

Spiritual Growth & the Option for the Poor

by *Albert Nolan, O.P.*

Introduction. Reverend Albert Nolan, O.P., is a former provincial of the Dominicans in South Africa and former national chaplain of the Young Christian Students in South Africa. In September 1983, he was elected master general of the Dominican order but permitted by the General Chapter to refuse the appointment in order to continue his work in South Africa. He is author of *Jesus Before Christianity* (Orbis, 1978). The following speech was given to the Catholic Institute for International Relations, London, at its annual meeting, June 29, 1984. It is reprinted with permission of the Irish Missionary Union, Dublin.

I have chosen to speak about the service of the poor. I want to talk about what this service of the poor means, and how it should develop, the spiritual development we can go through in our service to the poor in the many different ways in which we try to perform it.

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 will know quite a bit about the stages of humility, steps 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. Crisis, dark nights and light...and it is that which I would like to speak about.

Compassion

The first stage then, as I understand it, of this commitment to the poor 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 to grow. Two things help this growth and development of compassion. The first is what we have 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. 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 dies is the experience of being

hungry. All sorts of information can help us become more compassionate, more concerned. Providing of course 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'm 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 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, or sophisticated ways of doing that to help the poor. And the second action that leads immediately from our compassion would probably be 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, alms giving, voluntary property.

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 a lack of development. Poverty, in the world today, is a direct result of political and economic structures. It is the 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 poor of the world. Not that I want immediately to blame individuals. 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. It 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 guilty when we discover that we are angry. But there is a most 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.

The problem, of course, for us Christians is that there can even be a crisis at this stage. What about forgiveness, or loving one's enemies? Anger doesn't mean hatred to begin with. 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 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 the sin. What I want to suggest here is that the more we all understand the structural problem as a structural problem, the more we are able to forgive the individuals involved. It's extremely important for us in South Africa, for example, to recognize the wickedness, the extreme wickedness of what is happening is not something that we can blame P.W. Botha for, as if he were by himself a particularly wicked individual. We blame the system, and if he were to disappear, someone else would take his place and the system would go on. 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. My suggestion is that the more we have that anger, the closer we are to God. And if we cannot have that anger, not only about South Africa but 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 the 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. And this may be through a tremendous amount of activity on our part, action for social change, trying to fight the system and to change governments

maybe, getting involved in politics, campaigns of one sort or another. For some people, it leads to paralysis. What can I do against the system? I can't do anything to effect structural change. What can one possibly do in Britain about the structures in the world and policies that create poverty? Some people feel totally paralyzed by it, while others become very active. This then is what I would describe as the second stage. A struggle goes on within a person at this stage.

Humility

We come now to the third stage. It's difficult to know what to call this third stage. Basically, it 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, Europeans, aid agency people, conscientized middle-class people, the church maybe, leaders, either alone or perhaps together with others, have got to solve all these problems. Governments or people who are educated must solve these 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. That they are perfectly capable of solving structural problems, or political problems. In fact they are more capable of doing it than 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. I need something that only they can give me. It is not that I have things that only I can give them.

This can amount, in spiritual terms, to a crisis. It can also amount to a very deep conversion. I myself came first to pastoral work after a doctorate in theology from Rome. I thought I had the answers, only to discover gradually that I really knew nothing and that the people who were uneducated, who seemed to be simple, ordinary people, to whom I would have to speak very simply, they knew better than I, for example, what needed to be changed in South Africa and how it needed to be changed. I had to come to terms with that.

We discover that the poor are his 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. As soon as we've made this discovery, we tend to put the poor on a pedestal: the poor, the Third World, the working classes perhaps. 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 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 Third World, or the poor have not lived up to the heroic picture we had of them. We have misunderstood something. 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 me to the fourth and last stage. That stage, I am suggesting, centers around the experience of solidarity, 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 thought romantically 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. Nevertheless only the poor and 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. I'm talking about the stage of real solidarity.

Real solidarity begins when it is no longer a matter of we and they because this is how we generally experience it. 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 back-grounds and our different social conditions and we may have very different roles to play, but we have all chosen to be on the same side against oppression. Whether we're in Europe or South Africa, 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. 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, 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 to 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, spiritual development, a growth and a struggle. We're in it together and we need to help and support one another in it. We in South Africa and the church in general, are going through this process. Let us help it, encourage it, struggle with it in ourselves, because today it is the only way we are going to come closer to God and be saved.