

Mary, Most Poor

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There is nothing especially virtuous just in having no money or having few material comforts. The Gospel virtue of "holy poverty," therefore, must mean more than that. Primarily, it refers to "spiritual poverty" (as Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven," Mt 5:3) — in other words, **the detachment from anything and everything that might stand in the way of Jesus reigning in our hearts as Lord and Savior.** In *This Tremendous Lover*, Fr. Eugene Boylan explains what such "detachment" really means:

God will not be satisfied with anything less than everything: [Jesus said, love the Lord Thy God with] Thy whole heart, thy whole soul, all thy mind and all thy strength [Mk 12:29]. Jesus will not be satisfied until we are transformed completely into Him. ... Unfortunately ... we have, we persuade ourselves, other things to do in life; we have our work, our career, our friends, our loves, and our talents; we have our own life to live — so we fondly imagine. ... If we have to detach ourselves from various creatures and from our own self, from our own will and our own ways, from our own judgment, from our own strength, from our own pleasure, from our own achievement, from our own life, spiritual as well as temporal — it is only in order to become completely attached to Jesus.

From Mary's first appearance in the Gospels, she is clearly shown to be a person who embraced both material and spiritual poverty. She is one of the Lord's "faithful poor," his "anawim" as the ancient Israelites would have said. Material poverty was the rich soil in which her spiritual poverty grew and matured. In *Mary's Journey*, Fr. Louis Cameli writes:

Although poverty obviously implies a lack of material wealth, we would be mistaken to limit it exclusively to material things. There is another concept of poverty that is religious, and not merely social and economic. In the Old Testament the "poor of Israel," the anawim, refers to those who are in need of God and open to his will. Their poverty is linked mainly with the possibilities of faith, not with destitution. Their lives reflect the covenant faith of Israel. They sense their dependence on God. They deeply feel a need for God's saving power in their own relatively powerless lives. The anawim remember God and know their dependence. Israel recalled the great acts of God when the people were especially mindful of God and their dependence on him. God led a poor, enslaved people out of Egypt. God brought back a poor, exiled people to their land. God called a poor young girl of Nazareth to be the mother of the Messiah.

Pope Saint John Paul II taught that the whole Gospel story of the Nativity of our Lord centers upon the theme of God's special love for those who are poor and humble. They are blessed above all others because they have room in their lives for the coming of his Son:

In informing us about the circumstances in which the journey and the birth took place, the evangelist presents us with a situation of hardship and poverty, which lets us glimpse some basic characteristics of the messianic kingdom. It is a kingdom without earthly honors or powers, which belongs to him who, in his public life, will say of himself: "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk 9:58). ...

Mary experienced childbirth in extreme poverty. She could not give the Son of God even what mothers usually offer a newborn baby. Instead, she had to lay him "in a manger," an improvised cradle, which contrasts with the dignity of the "Son of the Most High." The gospel notes that "there was no place for them in the inn" (Lk 2:7). This statement, recalling the text in John's Prologue: "His own people received him not" (Jn 1:11), foretells, as it were, the many refusals Jesus will meet during his earthly life. ... Rejected by "his own," Jesus was welcomed by the shepherds, unrefined men but chosen by God to first receive the good news of the Savior's birth. ... Jesus' birth is the sign of God's merciful love, which is especially shown toward the poor and the humble. (General Audience of November 20, 1996)

In her *Magnificat*, Mary shows that God offers a tremendous treasure to those who embrace a life of material poverty — that is, a life of what is sometimes called "Gospel simplicity" — for the sake of the cultivation of spiritual poverty and detachment: **"He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty"** (Lk 1:53). What are these "good things" to which Mary refers here?

Jesus Christ, born in a manger in the midst of her poverty, signifies the birth of the Christ Child in the center of every human heart that is poor in spirit. Moreover, when Christ is born in the hearts of His "anawim," they receive also the gift of holy joy, for the whole story of the Nativity in the Gospels is about the gift of joy from God fills this poverty: "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favour on his lowly servant" (Lk 1:47-48); "Fear not, for behold I bring you tidings of *great joy*, which shall be to all people" (Lk 2:10); "And the shepherds returned, *glorifying and praising God*, for all they had heard and seen" (Lk 2:20).

The question remains: Do we have this "great joy" as followers of Jesus who live in the 21st century? Have we found with Mary the treasure of the gift of the Christ Child, and of holy joy, in the midst of true poverty of spirit? This is the holy joy to which Jesus invites each one of us, and its link with holy poverty was a central theme of His gospel message. Fr. Cameli explains:

[Jesus] said, 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Lk 6:20b). The reign of God belongs to those who are not owned by anything else. In the face of material possessions, Jesus poses the sharp question of our root identity. What is at the heart of our lives — what we have, or who we are? "What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?" (Luke 9:25).

The simple fact is that no material thing of great value can be taken away from those who hold material things of no great value. No devastating loss of financial or material goods can happen to those who possess them only as stewards of God's gifts, to be used solely for the sake of Christ's kingdom, and who accept that they are for Him to provide, or take away according to his wise providence. It is from this detachment, this freedom of the heart, that holy joy arises. The human heart finally recognizes that all things belong not to us but to the Son of God, as his rightful inheritance, including ourselves (Col 1:15-16)! There is no longer any need to cling desperately to what is not rightfully ours, and cannot bring us fulfillment and peace of heart anyway.

Our Lady of Banneux: The Virgin of the Poor

Mariette Beco was a product of the times in which she lived. The anti-Catholic sentiment that swept through Europe during the enlightenment did not leave the little village of Banneux, Belgium unscathed. Religion had very little influence in the lives of many of the people of this remote place. The Becos were no different than many of their neighbors. They had only a nodding relationship with the church.

At 11 years of age, Mariette was the eldest of seven children. The family was poor, by Belgian standards. The father, Julien, was an unemployed wiremaker. His wife, Louise was a stay-at-home mother. Neither had any concern that Mariette had not made her First Communion nor that she did poorly in her Catechism classes. They were an irreligious family.

Thus, it was a great surprise, when on Sunday, January 15, 1933, Mariette claimed to see a beautiful young woman standing in the front garden of their home, beckoning to her. She described her as wearing a long white gown with a blue sash. She was barefoot, with just a gold rose tucked into each foot. She seemed to be standing on a cloud and did not seem to be cold at all.

Mariette, an intelligent child, thought that her mind was playing tricks on her. She moved the oil lamp that had been shining in the window to another location and looked out again. The woman was still there. So she called to her mother and told her what she saw: "Maybe it's the Blessed Virgin!", the mother replied mockingly. Mariette insisted that her mother come to the window and see for herself. The mother saw nothing but an indistinguishable white shape. "Maybe it's a witch," she said to her daughter. "Oh no!" the child replied. "She's beautiful. She's smiling at me."

At this point Mariette noticed the rosary hanging from the sash of the young woman in the garden. She went to the drawer where she rummaged until she found a rosary she had once found on the road.

She began to pray. The woman in the garden also began to pray, though Mariette could not hear her voice. She only saw her lips moving.

"She's calling me to come to the garden," Mariette said. "Lock the door," replied Louise. At that, the vision vanished.

Several minutes later, Mariette's younger brother, Julian came through the door. She asked if he had seen anything in the garden. He had not. When she related the incident to her father, he told her she was crazy. The next day at school, she told her friend what had happened. She suggested that Mariette should talk with the parish priest. She did not do this immediately, but eventually she managed to speak with him. He told her to pray for guidance.

In the evening of Wednesday, January 18, 1933, Mariette left the house without asking permission. She later said she had a premonition. Her father followed her out of the house. He saw her fall to her knees in prayer. Mariette noticed a light in the distance that seemed to grow larger as it drew nearer. Soon, it developed into the figure of the woman Mariette had seen a few nights earlier. The apparition beckoned for Mariette to follow, which she did. "She is calling me" she exclaimed. Her father, troubled by what he was witnessing, called to a neighbor and both of them followed the girl down the country road. Soon, Mariette came to a spring, where, once again she fell to her knees. "Put your hands into the water," she was told. "This fountain is reserved for me. Goodnight." The Virgin then faded into the distance as she had come.

On subsequent evenings, Mariette continued to have visions of the Virgin. On Thursday, January 19th, she was told by the vision: "I am the Virgin of the Poor. This fountain is reserved for all the nations to bring comfort to the sick. I will pray for you. Goodbye." On the 20th she asked that a chapel be built near the spring. On February 11th, the vision told her "I come to alleviate suffering. On



February 15th, Mariette proposed a question to the Virgin that had been prepared by Fr. Jamin, the pastor to test the authenticity of the apparition. The Virgin replied: "Believe in me and I shall believe in you. Pray very much. Goodbye." On February 20th, the Virgin told Mariette: "Pray very much."

The final vision occurred on Thursday, March 2, 1933. It had rained all day. As Mariette knelt in the mud, praying her rosary, the rain stopped, the sky cleared and the stars shone. Suddenly, the Virgin stood before the child, looking more radiant than she had ever appeared. This time, she did not smile. Her face was serious. She said: "I am the Mother of the Savior, the Mother of God. Pray very much." Then she imposed her hands on the child and blessed her with the sign of the cross. "Adieu," she said, "Until we meet in God." This was the last time Mariette would see her Lady. She fell to the ground in heart rending sobs as the vision began to fade into the distance.

The Fruits of the Apparitions

Almost immediately, the fruits of the Apparition became apparent. Mariette became a model pupil in her catechism and was able to receive her First Communion during the course of the apparitions. Her father, witnessing her ecstasy, became a believer, went to confession for the first time in

years, and became a staunch defender of the Church. Even the priest, who was at first hesitant to admit the true nature of the apparitions, became a staunch supporter of Mariette and the Apparitions.

The Church began an inquiry into the apparitions almost immediately, but this was interrupted as the Second World War erupted across Europe. It was only after the war that the Church was able to once again review the case and give an affirmative decision that Mariette Beco had indeed seen the Virgin Mary who called herself the Virgin of the Poor.

In 1999, Pope St. John Paul II wrote to the Bishop of Liege, the Diocese in which Banneux is situated. He wrote in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the recognition of the Apparitions (which had taken place in 1949, after the war). In reflecting on the mystery of Banneux, the sainted pontiff wrote:

"The apparitions of Banneux invite Christians to question themselves about the mystery of suffering, which finds its meaning in the mystery of the Cross of the Lord. When he faces suffering which, in human terms, is inexplicable, the believer turns spontaneously to God who alone can help him to bear it and endure it, sustaining his hope of salvation and eternal beatitude. In a very special way, God is tenderly and lovingly present to every person afflicted by illness, for he is moved by the experiences of his people, the people he loves, to whom he wants to bring relief and comfort. "Then the Lord said, "I have seen the affliction of my people ... and have heard their cry.... I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them ... and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land"' (Ex 3: 7-8). As I explained in the Apostolic Letter Salvifici doloris, every person who offers his suffering contributes mysteriously to raising the world to God, and shares especially in the work of our redemption (cf. n. 19). He is thus joined particularly to Christ our Savior."