

vow of poverty has been violated even in our own Province, which He looks upon with special benevolence in preference to others" (Letters I).

From the letter we understand clearly that there was a "phenomenal" expenditure about which the Lord was not happy. However, the criticism – it seems to me – from the context of this letter is not about this single violation but rather the wish to set in motion an ongoing vigilance of poverty in a path to conversion over time of the whole religious province. In fact, Padre Pio's letter to Father Benedetto of March 15, 1913, presented here, was preceded by a few days with a circular letter from Father Benedetto to all the Friars.

On February 27, 1913, Father Benedetto, as Provincial Minister, wrote urging very severely all the Friars to the practice of poverty: "It is very important to realize that the observance of this vow is fundamental to us, it is the most lofty cause of all the other graces that are necessary for us for our justification and whose violation, on the contrary, most certainly invites God's anger and obstructs His mercy."

So what had happened? Why did Padre Pio invite the Provincial Minister to consider the question, when in fact it had been the Provincial who first wrote to the Friars about it? In this exchange, it seems to me, Padre Pio is given a more Franciscan sense to the observance of the vow of poverty as part of the radical conversion to God and not simply the result of those basic and necessary rules (on what a friar can possess; the size of his car etc.), but rather the fruit of an ongoing fraternal engagement, at times hard and severe, that assists the religious to conform always more his life to the poor and crucified Christ. Very often in the past, and also recently, the fault has not been in those excesses in the lack of poverty (that in all frankness have occurred and always will) but rather in the lack of brotherly exchange and sharing behind it all and which causes instead useless accusations, in which the choice of poverty ceases to be a virtue, but an instrument to attack or denigrate those who, in some manner, do not live up to a totally subjective idea of their own poverty.

May Pope Francis be an example to us with his courageous choices above all in his solidarity for the poor. All of us, whether religious or laity, are called to make clearer and more coherent choices. Padre Pio would say: "God does not reject the unfortunate and miserable, but rather, grants them His grace, erecting the throne of His glory on their abjection and vileness." (Letters III).

From the time that the Gospels were first written, this solidarity for the poor has been part of the very DNA of the Church, that, as Padre Pio affirms, is present in our midst like a throne of glory, through which God not only gives Himself to us but is present with us in our needs, elevating us and really holding out His hand to us so as to be able to climb out of the abyss into which we so often fall.

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## Padre Pio and the Case of Poverty



**“ The longer the trial to which God subjects you,  
the greater the goodness in comforting you during  
the time of the trial and in exaltation  
after the combat.” St. Padre Pio**

# Padre Pio and the Case of Poverty

by Brother Luciano Lotti

We can soften and tone down as much as we want Padre Pio's words (and also those of St. Francis of Assisi before him) but it is not possible to evade the problem. Today it is necessary to take up again calmly and committedly the question of poverty, in the Church at large and more specifically in the religious orders and particularly our order of the Capuchin Friars.

A preliminary remark, though, must be made or more exactly a "distinction" and which must characterize this enquiry. St. Francis of Assisi was so concerned about the misinterpretation of his writings that very often he used the term "sine glossa, ("without gloss") to ensure that the radical observance of his Rule, in particular the vow of poverty, was not altered. Nevertheless, he would refer everything to the fundamental end and purpose of things which in the Rule of the Friars Minor is the observing of the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to conform one's life to His. The question of poverty therefore, must be considered within this overall vision. And this is something that concerns not just those with a vocation to poverty but also those many outsiders and self-appointed judges who believe themselves authorized to make criticisms and decided on behalf of St. Francis and St. Pio how others should act and live.

In a letter dated March 15, 1913, to Padre Pio's spiritual director Padre Benedetto (Letters 1, pages 387 – 389) Padre Pio writes the following: "Where is their vow of poverty?"... "It is not just custom and convention that lead me to write you this letter as Easter approaches, but the tenderness and respect of a most loving and submissive son. During these days I can only redouble the prayers I offer every day of the year for your happiness. This is not merely due to the filial tenderness I feel towards you, but because I am indebted to you for your deep concern for my moral well-being even more than for my physical health.

"I hope you will pardon what I am about to say and not accuse me of shameful arrogance. Jesus complains a great deal about men's ingratitude, but especially of the ingratitude of our own mother Province. Oh, my dear Father, how often is Jesus offended by our own Friars! 'The religious,' says Jesus, 'consider themselves so many princes. Just look; is it just the princes (of the world) who correspond by telegram and with such parsimony? Are not religious today doing the very same? Where is their vow of poverty? How many souls are scandalized by this violation of their profession! My Father will no longer tolerate them. I too would like to abandon them, but alas! (Here Jesus stops and weeps, then continues) my heart is made for love. Speak my son, speak: let them hear how angry I am..."

"Now, dear Father, to whom can I turn if not to you who by your prudence, wisdom and authority can do so much to alleviate Jesus' suffering? Set to work, my dear Father, and be watchful. Jesus will help you. Consider, moreover, the great responsibility that that rests on you..."

The very text of Padre Pio's letter must be understood in the following way, otherwise we risk going no further than the surface of the problem and making petty criticisms of no use our help to anyone. Jesus' words are unmistakable. He is offended profoundly by the Friars lack of poverty and asked: "Where is their vow of poverty?" The year was 1913, and I do not think Padre Pio is referring to fast cars or too comfortable friaries. It is the root of the problem that undoubtedly is of relevance; not the 'how' or the 'degree' but rather the underlying mind – set that disrupts the living of poverty in imitation of the poverty and humility of Christ Crucified. Seeing this letter in context can also help us better to gather its significance.

Padre Pio with his spiritual children would very often hold up Christ's poverty as a model of life: "I want the humiliation and abnegation of the Son of God and the glory to which they led to be the subject of your daily meditations" (Letters II). His consideration of poverty here is broader than that poverty connected with the vow, and so restricted to the religious life, and opens up the question to the vocation of all believers. He continues: "Holiness means getting above ourselves, it means perfect mastery of all our passions. It means having real and continual contempt for ourselves and for the things of the world to the point of preferring poverty rather than wealth, humiliation rather than glory, suffering rather than pleasure" (Letters II).

As you can see his consideration, in these words, is focused not on the merely formal dimension of poverty and its value as a powerful penitential means, but on that vaster dimension of God's revelation of Himself to us and that requires minimizing of our attention for the world to be able to open our hearts and minds to Him. Padre Pio's impassioned concern for the lack of poverty, in the light of this, is quite understandable. For Padre Pio it was not a question of indulgence in habits contrary to the penitential rigor of the religious life, but a question of damaging directly our very relation with God.

Those who actually met Padre Pio saw how his contempt for sin, especially in the treatment of sinners, was not a judgment of the person or a squalid pointing of the finger, but a real and justified contempt for the conduct that led to the separation of one's life from God. To live poverty (for all, not just the religious) meant for him opening oneself to God and His grace and giving Him sovereignty in all one's desires and actions.

Let us return to us. There can certainly be no denying, even though Padre Pio envisaged poverty as part of the vocation of all Christians, that the prime object of Christ's complaint were the Friars. Padre Pio would write again, at a later date (1919), to Father Benedetto: "Jesus has complained a lot about this phenomena!... (He left a blank space here) by which the holy