

## FOUR STAGES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN HELPING THE POOR

By: Fr. Albert Nolan, OP

A Christian's spiritual development is tied to serving the poor. In this spiritual development one goes through stages in much the same way as one goes through stages in other aspects of living—for example, praying or loving. I have identified four stages, each characterized not only by a heightened spiritual awareness but also by a more effective way of actually serving the poor.

The first stage of our commitment to the poor is characterized by compassion. We have all been moved personally by what we have seen or heard of the sufferings of the poor. Our experience of compassion has been our starting point. But what I am suggesting is that it is only a starting point and it needs to develop and grow.

Two things help in this growth and development of compassion. The first is what we have now come to call exposure. The more we are exposed to the sufferings of the poor, the deeper and more lasting does our compassion become. Some agencies these days organize exposure programs and send people off to a Third World country to enable them to see something of the hardships and misery of grinding poverty.

Nothing can replace immediate contact with pain and hunger, seeing people in the cold and rain after their houses have been bulldozed, experiencing the unbearable, intolerable smells in a slum, seeing what children look like when they are suffering from malnutrition.

But information is also exposure. We know more than half the world is poor

and that something like 800 million people in the world do not have enough to eat and in one way or another are starving. For many, many people the only experience of life from the day they are born until the day they die is the experience of being hungry. Information of this kind can help us to become more compassionate.

The second thing that seems to me to be necessary to develop our compassion is a willingness to allow it to happen. We can put obstacles in the way of this development by becoming more callous, or saying, "It's not my business," or "I'm in no position to do anything about it." This blunts one's natural compassion for the sufferings of the poor.

As Christians, however, we have a way of allowing our compassion to develop, a way of nourishing our natural feelings of compassion. We believe that compassion is a virtue, a grace and indeed a divine attribute. When I experience compassion I am sharing God's compassion. I am sharing what God feels about the world today. Moreover, my faith enables me to sharpen and deepen my compassion by enabling me to see the face of Christ in those who are suffering and to remember that whatever we do to the least of his brothers and sisters we do to him. That is powerful.

Compassion leads to action. At first our action will probably be what we generally call relief work: collecting and distributing food, blankets, clothes or money. Compassion for the poor might

also lead us to a simplification of our lifestyle: trying to do without luxuries, trying to save money and to give our surplus to the poor. I don't want to go into that. There is nothing extraordinary about it. It is a long Christian tradition: compassion, almsgiving, voluntary poverty. Much has been said and written about it.

This then would be the first stage, the stage that is characterized by compassion.

The second stage begins with the gradual discovery that poverty is a structural problem. Poverty in the world today is not simply misfortune, bad luck, inevitable, due to laziness or ignorance or a lack of development. Poverty today is the direct result of the political and economic policies of governments, parties, and big business. In other words, the poverty we have today is not accidental. It has been created; it has been, one almost wants to say manufactured, by particular policies and systems. This means that poverty is a political problem, a matter of injustice and oppression.

We have seen that the discovery of the depth and breadth of poverty in the world leads to feelings of compassion. So now the discovery that his poverty is being imposed upon people by unjust structures and policies leads to feelings of indignation and anger. We find ourselves getting angry with the rich, with politicians and with governments. We accuse and blame them for their callousness and inhuman policies.

But our Christian upbringing makes us feel somewhat uncomfortable with anger. We feel a little guilty when we get angry with someone. Is it not sinful to be angry? Should we not be more loving toward the rich? Should we not be forgiving the politicians their sins -

seventy times seven times? For those of us who want to continue to follow Christ, our anger and indignation can lead us to a deep spiritual crisis.

The way forward and beyond this crisis is bound up with the discovery of the spiritual importance of God's anger. We all know that there is a great deal about God's anger in the Bible, and not only in the Old Testament. We tend to find this aspect of the Bible rather embarrassing and by no means helpful to our spiritual lives. But maybe it is just here that we have something to learn.

There are two kinds of anger and indignation. One is an expression of hatred and selfishness. The other is an expression of love and compassion. God's anger, indeed his wrath, is an expression of his love for the poor and for the rich, for the oppressed and for the oppressor. How can that be?

All of us have experienced this kind of anger. When my heart goes out in compassion toward those who suffer, I cannot help feeling angry with those who make them suffer. The deeper my compassion for the poor, the stronger my anger for the rich. The two emotions go together as two sides of the same coin. In fact, I cannot experience the one without the other once I know that the rich exploit the poor. And if I have no feelings of anger, or only very little, then my compassion is simply not serious. My anger is an indication of the seriousness of this concern for the poor. Unless I can experience something of God's wrath toward oppressors my love and service of the poor will not grow and develop.

And yet God's anger does not mean that he has no love for the rich as persons. We know from experience that we can get angry with the people we love.

In fact our anger can be an expression of the seriousness of our love for them. A mother who discovers her child playing

with matches and about to burn down the house must get angry with the child. Not because she hates the child but precisely because she loves the child so much. Her anger is an expression of the seriousness of what the child has done and her concern for the child.

Traditionally, we distinguish between love of the sinner and hatred of the sin. This is a notoriously difficult thing to do, but, the more we understand that the problem is unjust structures rather than individuals who can be held personally responsible for poverty, the easier it is to forgive the individual and hate the system. Individuals are only marginally guilty because they are only vaguely aware, if at all, of what they are doing - like the child playing with matches.

We are all more or less pawns or victims of an unjust system. In South Africa, for example, it is extremely important to recognize that the wickedness of what is happening cannot be blamed upon individuals like P.W. Botha. If he were to be converted, the system and therefore the suffering would continue. If we get angry with P.W. Botha it is because of the system he represents rather than because we are able to judge just how guilty he himself might be.

As we grow to share more of God's anger, we find our anger directed more at the unjust systems than at persons, even if this is sometimes expressed as anger toward those who represent and perpetuate these systems.

That does not mean that our anger becomes weaker. Our compassion can only develop and mature as we learn to take suffering and oppression seriously enough to get really angry about it.

During this second stage, while we are grappling with the structure and systems that create poverty and while we are learning to share God's anger about

them; our actions will be somewhat different from the actions we engaged in during the first stage. We will want to change the system. We will want to engage in certain activities that are calculated to bring about social and political change. Relief work deals with symptoms rather than causes. Relief work is like curative medicine as opposed to preventive medicine. What is the point of trying to relieve suffering while the structures that perpetuate the suffering are left untouched?

Preventive action is political action. And so we find ourselves participating in social actions, supporting campaigns against governments and generally getting involved in politics. This has its own tensions and constraints. But how else can one serve the poor? Relief work is necessary but what about preventive work?

The third stage of our spiritual development begins with yet another discovery. It begins with the discovery the poor must save themselves and that they will do so and don't need you or me to do it for them. Spiritually, it is the stage when we come to grips with humility in our service to the poor.

Up to now we will have assumed that we must solve the problems of the poor either by bringing them relief or by changing the structures that oppress them. We think that we must come to the rescue of the poor because they themselves are so pitifully helpless and powerless. There may even be some idea of getting them to co-operate with us. Or there may be some idea of teaching them to help themselves (the classical theory of development). But it is always "we" who are going to teach "them" to help themselves.

The realization that the poor know better than we do what needs to be done

and how to do it may come as a surprise. And the further realization that the poor are not only perfectly capable of solving the structural and political problems that beset them but that they alone can do it, may shock and shake us. In spiritual terms this can amount to a real crisis for us and to a very deep conversion.

Suddenly we are faced with the need to learn from the poor instead of teaching them. There are certain important insights and a certain kind of wisdom that we do not have precisely because we are educated and precisely because we are not poor and have no experience of what it means to be oppressed. "Blessed are you, Father, for revealing these things not to the learned and the clever but to the little ones" (Matthew 11, 25). It takes a considerable amount of humility to listen and learn from peasants, the working class and the Third World.

When one is dedicated to the service of the poor it is even more difficult to accept that it is not they who need me but I who need them. They can and will save themselves with or without me, but I cannot be liberated without them. In theological terms, I have to discover that it is the poor and oppressed who are God's chosen instruments for transforming the world - and the likes of you and me.

God wants to use the poor, in Christ, to save all of us from the madness of a world in which so many people starve in the midst of unimaginable wealth. This discovery can become an experience of God present and acting in the struggles of the poor. Thus we not only see the face of the suffering Christ in the sufferings of the poor but also hear the voice of God and see the hands of God and his power in the political struggles of the poor.

Having made this discovery and crossed this hurdle, we open ourselves

immediately to a particular kind of romanticism; the romanticizing of the poor or the working class of the Third World.

We Christians seem to have this strange need to romanticize something. Maybe it isn't specific to Christians, but we certainly seem to indulge in it a lot. In the past we tended to romanticize monasticism and then we had this very romantic idea of the missionary who risks everything to save the souls of pagan savages who live in jungles. We have also tended to romanticize the priesthood and now we are entering a stage of romanticizing the poor.

We romanticize the poor by putting them on a pedestal and hero-worshipping them. We feel that anything that has been said by someone who is poor and oppressed must be true. We listen to people from the Third World as if they possessed some kind of magic, secret knowledge. And whatever the oppressed people of the world do must be right. Any rumor of faults, weaknesses, mistakes and perversities must be rejected out of hand because the poor are our heroes and heroines. This is the kind of romanticism that does the poor and ourselves no good at all. And yet it is extremely difficult to avoid romanticism, at least for a time during the spiritual development of our service to the poor. What matters is that we do eventually grow out of it.

The fourth and last stage of development begins with the crisis of disillusionment and disappointment with the poor. It begins with the discovery that many poor and oppressed people do have faults, do commit sins, do make mistakes, do fail us and let us down or rather fail themselves and sometimes spoil their own cause.

The poor are human beings like any of us. They are sometimes selfish,

sometimes lacking in commitment and dedication and sometimes waste money.

We might even find that some of the poor have more middle-class aspirations than we have and are less conscientised or politicized than we are.

The discovery of these things can be an experience of bitter disillusionment and profound disappointment, a real crisis or dark night of the soul. But it can also be the opportunity for a much deeper and more realistic solidarity with the poor, a conversion from romanticism to realism in our service of the poor.

What we need to remember here is that the problem of poverty is a structural one. The poor are not saints and the rich sinners. Individuals cannot be praised for being poor or blamed for being rich, any more than they can be blamed for being poor and praised for being rich. There are exceptions like those who sell their possessions and embrace voluntary poverty or like those who become rich by exploiting the poor knowingly and intentionally. They can be praised and blamed respectively.

But that is not the issue. Most of us find ourselves on one or other side of the great structural divide of oppressor and oppressed and this has a profound effect upon the way we think and act. It affects the type of mistakes we are likely to make as well as the type of insights we are likely to have.

We can learn from the poor precisely because they are not likely to make the same mistakes that we are likely to make from our position of education and material comfort. And yet the oppression and deprivation that they suffer might lead them to have other misunderstandings and misconceptions. We are all conditioned by our place in the unjust structures of our society. We are all alienated by them.

Nevertheless, oppression remains

a reality. The two sides are not equal. The poor are the ones who are sinned against and who are suffering. Solidarity with them means taking up their cause, not ours. But we need to do this with them. Together we need to take sides against oppression and unjust structures.

Real solidarity begins when it is no longer a matter of "we" and "they". Up to now I have described everything in terms of "we" and "they" because this is how we generally experience the relationship. Even when we romanticize the poor and put them on a pedestal we are alienating ourselves from them. Real solidarity begins when we recognize together the advantages and disadvantages of our different social backgrounds and present realities and the quite different roles that we shall therefore have to play while we commit ourselves together to the struggle against oppression.

This kind of solidarity, however, must be at the service of a much more fundamental solidarity: the solidarity between the poor themselves. Those who are not poor and oppressed but wish to serve the poor in solidarity with them often do so in a manner that divides the poor themselves and sets them one against another. We need to find a way of being part of the solidarity that the poor and oppressed are building with one another. After all we do all have a common enemy - the system and its injustice.

In the end we will find one another in God - whatever our particular approach to God might be. The system is our common enemy because it is first of all the enemy of God. As Christians we will experience this solidarity with one another as a solidarity in Christ, a solidarity with the cause of the poor. It is precisely by recognizing the cause of the poor as God's cause that we can come through the crisis of disillusionment and

disappointment with particular poor people.

This is a very high ideal and it would be an illusion to imagine that we could reach it without a long personal struggle that will take us through several stages, through crises, dark nights, shocks and challenges. What matters is that we recognize that we are part of a process. We will always have further to go. We must always remain open to further developments. There are no short cuts.

Moreover, we are not the only ones going through this process. Some will be ahead of us and we may grapple to understand them. Others will be only beginning on the road to maturity in the matter. We need to appreciate their process, their need to struggle further and grow spiritually. There is no room here for accusations and recriminations. What we all need is encouragement, support and mutual understanding of the way the Spirit is working in us and through us.

Reprinted with permission of Praying  
P.O.

Box 419335

Kansas City, MO 64141