

before penury drove me back to the only work I know: being a doctor.

Having rediscovered, to my surprise, that this was my true vocation I set out to live the demands of the radical gospel as a resident in a Plymouth hospital. The first thing I knew with great clarity was that I must never own property again. Having given away my house in Chile and sold my Devon home to give the money to the poor I was determined not to be shackled by possessions yet again. I would live in the hospital residency, keep a little of my salary for pocket money and give the rest away to feed the starving of the Third World.

This lasted about three weeks until I made a friend and wanted to ask her to stay for the weekend. Even radical disciples must have someone to play with, I reasoned, but where was she going to sleep? On the floor of your room, you might reasonably answer, but I was forty-four not twenty, and a fretful sleeper at the best of times. That time I was able to borrow a room from the hospital but I realised that if I was to have any kind of social life I must move out of the hospital and find somewhere to live. For the next few weeks I searched for a flat to rent. Not a large flat, of course, just a small home where I could live the simple life and have friends of like mind to stay. The trouble with flats, I discovered, was that there were very few to rent unfurnished and those with furniture were both expensive and decorated in a style which did not particularly appeal to me. I was bemoaning this fact to one of my colleagues, a man twenty years my junior, when he said to me in an exasperated voice, 'But why don't you *buy* a flat, like the rest of us? The mortgage payments work out cheaper than the rent.'

So much for my ambition not to own property! I took his advice and set out to buy a flat. It would be a small one, inexpensive so that I would still be in solidarity with the poor (well, the moderately poor!). But of course the simple life does not come naturally to middle-aged middle-class lady doctors and when I contemplated buying a flat in one of the poorer areas of town the nurses laughed at me and said, 'Don't be stupid. You wouldn't be safe to walk in the street at night down there.' Then one day the estate agent rang up and said, 'Doctor Cassidy, we've found your flat!' And so he had: it was an attic flat overlooking the sea in a nice safe part

of town, so I got a mortgage and moved in to live happily ever after.

But the Helder Camara in me was not yet ready to give way to the real Sheila. Determined to be *seen* to be poor I vowed to furnish the place entirely with second-hand things and leave the floors spartanly bare. That was the winter my back went and I spent many agonising moments on my knees trying to sweep the bare stairs with a dust pan and brush. Eventually I gave in and had the place carpeted and bought a vacuum cleaner so that I did not have to bend down. But if a Hoover was a justifiable necessity, a washing machine certainly was not. I would wash my clothes by hand, tramping the sheets and towels underfoot in the bath like the peasants or some crazy monk friends of mine! All that summer my clothes got greyer and greyer until I could bear it no longer and gave a pile of towels and shirts to my cleaning lady to wash at home. (I should have added that somewhere along the way I had acquired a cleaning lady: if I could not be in solidarity with the poor, at least I could give them work!) It took only three weeks for me to calculate that the two pounds a week that I was paying to have shirts and two towels washed would be more intelligently spent on weekly payments on a washing machine so the next Saturday afternoon I abandoned the simple life and bought one.

Perhaps the final fall from my self-styled perch of grace came at the beginning of the winter season when *Brideshed Revisited* was serialised for television. Until then I had stably refused to have more than a transistor radio and tape recorder, but now I could bear it no longer and rushed into town to buy myself a TV.

What then is the lesson to be learned from this 'failure' to live the simple life? I am hesitant to pontificate lest I be accused of justifying my weakness and self-indulgence. I can only observe that each step I made towards the norm for the people among whom I lived left me a little less arrogant and a little less pleased with myself. As the years have passed I have become less rather than more sure of what it means to follow the gospel demands in the middle of a materialist society. What I am quite clear about, however, is that my place, at this moment, is to be planted right in the middle of that society. And the great joke is that, the more I get to know the ordinary people who inhabit this wicked materialist