Ignatius on Poverty (1547)

A college in Padua was insufficiently supported by its founder, Andrea Lippomani. Lippomani had hosted Jesuit scholastics in Padua as early as 1542. The Venetian government, though, stalled negotiations to transfer Lippomani’s bequest to the Society intended to support a college in the city, doing so despite a bull by Pope Paul III in support of the transfer in 1546. As a result of the yearlong delay, the Jesuits there suffered a great deal of deprivation. In response, Ignatius sent the following letter, an enthusiastic panegyric of real poverty the people voluntarily endured for the sake of Christ. The letter was written by Juan de Polanco.

May the grace and true love of Jesus Christ our Lord be always in our hearts and increase from day to day until our consummation. Amen.

Dearly Beloved Fathers and Brothers in Christ:

There comes to our hands a letter from our friend and yours, Pietro Santini, written to Father Master Láinez in Florence. In it we learn among other things of your love for poverty, which you have chosen out of love for Jesus Christ poor. Moreover, you sometimes have the opportunity for its effects to be seen in suffering a lack of necessities, to the extent that the prior of the Trinità’s resources do not reach as far as his generosity and charity. I know that with persons who are mindful of their state of life and keep before their eyes Jesus Christ naked on the cross, there is no need for exhortations to accept suffering—particularly since the letter itself shows how well you all accept it if you have some experience of poverty. Nevertheless, by commission of our father in Jesus Christ Master Ignatius, who has a true father’s love for you, I will take consolation together with all of you in this grace which his finite Goodness gives us, both here and there, by granting us to experience holy poverty—I do not know how strongly where you are, but very much so here—in keeping with our profession. I call poverty a grace because it is a very special gift from God. Scripture tells us that “poverty and probity are from God”; and how much God loves it has been shown us by his only-begotten Son, who came down from his heavenly seat and chose to be born and brought up in poverty. He loved it not only in life—suffering hunger and thirst, having no place to lay his head—but even in death, choosing to be stripped of his clothes and deprived of everything, even of water for his thirst.

Wisdom which cannot err wanted to show the world, says St. Bernard, the great worth of the jewel of poverty—a worth unknown to the world—by choosing it for himself, so that his teaching “Blessed are they that hunger and thirst; blessed are the poor,” etc. would not appear out of harmony with his life.

We can also see God’s high regard for poverty in the way that his specially chosen friends—particularly in the New Testament, beginning with his most holy mother and his apostles and
continuing through the centuries down to our own time—were for the most part poor, the subjects imitating their king, the soldiers their captain, and the members Christ their head.

So great are the poor in God’s sight that it was especially for them that Jesus Christ was sent on earth: “Because of the misery of the needy and the groans of the poor I will now arise, says the Lord”; and in another place, “He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor” —words recalled by our Lord when he sent to St. John his reply: “The poor have the gospel preached to them.” Jesus Christ so preferred them over the rich that he chose to pick the entire holy college of apostles from among the poor, to live and associate with them, to leave them as rulers of his Church, appointing them to act as judges over the twelve tribes of Israel (that is, of all the faithful) with the poor as their legal advisors. This is how high the poor rank.

The friendship of the poor makes us friends of the eternal King. Love of poverty makes us kings even on earth—kings not of earth but of heaven. This is shown by the fact that while the kingdom of heaven is promised in the future to other persons, immutable Truth promises it in the present to those who are poor and who suffer persecution for justice’ sake: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” They have a right to the kingdom even now.

Not only are they kings themselves, they also make others sharers in the kingdom. Our Lord teaches us in St. Luke, “Make for yourselves friends with the mammon of iniquity, so that when you fail they may receive you into everlasting dwellings.” These friends are the poor—particularly the voluntary poor—by whose merits those who aid them enter the dwellings of glory. For they, says St. Augustine, are the “least ones” of whom our Lord says, “What you did to any of these least ones, you did to me.”

This, then, shows the nobility of poverty. It scorns to amass a treasure of dung or worthless earth; it spends the whole resources of its love to buy the precious treasure buried in the field of holy Church—whether Christ himself or his spiritual gifts. This treasure will never be taken from them.

But if we look to genuine advantages inherent in the means that are suited to help us attain our final end, we will see that holy poverty keeps us from many sins by removing the occasions for them, for “poverty lacks the wherewithal to feed its love.” Poverty crushes the worm of the rich, pride; it cuts off the hellish leeches of lust and gluttony, and many other sins as well. And if through weakness a person falls, poverty helps him to rise at once. For it is free of that love which, like birdlime, binds the heart to earth and to earthly things and takes away our ability to rise up again and turn back to God. Poverty enables us in every circumstance to hear the voice (that is, the inspiration) of the Holy Spirit better, because it removes the obstructions that keep it out. It makes our prayers more powerful with God, for “the Lord has heard the prayer of the poor.” It lets us go forward unimpeded on the path of virtue, like travelers freed of all burdens. It frees us from the slavery common to so many of the great ones of the world, where “everything obeys or serves money.” When it is poverty of spirit, it lets the soul be filled with every virtue, for the emptier the soul is of love for earthly things, the fuller it will be of God through his gifts. And it is certain that poverty must be very rich indeed, since a hundredfold has been promised to it, even in this life. While this is fulfilled in a temporal sense when it is for our good, in the
perfect and spiritual sense it is unfailingly true. Thus, those who voluntarily make themselves poor in human possessions will necessarily be rich in the gifts of God.

Poverty is the land teeming with hardy men—*fecunda virorum paupertas*—of which the poet speaks, in words far truer of Christian poverty than of Roman. It is the furnace which tests one’s progress in fortitude and other virtues, distinguishing what is gold from what is not. It is the breastwork which secures the camp of our conscience in religion. It is the foundation on which Jesus Christ apparently erects the superstructure of perfection; for he says, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you have, and give to the poor…and come, follow me.” Poverty is the mother, nurse, and guardian of religious life, which is given birth, nurtured, and preserved by it, while it is weakened, corrupted, and ruined by affluence.

Thus we can easily see how great is holy poverty’s practical value, over and above its nobility, especially since it is poverty which wins our salvation in the end from him who “will save the poor and the humble,” and lets us obtain the eternal kingdom from him who declares that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit. Nothing else can compare to this advantage. Hence, no matter how bitter its taste, it seems that holy poverty ought to be welcomed gladly. But really it is not bitter; it brings great delight to those who embrace it willingly. Even Seneca says that the poor laugh more heartily because they have no cares. Experience shows the truth of this in the public beggars: if you look only to their contentment of mind, you will see they live more cheerfully and contentedly than great merchants, magistrates, princes, and other high personages. If this is the case with people whose poverty is not voluntary, what shall we say of those whose poverty is freely chosen? Possessing and loving nothing earthly that they could lose, they enjoy unshakable peace and utter tranquility in this area which for the rich is so full of storms. And with their assurance and purity of conscience they enjoy constant happiness, a continual banquet—especially since through poverty they dispose themselves for divine consolations, which in God’s servants are plentiful in the measure that their earthly possessions and comforts are not, provided they know how to fill themselves with Jesus Christ, so that he will make up for and replace everything else.

But I must not pursue this further. Let what I have said suffice to console both you and myself and urge us to have a love for holy poverty. For the nobility, advantages, and joyfulness I have mentioned are realized fully only in a poverty that is loved and voluntarily embraced, not one that is forced and involuntary. I will only add this: Lovers of poverty should also love her retinue as far as they can—poor food, poor clothing, poor sleeping accommodations, and being looked down upon. Otherwise, someone who loved poverty but was unwilling to experience any deprivation or effect of it would be a pretty dainty poor person. He would certainly give evidence that he loved the name rather than the reality of poverty—or loved it with words more than with the heart.
That is all for now, except to beg Jesus Christ, the true teacher and model of spiritual poverty, to grant that we may all possess this precious inheritance that he confers upon his brothers and coheirs, so that we may have abundant spiritual riches of grace and, at the end, the indescribable riches of his glory. Amen.

Rome, August 6, 1547