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EMBRACING POVERTY OF SPIRIT IN COLLEGE LIFE

April Louise Donovan

Winner of the 2014 *Obsculta* Undergraduate Essay Competition*Why College Makes Us Poor: Embracing Poverty of Spirit as a College Student*

College is a time when many people decide who they are going to become. They determine their habits, career path, life goals, and spirituality. For students who are already religious, determining spirituality can be a confusing ordeal. What does being a Christian mean for our habits and life goals? Should I choose a career path that brings me closer to God even if I might not like it? J.B. Metz's book *Poverty of Spirit* reveals what it means to be a Christian on earth. He shows us how to embrace our humanity by growing closer to God and humbling ourselves. His work applies to these students and anyone in the process of forming their future selves.

Metz's book encourages humans to embrace their authentic being, humble themselves, and become servants. Doing so will bring us closer to God and enliven our freedom. Humans already have the freedom to reject their authentic being, but doing so would be detrimental

to their soul. Metz claims that we cannot draw close to God our creator without first embracing our humanity. He uses the example of Jesus being tempted to illustrate this point.

When Jesus is tempted, Satan pressures Him to draw on His divinity. “Satan wants to make Jesus strong, for what the devil really fears is the powerlessness of God in the humanity that Christ has assumed. Satan fears the Trojan horse of an open human heart that will remain true to its native poverty.”¹ Jesus was fully human and fully God. He chose to limit himself to human capabilities by having an impoverished spirit. His humanity enabled him to relate to us and served as an example of how we should live. Jesus was tempted by Satan to give up his humanity, but he refused, which is why Metz is telling us to embrace it.

Unfortunately, we are a prisoner of our own being. We want to embrace our humanity, but there is always the freedom and temptation to reject it. People often reject their humanity as part of their sinfulness, which is why we struggle with it. If Christ had never embraced his full humanity, or if he had given in to Satan’s temptations, he would not have been able to relate to or love us in the way He did. He saved us by being devoid of divine glory.²

We can apply Metz’s teaching to college age kids. College students are a dynamic collection of people. Although the population of non-traditional college students is rising, the image of a college student is an 18-22 year old person with hopes and dreams looking forward to the future. College is a significant part of a person’s development. It enables us to mature, invest in our education, and further our qualifications for a career.

There are a variety of reasons college students don’t seem to have an impoverished spirit. One argument is that the students are simply not religious or spiritual anymore.

When looking at a Catholic university we still see a shortage of impoverished spirits despite there being a surplus of religion and spirituality. Even students who are devotedly religious are not always drawing close to God with their impoverished humanity.

Another possibility is that college students just don't have time to reflect on their inner self, and to reflect on their spirituality. Time is a huge crisis. However, Metz doesn't suggest that we need to find time to be our authentic self. Instead he calls it an ongoing process that is exemplified in our everyday actions and thoughts. Metz says that we are "religious by nature," and long for a connection with God. This nature "spurs and supports all our longings and desires, works itself out through them, but is never exhausted by them"³ which means that we can embrace poverty of spirit through our actions and moral decisions.

Perhaps Metz's message doesn't resonate with college students because we already believe that we are financially impoverished. The cost of tuition is ridiculous. No one can afford to go to college without help from financial aid, their upper-middle class parents, or generous scholarships.⁴ So when Metz tells students to impoverish themselves, they probably think, "No problem! I have \$3 in my bank account; I'm already in poverty!" However, while shoveling our money into our education we fully rely on our college (and sometimes our parents) for food, shelter, education, employment, and entertainment. When we graduate and hopefully get a job, we will have to repay the school for the time and resources we've taken advantage of during our time here, but for now, we can hardly say we live in financial poverty.

The relationship between student and university can be looked at as a metaphor for how our relationship with God should be. When we impoverish ourselves (by accumulating

massive amounts of student debt) we also gain the freedom to utilize our world and become a member of a dynamic community that nurtures us. Becoming fully human through impoverishment provides us with this same nurture from God.

It can be hard for us to impoverish ourselves because we live in a materialistic culture, and we buy into (literally) our society's ideas about wealth and possessions. To the college generation our phones and laptops are an extension of ourselves. We personalize them with pictures and cases. They are always on our person, and we feel anxious when they aren't with us. There are possessions that hold a special place in our heart and bind us to certain memories: a childhood teddy bear, pictures, a locket. There are valuable possessions such as a car that we might even name. Our possessions are so much a part of us that we feel incomplete without them. We can't even imagine life without Apple products.

Our spirits have been enculturated to desire instant gratification. It is easy to get a quick dose of happiness in this age of social media. We simply have to update Facebook or Twitter, get a few likes or favorites and our self-esteem skyrockets. But we can't ride this high for very long. Every minute, new statuses are being posted that are getting more likes than the one you just posted. There will always be someone with more followers on Twitter. So we keep posting. Maybe this tweet will make people follow me; maybe this status will impress my not-so-close-friends. We crave the affections of others to justify our worth and reality. College students are immersed in this mentality that our value is determined by internet based popularity.

Metz tells us that our worth comes from embracing

our humanity, not clinging to a fancy new MacBook with a rainbow gel case, or getting 50 likes on a clever status update. In order to become fully free we have to accept our authentic Being.⁵ Our full human reality does not exist in our online persona.

There is one way college students adhere to Metz's writings. Metz defines poverty as "the concentrated commitment of all our capabilities and powers."⁶ Everyone has a unique set of skills and ideas that we embody throughout our life. I think there is one way that college students—more so than anyone else—can embrace this concept of poverty of spirit: our majors. Each field of study is unique and offers students a new hermeneutic with which to view the world. We focus on our major; it defines us and becomes our identity. In college we finally decide what we really like in life, be it people, art, or ideas.

We embrace our majors because we think that they will bring us happiness in the future. When Metz says that we are uncomfortable with the uncertainty of the future he is right. College students try to plan out their future and maintain control over it. We think that if we major in one thing it will lead to our dream job, and we will earn money and live happily ever after. Sadly, life isn't like that. Metz says that if we can embrace the uncertainty, then we are putting our trust in God and not our own plans.⁷ Embracing uncertainty can be very hard for college students to do. We plan everything: what classes we are taking next semester, where we're going to live, what we're going to do this weekend, tomorrow, tonight.

As much as we like to think we have control over our destiny, we don't. We can let go of our plans and draw closer to God. Embracing poverty of spirit means majoring in what you love not what will get you the best future career.

Another key aspect of Metz's work is the importance of human dignity. He says that "the ones who see their neighbor see God."⁸ Metz's call to an abandonment of self is an aspect of love for one's neighbor. We are called to put others before ourselves and have empathy. To "offer up our heart" means to be vulnerable with each other so we can connect and feel fulfilled.⁹ Since the image of God is in our neighbors, to be vulnerable to others means being vulnerable to God.

Part of being vulnerable with people is being able to rely on them instead of our own means or possessions. Metz puts out a strong warning against materialism. He says that anything that comes before God, or gets in the way of helping another person is an idol. These things will lead us to become vain and self-centered if we let them control us. Possessions don't have to be a bad thing, but they get in the way of a more important human reality. When we have valuable possessions we increase the chance of putting those things before God and our neighbors. Think about how many times face-to-face conversations are interrupted when someone gets a text.

In today's culture, putting other people before yourself (and your possessions) sounds like a simple enough thing to do. However, in the global world it is almost impossible. We support corporations that utilize slave labor in foreign lands. We eat food that was produced unethically either by exploiting workers, animals, or the environment. When we have an opportunity to donate to charities we refuse, or give much less than we can afford to give.

In order to embrace poverty we must be able to say "I am an individual with unique talents and gifts, capable of helping my community grow towards God in solidarity with

others.” Ultimately, embracing poverty of spirit, becoming fully human and pursuing social justice are our purpose. They are all ways that our souls mature to be closer to Christ. By embracing our poverty of spirit we humble ourselves to become fully human, which according to Metz, will include being non-materialistic and caring for our neighbors. The care and love we show our neighbor is part of Catholic Social Thought.

Metz writes, “Our relationship with God is decided in our encounter with other human beings.” This expands our authenticity and poverty to include how we treat other people, and how we form and maintain relationships. Metz tells us that God cannot be separate from others. He is present in how we treat each other. “The only image of God is the face of our neighbor” and “The ones who see their neighbor see God.”¹⁰ We promote human dignity and respect for life every time we show love to our neighbor. God exists in the very love we show one another.

Interpersonal relationships are vital in college. We form bonds with our roommates, professors, classmates, and our significant others. Though each of these relationships is important, our relationship with our significant other is sometimes the hardest place to embrace poverty of spirit. The Church does not do enough pre-marital relationship coaching to prepare young people for the intimacies that form in a dating relationship. Since poverty of spirit is displayed in our interpersonal relationships, we should take great care in forming and maintaining our romantic attachments. The Church should especially take an interest in pre-marital relationships because these are the foundation for the next generation of marriages.

Poverty in Relationships: A Call for Catholic Involvement in Guiding Dating Relationships

Everyone seems to be talking about love, sex, and relationships. They're in our movies, television, literature, and music. It's impossible to walk into a high school or even middle school without hearing the latest gossip about who's dating who and the intimate details of everyone's love life. Even adults get mixed up in this fad: they scan the internet and magazine racks to find the latest gossip on celebrity hook ups and break ups. We simply can't escape all this talk about love and lust.

The Church has also historically taken an interest in love and relationships. Marriage, the ultimate form of commitment and expression of love, is a sacrament in the Catholic Church and is highly regarded in Protestant denominations as well. Even Jehovah's Witnesses who don't celebrate Easter, Christmas, or birthdays have a special celebration for people's wedding anniversaries. According to Metz's *Poverty of Spirit*, our interpersonal relationships reflect the relationship we have with God, and part of embracing our poverty of spirit is upholding another person's human dignity. Marriage is a picture of commitment and partnership in which the Church holds special interest.

You would think that since society is so keen on discussing the love lives of everyone else, we would be exemplary at our own. Sadly, this doesn't seem to be the case. In fact, the opposite holds true if you focus on the rate of divorces and break ups. Since the Church holds such an interest in human romantic relationships, it is only fitting that it creates a solid foundation for forming healthy bonds. In a culture where divorce is rampant we, as Christians, need to encourage the idea

that a relationship can be a permanent, life-giving witness to God's love. We need to foster poverty of spirit and create a sexually just culture by forming healthy relationships with one another, particularly committed romantic relationships.

There are several reasons the Church should involve itself in young couples' lives. Relationships and religion are both important aspects of a person's life, but not everyone thinks about the two as dynamic forces shaping a person's development. When we are kids we go to Sunday school and receive a moral foundation from our parents and our community. As we get older we begin finding other things to influence our reality: mainly relationships with peers.

We often underestimate the effect past relationships have on us. Bad or unhealthy relationships can especially give us enduring vulnerabilities. A controlling boyfriend will cause a girl to be overly sensitive to commands or criticism long after the relationship is over. A man whose wife cheats on him develops trust issues. Relationships have a significant influence on a person's development. In fact, part of every person's reality is their history, present self, and future or potential to further develop their personality and self. M. Farley articulates this very well in *Just Love*, "the reality of persons includes not only their present *actuality* but their *positive potentiality* for development, for human and individual flourishing, as well as their *vulnerability* to diminishment."¹¹ Bad relationships construct people's vulnerabilities which hinder their future development for poverty of spirit. In order to promote a person's potentiality for flourishing they need to engage in beneficial relationships.

The Church has always tried to encourage healthy marriages. After all, marriage in the Catholic Church is a sacrament—a sign of God's love to humanity exempli-

fied between two people. If marriages are failing what does that say about humanity's relationship with God? We need strong marriages to promote unconditional love. The only way to keep a marriage strong is to have a healthy ongoing relationship. The Church needs to encourage young people who are dating to have fruitful relationships. This way, if those relationships progress into marriages they will continue to thrive, or if the couple decides to break up they can at least have the knowledge of healthy relationship skills to use in the future.

Ultimately, the end goal of a committed relationship should be marriage—granted not all relationships will end this way and certainly should not be treated the same as marriage. Since marriage is a sacrament in the Catholic Church, it should fit in with other Catholic teachings, and non-married couples should practice these principles in their relationship as well. Catholic Social Thought (CST) has several branches that extend into the sphere of relationships and marriage. These teachings also help each partner embrace a poverty of spirit.

At the heart of Catholic Social Teaching is human dignity. People honor human dignity by seeing other persons as unique individuals made in the image of God, each with their own special gifts and talents, history, and future. Surprisingly, we don't always honor the human dignity of our significant other or spouse. It is incredibly easy to take one's significant other for granted and use them for our own benefit. Usually, the incidents are small and we make up for it right away, but in some relationships the human dignity of each person is habitually disregarded and the couple is caught in a downward spiral of negativity. The boy makes offhand remarks about how unreliable his girlfriend is. She tells her friends all the embarrassing secrets about her boyfriend to ruin his reputation. Over-possessiveness, insults, and controlling behavior are also

examples of disrespect to human dignity within a relationship. When these negative traits are present it compromises either person's ability to recognize their full authentic humanity.

Catholic Social Thought also encourages healthy relationships by promoting peace, solidarity, and life. Pope John Paul II said that "Peace... involves mutual respect and confidence between peoples... it involves collaboration and binding agreements."¹² In order to maintain peace in a relationship there must be trust and respect. It is the Church's duty to teach people how to respect and support each other in intimate relationships by linking it to theological doctrines such as CST. In unhealthy or abusive relationships human dignity is being disregarded and many other Church teachings are ignored as well.

Relationships are important for the Church to address especially regarding sex. Many people believe that the Church's strict 'no sex before marriage' stance represents a negative view of sex. In reality, this isn't true. The Church holds sex in an esteemed position. Sex binds two people together and creates life! What could possibly be more beautiful than that? The Church does not have to change its position, but it does have to meet young couples where they are, which means talking about sex.

The Church must tie in abstinence when discussing healthy relationships and present it as an act of love for the relationship. College students are fascinated with romance and relationships, so it should be easy to grab their attention with this topic. Remaining abstinent may actually be a huge factor in future marriage satisfaction. According to a study published in the *Journal of Psychological Studies*, couples who engage in pre-marital sex have higher divorce rates and lower marital satisfaction than couples who were abstinent.¹³

Refraining from sex plays more of a role in future commitment than most young couples realize.

Since it is clear that the Church has a moral obligation to foster healthy, fruitful relationships, how do they go about doing so? First, the Church can offer free couple's counseling for young adults, and advertise it. It can hold seminars and classes on communication in relationships by drawing from science and psychology. There are many parallels between the Church and the science of intimacy and emotions, so it would be easy to incorporate real scientific knowledge of romantic love into sermons about relationships.

One of the leading experts on relationships is Dr. John Gottman, professor emeritus of the University of Washington, Seattle. Through his observations, Dr. Gottman hopes to understand why some couples last and why some fall into what he calls "an absorbing state of negativity." Gottman's main foundation of good relationships is trust, which he defines as "the specific state that exists when both partners are willing to change their own behavior to benefit the other."¹⁴ Trust is a very important concept in theology; we are called to trust in God and have faith. If we shift that ideology onto our love lives we can have fulfilling relationships with one another. By having trust in another person you acknowledge that you both have a mutual interest in each other's wellbeing. If God did not have our welfare and safety in mind we would have no reason to trust Him.

The piece of advice and training that is most important from Gottman's work is the art of communication between partners. He devotes about 60 per cent of his book to this topic, and it is something that the Church does not discuss very often, if at all. It is essential for couples to be able to communicate: face to face, not just over the internet or via

text, like this generation employs. An important part of communication is attunement. Attunement is being able to listen and understand your partner's needs and feelings based on their emotional response.¹⁵ If we want the Church to foster healthy relationships that embrace poverty of spirit, both in marriage and out, we need to emphasize the importance of communication and attunement. The Church does not have a lot of sermons about how to talk to one another empathetically, even though expressing empathy and compassion are some of its main doctrines.

Whether we want to accept it or not the Church has a huge influence over our culture. There is already a seed planted in the heart of Catholic Social Teaching to promote healthy relationships. We need to be a truthful voice in a sea of lies about romance. If everyone is talking about love why should the Church—where love is found—be left out?

Notes:

¹Johannes Baptist Metz, *Poverty of Spirit*, trans. John Drury (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1968), 10-11.

²*Ibid.*, 12.

³*Ibid.*, 26.

⁴Richard Pèrez-Peña, "Report Says College Prices, Once Stable, Are Up Again," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2012.

⁵Metz, *Poverty*, 30.

⁶*Ibid.*, 31.

⁷Metz, *Poverty*, 29.

⁸*Ibid.*, 32.

⁹*Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 30.

¹²John Paul II, Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, "Peace is a Value with No Frontiers - North-South, East-West: Only One Peace," January 1, 1986, Vatican Archive, The Holy See, accessed online (n.d.), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19851208_xix-world-day-for-peace_en.html.

¹³Moses Ogunsola, "Abstinence from Premarital Sex: A Precursor to Quality Relationship and Marital Stability," *International Journal of Psychological Studies* 4, no. 2 (2012): 228-234.

¹⁴John Gottman and Nan Silver, *What Makes Love Last* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 7. Dr. John Gottman is a professor emeritus at the University of Washington, Seattle. He is the founder of the Gottman Institute where he studies relationships and attachment. He has written over 40 books including *The Relationship Cure*, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, and *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 67.

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