

The Treasures of the Church

A Theology of the Anawim

Introduction

My brothers and sisters, if you truly believe in our glorified Lord, Jesus Christ, you will not discriminate between persons.

—James 2:1

In the fourth chapter of Genesis, when the Lord makes Cain an outcast for the murder of Abel, he places a mark on Cain to prevent anyone from killing him.¹ From this first instance, God continually displays his concern for those outcast from society. This merciful love is a constant theme throughout salvation history.

“He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly,” Mary proclaims in her greeting to Elizabeth, a canticle (*Magnificat*)² which is one of the greatest expressions of God’s merciful love for the outcast. Yet this joyful praise of the Lord for his protection of the outcast, which is at the heart of Christianity, is mirrored in the Hebrew scripture in Hannah’s canticle of gratitude to the Lord for the birth of Samuel.³ In these twin songs, the vastness of salvation history is joined in one great hymn of the *anawim*, with the psalms providing the verses to the canticles’ refrain.

In fact, the whole of salvation history can be summed up as a relationship between God and the *anawim*, for we are all *anawim* in some way. Consider the great diaconal proclamation of the Easter Vigil liturgy, which reminds us each year that “To ransom a slave, you gave away your Son.” When we realize and name our own outsider status, we can more readily identify with those who are cast out for other reasons. Thus the Second Vatican Council proclaimed the role of the church in the modern world beginning with these words:

*The joy and hope, the grief and anxiety of the people of this age,
especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted,
this is the joy and hope, the grief and anxiety of the followers of Christ.*⁴

Who are the *Anawim*?

*Nothing’s fine, I’m torn. I’m all out of faith.
This is how I feel:
I’m cold and I’m ashamed, lying naked on the floor.*

—“Torn,” Natalie Imbruglia

1 Genesis 4:15

2 Luke 1:46-55

3 1 Samuel 2:1-10

4 *Gaudium et Spes* no. 1

According to *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*,⁵ *anawim* is a Hebrew term meaning “overwhelmed by want.” This word came to represent those aware of their dependence upon God. The word is variously translated as “meek” (e.g., in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the meek...”⁶) or “poor.” Thus, the word “poor” has a rich tradition in our faith, and we should resist the temptation to replace it with modern euphemisms such as “disadvantaged,” which can even be opposed to the very essence of the scriptural understanding of poverty, which is not devoid of advantage. In addition, the term has come to mean anyone cast out by “proper” society. Thus, it would include the tax collectors and prostitutes of Jesus’ experience as well as racial and sexual minorities in our own day, for example.

In the Hebrew scripture, the *anawim* are most often represented by the widow, the orphan and the alien, those with no hope of personal support (*i.e.*, from a property-holding male) who had to rely on God—and by extension, the community doing God’s will—for their sustenance. In this absolute reliance on God and others, the *anawim* find strength in weakness. God therefore lifts them up as an example to those who foolishly rely on their own intelligence, their own wealth, their own influence, their own power.

It is important to note that the very concept of discrimination between people is a human construct, the very conception of social sin which God, with infinite wisdom and mercy, nevertheless turns to good. For God, there is not discrimination between people; we ourselves impose such distinctions. To our sinful classifications, God responds with a particular love for those whom we cast out or marginalize. In this way, God acts as God, who always brings power from pain, triumph from tragedy, strength from sorrow.

When I was a grade-school student at Epiphany School in South El Monte, we were forever lining up according to various criteria. Sometimes we lined up according to grade. Sometimes we lined up in alphabetical order. Sometimes according to height, or gender. Such classifications are arbitrary and human. If we were to line up all five billion humans in a line, we could classify them according to various criteria. We could order them according to degree of lightest skin shade to darkest. We could line them up from greatest intelligence to the least. We could line them up in order of strength/weakness, affluence/poverty, beauty/homeliness, health/disability, homosexuality/heterosexuality. And what would we find? We would discover that it would be impossible to distinguish enough difference between each individual in line to be able to discern a dividing line between categories we think are absolute and obvious. We would see only a continuous, seamless spectrum of the diversity of humanity that varied imperceptibly from person to person along this single line of five billion individuals. In short, we would see humanity as God sees humanity. God’s folly would be revealed as wisdom, and human wisdom as folly.⁷ And so it shall be at the end of time.⁸

5 As explained in the commentary on the Psalms, p. 532.

6 Matthew 5:5

7 1 Corinthians 1:25, 27

8 1 Corinthians 13:11-12

As Dorothy Day often pointed out, when we realize the dignity of the *anawim*, we run the risk of romanticizing them as a class and can be disappointed by a lack of gratitude or coarseness we may encounter among the individual members of this class:

Here is a letter we received today: "I took a gentleman seemingly in need of spiritual and temporal guidance into my home on a Sunday afternoon. Let him have a nap on my bed, went through the want ads with him, made coffee and sandwiches for him, and when he left, I found my wallet had gone also."

Well, our friend has suffered from his experience and it is a part of the bitterness of the poor, who cheat each other, who exploit each other even as they are exploited, who despise each other even as they are despised.

And is it to be expected that virtue and destitution should go together? No, as John Cogley has written, they are the destitute in every way, destitute of the world's goods, destitute of honor, of gratitude, of love...⁹

God's preferential option for the *anawim* extends to them as a class we ourselves have constructed; but we experience the *anawim* as individuals, each with their own positive and negative personality traits, many of which we have as a society implanted in them. If we are looking for gratitude, we should confine our service to members of our family. We serve the poor and outcast for the sake of service alone, not for expectations of gratitude or respect in return for our service. Jesus said, "If you love those who love you, what is special about that?"¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer ties this ingratitude of the poor to the love of one's enemy:

By our enemies Jesus means those who are quite intractable and utterly unresponsive to our love, who forgive us nothing when we forgive them all, who requite our love with hatred and our service with derision.¹¹

God's Relationship to the *Anawim*

*If God had a face, what would it look like?
And would you want to see it,
If seeing meant that you would have to believe
In things like heaven and in Jesus and the saints, and all the prophets?
What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us?
Just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home?*

—*"One of Us," Joan Osborne*

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, Jesus told us that the last would be first.¹² This statement continues the theme of the inauguration of his public ministry in the synagogue at

⁹ *By Little and By Little: The Selected Works of Dorothy Day* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1983), p. 100

¹⁰ Matthew 5:46

¹¹ *The Modern Spirituality Series: Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate Publishers, 1992), p. 84.

Nazareth when he read from Isaiah's description of the mission of the Suffering Servant: "to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and new sight to the blind, to free the oppressed and announce the Lord's year of mercy."¹³

God's primary response to the plight of the *anawim* throughout salvation history has been to raise up prophets to remind the people of their responsibility to the outcast.

But the role of the prophet is not God's cop-out. Abraham Heschel describes the prophet's role as an incarnation of the "divine pathos," a term he uses to describe God's compassion and justice:

The prophet is a man [sic] who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man's fierce greed. Frightful is the agony of man; no human voice can convey its full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet's words.¹⁴

The prophet calls God's people to service to the outcast. The prophet's gift—for the community—is his or her union with the compassion of God. This gift is also a personal burden, as are all gifts for the common good:

The prophet disdains those for whom God's presence is comfort and security; to him it is a challenge, an incessant demand. God is compassion, not compromise; justice, though not inclemency... The prophet's word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven.¹⁵

At our baptism, we all became priests, prophets and kings. It is our prophetic role, as has been said by others, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.¹⁶ There is an urgency to the prophet's call to responsibility that drives our relationship to the *anawim*. For the Christian, there is great urgency to respond to the outcast, for in the face of the outcast we encounter the Risen Lord himself.¹⁷

Our Relationship to the *Anawim*

*When you're down and out, when you're on the streets,
When evening falls so hard, I will comfort you.
I'll take your part when darkness comes, and pain is all around.
Like a bridge over troubled water I will lay me down.*

—“Bridge Over Troubled Water,” Simon & Garfunkel

12 Matthew 20: 16

13 Luke 4:18-19

14 *The Prophets* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), p. 6.

15 *Ibidem*, p. 19

16 Thomas Cahill, *The Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 78.

17 Matthew 25:31-45

In the third-century story of St. Lawrence of Rome, the Roman prefect sends for Lawrence because he learns that deacons administer the assets of the church and demands that Lawrence turn over the treasures of the church. Lawrence asks for three days to gather the treasure, and on the third day leads the prefect into the presence of all the sick, disabled and the poor, the widows and orphans of Rome—all those who relied on the Christian community for their sustenance. “These are the treasures of the church,” Lawrence proclaims to the prefect, and pays for this truth with his life.

The urgency of our response to the poor and outcast has been a constant theme of the Christian tradition. This urgency is combined with an understanding that material goods are provided by God for the benefit of all, and are not to be hoarded when others are in need. A fourth-century story is told of St. John Chrysostom walking with a friend when they came upon a poor man who was barefoot. “Where are his shoes?” the friend asked John. “They are in your closet, gathering dust,” John replied. To those who said they could do as they wished with their own money, John wrote: “Do not say, ‘I am spending what is mine; I am enjoying what is mine.’ In reality it is not yours, but another’s.”¹⁸

Now is the acceptable time to deal with poverty and injustice when we discover it. As the Letter of James states,

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, to profess faith without showing works? Such a faith has no power to save you. If a brother or sister is in need of clothes or food and one of you says, “May things go well for you; be warm and satisfied,” without attending to their material needs, what good is that?*¹⁹

The urgency of our response to the outcast is not limited to material goods, but includes justice, for justice itself is the constitutive foundation of addressing need, not mere pity. The urgent response to the call of the prophet and the cause of justice requires response both from the individual Christian and from the Christian community. Therefore, the “poor box” approach to justice—whereby one would drop pocket change into a slot in the vestibule, which was then assumed to go to nameless and faceless “poor people”—robs the individual Christian of the gift of encountering the face of Christ in the outcast and perpetuates the clericalist notion that clergy perform works of mercy while the laity “pay, pray and obey.” Only with individual Christians serving others face-to-face and one-on-one can the institutional church begin to truly build the City of God through a radical and urgent response to injustice.

The Rabbis of Jewish tradition held that any of the laws of the Torah were superceded in order to save a life, and that this dispensation also applies to serving the poor. The famous Talmudic precept featured in *Schindler’s List*, “To save one life is the same as saving the whole world,” also applies to the individual Christian’s responsibility to the poor and outcast. Even the smallest merciful work is earth-shaking. For example, St. John Chrysostom wrote (using the voice of

18 Gilbert Markus, ed., *The Radical Tradition: Revolutionary Saints in the Battle for Justice and Human Rights* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 25.

19 James 2:14-16

Jesus): “If I am in prison, I do not ask you to set me free of my chains and release me; all I ask is that, for my sake, you should visit someone in prison.”²⁰

Conclusion

So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often even vocal sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

A recent news account told of Christmas Midnight Mass at a Catholic church in India where the Brahmin majority refused entry to *dalit* Christians (members of the oppressed “untouchable” caste—India’s institutional *anawim* whose Sanskrit name means “trodden upon”). The priest stood by and refused to intervene, so as not to upset the higher-caste Catholics. After the liturgy was over, he permitted the *dalit* into the church, but did not celebrate Mass with them.

If the *anawim* are indeed the treasures of the church, the church must safeguard its assets. Whenever the institutional model of the church looms large, we lose our vision and become wrapped up in ourselves. We have learned from the clerical abuse crisis what happens when bishops take vows of property, chancery and appearances. When we neglect our individual and corporate responsibility to the *anawim*, we gain the whole world—prestige, influence, stability—and suffer the loss of our soul. This is the bargain the world offers the church: we are taken to a mountain and shown the kingdoms and riches of the world, all of which can be ours if only we will bless injustice. And all too often, we take the Faustian deal.

Yet from age to age the cause of Lord is always vindicated. The proud are cast down from their thrones, and they in turn become the lowly who need the Lord to lift them up. This cycle is the lived experience of Christ’s church since its foundation and the individual resurrection lifecycle of each Christian. And God, in his eternal foolishness, has made loving concern for the *anawim* the key that unlocks the door to everything we need to rise again.

²⁰ Homily on the Letter to the Romans, Office of Readings For Those Who Work for the Underprivileged