

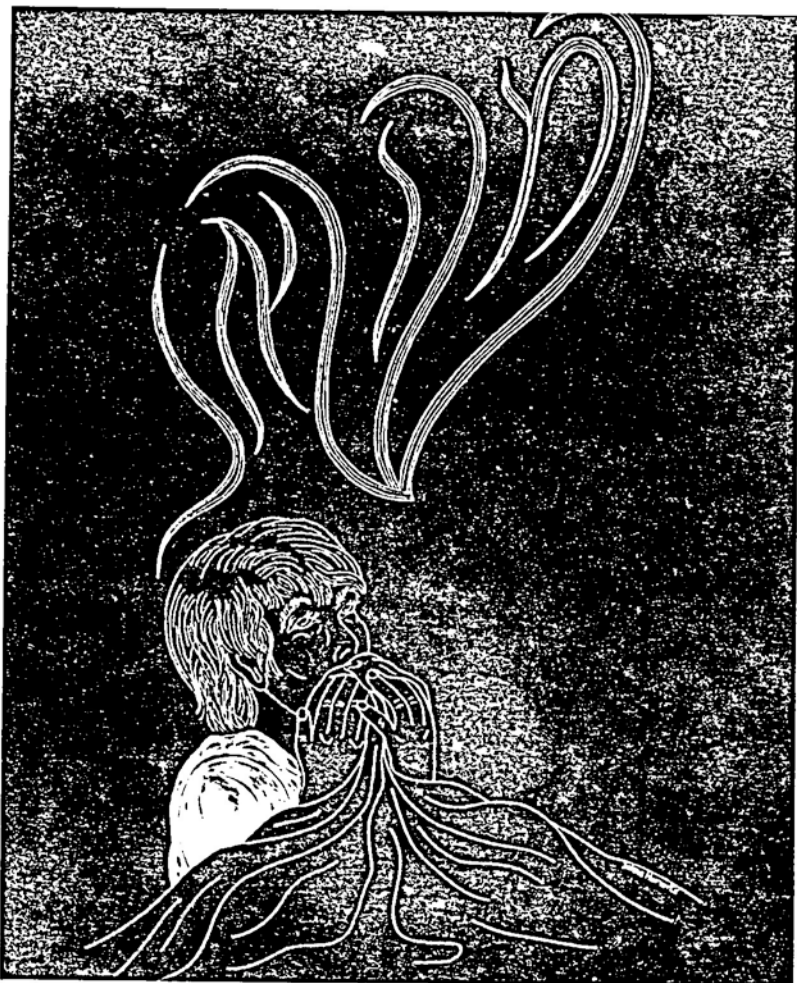
Reflections on Prayer and Poverty

READINGS

Much as I was sorrowfully awakened in the 1960's to the horrible racial injustice of the Christian world toward our black brothers and sisters, I am equally sorrowfully awakening in the 1970's to the horrendous evil in the economic injustice of the Christian world toward the poor . . .

Facing openly our darkness in this stark reality, I'm reminded of John Kennedy's words "Ask not what your country can do for you; rather ask what can you do for your country" by asking myself, "Ask not what your God can do for you, rather what can you do for your God"—and the answer falls out so clearly: reverse the whole silly insanity of keeping on trying to "get from God" to "giving to God". In a word, get into the joy and justice of God through the very exciting rhythm of giving, starting as Corinthians 8 suggests first "by giving our selves to the Lord" then by giving our silver (our money) as well. The converse is also true, as we "give our treasure," our hearts and thus our selves are also given!

This leads me to reflect on the lesson of the widow who gave her mite, which was all she had, to others of us who make \$10,000 per year and give 10% or \$1,000, to another who makes \$100,000 and then gives 10% or \$10,000 and how much less of



*The Calling of Samuel, by Selma Hurwitz, Potomac, Maryland.
Had-Ba-Kah (metalized thread).*

him/herself is given in proportion. Then to the person who makes \$1 million and gives \$100,000 and on it goes—as I think on this it helps me understand and clarify the inequality and injustice of my life and our whole economic order of money distribution throughout the world. In other words we, like the widow, must do more than use the tithe and offerings, and even proportionate giving as guides. We must consider sacrificial giving.

—Don McClanen in a letter to “Friends of the Remnant”¹

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In our less fortunate brothers
we are challenged by the Christ
challenged by His questions
searching questions
demanding straight answers
have we shared of our bounty
with a heart that understands
have we shared of our time
in nourishing ways
have we shared of ourselves
with a willing smile that befits
a steward for the Lord of Creation

Lois Shank Hertzler²

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While writing this book, I was arrested for participation in a civil-rights demonstration. A brief experience of a night in a cell made an abstraction personal and immediate: the city jail is one of the basic institutions of the other America. Almost everyone whom I encountered in the “tank” was poor: skid-row whites, Negroes, Puerto Ricans. Their poverty was an incitement to arrest in the first place. (A policeman will be much more careful with a well-dressed, obviously educated

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man who might have political connections than he will with someone who is poor.) They did not have money for bail or for lawyers. And, perhaps most important, they waited their arraignment with stolidity, in a mood of passive acceptance. They expected the worst, and they probably got it.

There is, in short, a language of the poor, a psychology of the poor, a world view of the poor. To be impoverished is to be an internal alien, to grow up in a culture that is radically different from the one that dominates the society. The poor can be described statistically; they can be analyzed as a group. But they need a novelist as well as a sociologist if we are to see them. They need an American Dickens to record the smell and texture and quality of their lives. The cycles and trends, the massive forces, must be seen as affecting persons who talk and think differently.

—Michael Harrington, in *The Other America*, p. 18¹

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In both the Old and New Testaments, God reveals his love and concern for the poor. In the codification of the laws which were to constitute Israel as a holy and just nation, the rights of the poor were rigorously guarded. Various *systemic* provisions were included to guarantee that no person or family would be forced into a perpetual state of poverty. God's antipoverty program for his chosen people was to assure through just economic institutions the ability of everyone to provide for themselves.

Most outstanding were the laws of the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee Year. Every seventh year was to be a holy year to the Lord. In that year any debts which were still outstanding were to be forgiven. Nor could one refuse to make a loan to one in need in the time immediately preceding the Sabbath Year out of fear of not being repaid. In the Year of Jubilee (every fiftieth year) all land was to be returned to the original owner

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or their family. Israel's law clearly stated that land could not be sold in perpetuity in order that no family in that agricultural system would be forever without an economic base. Likewise, the practice of selling oneself or one's family into servitude for payment of debts was ameliorated by the stringent laws protecting that person and the manumission of all Jewish slaves in the Year of Jubilee.

In addition to these systemic safeguards, God's law for Israel also contained provisions for humanitarian relief. Laws prohibited thorough gleaning of field, vineyard, or orchard so that the poor might reap thereof. Crops which grew spontaneously in fallow fields were for the poor. The tithe of harvest the third year were set aside for the poor. In this way, God provided that the poor might always have that access to food and not be forced into starvation.

Israel incurred God's wrath equally because of her idolatry and her oppression of the poor. The growing disparity between the wealthy few and the impoverished many, and the systemic injustices which aggravated the situation in contradiction to God's will led to Israel's downfall.

—Don McClanen in "God and the Poor"¹

QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the connection between prayer and concern for the poor in your own life. Can you see how your prayer life is strengthened when you show compassion to those in need?

2. How many poor persons do you know personally? In what ways is our spiritual life impoverished when we "distance" ourselves from the poor?

3. When Mother Teresa feeds or bathes a poor person, she says that she is feeding and bathing Christ. What do you think she means by this?

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4. What words or incidents from the life of Jesus can you use to show how his ministry was a continuation of the prophetic concern for the poor?

5. The emphasis on individualism in Western thought makes it difficult for us to appreciate the biblical emphasis on community. What part does the religious community play in your life? In what ways is it important to your inward journey (especially prayer) and your outward journey (especially your ministry to the poor)?

6. The Old Testament prophets and Jesus emphasize the importance of offering compassion *and* social justice to the poor. What is the difference between compassion and social justice? Give examples of both from your own experience.

MEDITATION

"Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"
(Luke 11:28)

Eternal Christ Spirit, I turn to you with heartfelt gratitude for your goodness and grace. It is a joy to remember your invitation to come when I feel heavy laden, and to trust your promise of rest. I know that I can turn to you any time and find you waiting. Thank you, Lord Jesus.

Silence

I have heard your word of love for all people. I want to live it. Yet sometimes the cares and conflicts of inner and outer worlds wear me down. My faith is in you, but my heart may feel anxious, guilty or impatient. Some things in my life need changing. I trust your wise guidance to lead me through the changes involved in growing to a deeper understanding and a more mature faith. With your guidance I can find ways to be helpful to the poor and spiritually impoverished, and share the great good news of your love. Because you have generously blessed me with your love, your patience, and life in your

world, I can turn graciously to my neighbor and share my attention, talents, time and possessions.

Your nourishing love is ever-present; you are eager to hear, guide and provide. I will gladly listen with all my heart and mind and soul.

Quiet for prayerful listening