

GLIMPSE

Poverty of Spirit

Fr. Larry Gillick, S.J.

A rose always tells the truth. As a shy but promising bud, as a public glorious face, as a proud, but elderly discardable memory, it always is what it is. I had a discussion the other day with a person who had admitted to a friend that she had lied to that same friend. Her reasoning had been that the truth would have hurt the relationship. Her not telling the truth and then later revealing the lie was hurting the relationship even worse.

In her musing she wondered out loud why we human beings do such things; lie, cheat, take revenge, steal, gossip, and all such things which our better selves would not want to do or have done to us.

In my giving a parish mission years ago, a person asked if poverty of spirit meant to have a poor spirit. Some of the congregation chuckled, but it is a good question for pondering. A poor spirit is rejectful, protective, fearful of being found out and ashamed of her/his true fragility. This spirit does not now and then tell lies, but rather lives a lie by pretending harshness, resentment and avoidance. This poor-spirit person is fundamentally ungrateful for who he/she is and there's no way out.

The person who has a poverty of spirit does however, tell lies as well. So we are back to asking "why!" This person has pockets or patches of humanity that pride does not allow to be public or even hinted at. We lie in various ways, because we wish this or that of ourselves were not there or wish there were more. It all comes down to our being grateful for what we would be tempted to hide. It really is about being insufficient in our own eyes which we project into the eyes of others. That which I do not accept in me, "you" couldn't possibly accept in me either.

Let's take our dear and ancient friends Adam and Eve. They had everything around them, but something was missing within them. They were seduced by a lie about who they were. They had a longing to *be* God rather than experiencing their longing *for* God. They lied to themselves by wanting to be like God and then they

covered that up by blaming some other. What they could not do was accept their poverty of being non-gods. From their lying, they had to literally cover-up; hide their naked simplicity in shame.

Why do we lie in its various forms? We do not like being simply and essentially poor and we try to escape that reality every time we avoid being known.

I say the fish I caught was this big, but it was really this small. I could be mad at the fish, but the lie has nothing to do with its size, but my size in your eyes as a fisherman.

The person who has then this poverty of spirit humbles the self, not just in front of God, but also at the feet of the "self-god" who attempted to eat the apple of pretense and found it sour. The good-spirited person of the poverty of spirit faces the lie for what it isn't. It is actually a form of stealing. A lie steals the sacredness of our own self-truth and prostitutes itself for an unholy gain. A poverty of spirit admits a human pride that wants to create truth in our own image and struggles not to be seduced by its wrappings. That holy person admits the untruth, but even more prays with the ungratefulness that is the root of the lie. We lie in many ways other than speaking; we speak in more ways than through our mouths. It is only a glimpse, to tell the truth, I'm not lying.

Only through poverty of spirit do humans draw near to God; only through it does God draw near to humans. Poverty of spirit is the meeting point of heaven and earth, the mysterious place where God and humans encounter each other, the point where infinite mystery meets concrete existence.

[Johannes Metz](#) Poverty of Spirit, 2015