

WHO ARE THE TRULY POOR? FRANCIS, BOFF, KAZANTZAKIS

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I. LEONARDO BOFF, ORDER OF FRIARS MINOR

Leonardo Boff has given us an account of Saint Francis in the context of “liberation theology.” This is a good general setting in which to consider Francis, since he surely aimed to set himself, and hopefully others, free from the constraints of a dominating world and/or Church. The problem we have is to detach Francis from any distortion this setting might involve. As Boff states, he wants to use Francis as a “model for human liberation,” and there is no question but that Francis freed himself from the confines of the life that would have limited him to his societally defined state. Boff states clearly that the “liberation theology” in which he sets Francis is not Francis’ own. But our question is to decide how faithful this is to the gospel Francis preached.

Let us go through Boff’s account and ask how accurately it renders Francis’ message, and then let us contrast it with the account Kazantzakis has given us. We would expect the accounts to be as different from each other as Greece is from South America. Great figures can be transposed from culture to culture and have something to say to each age. But the contrast may help us find the essence of Francis’ message and where it can carry over for us. We must be careful of putting our own causes onto the innovators of an earlier time, nontraditional as they were in their own day. We want to renew an important message without distorting it if we can.

When Leonardo Boff calls Saint Francis “a model for human liberation,”¹ we suspect that his may be a more “humanistic” interpretation than normal. There is nothing wrong with this, but we should see how far this may differ from what we might take to be Francis’ own message. Boff tells us that the perennial truth of the gospel appears “whenever the saints . . . plumb the depths of human existence.”² True, but we need to note that this makes the gospel a human discovery. Boff wants to stress creating “fraternity,” which turns Francis’ message into one of self-discovery. Boff is also interested in the Church in a way Protestants can hardly be. But more important, was it Francis’ own vision of his relationship to “Church”?

Francis’ concentration on the poor is the key for Boff, and this service is paramount for Francis. But did he understand the “poor” as Boff does? Boff

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¹ L. Boff, *Saint Francis* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

² *Ibid.* 1.

sees “our crisis” as “structural,”³ and it may be. But did Francis have the same goals that Boff has? For instance, he begins to talk about “class,” which is a Marxist concept. It is doubtful that Francis saw the poor of his time set in this metaphysical scheme. Boff talks of the “dominant class,”⁴ but we know that Francis was a radical individualist in his treatment of people. Is then the dialectics of Marx/Hegel congenial to Francis’ message? Boff gives us an account of Francis’ social setting, but how did Francis see himself?

Like the Marxist, Boff seeks a “universal fraternity,”⁵ but it is hard to see Francis thinking in these categories. Boff wants a “revolution” in the relation between human beings and the means of producing goods,⁶ but Francis talks more about finding God in those who suffer rather than a remedy for human goals as such. Boff wants the poor to evangelize the whole Church,⁷ an interesting goal but hardly Francis’ own. Boff wants the Church to assume “a political perspective,”⁸ but surely Francis moved on a more individual level. Boff wants to displace the elite in their social position,⁹ but Francis does not speak in such sociological terms.

For Boff it is the poor who are to change society,¹⁰ parallel to Marx’s role for the proletariat. He wants to realize the kingdom of God “objectively,”¹¹ which we should admit is far from Francis’ vision. This is not to say that it ought not to be our aim today, or that it cannot be done, or that we should limit Francis. But it is to give him a new mission and to treat the kingdom in a humanistic context. “Liberating” aspects are present within the gospel,¹² and Boff certainly is correct in seeing them. But is this within an individual, or does it involve a social dimension? Does Christian preaching really imply “a transformation of society”¹³ now? Certainly it does not as projected in the gospel message until Jesus’ return—that is, as far as God’s transforming work is concerned. Individual transformation is another matter and is sought after. Boff agrees that we do not find in Francis “any social concerns,”¹⁴ but he argues that we must translate him into our social setting.

Francis stresses “peace,” that much is clear.¹⁵ So how compatible is the agenda of social change with the primacy of peace? Francis is gentle and kind; social revolutionaries often cannot afford to be. Francis “was fundamentally a free man,”¹⁶ but this does not necessarily flow from changed social structures. We know that from the corruption revealed in socialist states. He rejected coercion; social revolutionaries require it. Boff wants to use Francis as an ally to create a new image of “Church,” but that is an intramural Roman Catholic matter that is not as important to low-Church Protestants who already have downplayed structure (e.g. the Quakers). Boff talks as if

³ Ibid. 4.

⁴ Ibid. 5.

⁵ Ibid. 46.

⁶ Ibid. 50.

⁷ Ibid. 57.

⁸ Ibid. 58.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. 84.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. 85.

¹³ Ibid. 86.

¹⁴ Ibid. 88.

¹⁵ Ibid. 96.

¹⁶ Ibid. 101.

Francis created himself a saint by ascetic practice, but that understresses the role of God—which Francis might stress.

How should we, then, appropriate Saint Francis for our own day? Leonardo Boff raises that important question for us. He wants to contextualize the gospel, following the lead of certain recent theories. Our problem, however, is that we know that Francis was not a theorist and that he rejected an intellectual approach to the gospel. It was to be lived, clearly, and in that sense existentialism or pragmatism might seem more congenial for reinterpreting Francis than Marxist-based liberation theology, powerful and influential as it has been. Were Francis to reappear today, might he be Mother Teresa more than Lenin, powerful in the reform of and radicalization of society as that figure was?

Does this mean that no Christian can be a social activist if he claims Francis and the gospel as his norm? Certainly not. But it should mean that no social reform follows automatically from Francis' love of nature and the poor, and so it must be argued on its own merits. This is particularly true if one is a social utopian, since the gospel does not postulate that to be a final result of our action but rather as a result of God's activity in the "last days." Furthermore our experience with utopian social orders, so much in prominence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, should lead us to beware of their ability to create in fact what they propose in theory. Here one must refer to humanism's frailty and the corruptive tendency of power and beware of schemes for our own self-reconstruction.

Can nothing be done to relieve the poor other than to identify with them as Francis did? Certainly. All social orders are not equally advantageous for all. But we must be careful of reifying "the poor" into a magical, universal class or of seeming to infer that all who are economically poor are thereby virtuous and lovable in themselves. Were that true, Francis' doctrine would not be so difficult to practice. Corruption and degradation exist at all levels of society, which does not mean that Jesus did not instruct us to serve the poor and all those in any distress. But it does mean that virtue is where we find it individually and that no class can be proposed as the vehicle of salvation.

II. SAINT FRANCIS

Having considered Boff's impressive words, let us listen to a few words of Francis before moving on to contrast this with Kazantzakis' version. Evidently every major figure is subject to several interpretations, a tribute to their versatility and power that resists settling in one mold. I choose *The Little Flowers*¹⁷ as an example because it presents a different side of Francis that must be considered if we want to be sure about his relationship to the "truly poor." Clearly Francis chose companions "vowed to the most abject poverty"¹⁸ so that his aversion to affluence of any kind is certain. Yet he did

¹⁷ N. Kazantzakis, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1951).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 1.

have to acquire land in order to allow the order to grow.¹⁹ Work for the poor needs a base of substance.

One does glory in sorrow and grief,²⁰ so at least one meaning for “the poor” must be all those in “sorrow.” If so, poverty cannot be defined on solely economic grounds, although it does exclude affluence and, perhaps more importantly, power. *The Little Flowers* records Francis’ sanctity and the miracles ascribed to him. So we know that poverty cannot exclude being gifted, since the gifts we receive from God should have the effect of making us humble.²¹ Thus it is how we receive and use what is given to us that defines poverty of spirit and not simple lack. Francis offered “gifts of the spirit” so that wealth of a spiritual nature is not excluded but in fact is sought after. We should exclude economic wealth only if it is a spiritual block.

“The treasure of eternal life”²² is what Francis sought to convey to those in want, not necessarily a socio-economic program, although in his own case the renunciation of possessions was his road to this treasure. He speaks of “holy poverty,” so that we must be sure to distinguish poverty connected to spiritual intent from a simple economic state. We remember the stories surrounding Francis’ relation to birds and animals as we consider his own rejection of wealth and his service to the poor. His sympathy with the animal kingdom is a sign of his simplicity as much so as his poverty, and the two virtues are distinct. Francis was “confirmed in Grace and in the sure sense of Salvation.”²³ This is what he wanted to convey to the poor, although he needed to be poor himself in order to serve as a vehicle, not that poverty is itself a virtue.

It was necessary to give all he had to the poor in order to follow Christ,²⁴ so that poverty is not a benefit but only a condition. Thus we do not celebrate poverty in itself, nor does it follow that any socio-economic program is certainly designed to alleviate it, good and desirable as it may be in itself. Poverty must be seen as an avenue to spiritual wealth only, which surely is how Francis saw it. Jesus practiced poverty himself, but he did not shun extravagance when used in pursuit of spiritual goals. Thus it is the use of poverty or of wealth that is crucial, not the state in itself, although wealth probably more easily blocks spiritual virtues than poverty does.

III. NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS’ FRANCIS AS AN INTERNAL SYMBOL

If poverty does not in itself confer spiritual graces, and if wealth does not necessarily exclude them, if all depends on how one’s condition is used, no external fact of Saint Francis’ life in itself confers Jesus’ spirit. Thus Nikos Kazantzakis’ admittedly poetic, artistic interpretation may equally offer us a clue about how poverty is to be used to spiritual profit. Of course Kazantzakis writes a novel about Francis, a conscious work of fiction. But he did this,

¹⁹ Ibid. 9.

²⁰ Ibid. 22.

²¹ Ibid. 30.

²² Ibid. 48.

²³ Ibid. 76.

²⁴ Ibid. 89.

he tells us, “from a need to match the Saint’s life with a myth.”²⁵ This should cause us to reflect on Boff’s account, or on any account, and ask whether any telling of the story of a person so fabled can avoid involving mythological construction and the projection of our own myths.

Art turns a story into a legend. Could that be “truer than truth itself”?²⁶ Would following this suggestion help us to see the “truth” in Boff’s account? Kazantzakis clearly recognizes the projection of his own spiritual goals onto Francis: “to transubstantiate the matter which God entrusted to us, and turn it into spirit.”²⁷ Are both accounts “true,” so that all we need to do is to see Boff’s spiritual needs, now mythologically constructed, as being “true” in that sense, not necessarily as identified with a social plan? “Searching for God”²⁸ is Kazantzakis’ theme, and Francis’ “poverty” is seen in that context. Searching for social justice would seem to be Boff’s theme, and he treats Francis’ life in that sense.

If the love of God made Francis “turn need inside out,”²⁹ poverty is in itself spiritually neutral unless accompanied by the love of God. Not all who are poor feel the love of God—far from it. Not all who approach the poor feel driven by the love of God, so a social conscience can itself be spiritually neutral. True, “the devil rejoices when he sees men afraid of poverty.”³⁰ But all depends on how poverty is used. “Poverty, Obedience, Chastity, and above all, Love, are the great companions on our journey,”³¹ Kazantzakis again tells us, so love seems to swing the balance between our spiritual and our nonspiritual use of poverty. Freedom also comes as a gift from poverty,³² but only if voluntarily embraced. And, again, it does not come necessarily.

Unfortunately poverty often leads to hate, and hate to a desire for vengeance. But as Kazantzakis protests: “I am not going to kill sin by killing the sinner”³³—which surely is the first temptation in the war against economic poverty (e.g. Lenin, etc.). Yet Kazantzakis agrees with Boff: “Resurrection of the people; that is the true meaning of the resurrection of Christ.”³⁴ The only questions between them are “How?” and “When?” We must consider the answers to these questions in spiritual terms first, in practical terms second. If, as Kazantzakis says, “we have only one purpose: to reach God,”³⁵ this gives us one key to the spiritual approach to poverty: Does our relationship to it help us along our road to reach God, or does it close us in upon ourselves and stress our own virtuous achievements?

Who, then, are the “truly poor”? Boff would seem to define them almost entirely in socio-economic terms, and surely that is the most obvious side to poverty. But examining a little of the lore around Saint Francis indicates that it was his spiritual sense, perhaps opened up by his voluntary poverty, that won him his wide appeal, not his utopian visions for social change.

²⁵ N. Kazantzakis, *Saint Francis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962) 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.* 16.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 107.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 147.

³¹ *Ibid.* 153.

³² *Ibid.* 159.

³³ *Ibid.* 184.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 198.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 277.

Kazantzakis' acknowledged fictional account, however, brings out the perils in any simple embrace of poverty as a religious avenue. Everything depends on humility and love and nearness to God. Neither poverty in itself nor any social program can guarantee these virtues, and their acquisition is never universal but rather involves an individual, a constant struggle.

IV. "THE LORD . . . SAVES THE HUMBLE OF SPIRIT"

When we consider Boff's portrayal of Francis and the constant connection he makes between Francis and the poor, we have noted that even a brief examination of Francis' life and thought does reveal other themes. Kazantzakis, as expected, takes a more creative, symbolic approach in transferring Francis' life into literature. All these and more interpretations are appropriate. Major figures inspire variety, since so much is condensed in such a life. But our interest is not so much in the "true" account of Saint Francis as it is to consider the nature of poverty. The economically, socially, politically poor are somewhat obvious, although the ways to deal with them, to respond to their situation, are far from obvious. Boff points out that although Jesus does speak of "the poor in spirit" he much more frequently mentions the economically deprived.

This is true and important. But if it is approached religiously, we need to ask: Do we need to understand any context other than the socio-economic if we want to grasp Francis' (and Jesus') message regarding the poor and the Christian approach? I suggest considering a few lines from Ps 34:17:

The just cry out and the Lord hears them,
and from all their tribulations he delivers them.
The Lord is near those whose hearts are troubled,
and he saves the humble of spirit.

These sentiments are familiar enough, but what can they tell us about how to approach poverty with a religious commitment?

What it says, I believe, is that poverty can be given a factual, an empirical definition, and that practical means can be devised to deal with it, socially and individually. But as always, God looks to the inner condition too. It needs to be said quickly that this is no reason to ignore poverty. Jesus is compassionate even when he does not approve of the individual in the difficult situation. But a religious approach should deal with the spiritual as well as the physical. And more important: We should never confuse any physical relief or remedy we may provide or devise with one that meets the spiritual need. As Jesus did, we need to operate on two divergent levels simultaneously and beware of too easily reducing the inner condition simply to an outer, physical solution.

The "truly poor," then, are those who fail the spiritual as well as the physical test of minimum subsistence and who need help on both levels. We know for a fact that all who are physically poor are not spiritually poor. The Negro spirituals, born out of slavery and suffering, are a magnificent testi-

mony to spiritual richness in the midst of abject conditions. We do not therefore excuse slavery and imposed suffering, but we do learn that the human spirit responds variously to external poverty. Ironically we also know that wealth often brings spiritual laxity, which tells us that the religious approach to the poor must be exceedingly complex. We meet physical needs, if we can, but we consider other less obvious needs at the same time.

In the intervening time we work, we do what we can, but we should beware of any notion that we usher in economic utopias by our own power. Jesus did not do that for his own people in his own time (and in partial consequence was crucified as a failed Messiah), and we are told not to attempt this either. But what, then, can the last note in these lines of the psalmist about the “humble of spirit” tell us about how poverty is to be assessed? The “humble of spirit” seems to be the key. We know that those who are caught in poverty respond in various ways, and one cannot totally blame them if they are not humble in spirit but rather resort to violence or deception. All are not religious in disposition, nor are they expected to be. But the Christian who approaches poverty must try to assess this.

Jesus in fact enjoined his followers to be healers, but this involves the spirit as well as the body. One needs to understand the culture of the individual to meet his or her need. But Christianity was early on, in Peter’s vision, released from ties to any one culture and thus opened to all cultures. Of course provincials have tried to tie it to a particular culture, even if it was detached from its original cultural setting. If the spirit is important to the Christian message to those who suffer, if in order to help one must know the situation of each person in his/her context, the translation into each cultural context is important. Economically, socially, to relieve suffering we need knowledge about each culture’s modes of operation.

Yet the discernment of the individual spirit, the detection of those who are humble even in adversity, or conversely of those who are proud in their success and their religiously untouchable state—this one does with words of love at the same time one works immediately to offer what relief one can, even if it is only temporary. If we do not do this we will be trapped in social or economic systems and allow Jesus’ offer of release from suffering to become identified with a particular political program. It may be important to follow one of these avenues to release the poor. But central to this whole process religiously lies the assessment of the spirit of the sufferer and the address of the saving word to the humble. The proud in spirit—whether rich or poor—are deaf to any voice except their own, but physical poverty still deserves compassion.