

Growing Rich Through Poverty

Aimed especially at young readers but useful for people of all ages, an article on the meaning of Jesus' first "beatitude": "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

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The view from the top of that high hill must have been breathtaking. Hundreds of people had flocked to Galilee to see the new prophet so many people were talking about.

Jesus watches as the large crowd walks up the slope. When they have sat down and fallen silent, He begins to speak in a powerful voice: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* [1]

The poor? Among those listening to him, many were truly poor. They knew what poverty was from their own lives, and also that it was not something desirable. God wants us to have good food to eat, a decent place to live, and to enjoy the necessary comforts. However, our Lord says clearly that there is a type of poverty that we should seek.

Being “poor in spirit” seems to be a necessary condition for the other beatitudes to become a reality in our life, since Jesus places it first in his discourse on the beatitudes. It is a firm foundation on which to build a great and beautiful life. But what

exactly does it mean to be “poor in spirit”?

Making room for God’s gifts

On another occasion Jesus was walking through a town and everyone was trying to draw close to Him. The apostles struggled to make way for Him through the crowd that had come to see the famous *Rabbi*. Amid that enthusiastic throng a poor sick woman was using the little strength she had to reach Jesus. The crowd jostled her as she tried to make her way close to Him. Weak and ill, for years she had suffered from a flow of blood and spent all her money on doctors who had been unable to cure her. Jesus is her last hope.

That sick woman was firmly convinced that only in Jesus would she find the remedy for her ills. With great trust and faith, she touches the fringe of his cloak and “forces” our

Lord to heal her. This woman is an example of what it means to be “poor in spirit.” She was truly poor and knew that her only hope was to accept the help of others as a gift, to put all her trust in our Lord.

Those who are poor in spirit trust completely in God for everything good in their life, and know that if He takes something away it is only to make more room in us for his gifts. Would that sick woman have struggled so hard to reach our Lord if she had not lost confidence in every other possible remedy? We need to be willing to lose everything in order to gain what is truly worthwhile. That is, we need to become poor in spirit so that God can make us rich. So the next question is: what do I need to do without in order to be poor?

Less is more

History recounts that, in the 7th century, the emperor Heraclius went to war against the Persians to recover the cross of Jesus, which they had stolen from Jerusalem and kept in a palace near Baghdad. After fifteen years of fighting, in 630 the Byzantine army recovered the sacred wood and the emperor led his troops in triumph to the Holy City.

Heraclius wanted to carry the cross himself as he entered Jerusalem, but when he took hold of the wood while mounted on his horse, it became extremely heavy. He dismounted to try to carry it on foot, but found it impossible to move. So he began freeing himself from all that was weighing him down: his crown, his royal mantle, his breastplate, his sword and shield... Finally, wearing only his tunic, he was able to lift the wood. Stripped of all his imperial riches, the emperor finally resembled Christ who, six centuries

before, had carried the Cross through those same streets.

As with Heraclius, being poor in spirit will enable us to resemble Jesus and to follow in his footsteps. Money and possessions can become a great obstacle, because they leave less room for God and make our soul restless. Not because material goods are bad in themselves, but because we often give them too much importance and our happiness becomes overly dependent on them.

A brief examination of conscience can help us realize that, almost without noticing it, we may have created many needs for ourselves. We *need* to see the latest episode of our favorite series, we *need* to listen to music whenever we are alone or when studying, we *need* brand new clothes, we *need* to have the latest iPhone, we *need* to raid the refrigerator every so often, we *need*

to look at *WhatsApp*. And if sometimes these are impossible, we become restless because we have linked our happiness to these needs.

Likewise, we have all experienced how satisfying it is to buy new things. A new video game, a new song or a new shirt can brighten up a dismal day. Spending money isn't a bad thing, but we must be vigilant so that it doesn't become the only support for our happiness.

Our heart is even more tied down if we need artificial aids (mild drugs or alcohol) to give a little excitement to our life. Taking them for fun or out of curiosity is a clear manifestation of a weak personality, of an empty life that needs to be enriched with artificial “products,” and that we have failed to take advantage of our personal gifts to build a meaningful life.

Sometimes it can be good to do without something we view as “essential” in order to experience what poverty means, and thus not depend so much on what perhaps has become too important in our life. Some people try to make two or three small sacrifices each day, in order to keep their will “in shape,” to keep it free and agile. If we try to do so and don’t succeed, it will be a sign that we need to regain our freedom as soon as possible. The advice of Saint Josemaría will always be useful: “Don’t forget it: he has most who needs least. Don’t create needs for yourself.”[2]

Sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.[3] This is the condition that our Lord places on the rich young man who had asked to follow Him. That young fellow was a good person – he kept the commandments, which is already

a lot – but he wasn’t *free*. Everything he owned had become a chain that was binding him and preventing him from taking advantage of the best opportunity that had ever come his way. He wasn’t able to see Jesus clearly and understand the great richness of what He was offering. Our Lord wants to offer this to us too, and we too run the risk of giving the same answer.

Ostriches, hedgehogs and masks

There is another way of being “poor in spirit,” perhaps an even more important one: the *inner* poverty and humility of those who know themselves well and realize that, without God, they are worth very little. In contrast, someone who is very sure of himself and refuses to accept help from anyone else is like many of the Scribes and Pharisees who constantly challenged Jesus. They had an answer for everything

and never requested help or asked questions with a sincere interest to know the truth, nor did they acknowledge their own doubts and weaknesses.

God is always ready to give us what we need, but we have to be ready to receive it. We too can sometimes stubbornly cling to our own opinions and not be open to receiving advice, or to humbly admitting that we are wrong. But since our Lord always helps those whose heart is open to his gifts, it is good to ask for advice, to learn to listen and to accept with simplicity the suggestions made by those who only want to help us.

“Don’t be sorry to be nothing, since then Jesus will have to be everything for you,”^[4] advised Saint Josemaría. God himself will help us if we have recourse to the sacraments and read the Word of God often, even when we think that it is not what we need at that moment in our life.

The ostrich is said to hide its head in the sand when it senses danger (although in fact this isn't true).

Something similar can happen to us when we sense that something isn't going well in our life: for example, when we realize that it is difficult for us to make friends, or we are unable to control our passions, or we are paralyzed by the fear of failing, or being laughed at, or being left alone... A person who isn't "poor in spirit" doesn't want to face the truth. We may try to hide from the problem or conceal it under a mask. Or like the hedgehog, we may try to close ourselves up in silence, or even attack and criticize others so that our own weakness isn't noticed.

Whoever refuses to face their problems and mistakes puts on a mask to try to make others believe they are a totally different person – carefree, happy, self-confident... In the long run, life becomes a show, a

pantomime. But sooner or later they will need to ask: who am I really? What do I believe in? Do my friends love me or the person they think I am? “Lord,” Saint Josemaría prayed, “help me decide to tear off, through penance, this pitiful mask I have fashioned with my wretched doings.”[5]

Those who aren’t humble will eventually realize that their life has become a complex labyrinth. And the best, and sometimes the only way to escape from it is to rise up in prayer to God’s presence. He will help us to be sincere and humble. A person poor in spirit doesn’t think they are humiliated when they acknowledge their weaknesses and ask for help through recourse to the sacraments or from a spiritual director. Thus we will live with our face “unmasked,” showing others our true face and our real heart, living with true interior joy and optimism.

“The person whose heart is detached and free from so many worldly things,” the Pope said, “is ‘awaited’ in the Kingdom of Heaven.”^[6] Only then will we be ready to listen attentively to our Lord. Poor in spirit, free from consumerism and interior pride, we will be able to open ourselves unconditionally to the happiness that Jesus promises us.

Questions to consider in our prayer:

Could I cut back on some unnecessary expenses? Do I try to give alms to those in need when I am able to?

Do I seek security in material goods (clothes, electronic devices, expensive plans...), and in the image others have of me? Or do I find security in my relationship with God and in sincere friendships? Am I overly concerned about what others think of me?

Do I try to make the things I use last (clothes, cell phone...,) or do I need to change them frequently? Do I always think I need the latest gadgets my friends may have?

Am I trying to make two or three small sacrifices every day to help me realize what is truly necessary in my life (in the use of a cell phone, videos and television, snacks ...)?

Do I show myself to others as I really am? Am I happy when others point out my defects in a charitable way? When was the last time I asked someone for forgiveness? Do I often ask others for advice?

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[1] *Mt 5:3.*

[2] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 630.

[3] Mt 19:20.

[4] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 596.

[5] Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, Sixth Station.

[6] Pope Francis, *Homily*, 1 November 2015.

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