

# THE GRAND POVERTY OF THE MANTRA

By John Main

## On Poverty

1. The essential task for the Christian is to understand *poverty* as the condition of spiritual development – and to see prayer as the deepening of our conversion, of our turning from self to God in faith.
2. The monastic tradition has always emphasized – since Cassian and St. Benedict – that poverty is the condition for prayer.
3. The monastic teaching and tradition of prayer tells us in every generation – to all Christians, not just monks – that *our prayer is our declaration of poverty*, our experience of poverty.
4. And so its teaching on how to pray tells us how to let ourselves be led by the Spirit into a totally generous poverty of spirit.

## “The Poverty of the Single Verse”

1. From Cassian until the present day, the monastic tradition has taught what Cassian’s Tenth Conference on Prayer calls ‘the poverty of the single verse’.
2. We are led to this other-centredness of love – into the prayer of Christ which is the Spirit praying in our hearts – by the simplicity, the humility, the openness, of committing ourselves wholly in our meditation to the *recitation of a single word*.
3. John Cassian speaks of the purpose of meditation as that of restricting the mind to the poverty of the single verse.
4. Cassian writes: *The mind should unceasingly cling to the [mantra], until strengthened by continual use of it, it casts off and rejects the rich and ample matter of all kinds of thought and restricts itself to the poverty of the single verse... Those who realize this poverty arrive with ready ease at the first of the Beatitudes: ‘Blessed are they who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven [Matt 5:3]’.* (Conference 10:11)
5. Cassian talks about becoming ‘grandly poor’. Prayer is both the acknowledgement and the experience of our own poverty, our own *utter dependence on God*, who is the source of our being. But, it is also the experience of *our redemption*, our enrichment by the love of God in Jesus.
6. This twin aspect of prayer – of poverty and redemption – leads Cassian to call the condition we enjoy in prayer a ‘grand poverty’.

## Meditation and Poverty

1. Meditation will certainly give you new insights into poverty.
2. As you persevere with the mantra, you will begin to understand more and more deeply, out of your own experience, what Jesus meant when he said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt5:3).
3. You will also learn in a very concrete way the meaning of *faithfulness* as you persevere in fidelity to the repetition of the mantra.
4. In meditation, then, we declare our own poverty. We renounce words, thoughts, imaginations, and we do so by restricting the mind to *the poverty of the one word*.
5. The mantra is the *sacrament* of our poverty in prayer.
6. As Cassian puts it, the mantra contains all the human mind can express and all the human heart can feel.
7. That one little word conveys and leads us into the silence which is the silence of creative energy.
8. Cassian wrote: “The Christian has as his principal aim the realization of the Kingdom of God, the power of the Spirit of Jesus in his heart.”
9. But we cannot get this by our own efforts, or think our way into it. So we have a simpler, more immediate goal which he calls ‘purity of heart’.
10. And this is all we should concern ourselves with, he teaches; the rest will be given to you.
11. And the way to purity of heart, to clear awareness, is the way of poverty, the grand poverty of the mantra.