

CONFORMED TO CHRIST

## ***We live no longer for ourselves***

by Mary Sharon Moore

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I do not like looking into the face of poverty. And today the face of poverty seems to be just about everywhere. I can't come to a signaled intersection without seeing the cardboard signs held by weathered hands, and the weary eyes looking just beyond me, alert to any gesture that might suggest I'm reaching into the back seat for a care package, a bottle of water, and rolling down my window to extend a hand.

I unjustly feel offended by the poverty I see today because it reminds me of what I would rather ignore: I participate in an economic system that rewards some at the moral, social, and personal cost of others—way too many others. I enjoy life's comforts because people who do not look like me or who perhaps do not even speak my language have exchanged the dignity of their personhood for someone else's profit and my convenience.

I do not like thinking these thoughts, but there they are.

St. Paul writes about poverty, too. In fact, he writes about two poverties—one a redemptive poverty and the other a poverty waiting to be redeemed. Our Christian vocation is to bring the fire of that redemptive poverty to the isolating cave of the other.

“For your sake,” St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, “the Lord Jesus made himself poor although he was rich, so that you might become rich by his poverty.” What is this poverty which Jesus embraced? The Gospels never portray a destitute young man whose

days are consumed with begging for the bare necessities of life. Rather, the poverty of Jesus was a radical dependence on his Father. As the canticle in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians affirms, Jesus did not deem equality with God as something to be snatched. Rather, he emptied himself of divine privilege and humbly assumed our human estate.

The Son of God, the Beloved One, depended on his Father's kindness for daily provision, certainly. The first of the Beatitudes, Jesus taught, is this: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the reign of God is theirs.” Blessed are those who may be materially poor or not, but who do not back away from their radical dependence on God. For them, the reign of God is experienced here and now. Like the birds in the sky and the wildflowers of the field, we are completely dependent on God, no matter how powerful or talented or secure we think we are.

Jesus especially understood his radical dependence on his Father for protection from the Evil One, protection for which he also prayed for his followers (see John 17). In embracing the fullness of the human condition Jesus understood that in the eyes of God he had nothing of which he could boast. That's redemptive poverty, the poverty that honestly admits the obvious: humankind's radical dependence on a just and merciful God.

This core truth of our humanity contains the seed of our calling in this world, “to live no longer for ourselves,” St. Paul says, “but for him who for our sake died and was raised.”

To live for Jesus is to live for those most hidden within his poverty. “You have become rich by his poverty,” St. Paul writes. “So now your plenty should supply the needs of others, that they one day might supply your need.”

Perhaps the wealth we share with others is financial or material. Or it might be the wealth of encouragement or counsel, mercy or teaching, hospitality or healing, or simply

sharing the good news with those whose spirit is broken and imagination parched.

Vocationally, by the grace and anointing of baptism, we must join ourselves to Jesus who is the enfleshed mystery of God. Putting aside his divine privilege with humility and grace, Jesus was pleased to pitch his tent among the poor, and asks us now to do the same.

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