

“As Soon As A Poor Person Cries Out”: A Benedictine Response to Poverty

I. Always With You

When the time had almost come for Jesus to be crucified, he had a mysterious encounter with a woman. She came into the home where he was a guest, broke an alabaster jar of perfume worth a year’s wages, and poured it over his head, infuriating his disciples with this lavish and senseless display. They complained that the money spent on the perfume could have been given to the poor. Jesus defended her, noting the symbolic weight of her anointing, expressing his gratitude, and making an ominous remark to the rest of his followers. “The poor you will always have with you,” he said. This line appears in every Gospel, and history has proven it to be true. From Jesus’ time through our own, there have always been people struggling to meet their basic needs, in societies that are indifferent if not cruel to them.

Statistics about poverty are bleak and alarming. Globally, there has been a sharp uptick in poverty rates in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the United Nations Economic and Social Council report in 2023 found that nearly 10% of the planet’s population lives in extreme poverty, and that “the world is back at hunger levels not seen since 2005, and food prices remain higher in more countries than in the period from 2015-2019.” (UN General Assembly Economic and Social Council, 2023) Even in the US, one of the world’s wealthiest nations, the Census Bureau reported that the official poverty rate in 2022 was 11.5%, and the percentage of children who live in poverty more than doubled between 2021 and 2022. (US Census Bureau, 2022)

In the face of these figures, Jesus’ statement, “The poor you will always have with you,” might seem to signal that doing anything to address poverty is futile. But intractable as poverty may be, the Gospels are clear that impoverished people were of particular concern to Jesus. This is the man who, according to the evangelist Luke, began his public ministry by announcing that he was sent to “proclaim good news to the poor,” (4:18) who abhorred the thought of a hungry crowd and instructed his disciples, “You give them something to eat,” (9:13) and who warned his followers with the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (16:19-31). Benedict picks up this theme in his *Rule for Monastics*, commanding, “You must relieve the lot of the poor.” (RB 4:14)

There is no single, simple way to fulfill this charge. But with systemic poverty firmly entrenched, it is clear that traditional models of charity—secular and religious—are not enough. This is largely because philanthropic giving rarely addresses root causes of inequality and suffering. Sending old or overstocked clothes to people in the Global South, for example, does nothing to improve the wages of factory workers in those countries, and the influx of cheap garments often leads to overflowing landfills that damage the environment and the health of the local communities. (McAndrews Leadership, 2024) Even more disturbingly, the experience of receiving charity can be demeaning and disempowering for those in need. Australian researchers found that “People felt a visceral shame accessing charity ... The experiences of shame were driven by a threat to people’s sense of self as capable.” (Parsell and Clarke, 2022) This shame can impede their efforts to build better lives.

How, then, ought we respond to poverty, if both charities are flawed, if unjust economic systems are slow to change, and if the act of giving has the potential to cause them harm? Benedict’s *Rule*, while not necessarily practicable in a literal way on a national or international scale,

holds important principles here, which Benedictine communities today are uniquely positioned to demonstrate for the rest of their societies. The monastery depicted in the Rule is a place where the humiliating and crushing effects of poverty are obliterated by love. Benedict gives concrete instruction on how to treat poor people in a variety of situations—the poor person who comes to the door in need, the poor person who enters the monastery to test their vocation, the poor child who is given as an oblate—and he also gives a glimpse into the monastery’s economic system, in which goods are distributed according to need, the “evil practice” of private ownership (RB 33:1) cannot gain a foothold, and the poor outside the monastery’s walls are the intended recipients of the community’s abundance. (RB 55:9) A careful examination, and faithful practice, of the Benedictine response to poverty yields important insights into how charity might be transformed into solidarity, and how this might alter lives and societies.

II. “That Isn’t Enough.”

It was late in the evening, two nights before Christmas, and I was a homesick novice, pacing the halls and feeling sorry for myself. Then I noticed something unusual: a motion-sensing light by one of the monastery’s rarely-used side doors was on. Curious, I went to investigate, and that’s when I first saw James. Curled up outside the door, wearing a sweatshirt and cargo shorts despite the freezing temperatures, he was probably in his early twenties, and he was clearly homeless.

I stuck my head outside before taking time to think. “Are you okay?”

He was startled and bashful, jumping to his feet and mumbling that he meant no harm.

“Wait,” I said. “Can I get you something to drink? Something to eat?”

He paused, eying me with suspicion, and finally said, “Yes, please.”

I begged him to stay there and went back inside, got a cup of water and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and brought it to him. I asked his name and how he got here, and though it was a little hard to understand him since he spoke so rapidly and circularly, I eventually got the gist of the latest chapter in his story: he had been bussed out of another city, somewhere down South, and didn’t know anyone in our town. But other homeless people had told him that if he needed a place to stay, he could try the monastery.

“They said if you come here, them nuns don’t kick you out,” he said.

While it was touching to hear that we had a good reputation with the local homeless community, I wasn’t sure what we’d be able to do for him. I didn’t think the prioress would like the idea of giving a mentally ill young man free rein of the guest wing, and it was too cold for him to stay outside.

“I’m going to go get another sister,” I told him.

I went and found my novice director and the prioress, and told them about James, nervous about how they would react. I shouldn’t have worried. Right away, the prioress was on the phone with local motels, finding a room for him for a few nights, and my director said she’d sit with him and talk about next steps. She patted me on the shoulder and said, “How about you go pack him some food?”

“Oh, I already gave him a peanut butter and jelly,” I told her, feeling rather proud of myself that my first instinct had been to feed him. But she looked at me like I had to be kidding.

She said, “He’s a grown man, and we don’t know when he last ate. A peanut butter and jelly? That’s not enough. Make him six or seven sandwiches with ham and turkey and cheese, and get him some snacks and fruit. We’re not letting him leave without food for the next few meals.”

An hour or so later, after a long conversation with James, my director and I were dropping him off at the motel, waving goodbye to a young man who would probably never have an easy life, but did now have a safe, warm room, a bus ticket back to his hometown, a new coat and mittens, and a box full of food. And we drove back home, to a monastery where it seemed as if nothing had changed. But I had just learned some of the most important lessons of my novitiate. In my director and prioress, I had seen what is possible when one moves beyond simple charity—giving a hungry person a sandwich—and lives out of a sense of truly sharing resources. It was a stunning illustration of the sixty-sixth chapter of the *Rule*, which teaches, “As soon as anyone knocks, or a poor person cries out, [the porter] replies, ‘Thanks be to God’ or ‘Your blessing, please’; then, with all the gentleness that comes from the fear of God, [the porter] provides a prompt answer with the warmth of love.” (RB 66:3-4)

It is significant that the *Rule* does not say that the poor are expected even to do so much as knock on the door of the monastery before they become the responsibility of the monastics. Simply crying out—simply triggering the motion-activated light, in James’ case—ought to bring them help. That suggests an attitude of alertness, of attentiveness, of the kind of listening that is so central to the Benedictine charism. That I happened to notice that a light was on was a happy coincidence, and perhaps also a gift of the novitiate, a moment that was possible after several months of long days and nights doing very little besides praying and becoming habituated to the monastery. But the help I was prepared to offer James was very limited, a far cry from the ideal described in the *Rule*. My prioress and director, more seasoned monastics, were ready to answer like Benedict’s porter, with gentleness, reverence, promptness, and warm love.

III. God Hears the Cry of the Poor (Psalm 34:17)

Governments, private groups, and religious institutions each take distinct approaches to alleviating poverty, and the poor themselves have a variety of tactics to lessen the burden of being impoverished. Good as this underlying goal is, it is important to be aware of the shortcomings of these efforts. There tend to be two main critiques of external agencies and policies aimed at helping the poor: either they err by being paternalistic, demoralizing, and superficial—providing those whom they serve with enough help that they can get by, but not addressing the structures that keep the poor trapped for generations, and failing to empower individuals or groups to reach a point where they no longer need social supports—or, on the opposite extreme, by being harsh and punishing, emphasizing a “bootstraps” mentality, and viewing those in need with suspicion.

For example, government programs that provide the poor with “in-kind” aid, like food stamps and housing assistance, have been criticized for “effectively infantiliz[ing] people who are poor. These people are not expected to budget or choose among competing priorities the way people who are not on welfare are expected to. Rather, in-kind benefits substitute the government’s choices, values, and priorities for those of the people.” (Tanner, 2022) Similar assessments could be made of organizations that give out meals, clothing, school supplies and other necessities. They do not make it possible for the poor to act as agents, and in some cases contribute to instilling in them an “identity of passivity and humility.” (Parsell and Clarke, 443) These kinds of programs, at least, seem to come from a charitable attitude and mindset, in contrast to the more punitive style of anti-poverty measures, like Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), government aid programs that require recipients to be employed or lose access to benefits. (Parrott, 2022)

People experiencing poverty often turn to one another for assistance, rather than exclusively using official channels. Sociologist Matthew Desmond researched the ways that evicted

tenants formed so-called “disposable ties.” These emotionally intense connections are quickly formed with other people in similarly dire situations, who pool their resources in attempts to better their circumstances, often following a highly volatile pattern prone to ending in dramatic severances. (Desmond, 2012) Living under stress and stigma, Desmond explains that it is humiliating to turn repeatedly to more financially secure relatives for help, and nearly impossible to provide consistent financial or emotional support to one another.

Benedict’s approach to poverty provides potential remedies to each of these strategies’ deficiencies. He provides a model for a society that is equitable to the core, in the manner of the early Christian communities who “held all things in common.” (Acts 2:44, RB 33:6) He takes this to such an extent that he aims to completely rid his followers of private property, dedicating the entire thirty-third chapter of the *Rule* to that idea. Yet in the following chapter he insists that all members should have everything they need, acknowledging that each person’s needs are different. In the fifty-fifth chapter, he enumerates many necessities that everyone ought to have, from specific clothing items to tools and writing materials, and argues that the way to avoid the vice of private ownership—and the greed and clinging that make this problematic in community life and damaging to spiritual growth—is for the abbot to simply give these goods to all. (55:18-19) Security is the key to satiety, having enough is the way to avoid wanting more. Any excess clothing in the monastery is to be set aside for the poor (55:9) which indicates that even the most mundane policies and routines are developed with the needs of the entire broader community in mind.

This principle can be applied to modern secular society in a variety of imaginative ways. As a spiritual teaching, it can inspire those who are financially comfortable to discern what is really necessary for their flourishing, and where they have room in their budgets to ensure that other people’s needs are met. From this starting point, philanthropy would be motivated not by a condescending pity, but by a desire for both the poor and the wealthy to benefit from right-sized living, neither too austere nor too lavish. This can be practiced by cenobitic communities as well as by oblates and secular people inspired by Benedictine spirituality. This ought to motivate Benedictines and those who respect the *Rule* to support proposals like the Universal Basic Income, which would see all adults receiving some amount of money that they can use as they see fit. This type of safety net is directly in line with Benedict’s instruction: “In order that this vice ... may be completely uprooted, the abbot is to provide all things necessary.” (55:18)

The moral clarity of the *Rule* shines in its moments of specificity, in the examples that reveal that Benedict was an expert in the monastic life, with all its joys and challenges. This is particularly true when he discusses real poor people whom monastics may encounter. For instance, he writes that child oblates, who may come from noble or peasant families, including those who “have nothing at all” (59:8) all enter into the monastery as equals, relieved of any property or inheritance that might have one day been theirs. Within the community, rank is never determined by social class, with members born in slavery inherently equal to those born free. (2:18) The goal is the dissolution of these kinds of divisions, into a mystical Christian unity. This attitude extends into welcoming the poor who cry out; trained to welcome everyone as Christ, (53:1) and to understand oneself as a part of an interdependent community, the monastic is to immediately answer, even seeking the blessing of the poor person. (66:3) It is presumed that they are in a position to bless, not solely to take, and it is understood that they are to be met with love and solidarity, not wariness or disgust.

This solidarity and mutuality is contrary to the “disposable ties” that Desmond discusses, in which two desperate people ultimately exploit one another in an effort to survive. Rather, it is

based in mutuality and a sense of broad community, and it is made possible by the very un-disposable nature of Benedictinism. In a spirituality that prizes stability, there is no option to throw away a relationship, or to abandon someone simply because they no longer seem like a helpful connection. Cenobitic relationships withstand the tests of time.

My sisters, again, provide me with countless examples of this ideal, as many of them have maintained close, loving relationships with people in poverty for decades. In one instance, a refugee family from Central America was assisted by two of our sisters in the 1990s; when their oldest children dropped out of high school, one after another, they sent their youngest daughter to live at the monastery until she completed her education. In her case, this meant a Master's Degree. The sister who took the closest care of her in high school walked her down the aisle at her wedding fifteen years later. Another sister attends every court date for her goddaughter, who has been in and out of prison and struggling with addiction and mental illness for her entire life. Now in her late thirties, she counts on her godmother to visit her in prison whenever she is incarcerated, and to bring her a meal or a pack of cigarettes when she is refusing to use shelter services and choosing to live on the streets. And she also knows how to make her godmother laugh.

My own vocation has been shaped by my role as the godmother of three young girls in poverty who live in a neighborhood where my community has a strong presence. The past nine years of cheerleading them through their education and their tumultuous home life, answering the phone when they call to ask for a pair of shoes or a listening ear, have at times left me feeling powerless before the magnitude of their needs, and the needs of so many similarly suffering children whose paths I do not cross.

But the Rule calls us to steadiness, and to seeing to the needs of everyone we can. If the kinds of deep, reciprocal, long-lasting relationships that my sisters practice could be experienced on a societal level, the dividing lines between classes would begin to melt away. The judgment and shame that characterize both sides of typical charity would evaporate in the face of so much shared humanity.

IV. Moderation in Most Things

It's Easter Sunday, and the monastery chapel teems with a joyful crowd. Well-heeled benefactors, nuns in pastel twin sets, oblates and friends make their way to the dining room after the recessional hymn. I can't help but notice that Kevin is here, too, in a Day-Glo yellow T-shirt as usual. A nightly guest at our soup kitchen, who always stays to clean up and take out the garbage, he spent some time in prison years ago and has been unable to find employment since. But he is welcome with Benedictines. Lately, he started coming to church with us on Sunday mornings, then mingling at the coffee hour. He does the same today, staying through Easter dinner, breaking bread and sharing wine, ham, and roasted carrots with sisters and other guests.

While much of the crowd here is at least middle class, Kevin is not the only one contending with poverty. One of the sisters is hosting a man who she helped to raise from the time he was in kindergarten, when his mentally ill mother could not care for him. He's recently moved back to town and works at a local factory; today, he's brought his young son to the monastery. The nuns are murmuring to each other, "Look how much Oliver looks like his dad when he was little. That same sweet face." The sweet little face is covered in frosting, since he's been told there's no limit to how many cupcakes he'll be allowed to eat here. Meanwhile, sisters keep bringing me Easter baskets we were given, asking if I can give theirs to my godchildren.

Benedict preached moderation in most things, but not in zeal or love. And at this Easter dinner, an abundance of both are in the air. If a woman walked in and poured out a bottle of perfume, that would make a certain amount of sense. Why reduce something beautiful down to the

amount it costs, and then give it away as cold charity, if instead it can be shared it and enjoyed together? No, poverty has not been defeated and the cruelty of class divisions has not yet lost its power. But today, right here, at this feast, in the already-and-not-yet of the Paschal Mystery, the poor are known and loved, welcomed and respected, not solely the object of charity, but part of a community that helps each other. Always with us, indeed.

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