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On Poverty

By: St Evagrius of Pontus



You will be proclaimed charitable, not simply because you have refused to accept something from another person, but rather you will be recognized as a renunciant because you have given without looking back. When you distribute material goods, strive to cast pure seeds, lest instead of wheat you have tares come forth (Matt, 13: 24-30). In what you offer, remember God who is both the giver and the receiver (1 Cor 4: 7; Matt. 25: 40), so that with praises He may reckon to your account the rewards of renunciation.

The person without possessions enjoys the pleasure of a life free from cares, but the one attached to possessions has the distress of the rich person as his constant concern. When you do not give your heart to considerations of material things, at that moment you may drive away captive the crowd of thoughts. When you deny the desire of acquisitiveness, at that moment you will bear also the cross without distraction. But the thought of material things will forebode for you old age, famines, and sicknesses in order to divide your hope in God among financial concerns. Let him who has chosen to practice the asceticism of renunciation make for himself a wall of faith, a fortification of hope, and a secure grounding in love. For faith is not the abandonment but the substance of superior goods in the hope of perseverance and the love of life (Heb. 11:1).

When, having renounced external material goods in freedom from passion, you walk in the path of the superior goods, then the sword-like thoughts will watch out for an opportunity to make poverty and destitution reproachful to you, presenting you with degradation and dishonour, in order that the murderers may work with murderous cunning a change of mind from such a radiant virtue. If then you give intelligent attention to victory in the contest, you will then discover rather that through the things that present you with reproaches a crown is being plaited for you; for in practising renunciation, you do so through those contests for which you receive reproaches. Therefore, do not surren-



der in the battle with the interior thoughts, because it is not at the beginning of renunciation that the end is praised, but rather at the end of perseverance the beginnings receive the crown. It is not only for bodily exercise that the contests receive applause, but the goal of the crown is also sought in the battle with the thoughts.

(From: *The Treatise To Eulogios*, in, Evagrius Of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus Translation, Introduction, and Commentary By: Robert E. Sinkewicz)



A Group of Boys from St Anthony's Church Visiting the Monastery

Abba Agathon's Dealing with the poor

Abba Agathon saw Abba Nastir wearing two shoulder wrappers, and he said to him, "If a poor man were to come, and ask you for a garment, which of them would you give him?" And Abba Nastir replied, "I would give him the better of them and Abba Agathon said to him, "And if another poor man came, what would you give him?" Abba Nastir said to him, "I would give him the half of that which remained." And Abba Agathon said to him, "Supposing yet another beggar came, what would you give to him?" And Nastir said to him, "I would cut the half which remained into two pieces, and give one to him, and with the other I would cover my body." And Abba Agathon said to him, "And supposing yet another beggar were to come?" and Nastir said, "I would give him what was left. For I do not wish to receive anything from any man, yet I would go and sit down in some place until God sent me wherewith to cover myself."



Monastic Poverty and Real Poverty

By: On of the Youth



We may at times mix between 'monastic poverty' and 'real poverty' when we read the life of a saint or consider the life of a monk or nun, however the distinction is rather valid and important to note. For the purpose of this paper, 'monastic poverty' describes a monk or nun's voluntary vow of poverty, whereas 'real poverty' stems as a result of extremely poor economic conditions that place persons in dire need for material resources to merely live.

Simply put, 'monastic poverty' usually means renunciation of private property to the point where the monk or nun owns nothing of their own, but has all things in common with his or her monastic colleagues. In fact, entering a cenobitic monastery such as that associated with Pachomius and Shenoute in forth and fifth century Egypt was more likely to protect a monk from 'real poverty' and starvation.

The distinction here is the voluntary / involuntary nature of the poverty that a person may be subject to. Indeed, though a person outside a monastery may suffer 'real poverty', such poverty is usually outside their will and unlikely to have originated as a sacrifice to God. On the other hand, the monastic vow of poverty tends to have as its original intention a sacrificial element for God, and above all is a wilful step towards poverty.

To compare 'real poverty' with 'monastic poverty', one may suppose real poverty the greater of the two, in that 'real poverty' may threaten human life by causing real physical suffering and even death. However this would be wrong. Indeed, we cannot rank 'real poverty' with 'monastic poverty' for monastic poverty would not and could not compete with the physical extremes brought about by 'real poverty'. We cannot compare the two forms of poverty because 'monastic poverty' does not have poverty as its goal, but rather uses poverty as a means to the goal, being unity with God.

Since it has been established that one does not choose to be subject to 'real poverty' due to its involuntary nature, we now turn our attention to some aspects of 'monastic poverty'.

'Monastic poverty' involves the renunciation of private property. As such, possessions can be potentially problematic since they are material things defined by our attitudes. Our thoughts towards these material things can potentially attach them to us – for example, "these items belong to me". As such, Evagrius exhorts the monk or nun to renounce possessions, arguing that the "person without possessions enjoys the pleasure of a life free from cares" but the person still attached to possessions suffers from continual anxieties about them. As a result, Evagrius argues that such possessions



distract the monk or nun from prayer and contemplation on God.

However, considering the above, monks and nuns are not expected to live with absolutely nothing, but to merely have the most basic necessities. As a result, monks and nuns will inevitably come into contact with money in one way or another. To this Evagrius warns the monastic celibate of the demon Love-of-Money. Evagrius consistently encourages generosity to the truly poor, but warns that the demon Love-of-Money may suggest that such generosity threatens to send the monastic donor over the edge of self-sufficiency into “real poverty”. As a result, the demon Love-of-Money may suggest that the monastic donor avoid such generosity to the truly poor.

Evagrius advises though that the ideal monk or nun ought to live at the edge of poverty, accumulating only enough to support themselves and to provide basic hospitality to their guests. Any surplus to this amount is to be given to the poor. He suggests that the monk or nun cultivate a condition of economic vulnerability, which fosters a spiritual condition of dependence on God and openness to other people.

Evagrius goes further in advising the monastic celibate of potential pitfalls, saying that the demon Love-of-Money may deceitfully persuade the monastic celibate to perform charitable acts of kindness while all the more introducing the donor to the demon of vainglory and the demon of pride.

In considering the above, I hope the reader notes that though ‘real poverty’ and ‘monastic poverty’ may sound similar, they are quite distinct and have rather different challenges. We should try and implement in our life some element of charity and avoid the pitfalls of ‘monastic poverty’ since “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”



A Group of girls from St Marks Church visiting the Monastery



Monastic Poverty in Evagrius's Work

By: Prof. David Brakke

Evagrius's ideal monk lives simply, at the edge of poverty, so to speak, accumulating only enough to support himself and to provide basic hospitality to his guests; any surplus to this amount is to be given to the poor. Possessions, Evagrius argues, weigh down the monk, distract him from prayer, and exacerbate the irritable aspect of his soul. Evagrius consistently encourages generosity to the truly poor, but such generosity threatens to send the monastic donor over the edge of self-sufficiency into poverty or at least some monks feared and the demon of Love of Money suggested. Evagrius wants the monk to cultivate a condition of economic vulnerability, which fosters a spiritual condition of dependence on God and openness to other people.'

Evagrius frequently exhorts the monk to renounce possessions. Like many Christian authors before and after him, Evagrius argues that "the person with out possessions enjoys the pleasure of a life free from cares," but the person still attached to possessions suffers from continual anxieties about them. The attention that possessions claim of their owner divides the monk's intellect and so distracts him from prayer and contemplation of God. Evagrius can employ a variety of metaphors for the danger that possessions pose to the monk, most of which convey his conviction that they restrain or hold the monk back from free ascent toward his heavenly goal. For example, possessions are like the cargo that sinks an overloaded ship, while the monk should be free to soar like an eagle.

More precisely, Evagrius does often refer to the monk choosing to be poor or to live in poverty, but what does he envision in practical terms? Not, surely, having absolutely nothing, and not having only the most basic necessities, for Evagrius himself clearly has a library, for example. Rather, the ideal monk seeks the kind of self-sufficiency that Athanasius had Antony model in the Life of Antony. As Athanasius presents his story, when Antony moves to his more remote retreat, in the inner mountain, he at first relies on others to bring him supplies of bread. But eventually Antony plants a garden and is able to produce his own bread, and then he rejoices that he will no longer be a burden to anyone. He then grows some vegetables to provide hospitality to his guests. Antony's support of himself and his provision for guests represent strategies by which Antony configures a proper form of monastic independence from and connection to the wider society." Echoing Athanasius, Evagrius instructs the monastic beginner, "Give thought to working with your hands, if possible both night and day, so that you will not be a burden to anyone, and further that you may be able to offer donations, as the holy apostle Paul advised" (meaning most likely 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8).

The monk, then, should have only enough to support himself and to provide charity to others. This principle means that the monk must have a business life based on his manual labor; Evagrius worked as a calligrapher, but the weaving of baskets appears to have been the most popular monastic trade. Evagrius admits, however, that buying and selling merchandise inevitably entangle the monk in sin, and so he suggests that the monk never bargain about prices and instead resign himself to taking a small loss



in every transaction. Better yet, the monk should employ “some other trustworthy person” as his business agent, and so leave the haggling to him.

At first glance the twin goals of self-sufficiency and charity seem clear enough, but they raise several questions and present complications that do not trouble the person who simply seeks to make himself as rich as possible. In other words, despite what Evagrius says, the renunciation of possessions does not simply eliminate cares about them; it also introduces new cares. What constitutes self-sufficiency? To what extent should the monk secure his economic future? What if he cannot support himself because of sickness or old age? And what are the limits to the monk’s obligation to give to others? If giving to the poor is a good thing, would it not be better to give more, thus justifying more ambitious business activities? Questions like these provide the raw material for the demon of the Love of Money, perhaps the craftiest of the eight demons that make war on the Evagrian monk. As Evagrius presents it in the *Praktikos*, Love of Money preys primarily on the fragility of self-sufficiency. “Love of Money,” he writes, “suggests an extended period of old age when one’s hands will be too weak to work, future famines and the accompanying diseases, the bitterness of poverty, and that it is shameful to receive what one needs from other people”. These anxieties appear in other works as well and indicate a general insecurity about the future, and they are not groundless. His work titled *Talking Back*, is peppered with references to monks who are truly impoverished because, for example, illness has prevented them from working. Here these truly poor monks appear as potential recipients of the monk’s almsgiving, a theme to which I will return, but such monks also provide vivid incarnations of what every monk might face. And thus Love of Money seeks to persuade the monk to work more and set aside money and provisions for the proverbial rainy day and especially for an extended period of old age. Evagrius attempts to counter such thoughts with biblical verses that encourage trust in and dependence on God” The Lord will not withhold good things from those who walk in innocence” (Ps. 83:12) and that stress the fleeting nature of human life; “A human being is like vanity; his days pass by as a shadow” (Ps. 143:4). Place your trust in God, Evagrius says, and understand that to be human is to be contingent and insecure in the face of the future.

When Love of Money targets the monk’s economic self-sufficiency, then, it exploits the temporal dimension of human life. This aspect of the demon’s attack finds its summation in this passage from *Talking Back*: Love of Money “suggests to our intellect either the remembrance of money that we have renounced, or the effort that we are making to acquire things that at present cannot be seen, or the preservation and safekeeping of the things we have now”. That is, Love of Money seeks to redirect the monk’s attention to the past that he has left behind and to saddle him with regret; calls into question the rewards of the kingdom of God and knowledge of God that lie in the future; or encourages the preservation of what the monk has at the present time.

Love of Money tries to turn economic self-sufficiency, a monastic good, into spiritual or existential self-sufficiency, the monastic vice of pride. The demon suggests that the monk should secure his future by his own efforts rather than accept his temporal nature and trust in God for his future. From this perspective, we see that the monk’s economic self-sufficiency certainly has the practical aim of not making the monk a burden



on others, as Evagrius says explicitly, but it also has the disciplinary goal of fostering in the monk a spiritual condition of dependence on God. Evagrius writes, “Having therefore what you need for the present time, do not worry about the future, whether that be a day, a week, or some months. When tomorrow has arrived, that time will provide what is needed, as long as you are seeking above all for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” The monk should seek economic sufficiency, not economic security. Sufficiency represents a state of vulnerability.

But self-sufficiency is not the only principle guiding the monk’s relationship with money; the other is charity to others. “The one who consoles the poor,” Evagrius writes, “is manly in pious acts” Here too Love of Money finds plenty of complications to exploit, for the monk must learn to give generously without making generosity his primary project. Already in *Foundations of the Monastic Life*, a work aimed at beginners, Evagrius must command, “Do not desire to possess riches in order to make donations to the poor, for this is a deception of the evil one that often leads to vainglory and casts the mind into occasions for idle preoccupations” Instead, he suggests for his reader the widow with two mites from the Gospel of Mark (12:41-44): the monk need only give his small surplus to fulfill his charitable obligation.

For Evagrius even charity for the poor is a secondary good, subordinate to the monk’s goal of pure prayer and, ultimately, knowledge of the Trinity. To reach that goal, the monk must create in himself or herself a spiritual condition of reliance on God and openness to others. It is this spiritual vulnerability and generosity that economic vulnerability and generosity are meant to cultivate.

(From: David Brakke, *Care for the poor, fear of Poverty, and Love of Money: Evagrius Ponticus on the Monk’s Economic Vulnerability*. In Susan R. Holman Edition of *Wealth and poverty in Early Church and Society*.)



St Bishoy’s Coptic School Visit to the monastery



Stories from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers

The Naked Beggar and the Monk

One of the Fathers went off to the city to sell his manual work, and seeing a naked beggar he was moved by compassion and gave him his own habit. The poor man went and sold it. When he heard what he had done, the old man was very annoyed and regretted giving him the habit. That night Christ appeared to the old man in a dream; he was wearing the habit and said to him, 'Do not grieve, for see I am wearing that which you have given me.'

A Monk Keeping a Sum of Money

He also said, 'There was a distinguished officer who had renounced everything and distributed his goods to the poor. He kept a little bit for his personal use because he did not want to accept the humiliation that comes from total renunciation, nor did he sincerely want to submit to the rule of the monastery. Saint Basil said to him, "You have lost your senatorial rank without becoming a monk."'

Lazarus the Poor Man

One of the old men said concerning Lazarus, the poor man, "We cannot find that Lazarus ever did one excellent thing except that he never murmured against the rich man as being one who had never shown him an act of mercy but he bore his infirmity with the giving of thanks, and because of this God took him to Himself."



Bishop Paul's visit to the monastery