

RELIGIOUS IMPERATIVE OF POVERTY

Chavara's Perspective: A Socio-Ecclesiological Reading

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Abstract: After a brief examination of Chavara's perspective on the poor and the marginalized the author makes a theological assessment of the vow of poverty and the option for the poor. Describing the gap between the ideals and the reality he moves on to an analysis which portrays the intrinsic relation between the vow of poverty and the option for the poor as described in the constitutions of various religious communities. Then he takes up a discussion on the individual and communitarian dimensions of the vow of poverty and contends that poverty should become the proclamation. Finally, through an introspective reflection he argues that a change in the approach towards the members working in the social apostolate can gradually effect change in the attitude towards the poor and poverty.

Keywords: Poor, marginalised, community, commitment, poverty *ressourcement*, Chavara, Dalit, religious vow, Vatican II, Globalization, education, justice, redemption, oppression, mercy, kingdom, spirituality, economy, Church, evangelization, apostolate.

1. Introduction

Commitment to the Poor and the Marginalized¹ is a theme of major concern for religious communities round the world from the inception of religious life in the Church. Radical following of 'Christ-the-poor' was one of the fundamental criteria that motivated the Desert Fathers and the early communities to dedicate their entire life for Christ. For this reason, commitment to the poor has become an indispensable part of the call to consecrated life, irrespective of the unique and distinct charism each religious community follows. It is generally opined that external appearance defeats the claim of the religious groups and the Church as a whole that they stand for the poor. Taking this into

¹This was originally a talk given during the CMI renewal program held at the pastoral centre of the diocese of Bijnor during 17-21 October 2015.

consideration, this paper attempts to discuss the following problems: Is the Church (and the religious communities in particular) really committed to the cause of the poor; or has it become victim of self-betrayal? Are we trapped in posh buildings and cosy positions? One of the causes for this de-tracking would be the disease of *Cybermania*, if one might call it this way, to which many of the religious and priests have become overtly entrapped and obsessed. It may not be untrue, if accused that the *smart age* has affected our commitment to the poor and the marginalized.

This entrapped situation of the Church with its repercussions paved way to the discussion on this topic. I think, it is necessary for the Church to undergo a process of *aggiornamento* with an orientation to *ressourcement*. In fact, our commitment to the poor and the marginalized would be a major thrust in *ressourcement*. A paradigm shift is needed to restore the original thrust of the religious communities, which calls for a radical change in our thinking, doing, and living. It is for this reason we look into the ecclesio-sociological vision of Chavara and his concern for the poor and the marginalized.

2. Against Forgetfulness of the Poor: St Chavara's Perspective

Hans Christian Andersen's short tale entitled "The Emperor's New Clothes" narrates the story of two weavers who promise their emperor a new suit of clothes that is invisible to those who are unfit or incompetent for their respective offices. Thus, the weavers were successful in convincing the emperor that he is wearing this imperceptible suit, when actually he was naked. However, no one dared to speak this truth to the King in fear of losing his or her job in the palace. In turn, all in the palace praised the king for his invisible suit. When the emperor was out in the street a group of singers were appointed to praise and sing the glory of the invisible suit. But one day, when the emperor was moving in his chariot through a village a little child screamed: "Look, our emperor is so poor he has no clothes! He isn't wearing anything at all!" That one loud cry shocked the entire city and turned the course of the entire events. Since it was the truth, no one could deny it anymore. And eventually the emperor too realized it.²

²Hans Christian Andersen, "The Emperor's New Clothes", Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Emperor%27s_New_Clothes (accessed 14 December 2015). See also, Chetan Bhagat, *Making India Awesome*, New Delhi: Rupa, 2015, 44.

The cry of the child in the story was crucial for the Emperor to come to the realization of his nakedness. In terms of our commitment to the poor and the marginalized, there should be a child to cry out that the cloth of poverty we wear is not there, we are naked! Or to bluntly announce that our speeches and claims of poverty do not work at all. In the works and life of Chavara, such a cry echoes loudly. Commenting on Chavara's concern for the poor, Chackalackal observes that the life of Chavara was "supporting and enhancing the lives [...] of the marginalized."³ As a social reformer⁴ all his actions were oriented for the cause of the poor and the marginalized in the society. As R. Venkataraman, the former President of India opined, "Chavara was [...] a motive force for the establishment of a social order in which everyone could live in dignity and faith."⁵

The schools that Chavara established took special care to admit the marginalized and the downtrodden who otherwise were kept away from literacy. Dalit uplift was one among Chavara's most renowned ways of social reforms. Caste mentality as Chavara viewed is against the Will of God because all are children of the same God the Father. The establishment of "*Upavisala*" (a house for the destitute) and the system of "one handful of rice" demanded from every family for the poor has played a lot in instructing the people of their collective responsibility in helping the poor. As Chackalackal describes, reaching out the needy was the motto of Chavara.⁶ It is from this conviction that Chavara instructed the people that "the day you could not do any good for others is not counted in your life."⁷ Thus, as Chackalackal describes, "[i]t is really praiseworthy to see that [Chavara] could evoke

³S. Chackalackal, *Igniting Minds to Transform the Society*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2013, 4.

⁴The notion "God is with the poor" was central to the spirituality of St Chavara, See, T. Panthaplackal, *A Pearl Truly Indian: Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Ernakulam: The CMI Generalate, 2005, 79. Chavara's demand for just wages for the Dalits, his efforts towards the empowerment of women, etc., are signs of his concern for the poor and the marginalized.

⁵R. Venkataraman, "Chavara Represents Indian Christianity at its Best," in *The Lord of Heaven and Earth: Chavara Studies in Honour of Fr. Lucas Vithuvattickal*, CMI, ed. P. Kalluveetil and P. Kochappilly, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2004, 86.

⁶Chackalackal, *Igniting Minds to Transform the Society*, 17-18.

⁷Kuriakose Elias Chavara, "Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul: Upbringing of Children," in *Complete Works of Blessed Chavara*, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Blessed Chavara, 1990, 108.

a proactive social consciousness for the other among his own people by way of initiating various voluntary acts of charity.”⁸ The Christian institutions of Kerala started at the initiation of Chavara have become beacon lights of social reforms, which played a major role in the uplift of the outcastes, poor, and the marginalized. For Chavara, concern for the poor was normative to Christian living.

As seen in the desert Fathers, for Chavara as well, radical following of Christ becomes total only through an adherence to the cause of the poor. Accordingly, it is not in preaching poverty that we fulfil it; its realization is possible only through a life oriented identification with it. As seen in Chavara, the observation of poverty must be a *Religious Imperative* in and of our communities. Unfortunately, *forgetfulness of the poor* has become a common feature of the present day religious communities; and this *forgetfulness* is the cause of the crisis that the consecrated life encounters today. This forgetfulness is visible at different levels. For example, sins against the vow of chastity, and to a certain extent against the vow of obedience, are seen as serious aberrations; and one may have to face strong reproof if proved of their violation. However, the tragedy is that poverty is theologized expensively and is relegated through individualization. There are no means to measure its violation. If we fail in our social commitment we need to start with the reparation of our commitment to the vow of poverty. The *Religious Imperative of Poverty* (RIP) should reformulate the structure and life styles of our communities and of individuals. The *Religious Imperative of Poverty* should put forward an ultimatum, both individually and at the level of the community. It should guide and direct our transactions and financial deals. If *Religious Imperative of Poverty* does not direct us, then our option for the poor becomes an “*auction of the poor*” from our religious circles. Poor will be alienated and will find no space in our apostolate and in our religious houses.

3. Theological Analysis of Poverty and the Option for the Poor

In this session we analyse the question of poverty from a theological perspective, particularly focusing on the “option for the poor.” Following a different track from that of the communist ideals, the Church holds that every individual has a right to own private property. In and through the vow of poverty the consecrated surrender this right to have private property, and commit them totally to God acknowledging Him as their Wealth. Indeed, material wealth is

⁸Chackalackal, *Igniting Minds to Transform the Society*, 18.

no more an attraction that entices them rather, *tapo-danam*, i.e., *tapas*, is regarded as the imperishable wealth.⁹ As Pope John Paul II declared in *Vita Consecrata*, "Poverty proclaims that God is man's only real treasure."¹⁰ In the vow of poverty, we renounce this right (to own) and capitulate to God. In this sense, we have no right of transaction or cannot do business with this right.

The present *smart age* in which all of us are engulfed, has made us forget the value of poverty. Moreover, in this forgetfulness, religious have conveniently discarded the intrinsic relation between the vow of poverty and the commitment to the poor and marginalized. As a matter of fact, it is the primary aim of this paper to argue for their intrinsic relation. Accordingly, we claim that commitment to the poor and marginalized is part of the vow of poverty. The vow may not be complete without our dedicated action for the cause of the poor and marginalized. We need to reinterpret the vow of poverty in terms of our commitment to the poor and marginalized.

The question, "what is poverty?" may be rightly answered defining it as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. One needs to speak of it from different angles: poverty in material necessities, i.e., lack of material needs; poverty in familial realm, i.e., lack of love between the family members; poverty in digital domain, i.e., lack of cyber access and accessories; poverty in spirituality, i.e., lack of spiritual guidance and inspiration; poverty in ecological concern, i.e., lack of concern for the earth and its resources; poverty in values, i.e., lack of basic human values and principles; poverty in self-esteem, i.e., lack of self-understanding, etc. However, unlike the above, the *Vow of Poverty* is not a deficiency of something, rather it is a grace and a gift, because here one finds God as the wealth. Here, poverty turns to be a possession - possessing God.

Furthermore, poverty is identification with 'Jesus-the-poor,' who lived for the poor and marginalized. For this reason, commitment to

⁹'Tapas' has a variety of meanings in Indian philosophy. Generally it is translated as 'asceticism.' The word "tapas" derives "from the verbal root tap (*tapati*), which means to heat up, warm up, to burn, etc." See, A. Thottakara, *Indian Philosophy: Basic Concepts and Important Themes*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram, 2015, 171. Hence, it would mean the inner heat (longing) for God, which is the source of God experience. For the one who is possessed by this inner heat, everything else will be regarded as worthless.

¹⁰John Paul II, "Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*," in AAS (25 March 1996), English Translation from *Vita Consecrata*, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing, 2011, §21.

the poor and the marginalized completes the vow of poverty. The resemblance of Christ in religious life becomes total in becoming the voice of the poor. Therefore, the idea of the Church of the poor was not something entirely new emerged in the Second Vatican Council; it is fully evangelical and radically central to the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. However, in the course of time, this thrust and option for the poor became marginalized. As the Council Fathers opined, Second Vatican Council witnessed a rediscovery of this fundamental option for the poor.¹¹ It was Cardinal Lercaro who wanted to make “the poor” the major theme of the Council. Without the poor, as Moacyr Grchi notes, the Church loses practically everything,¹² i.e., its universality, function, meaning in the world, etc. Finally, the Church loses “its head” Christ himself. Emphasizing the importance of the Church of the poor, Pope Francis in his meeting with bishops, priests and religious on 26 September at Pennsylvania, Philadelphia said that the Church is not about Church buildings, but it is about personal call – breaking walls and going to the peripheries, to the poor and marginalized.¹³

The Council Fathers felt that the caption, “the option for the poor,” simply remains redundant. Therefore, reflecting on Jesus’ assurance “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40), they tried to revive the option for the poor as central to Church’s life and mission. Thus Vatican II introduced a new consciousness in the Church by reemphasizing the option for the poor as its central mission.¹⁴ The actual renewal of the Church, if seen critically has taken place through this new paradigm

¹¹Cardinal Lercaro, Archbishop of Bologna, along with the “Belgian College Study Group” argued that the central them of the council has to be “the Church of the Poor.” It was an affirmation of the opening announcement on 11 September 1962 in which John XXIII expressed the principle concern for the poor as its vision. See, Jorge and Boff Pixley, Clodovis, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor: Biblical, Theological and Pastoral Aspects of the Option for the Poor*, Liberation and Theology, Wellwood: Burns & Oates, 1989, xii-xiii.

¹²Pixley, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, xv.

¹³Pope Francis, “Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis at Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul, Philadelphia, Saturday, 26 September 2015” https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150926_usa-omelia-philadelphia.html (accessed 1 December 2015).

¹⁴However, as M. Mollat observes, in the twelfth century the poor were considered as *Vicarius Christi* – the vicar of Christ; *The Poor in the Middle Ages. An Essay in Social History*, New Haven: Yale University, 1986, 59ff.

shift brought in the consciousness of the Church. But today, through the advent of globalization and the new economic policies, a kind of anesthetizing of Church's consciousness has taken place, which needs to be addressed promptly in order to avoid the disease that would otherwise harm the very existence of the Church. A failure in recognizing the poor as our treasure is the cause behind this disease.

If the poor are considered our treasure, a major number of our members will be engaged in social apostolate for the poor. It seems that we have found our treasure in our (educational) institutions, so we invest most of our members in such fields. Losing sight of the poor is a crime for every Christian; it is unchristian. A similar attitude can be observed in Chavara too. As Chackalackal describes, St Chavara maintained the view that "when a Christian ceases to exist for others, he or she would cease to be a *Christian*."¹⁵ Therefore, to be genuine Christians we need to foster a "Mother-Theresa cult" in our communities. "Through knowing the poor better, the church knows its divine founder and Lord better."¹⁶ Indeed, we need to make the agony of the poor, our agony; knowing that the agony of the poor is the agony of Christ on the cross. Furthermore, though we are called to become 'Christs', at least we need to become Simons of Cyrene who help "the poor Christs" around us to carry the cross of poverty.

3.1. Image of God: Theological Imperative for Social Commitment

The documents of Vatican II portray the dignity of humanity on the basis of the common origin and common destination of all. They emphasize on the need of a reflection on the image of God in which each human person is created.¹⁷ A reflection on the poor and the marginalized from this perspective of the Image of God would definitely place an imperative that would bring drastic change in our approach to the poor. However, often it seems that preference is given to the rich. Does the Image of God vary in degrees between the rich and the poor?

In fact, any segregation on the basis of poverty and richness is against the dignity of humanity. The poor are the Sacrament of God or

¹⁵Chackalackal, *Igniting Minds to Transform the Society*, viii.

¹⁶Pixley, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, xii.

¹⁷See, Second Vatican Council, "Nostra Aetate," "Dignitatis Humanae," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Trent to Vatican II*, ed. N. P. Tanner, London: Sheed & Ward, 1990.

the Face of God.¹⁸ If we fail to see the image of God in the people around us our call becomes meaningless. In the poor we see the image of God and particularly of the incarnated Christ who emptied himself for our sake. "Whatever you have done to the least of my brethren you have done to me" (Mt 25:40). Our call is to become the voice of the voiceless. Indeed, we must recognize, and should be moved by the battered face of the other in the poor. Can one see the Image of God in them, a face that demands justice and liberation? Forgetting the face of the other in the poor is negating the image of God in them and negating the God-given gift of life and its fullness. Poverty is a contagious disease that has to be treated; if not treated immediately, it will cause harm to the life and flourishing of the poor around us. We would be guilty of shutting our eyes against the image of God in them.

The poor and the question of justice must haunt us every moment of our lives; it should direct us in all our choices and transactions. "The option for the poor" emerged due to God's option for them (Jam 2:5; 1Cor 1:26-28). It is for this reason that Pope Francis often reiterates that the Church is the Church of the poor. "Option for the poor" has to be seen as God's will. Christ's state of poverty was a chosen one, so it becomes an integral part of his saving mystery.¹⁹ The Council documents like *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes* reaffirm this aspect of Christ's poverty. "Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and under oppression, so the Church is called to follow the same path."²⁰ The Council regards the poor as the living memorial of its Founder. In this manner we take on a theological basis for Church's option for the poor; not on a sociological one. Poverty therefore functions as a setting for God's disclosure.

In this manner, opting for Christ is completed in owning the option of Jesus; i.e., for poor. Christ and the poor cannot be separated. The poor are the disclosures of Christ, the extensions of incarnation in the world. As Pixley puts it, "the poor are the sacrament of Jesus: the manifestation and communication of his mystery, the setting for his revelation and dwelling."²¹ Option for the poor in this sense is highly

¹⁸Pixley, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, 109.

¹⁹Pixley, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, 110.

²⁰Second Vatican Council, "Ad Gentes," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Trent to Vatican II*, ed. N. P. Tanner, London: Sheed & Ward, 1990, §5.

²¹Pixley, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, 113. However, he observes that though there is an actual identification of the poor with Jesus, it should not be misinterpreted as an ontological identity.

Christological. It is not anything radically *ex novo* that the Council invented, rather it is highly Christ-centred. It is affirmed that option for the poor has to become an inseparable part of our commitment to Christ. In our religious communities it should become a collective thrust along with each one's individual thrust. Love for the poor should be out of love for them; i.e., not from an objective perspective, so as to depict us as generous social workers. Often we are not moved at the face of the poor because our love for the poor is from an objective perspective, not from a subjective view.

3.2. Biblical Understanding of Poverty and the Poor

One would find many instances in the Bible where option for the poor is presented as a norm for God's action. In the Old Testament, the concept of the *anawim* of Yahweh (Ex 22:25-26; Lev 25:35-38; Deut 24:10-15; Is 11:4, 49:13; 66:2; Ps 22:25, 34:7) and in the New Testament, Jesus' preference for the poor, are major themes of scholarly discussions. For our purpose we limit our discussion to the special concern for the poor that is depicted in the gospel of Luke. It is known as the gospel of mercy, as it focuses on the poor. According to Luke, the poor are the blessed ones and the kingdom of God belongs to them. A division between the rich and the poor was made in the proclamation of the kingdom of God by Jesus: "How happy are you who are poor, yours is the Kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20, 24). There are a number of instances where the rich and the poor are kept apart in the gospel of Luke. Even the mission statement of Jesus (Lk 4:18), as we have seen earlier, clearly depicts Jesus' option for the poor and the marginalized. Besides that we also see many other parables that disclose this thrust of the evangelist; for example, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31), the parable of the rich young man (Lk 12:18-23), the story of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10), etc. Zacchaeus model (sharing of his wealth with the poor) is presented as normative to all the religious.

Of course, in other gospels and in the epistles too we find Jesus' concern for the poor and the marginalized. Mathew presents almsgiving (*sadaqah*) as an expression of justice (Mt 6:1-2). Paul admonishes the faithful to make a collection for the poor (Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8-9; Gal 2:9-10). James also in his letter comments that the poor are God's chosen ones (Jam 2:5-7). Thus, concern for the poor is an underlying theme of biblical spirituality. Poverty in these instances is not a virtue, but is presented as a disposition and a spiritual attitude

(Ps 34:7-11) that enables the poor to turn to God and place his or her trust in Him.

3.3. Evangelical Poverty and Economic Poverty

Do the vow of poverty and poverty as deprivation of sustenance one and the same or are they completely unrelated? Poverty as paucity of things may not be a virtue or an ideal state. It is in fact a social evil from a purely an *economic perspective*.²² Actually, it is to reduce such instances of material poverty that all systems, be it political, social, global, strive for. Unlike material poverty, evangelical poverty is considered to be a privilege. From a critical perspective, religious life is tremendously a privileged life, and the religious are viewed as a privileged class in the society. In fact, evangelical poverty does not exclude us from our responsibility to identify with the poor and the marginalized.

In its true sense, the vow of poverty is different from material scarcity; though it is a freedom from having material possessions. It is more of simplicity and identity with Jesus the Master. Lack of possession is not the soul of the evangelical vow of poverty. Regarding lack of possession an “end in itself,” would certainly destroy the meaning of the vow. Actually, it is directedness towards God, and not an exclusive ‘non-consideration’ of goods. The following are the differences between evangelical poverty and material poverty: i) Economic poverty is mostly an involuntary poverty, whereas evangelical poverty is opted for or an intentional poverty. ii) To have God as one’s portion is evangelical poverty. Whatever be the situation economically, without God as one’s portion, poverty will not be blessed or be evangelical. Poverty, whether material or voluntary, if it does not let one rely on God, it is not evangelical poverty. iii) Today the world tells people what they need, and they are enticed by the world and behave accordingly. In evangelical poverty it is the person,

²²In the Old Testament, poverty is depicted as evil, which one needs to try to overcome with the grace of God (Dt 15:7-11). Humiliation, oppression, dependence, etc. are presented as consequences of poverty (Sir 13:3-7, 21-23). OT presents a God, who is the God of the poor (Ps 72; Is 11:1-4). Furthermore, Nathan who narrates a story to David on taking what is of the poor, and David’s anger towards the rich man for taking the lamb of the poor man (2 Sam 12:1-6), shows the need of justice for the poor. Many of the proverbs depict “poverty as a calamity” (Prov 14:20, 31; 19:4; 22:7, 22-23; 28:6; Eccl 13:3, 18-20).

who decides what he or she needs; the world does not have any control over him or her. iv) Material possession ties you to them; you may not get time for God and His people. The religious are chosen and consecrated by God. v) Religious poverty is an option to "choose to live in a simple way," whereas for the poor around us it is not an option, but a depressing situation. vi) In material poverty the poor are victims of poverty, whereas in evangelical poverty the religious are not victims rather are considered to be the privileged ones. Voluntary poverty motivates the religious to alleviate material poverty.

Evangelical poverty is characterized by the following: i) affective detachment, i.e., their heart is not set on material things, because the love of money is the root of all evil (1 Tim 6:10). But detachment here does not mean destroying or throwing the riches away as the cynic philosopher Crates did. ii) Sharing is another element of evangelical poverty. Happiness in sharing what one has is a mark of evangelical poverty. iii) Evangelical poverty helps one remain moderate in one's approach towards achieving wealth (Prov 30:7-9; 1Tim 8:8). In this sense, spiritual poverty thrives from an attitude of detachment, whereas material poverty is a deprivation.

Unfortunately, today even in religious circles, poverty and the evangelical vow of poverty are not priority talks. Many opine that in the current smart age such a vow has no relevance. Here lies the problem of religious life: this lack of interest in the vow of poverty has affected our social commitment. As we lose interest in the vow of poverty we risk losing the connecting link with the poor and the marginalized and vice versa.

3.4. The Blessed Poverty

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3). The gospel speaks of a blessed poverty. In what sense is poverty blessed? According to Chavara, "the blessed poor" is the one who recognizes one's unworthiness and relies completely on God. Because one is aware of one's sinfulness he or she relies on God and pray for God's mercy. This is the true meaning of poor in Spirit in the thoughts of Chavara. In this sense, he may be called poor-in-spirit, i.e., one who continuously acknowledged one's unworthiness in front of the Holiness of God, which we see in all his writings.²³ Similarly, the "poor Church" is the Church that completely relies on God. Therefore,

²³*Atmanutapam*, in Z. M. Moozhoor, ed., *Chavarayachante Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Mannanam: St Joseph, 1981, 5, 10, 13.

poor-in-spirit are those who understand that it is God's sheer mercy that saves us, not one's merit.

We are good at instructing the poor and making them conscious of the "blessedness" in being poor, though in no way we try to own such blessedness. This way of canonization of poverty has created a kind of indifference in our attitude towards the poor. Identifying with the poor is foreign to our way of functioning. Unlike Jesus' method of "identification with the poor" we are experts in "identifying the poor" around us. Jesus' orientation towards the poor is clearly expressed in his mission statement in Lk 4:18, i.e., he has come "to bring good news to the poor [...] to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." In this perspective it may be argued that solidarity with the poor is an integral part of holiness in Christian living; and all the more, an inherent feature of radical following of Christ. Non-consideration of the poor is a sign of spiritual deprivation, because poverty and spirituality are intrinsically related. They are a compound reality, and exist together. A truly spiritual person will have an affinity to the poor and with poverty. Lack of concern for the poor and forgetting the spirit of poverty are symptoms of a contagious disease of poor spirituality. Therefore, concern for the poor and the marginalized is an explicit norm to measure our spirituality. In this sense, poor-in-spirit would mean having no attachment to things while placing one's whole trust in God.

4. Four Levels of Understanding Poverty

Before describing the various levels of understanding of poverty, it is good to differentiate between "needs" and "wants." In religious communities needs are met (Acts 4:35 "each according to his or her needs"); but when religious seek to satisfy wants than needs it causes crisis in religious life. Thirsting for wants is against the spirit of religious poverty. If we describe the vow of poverty in terms of attachment (wants) and detachment (satisfied with the needs), attachment makes one withdraw from sharing what one has, whereas detachment takes one towards God and the other. As a matter of fact, a willingness to let things go would be the characteristics of one having such a detachment. Based on this "attachment-detachment principle" there are four ways of understanding the vow of poverty:

- i) Normative or Evangelical Poverty: it is the understanding of poverty in reference to the gospels, that is, poverty lived by Christ as described in the gospels.

- ii) Constitutional Poverty: it is the understanding of poverty that the Constitution of a Congregation or Order upholds. Emphasis on poverty differs here according to the special charism of the founder/ress of the Congregation;
- iii) Espoused Poverty: It is the understanding of poverty as described by each group of religious. It is often an idealized explanation of poverty in accordance with the above two.
- iv) Operant Poverty: It is poverty in practice. It is poverty as practiced by each individual or each community in actual life situations.²⁴

A critical observation of these different levels of understanding of poverty would reveal that there remains only a hairline similarity among these four levels of poverty particularly in relation to the fourth, that is, the actual living of poverty. The first two seems to match and to a certain extent also the third. However, the first three hardly seem to have any similarity with the fourth. Therefore, we argue that unless the four levels of poverty merge, a religious person may not be living poverty, and he or she may simply remain at the espoused level, that is, simply an idealized description, which may be termed as Descriptive Poverty. As a matter of fact, an evaluation of the vow of poverty must take into account the relation of 'operant poverty' to the other three levels.

5. Religious Congregations and the Vow of Poverty

On the basis of the four levels of understanding of poverty, we now examine *poverty* as described in the constitutions of a few religious congregations in view of understanding the intrinsic relation between the vow of poverty and the poor. On this basis, we reiterate our central argument that vow of poverty and our commitment to the poor cannot be separated. Vow of poverty demands a positive response to the cause of the poor and the marginalized. The following analysis is the result of an examination of the respective constitutions of these congregations and the subsequent conversation with the members of these religious congregations.

As per the constitution of the Congregation of Mother of Carmel²⁵ poverty is dependence on God. It is to enable us to live for the other.

²⁴Adapted from D. Bhatti, H. Cameron, C. Duce, J. Sweeney and C. Watkins, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*, London: SCM, 2010, 54.

²⁵Constitution of the *Congregation of Mother of Carmel*, Aluva: CMC Generalate, 1976, 64-67 (Art. 41-51).

Accordingly, members opined that hard work is necessary in fulfilling the vow of poverty. More than structural poverty, individuals are encouraged to observe and practice the vow of poverty in one's daily life.

According to the constitution of the Sisters of the Destitute²⁶ *poverty in spirit* is to experience joy and fulfilment in God alone (Ps 18:2); and to find security in God with detached Heart (Mt 6:20-25). It is total dedication to the will of God. We have to become poor and free ourselves from all sorts of material attachment, to impart love of Christ to our poor brethren. The vow of poverty is to renounce the right to procure, use and administer material goods. It is not solely about renunciation rather it is placing complete trust in God's providence. Concern for the destitute is the main thrust of the congregation, as it is the charism of the congregation.

According to the Order of Servants of Mary, the institutions that bring profit is always pooled together to meet the needs of other institutions, which are totally dedicated for the poor people, the marginalized and the less privileged ones of the society. Even the use of mobile phones, handling of money, etc. are reserved for the superiors unless otherwise permitted.²⁷

According to the Congregation of the Sacred Heart, as the poor of Yahweh, they find wealth in God and try to live with a pure heart. Whatever they are and whatever they have is the gift of God, and has been entrusted to them to be used for others. Therefore, poverty demands to become humble receivers in sharing the received with the needy. Poverty should not be lived in spirit alone, it should be lived in practical life. Poverty is to find safety in the protection of God and in identifying with the poor through hard work.²⁸

For the Pilar Fathers, poverty is following Christ who assumed the state of the poor. Hence, the vow of poverty is to take on a life style that is poor in reality and in spirit with a sense of detachment from earthly riches. A review of one's personal belongings must be made on

²⁶Constitution of the *Congregation of the Sisters of the Destitute*, Aluva: SD Generalate, 1971, Art. 16-19.

²⁷Adapted from an interview with the members of the Congregation.

²⁸Constitution of the *Congregation of the Sacred Heart*, Kottayam: SH Generalate, 2008, 18-21 (Art. 44-55).

the occasion of renewal and retreats, so as to enable them to make continual assurance of their commitment.²⁹

The Carmelites of Mary Immaculate live a life of the "poor of the Lord" (Ps 34:6) both individually and in community. Identifying with the poor becomes complete as we avail ourselves totally for the people and by sharing what we have with the poor. All our property is meant for the service of the people. The constitution stresses both the individual and the communitarian dimensions of the vow of poverty.³⁰

In the above analysis, it is clear that whatever be the congregation, the constitution of all religious communities portray an intrinsic relation between the vow of poverty and our commitment to the poor and the marginalized.

6. Is Poverty Individualistic or Communitarian?

A recurring question in every reflection on the vow of poverty may be, "Is vow of poverty a personal matter or has it something to do at the communitarian level?" Often we justify our commitment in terms of describing it as a personal vow that has to be personally taken care of; and at other times, we save our face stressing the communitarian aspect of the living of poverty. At the same time, we all acknowledge that the communitarian dimension of poverty has lost its significance because of our institutional structure. Therefore, if we need to re-orient our communities, we need to re-orient the communitarian dimension of poverty. As we have seen above, since the Church is the Church of the poor, poverty is the *identifying factor* of Christian community. To safeguard the identity we need to take into consideration our attitude towards the poor. *Poverty is the brand of our identity*. If people fail to recognize us as "religious or priests" it is because we no more embrace this identity marker. Our institutional structure and corporate nature have masked it, and made it invisible.

Nevertheless, the problem starts at the personal level. Each of us fails to be living examples of poverty. As poverty is invisible at the individual level; it is all the more obscured at the communitarian level too. Definitely, parts always contribute to the making of the whole. As a matter of fact, we need to begin a renewal that transforms the lives of the individual, which would gradually transform the face of the

²⁹Constitution of the *Society of the Missionaries of Saint Francis Xavier* (Pilar Fathers), 16-17 (Art. 55-62).

³⁰*Constitutions and Directory: Carmelites of Mary Immaculate*, Kochi: Prior General's House, 2013, 8-10 (Art. 27-36).

community. As a community no more we possess the *visible poverty*. Our buildings distance us from the people; and often we hold a distorted face of poverty. Such a disfigured face demands an urgent rediscovery of our commitment to the poor. For this reason, it must be taken care neither to fall into what one might call *religious solipsism* (individualization), nor to what it otherwise be termed as *religious Marxism* (communalization).

7. Charity Approach versus Jesus' Approach

We need to make a change in our focus from *what* we do (a quantitative perspective), to *how* we do them (a qualitative perspective). A reflection on the *how* of doing would change our perspective – a perspective *for* the poor and the marginalized. Pope Francis invited us to transform ourselves as “Shepherds with the smell of the sheep.” We must allow ourselves to have the dirt and smell of the poor and the marginalized. Other than our *charity approaches* we must develop the *Jesus approach* that is motivated by pure love for the poor and the marginalized. In fact, in the *charity approach* the poor and the marginalized are our objects; they are never considered as subjects. Hence, all our apostolate must focus on the poor, be it education, frontier ministries, social work, etc. Primary importance has to be for the poor.

8. Poverty as the Method of Proclamation and Evangelization

In the light of the discussions above it must be restated that poverty should not be an exhibition, rather it should be a real expression of what we are. Poverty-shows, occasional travels in in a bullock-cart, selfie taken with poor people, etc., may not bring any effect. Spirit of poverty should allow us to know the pain and problems of the ordinary ones. Indifference at their face as Pope Francis says is “un-Christian.”³¹ In other words, it is humility, i.e., humbling oneself

³¹The Pope spoke about poverty and Christianity: “For us Christians, poverty ... is a theological category. I would say perhaps the first category, because God, the Son of God, abased Himself, made Himself poor to walk with us on the road. And this is our poverty: the poverty of the flesh of Christ, the poverty that the Son of God brought us with His incarnation. A poor Church of the poor begins by going to the flesh of Christ. If we go to the flesh of Christ, we begin to understand something, to understand what the poverty is, the poverty of the Lord.” Quoted from S. Gregg, “Pope Francis on the True Meaning of Poverty”, Crisis Magazine <http://www.catholiceducation.org/>

despite the possibilities for otherwise. It is conforming oneself to Jesus, the God who humbled himself.

Life of poverty should be our proclamation and the method of evangelization. No direct proclamation of the gospel is promising in today's Indian context, but witness of our life of poverty, obedience and chastity has to become our proclamation. The people with us feel that we are people "teaching Christ," but fail to be "living Christs." We need to be living 'Christs' and that is possible through living a life dedicated for the poor and the marginalized.

9. The State of Religious in Social Apostolate: An Introspection

The acute poverty in generosity may be well depicted through a well-known story, which presents two differing approaches. For the birthday celebration of her only son the mother went to a shopping mall, and after buying all costly things for the celebration and for the child, she asked the shop keeper, for a set of the cheapest sari to be presented to the house-maid who helps in the kitchen. After a while the housemaid approaches the same shopkeeper, and asks for the best dress for the birthday baby of her boss. She reminds the shopkeeper that the dress should be of the best quality, even if it is costly. The mother of the birthday baby suffers from the poverty in generosity, in giving; whereas the domestic helper really is rich in her attitude in giving than receiving. We need to wipe out poverty of generosity. Based on the approach towards the poor, we may differentiate four categories of people within our communities.

- i) Self-focused indifferent type: they are the religious who are not worried about poor people; they are worried about their own cares and welfare.
- ii) Ideal-holding hypocritical type: they speak of high ideals, but when it affects them personally, they attack others. That which does not affect them is highly praised.
- iii) Hardworking and miserly type: they work hard and do not waste a single penny; but they are not ready to spend even for worthy causes. They are stingy and demand others to be so.
- iv) Service-minded genuine type: they are those who live according to the ideals they preach and have true concern for the poor.

It must be acknowledged that the fourth category is really few in number compared to the other three. There may be various reasons for

this decreased number. One of the most important reasons may be the mean state of the religious working in social apostolate. We need to bring a change in our perception and in our approach and let them have an equal status and voice as those in the field of elite apostolates like education and administration. Their works are to be highlighted and appreciated, which will gradually bring changes in our approach towards the poor and the marginalized.

10. Conclusion

What would bring change in our attitudes and approaches? Each one has to become aware of this fact; and let the Francis-effect happen in each one's life. Individual values need to be changed. In fact, transforming personal values is important for a change in our approach and thinking. Becoming a servant is an expression of the commitment to the poor and the marginalized. Hence, a spirit of service and servant-hood should be practiced at all levels of our religious and ecclesial responsibilities. In this sense no one has an exception from this commitment. It should be practiced at all levels of our community life. Only then, we can become "awesome religious" and "awesome Christians." Definitely, to be relevant in the present context, the option for the poor has to constitute an integral part of our call and life; it should become an *imperative* that motivates all our actions.