

The Anawim Spirituality of Vatican II

Benedict T. Viviano, O.P.

Understandably, the newspapers and glossies have lingered long over the more striking reforms of the recent Vatican council, such things as vernacular liturgy, collegiality of bishops, the new ecumenical climate. The more sturdy theological quarterlies have pondered some of the more subtle, professional aspects of the decrees: Mystical Body versus People of God as a definition of the Church, religious liberty versus indifferentism, anti-Semitism in the Gospels. But little has been said of the inner spiritual temper, the change in the spiritual atmosphere which the council represents. And yet it is well known that if this spiritual inner reform does not "take," the council will have no real effect. If a council is not an occasion for saints, it is a failure. This is so clear from history. It was Athanasius who made the creed of Nicea a part of the living faith of the people. Where would Ephesus have been without Cyril, or Chalcedon without Leo? The legal reforms of Trent would have remained a dead letter were it not for men like Charles Borromeo, Francis de Sales and Peter Canisius. And when a council lacked a spiritual dynamism and ignited no saints its legal reforms were stillborn: Constance, Basle, and the Fifth Lateran.

It is only in their inner lives that the vast majority of believers can be reached by a council. For a council is a great cultural-spiritual event which usually defines the religious atmosphere in the church for a century or more. Thus, it does not take much historical study to feel the difference between the prayer-life of an Ambrose—spacious, biblical and liturgical (Nicea); the passion-mysticism and Eucharistic devotion of a Francis or a Bonaventure (Lateran II-IV); the energetic militancy of an Ignatius or a Borromeo (Trent); and the in-

tense, but narrow and inward-turning devotion of a Therese of Lisieux (Vatican I).

We may then ask: what is the spiritual climate which both shaped and was shaped by the Second Vatican Council? Who are the saints of this council? The second is a question we cannot as yet judge, although we may venture a guess that Pope John himself will be in their band. But the answer to the first question is, I believe, contained in a paragraph of the Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*) which has not received the attention it deserves, largely because of theologians' and journalists' concern for other, more controversial issues. It reads as follows:

Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the Church is called to follow the same route . . . Christ Jesus, "though he was by nature God . . . emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave," and "being rich, became poor" for our sakes. Thus, the Church, although it needs human resources to carry out its mission, is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim, even by its own example, humility and self-sacrifice. Christ was sent by the Father "to bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart," "to seek and to save what was lost." Similarly, the Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder.¹

This paragraph strikes the death-knell of triumphalism, the end of feudal claims to temporal power and of baroque pretensions. It heralds the dawn of a new age for the Church, a Church composed of poor men at the service of the whole human family, to show men the love God has for them in Christ.

The spirituality in the above paragraph can be expressed in one word: Poverty. But there is a serious danger of misunderstanding. We normally think of poverty in terms of financial destitution. But we must expand our ideas to embrace the full biblical meaning of poverty, the spirit of the *anawim*, before we can do this idea justice. For the full biblical idea involves traits like humility, simplicity, detachment, utter loyalty to God, piety and service of others.

Here we shall briefly trace the development of this type of spirituality, first in Scripture and then in the history of the Church. At the end we shall consider some objections that can be raised against this way of life.

Although poverty is one of the great themes of the Bible, it is not found clearly in all the books of Scripture, nor in all periods. At

first, Israel's view of poverty was rather conventional. It was seen, as we generally see it today, merely as an unfortunate social condition, economic insufficiency, which had no spiritual significance and which should be abolished as soon as possible (Exodus). With the growth of the idea that God rewards the good with material riches and punishes the sinners with temporal misfortunes some began to see economic misery as a sign that a man was cursed by God (Deuteronomy), or at least that he was lazy (Proverbs). A middle class view developed in the circles which gave rise to the Wisdom literature: neither too much wealth nor too little but a certain *aurea mediocritas* was the ideal, for only thus could a man escape the pride of the rich and the dishonesty of the poor.

When did the breakthrough to a deeper understanding take place? According to Albert Gelin, it was around 640-630 B.C., when the prophet Zephaniah identified the "remnant," the heirs of the promise, with the poor.²

For I will leave in the midst of you (Israel) a people humble (*ani*) and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord, those who are left (the remnant) in Israel (Zeph. 3:12f).

Man must be poor before God. This means there is no room for pride. Spiritual poverty is faith plus abandonment, humility and absolute confidence.

Space does not permit a full presentation of the evolution of this theme throughout the Bible. We can only emphasize certain peak moments in that evolution. The real home of this theme in the Old Testament is in the prophets and in the psalms. Just before the exile, Jeremiah, through the intense experience of his own suffering, was led to deepen Israel's religious ideals, to interiorize her values. He was led to see that God's favored ones were not the men of temporal success, but those who clung to him without counting the cost—and these were either poor men to begin with, or soon became poor by backing unpopular causes. Job too is the type of the righteous man living in misery but trusting blindly in God, while taunted by his "comforters" with accusations of sin to account for his destitution. Among many other contributions, Second Isaiah announced in his Servant Songs³ that the longed-for messiah was to be a man of sorrows who would suffer for the sins of others, a poor man then—quite different from what the men of Israel had been

expecting as a redeemer. Zechariah neatly links the humble and royal aspects of the messiah :

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble (*ani*) and riding on an ass (Zech. 9:9).

But the soul of the *anawim*, the fullest expression of their dependence on God, is to be found in the Psalms. How often the words "poor and needy" are linked together in these endlessly moving verses. If one would learn the spiritual doctrine of poverty he must enroll in the school of the Psalter.

We must try to sum up the teaching of the Old Testament now. The *anaw* is the little man, the humble, the oppressed, the poor. But his sufferings have brought him close to God and as the religious class was largely made up of little men, the words "poor-pious-humble" on the one hand and "rich-sinful-proud" on the other were gradually linked. The *anawim* were the followers of Yahweh. In their hopes is a strong will-to-community. Although they, better than anyone, understood the value and dignity of suffering, they never wallowed in it morbidly but looked to God for deliverance. They had learned to await in silence, but with an intense forward longing, for the messiah whom God would send. This silence springs from faith, from total commitment to God. The *anawim* were God's humble servants.

All these elements are taken up in the New Testament and fulfilled and developed to their highest point. With Mary's *Magnificat* (Lk. 1:46-55) and Jesus' beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-11) the pattern of the new Gospel is laid out. Mary is the type of the humble client of God who has nothing of her own to boast of but only of what God has done to her. She knows that the poor are God's special friends. There is an almost Socialist fervor in her words. Jesus, on the other hand, is the messiah of the *anawim*. He is one of them ("The Son of man has nowhere to lay his head" Mt. 8:20) but he has come to deliver them.

I thank thee, Father, . . . that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to *babes* . . . Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am meek (*anaw*) and humble of heart (Mt 11:25-30).

This accent on humility can be shown by a glance at the vocabulary which the New Testament employs to express the nature of office in the Church. In seven instances the task given to the disciples is designated by the term *exousia* (power, authority), ninety-five times in terms of *diakonia* (service, ministry). This is made clearer in three important Gospel narratives, where the question of precedence and authority comes up. When the disciples dispute who will be the greatest (Mk. 9:33; Lk. 9:46; Mt. 18:1), Jesus settles the matter by saying that the greatest is he who is as humble and simple as a child. Again when James and John ask to have the first places next to him in the kingdom he answers that such places go to those who serve the most (Mk. 10:35-45; Mt. 20:20-28). It is on this occasion that he gives the decisive and programmatic word: "the Son of man is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister." Lastly, when he washed the feet of the Twelve at the Last Supper he expressly intended to give them a model of the kind of rule which they should exercise after he was gone (Jn. 13).

St. Paul is no less clear in his teaching on Christ as servant and his disciples' obligation to follow suit. In the famous Christological hymn in Phil. 2:6-11, he says: "Christ emptied himself, taking the form of a servant . . . And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. *Therefore* God has highly exalted him . . ." (Cf. Heb. 5:8) Paul describes the apostles as "ourselves your servants through Jesus" (2 Cor. 4:5).

It is the growing awareness of this current of biblical thought which underlies the spiritual awakening surrounding the second Vatican council. But it must not be thought that this type of spirituality has ever been wholly absent from the Church. Many great saints and spiritual movements have embodied it. We have only to think of the desert fathers of the 4th and 5th centuries, and in a very special way of St. Francis and the vast movement he initiated. One can predict a new dawn for the Franciscan Order if it will be true to its vocation, if it really serves the poor, and first of all by *being* poor. (Of course this goes for other orders and congregations too, more especially those of a mendicant tradition, always allowing for different emphases and situations.) Closer to our own times there was the tremendous wave of enthusiasm for the "little way" of St. Thérèse of Lisieux in the first half of this century. And now the

figure of Charles de Foucauld looms ever larger on the horizon. The movements which take their rise from his inspiration, especially the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus, are growing rapidly all over the world and are generally recognized as the freshest and most evangelical initiative in contemporary religious life, although, significantly, they have barely dented the American religious scene. Their genius seems to be a combination of the desert spirit with Franciscanism, to which is added a very modern apostolate of presence to the industrial slum-dwellers. Finally, we have already hinted that perhaps part of Pope John's secret in touching the hearts of millions was precisely the fact that he possessed this special quality of evangelical poverty. And who can forget the faces of his brothers?

It may well be imagined what great changes will sweep over the Church if this spirit takes deep root. These changes will be not only interior, but sociological as well. Spanish ruff at the papal court, crossed sabers at the local cathedral, non-liturgical church pomp, and certain scandalous financial situations will all have to go. A certain missionary has recently asked whether missionaries are too rich to serve the poor.⁴ He records a Vietnamese peasants' saying: "rich as a missionary." And we all know of things like a new \$120,000 rectory in San Francisco, with its wall-to-wall carpeting, built-in television for each room, adjustable lounge chairs, indirect lighting and wood paneling throughout. This same priest regards poverty as the pearl of great price for the missionary. He even speaks of poverty as a sacrament. Christ is in the world in three ways: in the Eucharist, in the Scriptures, and in the poor.

By now, I hope, it will be clear what a rich, many-faceted thing the spirit of poverty is. We have seen that it is an ever-present theme and reality in the life of the Church down through the ages. But it is also true that it has devoted new dimensions at different times. To the rather passive Old Testament stance of humility and abandonment before God, the New Testament adds the active element of service (*diakonia*) to one's neighbor. Until recently this has usually meant charity to one's *fellow Christians*. But today I think a new dimension is being added—that of service to the *world*, de-Christianized, secular, sometimes pagan and hostile. Today we need a "worldly" poverty, a "worldly" spirituality. We must come out of our spiritual Thebaid and plunge into the midstream of a world which is so far from (and yet potentially so near to) God.

We have stated the basic ideas of this "new" spiritual cast of mind. In conclusion it will be well to consider a few rather obvious objections which might have occurred to the reader. The first is: "how can a spirituality of poverty mean anything to Americans who are today living in a society more affluent than any the world has ever known?" Let me say at once that there never was a greater need than today for a fierce Christian witness to the absolute primacy of the spiritual by a life of radical detachment from material things. This is precisely what is needed most by a society which is close to drowning in its lush carpeting and its backyard pools. Moreover, if one simply lifts one's eyes beyond our own borders it becomes apparent that our affluence is a crime of injustice against the starving people of the world. I cannot go into the difficult question of how the rich man can pass through the eye of the needle here, but let it be bluntly said: we can no longer salve our consciences with certain moral-theological clichés, whether we be religious or lay. The possessors of wealth are under a heavy responsibility from which they cannot be lightly absolved. The sting of the Gospel must not be blunted. It is next to impossible to have "spiritual poverty" without physical poverty as a basis.

A second objection might be "what of the vigorous dynamic type of personality, say a John F. Kennedy; is there any room for him in this spirituality?" First of all we should point out that many spiritualities flourish side by side in the Church without conflict. So no one is forced into this pattern in all its details. But as we have seen, the full idea of poverty involves certain essential elements of Christianity. A member of the Pepsi generation would in any case have to be *humble* before his God, if he was to save his soul. He would very likely be happy to find fulfillment in active service of others. Simplicity of heart is an ornament to any man's character. Even a Kennedy was given his gifts by God. He thanked God for them and tried to use them for the good of others. That is not a bad start on this road.

NOTES

¹ Chapter I, paragraph 8 ad finem.

² A. Gelin, *The Poor of Yahweh* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1964), p. 29f.

³ Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

⁴ A. Schwartz, *The Starved and the Silent* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).