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THE PARADOX OF POVERTY

FOR THE SISTERHOOD OF SAINT
JOHN THE DIVINE, A VOW OF
POVERTY IS ABOUT 'MORE THAN
DOLLARS AND CENTS.'

Sister Elizabeth, SSJD's reverend
mother, leads the author through
the convent and guest house

PHOTO: JOELLE KIDD

■ Since even before St. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy that “the love of money is the root of all evil,” Christians have struggled to make peace with the very fact of money. “You cannot serve both God and money,” Jesus warns in the gospels.

In fact, the Bible has an enormous amount to say on the topic of money, and perhaps that is why faith, poverty and wealth have played a touchy dance since Christianity’s earliest days. Still, modern Christians may wonder where to place themselves upon a spectrum that reaches from monks like St. Francis of Assisi, who ate off the ground and refused to even touch a coin, to modern-day prosperity gospel preachers who fly in private jets as a symbol of God’s favour.

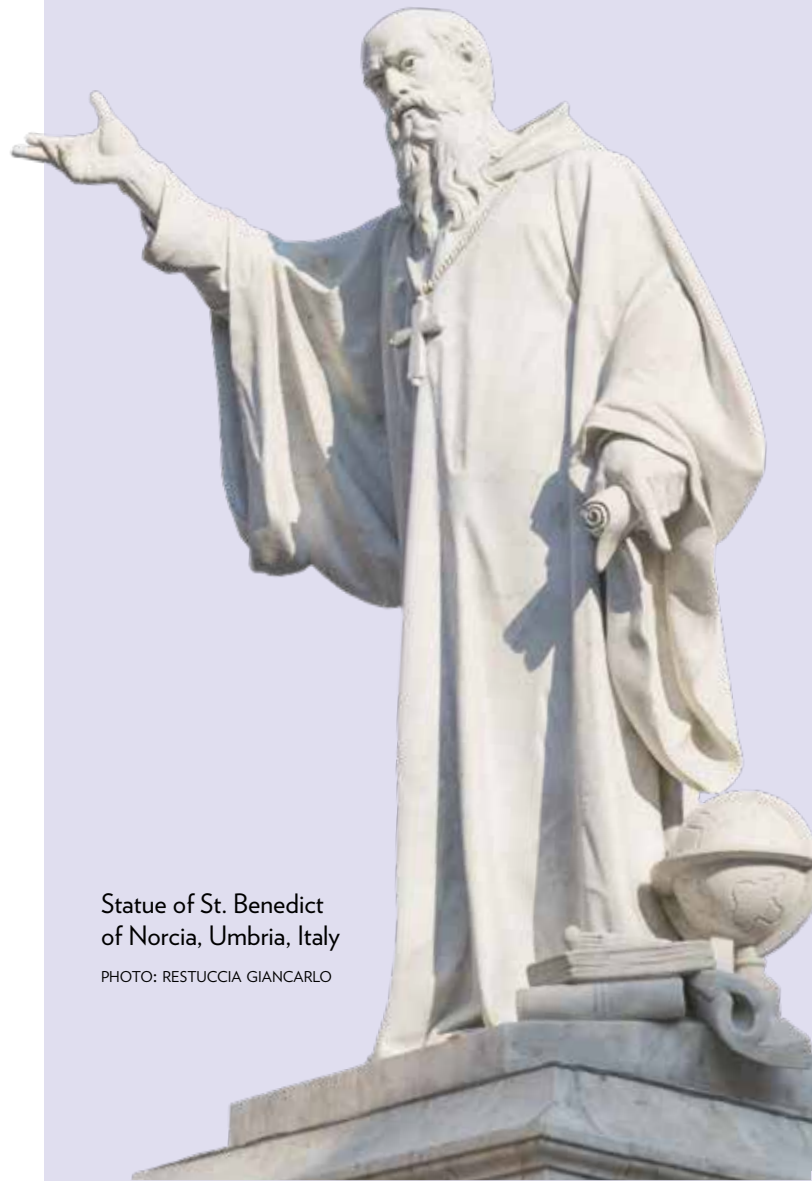
The question of how to use money without serving it, how to live within one’s means, is a timely one. Neo-monastic and “intentional communities” have become popular expressions of faith in recent years. Even outside the church, interest in minimalism and simple and sustainable living is soaring. Cleaning guru Marie Kondo recently garnered global popularity with her self-help book and Netflix show focused on clearing out anything that doesn’t “spark joy” in one’s life (donations to second-hand shops reportedly spiked when the show came out in January 2019). At the same time, consumer brands are scrambling to market themselves as eco-friendly, low-waste and sustainably sourced, as the climate impacts of negligent discarding and mass production have become painfully clear.

Simple living is making its way into the zeitgeist, but in this respect, the fad is a few centuries behind the times. For monastic communities, simplicity is woven into the very fabric of communal life, represented by a vow of poverty.

St. Benedict wrote his rule of life, still the basis of many orders’ vows today, in the early sixth century. Among his rules, he forbade the private possession of anything, though he bound the abbot to supply all necessities.

In 1884, Mother Hannah Grier Coome founded the Sisterhood of Saint John the Divine (SSJD), an Anglican order of women committed to prayerful community life and ministry, basing the new sisterhood’s rule of life on the *Rule of St. Benedict*.

More than 130 years later, SSJD runs a convent and guest house in the north of Toronto; a ministry at St. John’s Rehab (part of Sunnybrook Health Sciences



Statue of St. Benedict of Norcia, Umbria, Italy

PHOTO: RESTUCCIA GIANCARLO

The Sisterhood of St. John the Divine’s vow of poverty

(from *The Rule of Life* of the SSJD):

The vow of poverty is grounded in the simplicity of life which Jesus lived and taught. Poverty as expressed in community of life and goods is a single minded response to God, who invites our love to show itself through the gift of our whole self.

The spirit of poverty manifests itself in contentment, simplicity of living, and joyful dependence on God. It requires us to use with reverence, responsibility, and generosity all that God entrusts to us—resources, energy, talents, industry, and time.

To be poor in spirit is to claim nothing as ours by right, but to reconcile to God, at all levels, the demands of self-seeking, self-preservation, and self-security. In poverty we bear witness that God is our whole support.



The lobby inside the entrance of the Sisterhood of Saint John the Divine convent and guest house

PHOTO: ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

Centre); and St. John's House, a base for community ministry and retreat in Victoria, B.C.

Today, the sisters still follow a rule of life that includes vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Within the vow of poverty is a commitment to "the simplicity of life which Jesus lived and taught," and to, as St. Benedict dictated so long ago, own next to nothing; rather, to "hold all things in common," as they say on their [website](#).



I visited SSJD's convent on a warm day in September, curious and eager to see what a vow of poverty looks like in 2019 in Toronto.

Taking my first steps down the driveway, I had my first taste of the strange tension within the sisters' vow of poverty: a commitment to owning nothing which paradoxically ensures all their needs are met.

The convent, with its attached guest house, is a

beautiful brick-clad building with large gleaming windows and a line of stained glass in the chapel, surrounded by lush lawn and gardens. It was purpose-built in the early 2000s and finished in 2005, in collaboration with Montgomery Sisam Architects, after the sisters decided to sell their previous convent, which didn't have enough space for their growing guest and retreat ministry.

In *A Journey Just Begun: The Story of an Anglican Sisterhood*, Sister Constance Joanna writes that "while it was important for the sisters to balance Benedictine values of simplicity, privacy, and hospitality when they envisioned a convent, St. Benedict hadn't had to contend with Wi-Fi, elevators, and closets for modern secular clothing. The new building had to be functional and accessible for all.... Knowing what they needed for living simply in the new century, the sisters...together with the architects, [read] about traditional monastic architecture and looked for new ways of realizing their goals: to provide appropriate and adequate space for groups and guests; to provide privacy for the sisters' community life while sharing common space like the chapel, refectory, and library; to provide lots of light and space, bringing the outdoors in; and to incorporate treasured items from the previous convents (especially stained glass and other works of art)."

The building has all the traditional components of a monastery: a chapel, a community room in which the sisterhood can gather, a private area containing the sisters' rooms, a novitiate space for new members, an infirmary for ailing sisters, a guest house, a refectory, a kitchen, a library, arts and crafts rooms, and courtyards with gardens. It is clean and bright. Art and icons hang on the wall, most gifts given to the sisterhood; the guest house and common spaces are filled with comfortable-looking but mismatched furniture, donated by family and friends of the community (though one generous donor who owned a furniture store supplied around \$70,000 of furnishings) or a sisters' estate.

Sister Elizabeth, the convent's current reverend mother, was there to meet me at its entrance, and she lead me through the building, giving a glimpse into the many careful decisions that had gone into designing the convent, right down to the number of washrooms (to keep costs down, the 25 sisters share four communal bathrooms and showers).



Sister Elizabeth remembered visiting home and having a friend ask how she could follow such a strict schedule. "I said, because it enables me to do what I really want to do, which is to know God and have a better and closer relationship with God."

PHOTO: JOELLE KIDD



PHOTO: JOELLE KIDD

“I have never felt that my life here was anything less than luxurious.”

—Sister Margaret Ruth

Another conscious decision was to house an infirmary, she tells me, despite its high cost (there is a small full-time nursing staff in case of emergency). It's important for aging sisters to be able to die at home, in the community; many of the sisters who live in the infirmary still do their work in the convent every day.

While each sister individually owns next to nothing, in practice the community is far from destitute.

“I have never felt that my life here was anything less than luxurious,” said Sister Margaret Ruth. She runs the library, and has been in the sisterhood for “forty-nine and three quarters” years.

The sisterhood is “not poor in books,” as Sister Elizabeth put it; rows of shelves in the library hold everything from spiritual and religious writings by the likes of Richard Rohr and Ilia Delio to detective novels—the sisters are big fans of Louise Penny as well as series by Ellis Peters and Peter Tremayne, whodunits set in monastic communities.

Poverty “has more to do with God than it does with dollars and cents,” said Sister Margaret Ruth. Coming from “a simple background,” she said, she has always felt she had what she needed in the convent. “I’ve had



everything I've ever asked or expected in financial terms. But there have been times when I felt a pinch on something that really mattered to me."

She recalled that after she lost a dear friend, her first reverend mother told her, "[Poverty] has nothing to do with whether or not you need another pair of shoes. It has to do with whether you're prepared to live without something that you actually need.' Friendship, or a good confidant or something. You really feel that you need someone you could go to, and you have no one—that is an example of poverty." You may feel you can't go on. "Well, that's just what you do—you go on. And God provides."

A vow of poverty is not about money, she said—it is about, "quoting my novice mistress, 'total dependence on God.'"



For many of the sisters who didn't come from particularly rich families or high-paying careers, the sacrifice of the vow of poverty has less to do with giving up material possessions than committing to this total

Thousands of titles line the shelves of the sisters' library, from theological studies to mystery novels. The sisterhood is "not poor in books," says Sister Elizabeth.

PHOTO: JOELLE KIDD

physical dependence, on God and on community.

“Financially or economically, I was always on the edge of poverty,” said Sister Anne. She worked as a professional musician before entering the convent 25 years ago. “I never owned a car, I only rented, my family only rented. My parents were musicians, so they didn’t earn that much...culturally I was rich, but economically always poor, consistently in my life.” She understood the community as a sharing of goods, she said. “I’m actually richer than I’ve ever been in my life. I mean, I have three meals a day, I have a bed to sleep in. I can budget and I’m not worried about ‘I can’t afford this or that...’”

“I still own my instrument. When I die that’s going to be sold, the balance will be given to the sisterhood... Sharing my talents and my gifts and opportunities and so forth, it’s not an issue for me. I didn’t have to give up much. Poverty is not owning anything for yourself. Actually, there’s a freedom in that. You don’t have to worry.”

Sister Louise, who has been at the convent for 18 years, agreed. “Like Anne, I was never financially flush, rich. I was never so poverty-stricken that I was on the streets, but I had never been rich, nor had my family. So a vow of poverty as far as finances were concerned was never a problem for me.

“In our rule of life, our vow of poverty emphasizes a spiritual poverty that we all have in some regard, and I felt that was the most poignant aspect of the vow of poverty for me.” For Sister Louise, poverty is about moving from fear into trust.

“For me that was very big, because I had been on my own for a number of years. I was responsible for myself and I trusted myself—but nobody else. So for me to make that change-over was quite stunningly difficult, and it’s taken a long time to get there.”

She had been married at one time, she explained, and raised a son by herself, working to put him through school. It was necessary for her to learn to be dependent on Christ to sustain her, she said. “God calls us every day—Jesus calls us every day—to put our trust there and stay attuned. To be there and open and ready. For me, that’s part of the vow of poverty, allowing yourself to look toward Christ for our spiritual nourishment.”

In the convent’s fundraising office, I met Sister Kathryn, a first professed sister (meaning she’s gone through a six-month postulancy) who worked in accounting for 38 years before joining the sisterhood.

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—Sister Anne

Moving from being responsible for her own livelihood to being dependent on the community was “a big change,” she said.

“The most radical part of the poverty, of course, is ridding yourself of everything you had before, in your ordinary life,” she said.

“Anything you own is owned in common. You don’t own anything. So not only do you have the exterior poverty of not having possession of anything, but having loan of it—you have that interior poverty of gaining a sense of simplicity over your desires, over your wants,” she said.

“That’s the sort of interior poverty you have to recognize, the radical simplicity of your life.” When you see yourself as a steward, rather than an owner, you are more careful with things, she explained. Thoughtfully, she ran her fingers over a silver cross hanging around her neck. All the sisters have this cross, on a chain or pinned as a brooch on their clothing—it is, along with the rings they receive when they are life professed, the only piece of jewellery the sisters wear. “Our crosses are from previous sisters. So that’s very poignant, because it’s like continuing on the legacy of not only a physical possession, but something that represents who they were. It’s a really valuable lesson of stewardship, responsibility, accountability, so that you don’t waste things.... There’s no superfluosity in the way you eat, the way you shop, anything.”

She said she also loves the artwork and furnishings around the convent that come from sisters’ estates. “That legacy is what touches my heart more than anything.... It’s just wonderful to live with this sort of history—it’s a living history in your midst.”

Sister Wilma, the most senior sister in the convent—she entered in 1953 and has celebrated her 60th profession anniversary—also works in the fundraising



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—Sister Kathryn

office. Poverty to her means “simplicity, self-offering and stewardship,” she told me.

“Before I came to the community, I worked in Regina at the Bank of Montreal, and I got to the point where I thought, ‘What am I doing here?’...I mean, I’m not that fond of money,” Sister Wilma recalled. “So I came to the convent, and after about two months, guess where they put me? In the bursar’s office!

“But it was altogether different. It had a different purpose and a different meaning...and we’re taught that one kind of work is just as valuable as another.”

The convent’s operating budget comes from several sources: contributions from its Founders Fund (24%), donations (20%), sisters’ pensions (23%), hospitality (17%) and missions (16%), according to this year’s narrative budget. Every so often they fundraise for specific needs—for instance, the convent now needs to replace its computer servers, which have become outdated.

In addition to keeping the convent running, the sisters run several ministries—they provide spiritual care at St. John’s Rehab, are involved with Indigenous reconciliation programs and maintain an education fund that enables their Companions and Women at a Crossroads programs. They also fund continuing education and formation for the sisters.

The sisters don’t usually get a mid-morning snack, Sister Elizabeth explained as she offered me milk for my coffee (“We only have skim or 2%...we do get half and half, I think, on Thanksgiving and Christmas!”), but that day was an exception because they were hosting a retreat group. As a result, I found myself with a soft,

crumbly scone studded with tart aronia berries from the garden outside.

“I read recipe books all the time,” said Sister Elizabeth Ann, from her seat across the table in the empty dining area. A long table stretched across one end of the room, where the sisters and retreat guests would soon serve themselves lunch, buffet-style. “I read recipe books, I read magazines, food magazines, all the time. I’m always searching out new recipes to try. We make the food here, we don’t do a whole lot of prepared foods, which is better—healthier—for eating; which means we’re getting good food. But it’s simple.”

Sister Elizabeth Ann asks for input on what the sisters might like to eat, and caters to those with dietary restrictions—several of the sisters are vegetarian, one vegan, and others have celiac disease and can’t eat wheat. Visitors to the guest house, who eat with the sisters, may have other allergies or restrictions. Beyond that, however, there is little choice. What’s served is served.

“Before I entered the community, I could decide what I wanted to eat every day of the week, breakfast, lunch and dinner,” Sister Elizabeth pointed out. “Now, we have wonderful meals, it’s not a complaint, but there may be days that I don’t happen to particularly like those two vegetables that are out for dinner. But that’s what there is.”

However, the biggest difference between eating in the convent and in the ‘outside world’ is not just what is on the plate. All meals at SSJD are eaten in total silence.

“We spiritualize it a little bit by talking about how the table that we eat at is an extension of the altar, the table



The sisters and their guests gather daily in the dining room for communal meals, which are eaten in total silence.

PHOTO: JOELLE KIDD

of love,” said Sister Elizabeth Ann. “It’s another way of learning how to focus and be at prayer when you’re doing one thing at a time, by concentrating on your food.”

“And enjoying it more,” Sister Elizabeth agreed. “Eating mindfully.” On Sunday evenings, the sisters sometimes have a “talking supper” during which they are allowed to speak. On those days, Sister Elizabeth said, “I don’t really appreciate my food as much, because I’m talking.”

Sister Elizabeth Ann came to the sisterhood in 1987, after attending retreats at the convent while working as a Sunday school teacher. “[I] just really fell in love with the silence and that life of prayer.” A nature lover who took forestry in university, Sister Elizabeth Ann said one way poverty touched her when she first joined was not being able to get outside as much as she wanted. She also added that she “came from a home that had books everywhere, and where there weren’t books there was art on the walls. So I find, it’s still a bit of a poverty for me to not have as much artwork around...I would have every place possible filled with bookshelves!”

When I asked how poverty enriches her spiritual life,



she mused about her time as a novice, when she wore her habit at all times. “You didn’t have to make choices. That was actually kind of good.”

While all the sisters’ possessions are owned communally, the sisterhood ensures all basic expenses are covered, and that each sister has what she needs. Each year, all the sisters must fill out a personal budget, listing everything they need that year, from a new walker to a new winter coat to art supplies. Each sister gets only a small amount of “treat” money for personal purchases, like a coffee or a book.

As reverend mother, Sister Elizabeth explained, she sometimes budgets for the purchase of a few DVDs for the sisters to watch together. She briefly weighs the pros and cons of purchasing DVDs when the convent subscribes to a Netflix account (shared among its four common-room televisions and 25 sisters)—DVDs are more expensive, but can be passed around the community and taken to the B.C. house.

It struck me how intentional—how thoughtful—the members of this community are about even the smallest, common actions of my days; buying a coffee, or choosing a movie to watch.

“It’s still a bit of a poverty for me to not have as much artwork around,” says Sister Elizabeth Ann. “I would have every place possible filled with bookshelves!”

PHOTO: JOELLE KIDD



A vow of poverty means being intentional with everything, even time. “I always think that I don’t have enough time!... I find that I’m very poor that I don’t really know enough about Jesus’ life,” says Sister Dorothy Grace.

PHOTO: JOELLE KIDD

“When you have to budget, and you know that your budget has to be approved...you’re going to think twice about what you put on it,” Sister Elizabeth pointed out. As reverend mother she reviews the sisters’ budgets—and, she says, sometimes shaves them down by a couple hundred dollars. “I will sometimes say, ‘I don’t think you need that much for clothing; you spent this much and this much over the last couple of years.’”

Thoughtful is a good word for it, Sister Elizabeth Ann agreed. “That’s what we have to do—we think about it. So then it becomes thoughtful, intentional.”

Later, during lunch, I sat outside with Sister Anne, Sister Louisa, Sister Elizabeth and Sister Dorothy Grace, one of the newer members of the community, having been there five years. When I asked the sisters what Anglicans who don’t live in religious orders could learn from their vow of poverty, Sister Elizabeth circled back

to the idea of intentionality, not just about money, but in all things. “Being very intentional about worship of God, being very intentional about what you eat and [if you] are eating what is healthy for you, being intentional about what you buy, and [if] you really need all these things.”

This care includes extending the life of what you have; Sister Louisa runs a free room in the convent where people can drop off used clothing that no longer fits or suits them, and another sister can make use of it.

They also make choices with ecological consciousness in mind. They’ve recently decided to plant trees on the property, and have installed solar panels on the convent’s roof. The sisters had put out a fundraising call when they decided to buy solar panels, and a donor ended up covering the entire cost.

Sitting with the sisters, and after meeting so many others on my journey through the building, it became



Among the readings that day were these verses from Luke 12: “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourself that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

PHOTO: JOELLE KIDD

clear that for everyone, poverty means something slightly different.

“I think for myself, the poverty is time,” said Sister Dorothy Grace. “I always think that I don’t have enough time!... I find that I’m very poor that I don’t really know enough about Jesus’ life.”

She sees it as part of God’s plan, “to put me here, to the environment here, to provide me more opportunity to know more about Jesus, through the sisters. So for me, I see that my poverty is not material.”

For those who live in the convent, every part of the day is scheduled, from when the sisters get up until 8:30 p.m., when compline ends. They worship together four times a day and place great importance on prayer.

Sister Elizabeth remembered visiting home and having a friend ask how she could follow such a strict schedule. “I said, ‘Because it enables me to do what I

really want to do, which is to know God and have a better and closer relationship with God.”

People in the outside world can sometimes have misconceptions about how the sisters live—Sister Dorothy Grace laughed sharing how whenever she visits her home city of Hong Kong, her family takes her out to eat. “I always remind them, I have lots of good food here—I told them that the Western food is good, it just depends on how you cook it!”

Though she does miss the fresh seafood that she ate when she lived in Hong Kong, living without it doesn’t feel like poverty to her, she said. “I see that [what] God provides is enough for me.”

“That’s true of all of us, I think,” added Sister Louisa. “I mean the first thing that friends want to do is, ‘Oh, you must be suffering! You need food! Let me take you out!’”

The sisters traded anecdotes of questions they’ve

received from people who learned they were joining the convent—everything from “but what if you want to go skiing on the weekend?” to “but there’s no golf course!” But, Sister Elizabeth points out, this vocation is not for everybody.

“You choose it because you think it’s where God is calling you...the people that are drawn here are drawn here for some reason related to God. Otherwise, we wouldn’t do it.”

Sister Elizabeth was a teacher and a school administrator before entering the community.

She first felt called to join the sisterhood in the 1970s, but at the time, her parents were against it. When she was in her 40s, Sister Elizabeth got married; she remained happily so for eight years, until her husband died of a brain tumor. She has two stepsons and four granddaughters.

“I don’t regret that I didn’t enter earlier, because I wouldn’t have missed my marriage for anything,” she said, but when she found herself back at the convent for the Woman at a Crossroads program, the old call resurfaced. “Within my first week of being here—and at that time it was a four-week program—before I left here, I had taken an application form and sent a letter of resignation to the school.”

Sister Elizabeth said she had been working for a while and had a good salary. “I did give up a lot. I owned an apartment and a car and I used to have holidays in Europe most summers.” But she doesn’t miss the things she used to have. Laughing, she added that now she has five cars instead of one and a much bigger, more beautiful garden—even if she’s much more restricted in how she can use these things.

“I was interviewed on TV either in 2000 or 2001, when I was in Montreal,” sister Elizabeth recalled, “And [the interviewer] wanted me to say that the hardest vow to keep was celibacy... For most sisters, the hardest vow is not poverty, it’s not celibacy—it’s obedience.

“It’s not the obedience of one hundred years ago, where you had to believe without ever asking questions. It’s obedience first of all to God and then through the community and the rules of the community.”

Just before lunch, I had joined the sisters in the convent chapel for the celebration of the Eucharist. I settled into a seat in the chapel, sunlight shafting through a row of windows high above my head, glinting off the pipes of an organ, the crucifix on the wall, the

“Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourself that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

—Luke 12

limestone altar. Sisters and oblates and guests on retreat shuffled in, slipping into the seats around me. The convent has a different sort of quiet, a quality of quiet that probably only comes out when people are used to silence. Peaceful.

Among the readings that day were these verses from Luke 12:

“Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourself that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Later, after I had re-entered the world ‘out there’ with all its rush and sound—waiting on a hot subway platform in the midst of a crowd—I thought about that phrase, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Sister Elizabeth had said, “For each one of us, our poverty is different.” It has a lot to do, it seems, with what you value—where your heart is. With music, with art, with nature, of course with God.

The day I visited was the feast of St. Sergius, the Russian Orthodox saint who himself lived a life of intentional poverty. According to some [accounts](#), he took on his community’s most lowly tasks and, as the abbot of his monastery, wore old, ragged garments so that no one would know his station. As I sat in the chapel at SSJD, the homilist told the story of Saint Sergius and the bear.

A bear, the story goes, would come to visit the monk’s hut in the Russian forest, and he would feed the animal. Often, Sergius did not have enough food for both of them, so he would let the bear eat while he himself went hungry.

His brother monks reproached Sergius for doing this. But, as the story goes, the saint replied: “The bear does not understand fasting.” ■