

Justinian Cherupallikat O.F.M. Cap.,

Witness Potential of Evangelical Poverty in India,
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1975, 215+xxxii pp.

To be self-critical for a religion or a religious movement is hardly possible where the belief is not tempered by the recognition of secular values. But more often than not when a religious enthusiast undertakes such an examination, he rather attends to the existential consequences of his religious belief not being seriously practised than to the theoretical inconsistency or acceptability of such a belief. Thus Justinian Cherupallikat, accepting a life lived under a vow which prohibits a man the free use of earthly goods as a desirable spiritual value, undertakes to survey the existential situation as regards its practice in the religious groups in the Catholic Church in his work, *Witness Potential of Evangelical Poverty in India*.

The book under review is a doctoral dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Missiology at a University in Rome. It has eight chapters in three parts. The first part tries to determine the ideal or real meaning of the vow of poverty from OT, NT and the life of Christ himself. This is contrasted with the religious value which classical and modern Hinduism attach to the ideal of poverty. Poverty understood as a lack of normal comforts of life has no positive value in itself. Hence there can be no witness value for poverty in India where poverty itself is the greatest social evil. The second part of the book offers a graphic picture of the miserable plight of the teeming millions in India. The third part which the author claims to be a synthesis, is more a concrete study of the practice of poverty of certain charismatic individuals (Peter Reddy, Sadhu Ittyavira), communities (religious communities of Mother Teresa, Sr. Peter Moenningmann and the Hindu *sannyāsrama*) and groups of people (bishops, priests, layman, and religious communities in general) than a synthesis of the two earlier sections.

It is heartening to follow the self-examination of a disciple of St. Francis Assisi committed to the ideal of poverty. At a time when the Catholic Church in India is under attack from all sides because of its apparent affluence manifested through its well-established institutions and hierarchical network, it is certainly a welcome endeavour to examine the image of the Church in the eye of the common man. The real contribution of the work lies in the third part which manifests the real concern of a believer to be honest to his belief, and to be genuine in his religious practices.

A Christian seeks the true meaning of poverty in the mystery

of Christ's "kenosis", self-emptying in the act of Incarnation. In OT tradition poverty had meaning only in the sense that it prepared the people to submit themselves to the mysterious will of God. In NT Christ chose to speak to the common man, to the poor, poor not only in spirit, but also in sociological conditions, for they were the people most prepared by their earthly plight to grasp the gospel message that the Kingdom of God has to be preferred above all riches. The elements of renunciation and the ensuing perception of a truly poor man's lowly estate before God, and the call to service and sharing also are counted in as the constituents of poverty. In contrasting the Biblical concept of poverty with that of Hinduism, the author rightly points out that the elements of service remains much to be desired in classical Hinduism. But he hastens to remark that the lives of Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave dedicated to the service of the millions of poverty-stricken people in the country not only makes up for the past but also offers glorious examples for the Christian task of witnessing to evangelical poverty in India. Although there have also been radicals of evangelical poverty within the Christian churches, they have not inspired the poor in India to bring to fulfilment India's age-old doctrine of renunciation and God-seeking. The watch-word of the masses is still "Garibi Hatao", away with poverty.

As a matter of fact the self-effacement implied in the love of poverty has no meaning in itself unless its fruits are made available to all men. The virtue of poverty has to manifest itself in a total surrender and availability of oneself to God and fellowmen. This is the positive vision the work highlights. "Working for the improvement of the lot of the poor and destitute is part and parcel of witnessing to poverty" (210). Here a very negative religious concept like poverty become most poignantly constructive and positive. It is a common belief that religions as a rule teach world-rejection or world-fleeing. Hence to bring a proper balance between the attitude of world-denial and the this-worldly thinking the analysis of religious poverty is of much help. By virtue of his faith the believer is called upon to seek ways and means to incarnate the ideal of poverty in his milieu.

The delineation of the witness programme of poverty in the present work leaves much to be desired, for the author was away from Indian context for a long period. As he himself confesses a "year or two of field work in India could have enhanced the value of the book" (p vi). Yet it is no exaggeration to say that the work is of great value for all those who wish to know about the current views of the Indian religious thinkers on the issue of evangelical poverty. The work advocates that for a Christian, participation in the self-emptying of Christ is the means to find joy, rest and fulfilment in God.

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