

Spiritual Growth and the Option for the Poor

by Albert Nolan, O.P.

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In our service of the poor, there is a real development that goes through stages in very much the same way as the stages of prayer. For example, some of us know quite a bit about the stages of humility which St. Bernard talks about, or the stages of love and charity that we read about in our spiritual books. Now I am suggesting that in our commitment to the poor there is a parallel spiritual experience that also goes through different stages.

Compassion:

The first stage is characterized by compassion. We have all been moved personally by what we have seen or heard of the sufferings of the poor. That is only a starting point and it needs to develop and grow.

Two things help this growth and development of compassion. The first is what we 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 grinding poverty.

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There is nothing to replace the immediate contact with pain and hunger. Seeing people in the cold and rain after their houses have been bulldozed. Or experiencing the intolerable smell in a slum. Or seeing what children look like when they are suffering from malnutrition.

Information is also exposure. We know and we want others to know that 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 people the only experience of life from the day they are born until the day

they die is the experience of being hungry.

All sorts of information can help us become more compassionate, more concerned --- providing of course that we allow it to happen. That we don't put obstacles in the way by becoming more callous, or saying, "It's not my business," or "I am in no position to do anything about it."

We as Christians have a way of allowing our compassion to develop, indeed, we have a way of nourishing this compassionate feeling, because we can see compassion as a virtue. Indeed, we can see it as a divine attribute, so that when I feel compassionate I am sharing God's compassion, I am sharing what God feels about the world today.

Also, my Christianity, my faith, enables me to deepen my compassion by seeing the face of Christ in those who are suffering, remembering that whatever we do to the least of his brothers and sisters we do to him.

All these things help, and this developing compassion leads on to action, action of two kinds that we may to some extent be involved in. The first of these is what we generally call relief work, the collecting and the distributing of food, of money, of blankets, of clothes, etc.

The second action that leads immediately from our compassion is a simplification of our lifestyle, trying to do without luxuries, trying to save money to give to the poor, doing without unnecessary material goods and so forth. There's nothing extraordinary about that; it's part of a long Christian tradition: compassion, almsgiving, voluntary poverty.

My point is that this is the first stage. And what seems to be extremely important is that we go on from there.

Structural Change

Now the second stage begins with the gradual discovery that poverty is a structural problem. That is, poverty in the world today is not simply misfortune, bad luck, inevitable, due to laziness or ignorance, or just lack of development.

Poverty, in the world today, is the direct result of political and economic policies. In other words, the poverty that we have in the world today is not accidental, it has been created. It has been, I almost want to say, manufactured by particular policies and systems. In other words, poverty in the world

today is a matter of justice and injustice, and the poor people of the world are people who are suffering a terrible injustice. They are the oppressed and the poor of the world. Certainly the greed of the rich is the reason why there are the sufferings of the poor, but what I am trying to say is that it is a structural problem. We are all involved in this; we're victims, we're pawns, whatever you like, but we're all part of it.

“The second stage begins with the gradual discovery that poverty is a structural problem.”

This characterizes what I am calling the second stage of our spiritual development. It immediately leads to indignation or, more bluntly, anger. It leads to anger against the rich, against politicians, against governments for their lack of compassion, for their policies that cause poverty and suffering. Now anger is something that we as Christians are not very comfortable with. It makes us feel a little guilty when we discover that we are angry. But there is a more important sense in which anger is the other side of the coin of compassion. If we cannot be angry then we cannot really be compassionate either. If my heart goes out to the people who are suffering, then I must be angry with those who make them suffer.

For us Christians, there can be a crisis at this stage. What about

forgiveness, or loving one's enemies? But anger doesn't mean hatred. I can be angry with a person whom I love; a mother can be angry with a child because the child nearly burned the house down. And mustn't we be angry with the child because of love and concern, to show the child the seriousness of our love and concern? So sometimes I must be angry. Sometimes I must share God's anger. The Bible is full of God's anger, which we tend to find embarrassing at times, rather than helpful to our spiritual lives.

My suggestion that we need to share God's anger means not hatred, but rather, as we say so often, not a hatred of the sinner but a hatred of sin. The more we all understand the structural problem as a structural problem, the more we are able to forgive the individuals involved. It is not a question of hating or blaming or being angry with individuals as such, but of tremendous indignation against a system that creates so much suffering and so much poverty.

The more we have that anger, the closer we are to God. And if we cannot have that anger about any system or any policy that creates suffering, we don't feel about it as God feels about it and our compassion is wishy-washy.

During this second stage, our actions will be somewhat different, or we may add to what we were doing before. Because as soon as we realize that the problem of the poverty in the world is a structural problem, a

political problem, then we want to work for social change.

Relief work deals with the symptoms rather than the causes.

Relief work is somewhat like curative medicine, and the work for social change is somewhat like preventive medicine. We want to change the structures, the systems that create the poverty, not only to relieve people when they are suffering from that poverty.

Both are necessary but at this stage you begin to recognize the need for social change. For some people, it leads to paralysis, while others become very active. A struggle goes on with a person at this stage.

Humility

We come now to the third stage which develops with the discovery that the poor must and will save themselves, and that they don't really need you or me. Spiritually, it's the stage where one comes to grips with humility in one's service to the poor.

Before we reach this stage, we are inclined to think that we can, or must, solve the problems of the poor. We, aid agency people, conscientized middle-class people, the Church maybe, and leaders, have got to solve all these problems. Governments or people who are educated must solve the problems of the poor. We see the poor as what we often call the needy; we must go out and rescue them because they are helpless. There may even be some idea of getting them to cooperate with us. There may be

some idea of teaching them to help themselves. But it's always *we* who are going to teach *them* to help themselves. There is a tendency to treat the poor as poor, helpless creatures.

Now I am suggesting that at this third stage the shock comes, perhaps gradually, as we begin to realize that the poor know better than we do what to do and how to do it. They are perfectly capable of solving structural problems, or political problems. In fact they are more capable of doing it that you and I are. It is a gradual discovery that social change can only come from the poor, from the working class, from the Third World. Basically, I must learn from them: I must learn from the wisdom of the poor. They know better than I what is needed and they, and only they, can in fact, save me.

*"...discovering in the poor,
God saving us, God acting
and speaking to us today."*

We discover that the poor are God's chosen instruments and not me. The poor themselves are the people that God wants to use and is going to use in Christ to save all of us from the crazy madness of the world in which so many people can be starving in the midst of so much wealth. This can become an experience of God acting and of God's presence in the poor, not merely as an object of compassion, not merely seeing the face of Christ in their sufferings, but discovering in the poor, God saving me,

God saving us, God acting and speaking to us today.

The hazard in this third stage is romanticism --- romanticizing the poor, the working class, the Third World. We can get ourselves into a position where, if somebody is poor and says something, then it is infallibly true. Or, if somebody comes from the Third World, we must all listen simply because they come from the Third World. And if they do something, it must be right. That's romanticism, and it's nonsense. On the other hand, it is a kind of romantic nonsense that somehow we all seem to need at one stage. As long as we recognize what we're doing, I don't think it is necessarily very bad. But it can become a problem at the end of this third stage. We are likely to reach a crisis, a crisis of disillusionment and disappointment because the people of the Third World, or the poor have not lived up to the heroic picture we had of them. We have misunderstood the structural problem. It doesn't mean to say that poor people in themselves and by themselves are any different as human beings from anyone else. They have their problems, like anyone else.

Solidarity

That brings us to the fourth and last stage. That stage centers around the experience of real solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. And I think the real beginning of this stage of our spiritual development is the disappointment and disillusionment that we experience when

we discover that the poor are not what we romantically thought they were. I am not saying that we do not have a great deal to learn from the poor. I maintain that. I am not saying that the poor are not going to save themselves and us. I maintain that. I am not saying that they are not God's chosen instruments. They are.

All of that remains true, but they are human beings. They make mistakes, are sometimes selfish, sometimes lacking in commitment and dedication, sometimes waste money, are sometimes irresponsible. They are sometimes influenced by the middle class and have middle-class aspirations, and sometimes believe the propaganda and perhaps don't have the right political line. Maybe they are not all that politicized. Nevertheless, I can and must learn from them.

Only the poor and the oppressed can really bring social change. It is simply a matter of moving from romanticism about the poor to honest and genuine realism, because that's the only way that we can move into this fourth stage.

Real solidarity begins when it is no longer a matter of *we* and *they*. Even when we romanticize the poor, make tremendous heroes of them, put them on a pedestal, we continue to alienate them from ourselves --- there is a huge gap between us and them. Real solidarity begins when we discover that we all have faults and weaknesses. They may be

different faults and weaknesses according to our different social backgrounds and conditions and we may have very different roles to play, but we all have chosen to be on the same side against oppression.

Whether we're black or white, whether we were brought up in a middle class or working class, we can be on the same side against oppression, well aware of our differences. We can work together and struggle together against our common enemy, the unjust policies and systems, without ever treating one another as inferior or superior, but having a mutual respect for one another while recognizing the limits of our own social conditioning.

*“Real solidarity begins when it is no longer a matter of **we** and **they**.”*

This experience, and it is an experience of solidarity with God's own cause of justice, can become spiritually an experience of solidarity with God in Jesus Christ. It is a way of coming to terms with ourselves in relationship to other people, with our illusions, our feelings of superiority, with our guilt, our romanticism, which then opens us up to God, to others, to God's cause of justice and freedom. 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 ---

dark nights, crisis, struggles, shocks, and challenges.

The four stages I have described then are not rigid so that you have to go through exactly one stage after another. It does get mixed up. But I have presented this model in the hope that our attitude towards the poor may always remain open to further development.

The one really bad thing that can happen to any of us is that we get stuck somewhere along the way. We are then no longer able to appreciate others who have gone farther. Because we don't realize that it's a process, we also don't appreciate and understand those who are still beginning.

We need to understand that we and the church are all going through a process, a spiritual development, a growth and a struggle. We're in it together and we need to help and support one another in this process. Let us help it, encourage it, and struggle within ourselves, because today it is the only way we are going to come closer to God and be saved.

