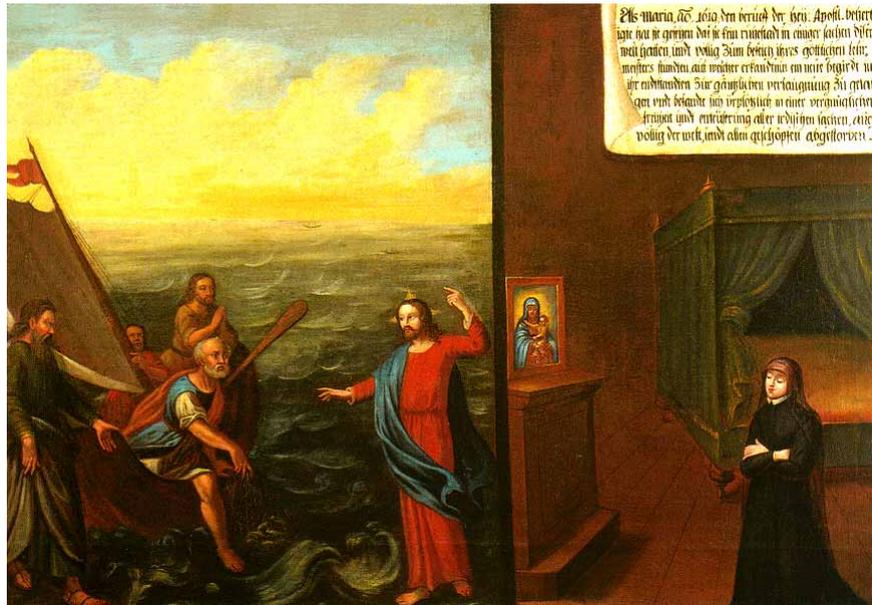
We’ve talked about poverty and St Ignatius, and in this next part I’d like to focus on Mary Ward and poverty. In a sense, what Ignatius prays for, Mary Ward gets! She really lives the poverty, humiliation and insults of the third degree of humility.

But before we launch into Mary Ward, I just want to draw one thread out of what we were talking about before the break for prayer, and that is *poverty as a response*. Our poverty is freely chosen, but it’s not our initiative: it’s a response to an experience of being chosen by Christ in a particular way. It’s a sort of leaving behind or letting go that happens because we have found the love of our lives.

This is important. Our poverty is not a sort of grim-faced or calculating imitation of Jesus. Sometimes you read about actors having to lose a huge amount of weight to play a particular character: if they want the part, they have to look like the person, and so that means no cake for you! Poverty is about imitation of Christ, but not like that – it’s not a strenuous effort to look like him, but a free leaving behind of anything that holds us back from being close to him. I always think this about the *First Principle and Foundation*: we are

told we should not prefer a health to sickness, a long life to a short life, riches to poverty – it can sound a bit grimly indifferent, but I always hear the echo of marriage vows: ‘for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part...’ What the *First Principle and Foundation* is saying is, in a sense, ‘I don’t care what happens as long as I’m with you. I’ll choose whatever keeps me close to you.’ That’s the attitude behind poverty: a love that lets us let everything else go.

So embracing poverty is our free response to Christ’s call, and it also *leads us* into deeper freedom and openhandedness. This is what Mary Ward shows us, I think.



This is painting 31 of the Painted Life, which corresponds to some notes we have from Mary Ward’s contemplation on the calling of the Apostles.

‘I perceived that their relinquishing of everything was wonderfully entire and perfect, and that this was why they were given such abundance of grace. I would like to have known what kind of leaving this was, that seemed so peaceful, plain, entire, and differed so much from the ordinary. I thought that they had no inheritance or resting place in anything of this world, and that thereby their affection, and consequently the whole person, was entirely at their master’s disposal. Without this, they would never have been capable of such abundance of grace, nor had the wherewithal to have done him so much service.

It seemed one thing to possess anything, and another to be possessed by that same thing. We leave the first behind by our vow [of poverty], but if we continue in the other by clinging to things in affection, we would never either be quiet, or perfect, nor capable of much grace, nor have strength or time to do God great service. I saw, in general, that I was far from ‘leaving all’ in this perfect manner. I thought the best way for me to get it was first to desire it, then to ask it of God –for it seemed a particular gift of his, though we must do *something* to gain it– and after to endeavour for it. Jesus say amen.

...It seemed a friendly separation from diverse things of this world, so that they had no part in me, nor I in them. I could equally have or not have them, see them and not love them, like them, and not live in them...'

(Notes from the Spiritual Exercises, Liege April 1619)

We can see Jesus calling, and we can see the apostles responding: praying, hitching up a garment, taking a step towards Christ. This is the free response to his invitation, the leaving of boat, nets and livelihood. And we can see in her reflection that this response, this extraordinary kind of 'leaving', produces peace, and freedom – they are entirely at their Master's disposal. As she reflects on herself and on 'hers', Mary Ward can see that without that kind of extraordinary leaving, there will be no peace, not much capacity for grace, and we will not have strength or time to do God service. And she concludes that this extraordinary leaving is a gift, but it's also something we must pray for and work for somewhat, not by fearfully rejecting things, but by nurturing a 'friendly separation'. A nice phrase, that.



We can see something similar in painting 38 above. While Mary is praying about the Institute, 'she saw clearly that its prosperity, progress and security did not depend upon wealth, dignity and the favour of princes, but that all its members had free and open access to God, from whom proceed all light, strength and protection.' (August 1625) We are free in relation to wealth, dignity and the favour of princes because our real treasure, our real dignity, our real sense of being beloved –all our riches– are elsewhere, in God. The picture really puts that question to us: where is our treasure? And it makes the link between *what we have received, and what we are therefore free to let go of.*

- to the extent that I am rooted in the richness of God's grace, I am open-handed with my 'riches', and do not cling to possessions for security (possessions can be 'my space', 'my time' as well as 'my things'). *I am free in relation to wealth.*

- to the extent that I am rooted in God’s love for me, I am open-handed with my ‘honours’, and do not cling to recognition, praise, self-importance. *I am free in relation to my ‘dignity’ of a certain kind.*
- to the extent that I am rooted in God’s foolishness in Christ, I am free in relation to what seems ‘wise’ or reasonable according to the standards of the world. *I am free in relation to the favours of princes.*

(I was reading Evagrius recently, and he has a lovely quotation about this. He says, ‘...people sometimes become excessively worked up for quite trivial reasons. Tell me, why do you rush into battle so quickly, if you are really above caring about food, possessions and glory? Why keep a watchdog if you have renounced everything? If you do, and it barks and attacks other people, it is clear that there are still some possessions for it to guard.’² When someone is rude to me or treats me like an eejit, I often find my inner watchdog starts yapping and snapping, and I say to myself, ‘Oh ho, Theo! What treasure is that dog guarding...?’)

Mary Ward shows us that living poverty, spiritually and materially, is about *rooting ourselves in the flow of God’s self-emptying love in Christ*. To the extent that we really receive that, then we are free to open our hands – opening our hands to let go of what gets in the way of following the poor Christ, and opening our hands to give to others what we have received ourselves.

Mary Ward says that the best way for us to get this is first to desire it, then to ask it of God, and then to endeavour for it. I’d like us to spend the end of this session doing that.

Questions for prayer

1. Do you desire poverty... this ‘extraordinary leaving’ or ‘friendly separation’?
2. What draws you towards it?
3. What makes you anxious or resistant?
4. Can you ask for it?
5. How might you endeavour for it...?
6. How might we endeavour for it?

² Evagrius, *Texts on Discrimination in Respect of Passions and Thoughts*, 5.