

THE POOR MAN OF NAZARETH

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HE Providence of God is the guiding hand of everything in the universe. The great and small, the sublime and the lowly, the heavens and the earth and all that is in them know the Power of God, and "It disposes all things sweetly."¹ Likewise, no characteristic of the Incarnate Word was excluded from this divine disposition. The smallest detail was accounted for with the same precision as the greatest thing in creation. The same Divine Wisdom arranged the nature of the amoeba, chose for our Lord a life of poverty among men, death for Him at the hands of His creatures, chose every incidental of a divine-human life for our edification and salvation.

The Son of God, made man, was eminently full of grace; every virtue was in His soul and in an infinite degree of perfection. There can be no perfection of soul without humility. It is the center around which all the other virtues revolve. Yet, He Who is all perfect, all holy, chose not only the virtue but the means as well. His was the privilege of having sanctity without acquiring it, yet He chose the ordinary means to the acquisition of virtue in order to show us the way. He Who is "the Way, the Truth and the Life,"² would not be satisfied with mere passive example. His love for man, that love which bade Him lay down His life for man, was so boundless that He would show man not only what virtue is but how it is acquired.

In Bethlehem's holy night we scarcely know which to admire more—the humility of the Prince of Peace with His stable-mansion, His beast-courtiers, His manger-throne, or the poverty which necessitated these things instead of a marble castle, thousands of earthly trumpeters heralding His coming, and a throne of pure gold. All the comforts of wealth He could have had for the mere wish. Instead He chose Bethlehem. Even before the

¹ Wis. viii, 1,

² S. John, xiv, 6.

"holy night" He chose His mother from among the poor. Mary's station in life and Joseph's too was nothing to excite pride. Joseph eked out a living for the holy couple by the labor of his hands. When they journeyed to the city of David to be enrolled their caravan boasted one pack-mule. Their influence with men was of so little avail that they had to take shelter in a stable. When the new star appeared in the heavens, when the angel-choir made the air about Bethlehem vibrate with its eternal "*Gloria in excelsis Deo*," the Son of God was laid in a manger, mere strips of cloth protecting his sacred body from the irritating touch of straw. Christ's birth and divinity were first made known to poor men. In the temple the offering made was for one of the poor. In Nazareth the Child labored with His foster-father in the menial trade of carpentry. Was not this a frequent reminder that one day He would be humiliated by a piece of carpentry and turn His degradation into glory? Oh, blessed tree, touched by the hands of the world's Saviour, saturated with the infinite price of redemption, the destitute death-bed of an almighty God-man! Poverty was the keynote of Christ's life; it was His choice in infancy, childhood, youth and maturity. Indeed, the poor He had always with Him.

When His time was come it was to the poor He looked for companionship. St. Matthew was the only Apostle who might have had claims to comfort and security in this world's goods, but he left his money tables and followed. In commenting on the passage, "The Son of Man hath not where to lay His head,"³ St. Jerome makes the Master say further: "Why desireth thou to follow Me for the sake of riches and worldly gain; since I am so poor that I have not even the smallest dwelling-place, and I am sheltered by a roof that is not Mine?"⁴ When Jesus and the Apostles went to Capharnaum they had not even the price of the tax demanded of them for the service of the temple, not even the little coin, the stater, worth about thirty-five cents in our currency.⁵

Our Lord, it would seem, could call but one garment His own, and even this was taken from Him in death. If there were no Bethlehem to show the poverty of our Divine Lord, no Nazareth where He labored, no public life among the poor, the cross would be sufficient reason for St. Paul's saying: "He became

³ S. Matt. viii, 20.

⁴ S. Jerome, *Comm. super Matt. viii.*

⁵ S. Matt. xvii, 26.

poor for your sakes."⁶ There, the Son of God, the Prince of Peace and King of heaven and earth, clothed only in a girdle placed about Him, so tradition says, by a daring friend at His scourging, His kingship acknowledged by the scornful diadem of tree spurs—there in complete abandonment of the world He died, a failure in the eyes of the world, suspended between heaven and earth, abandoned by the Father, rejected by the world. And after death He was laid in the tomb of another!

In the face of these extraordinary circumstances we are impelled with childlike simplicity to ask "Why?" Why did the Son of God take upon Himself poverty when it brings hardship and is the occasion of sin and strife. We can look for reasons of fitness only, since whatever God does springs from Truth, Goodness and Wisdom. What could we say to justify anything that God does? Mere man making rules for the government of Divinity's actions! That is not our purpose. We take the fact and investigate it to find out why it happened thus. Although we are convinced of these things by our faith, yet we are so constituted by nature that we will not rest until we have given a reason for the faith that is in us.

St. Thomas Aquinas, in his immortal *Summa Theologica*,⁷ gives four reasons of convenience for the life of poverty lived by Christ. It was fitting for our Divine Lord to live in straitened circumstances, first of all, because it was in keeping with His duty of preaching. It was for this purpose that He came. His own words are evidence of His vocation: "Let us go into the neighboring towns and cities, that I may preach there also: for this purpose am I come."⁸ The Master's advice to His Apostles when He sent them to preach was: "Do not possess gold nor silver."⁹ Like every good master our Lord practiced what He taught. The Apostles were to take example from our Lord's life. And His was a life wholly free from care of material affairs and given entirely to preaching the word of God.

Just as Christ submitted to bodily death in order to give us spiritual life, so did He endure bodily poverty to enrich us spiritually. St. Paul speaks of this in his second letter to the Corinthians: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ:

⁶ II Cor. viii, 9.

⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 40, Art. 3.

⁸ S. Mark, i, 38.

⁹ S. Matt. x, 9.

that being rich He became poor for your sakes; that through His poverty you might be rich."¹⁰

There are those who would have said Christ, were He wealthy, was preaching for the love of money and not for the spiritual good He could effect. By being poor our Lord deprived His calumniators of this occasion to accuse Him falsely. Yet it is asked, "Why did Christ live in extreme poverty? Why could He not have been just moderately rich? It would seem He lived in destitution, with nothing His own, an undignified situation for anyone, and very much out of line with One Who was God." While it is true that Christ had not even the money needed to pay the tax, yet He was never destitute. Christ's divinity was never separated from His humanity. The heavens and the earth bowed at His wish. When He was embarrassed for the price of the tax He said to Peter: "That we might not scandalize them, go to the sea and cast in a hook: and that fish which shall first come up, take: and when thou hast opened its mouth, thou shalt find a stater: take that, and give it to them for me and thee."¹¹ Even humanly speaking Christ's poverty was never a drawback to His ministry. Possessing riches is not the only way of maintaining one's place among the sufficiently nourished and clothed. A man may feed and cloth himself with the donations of others. The human wants of Christ were supplied Him by women who, according to the custom of their nation, "ministered unto Him of their substance."¹²

The fourth reason given by St. Thomas for the poverty of Christ is that "the more lowly He seemed by reason of His poverty, the greater might the power of His Godhead be shown to be."¹³ At the Council of Ephesus a sermon was delivered in which we read: "He chose all that was poor and despicable, all that was of small account and hidden from the majority, that we might recognize His Godhead to have transformed the terrestrial sphere. For this reason did He choose a poor maid for His Mother, a poorer birthplace; for this reason did He live in poverty."¹⁴

The life of poverty as lived by Christ was never an occasion of sin to Him Who was all perfect. Enforced poverty might be

¹⁰ II Cor. viii, 9.

¹¹ S. Matt. xvii, 26.

¹² S. Luke, viii, 3.

¹³ S. Thomas, *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ Conc. Ephes., part 3, c.9.

an occasion of theft and perjury, but not voluntary poverty. "And being rich, He became poor."¹⁵ As God He was the Author of the universe. Everything in the world was His. "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof: the world, and all they that dwell therein."¹⁶ He was infinitely happy with His Father in Heaven, but for love of man He assumed the nature of man and lived in poverty from His birth to His death. He became poor willingly that we might become rich.

¹⁵ II Cor. viii, 9.

¹⁶ Ps. xxiii, 1.