

“I Recommend You My Beloved Poor ...”

Magdalene of Canossa

☪ What is Poverty?

*... Don't ask me what poverty is because you have seen it in my house.
Look at the roof and count the number of holes. Look at my kitchen utensils and the clothes I wear.
Look everywhere and write down what you see. What you see is poverty.
Kenya, 1997*

Poverty is the lack of basic human needs, such as clean water, nutrition, health care, education, clothing and shelter, because of the inability to afford them. This is also referred to as **absolute poverty or destitution**. **About 1.7 billion people live in absolute poverty.**

Relative poverty is the condition of having fewer resources or less income than others within a society or country, or compared to worldwide averages.

Poor people do not have enough to eat, a place to sleep, or clean water. Their land is poor, there is no water for irrigation, roads are inadequate, and there are no schools for their children. This view of poverty encourages plans to provide the missing things: food, low-cost housing, wells. The unspoken assumption is that when the missing things are provided, the poor will no longer be poor.

Poor people may not understand nutrition, the need to boil water, the importance of child spacing. They do not know about sustainable agriculture, running small businesses, the importance of saving money. This view of poverty invites programming which give importance to education and non-formal learning. It assumes that if the poor simply learn enough, they will no longer be poor.

Poor people lack knowledge about God and the Good News of Jesus Christ. These views of poverty are true and real. People do need things: skills, knowledge and a chance to hear the Gospel.

In the world, extreme poverty borders on wealth. Poverty is **humiliation**, the feeling of being dependent on others, of being forced to accept **offences, contempt, and indifference** when one looks for help. Poverty is an **unacceptable privation** of well-being to which every human being has the right. But what is **privation** and what is unacceptable? Not everyone has the same idea of the concept of poverty nor value equally its causes. For us, the meaning of poverty is not just a question of **low wages and consumption reduced to the minimum**, but even the **difficulty of having access** to an adequate level of education, health services and nutrition. It goes beyond the aspect of money to include the danger and **vulnerability**, powerlessness in respect to the daily uncertainty and the inability of making one's voice heard. The experience of poverty is not just the lack of material well-being but even the **negation of the opportunity** of living a tolerable life. **Life can be shortened.** It can be rendered difficult, painful or casual; it is deprived of dignity and trust. **Poverty limits life.**

If poverty is the absence of things, then the solution is to provide them. This often leads to the outsider becoming the development “Santa Claus”, bringing all good things: food, well-drilling, education and proclamation of the Gospel. The poor are seen as passive recipients, incomplete human beings we make complete and whole, through our generosity. This attitude demeans and devalues the poor.

Our view of them, which quickly becomes their view of themselves, is that they are defective and inadequate. **We do not treat them as human beings made in the image of God.** We act as if God's gifts were given to us and not to the poor. This attitude increases their poverty and tempts us to play god in the lives of the poor.

Second, our attitude about ourselves can become messianic. We are tempted to believe that we are the deliverers of the poor, that we make their lives complete. And this is not good for us.

☪ The Poverty Trap

The family is poor, physically weak, isolated, vulnerable and powerless.

- **Material poverty:** the family has few assets. Its housing and sanitation are inadequate. It has little or no land, livestock or wealth.
- **Physical weakness:** the family members are weak. They lack strength because of poor health and inadequate nutrition. Many in the family are women, the very young, and the very old.
- **Isolation:** the family lacks access to services and information. It is often remote, far from main roads, water lines and even electricity. It lacks access to markets, capital, credit and information.
- **Vulnerability:** the family has few defences against emergencies or disaster. The poor have no reserves and disaster push them to do things they might not wish to do, such as sell land and livestock. Its members lack choices and options. They cannot save and they are vulnerable to cultural demands, such as a dowry, bridal price, feast days, weddings and funerals that soak up savings. These social requirements create a permanent demand for moneylenders, whose usurious rates ensure permanent poverty. Unproductive expenditures reveal vulnerability: expenditures for drink, drugs, radio, shoes, clothes and poor business investments.
- **Powerlessness:** The family lacks the ability and the knowledge to influence life around it and the social systems in which it lives. Powerlessness is an invitation to exploitation by the powerful. The local non-poor often are like nets between the poorer people and the outside world by trapping benefits that are intended for the poor. The local non-poor use deception, blackmail, violence to rob the poor who, in turn, lack recourse to justice, since they do not know the law, cannot afford legal help and fear to offend the patrons on whom they depend. The poor are particularly vulnerable when it comes to being paid for their labour. The power to with-hold work without reason is a powerful bargaining tool.
- **Spiritual poverty:** the family suffers from broken and dysfunctional relationships with God, each other, the community and creation. Its members may suffer from spiritual oppression, fear of spirits, demons and ancestors. They may lack hope and be unable to believe that change is possible. They may never have heard the Gospel or have only responded to a truncated version of the Gospel that lacks transforming power. Isolation from God and the Bible is as significant as not having access to government services, markets and hospitals. The need to find money to eliminate curses and cursing the blessing of the spirits contributes to vulnerability in the same way that disaster and social convention do. *(Robert Chambers)*

We have looked at poverty as deficit, as entanglement, as lack of access to social power, as powerlessness and as lack of freedom to grow. All have added important elements to our picture. And yet poverty is a complicated social issue involving all areas of life: physical, personal, social, cultural and spiritual.

We know that our worldview, education and training allow us to see. We need to be aware of this and work hard at seeing all there is to see.

We doubt there is, or ever will be, a unified theory of poverty. There is always more to see and more to learn.

“Everyday I am afraid of the next.” Russia

“Wasta (nepotism or connections) is the most important thing. If one has wasta then one can work.” Egypt

“Life in the area is so precarious that the youth and every able person have to migrate to the towns or join the army at the war front in order to escape the hazards of hunger escalating over here.” A discussion group in rural Ethiopia

“Today we're fine, tomorrow they will throw us out.” A squatter settlement, Ecuador

“Vulnerability was defined by slum-dwellers as the failure to protect their young daughters from hooligans as well as protect themselves both from the harassment of outsider hoodlums and the police.” Bangladesh,

“The police support their families by just showing their shadow.” Akhuria, Armenia.

“As the state sector contracts, employment opportunities are evaporating.” Ukraine

“After one poor crop, we need three good harvests to return to normal.” Vietnam

“If you don't have money today, your disease will take you to your grave.” An old woman from Ghana

☞ Fighting Poverty to Build Peace

Poverty is often a contributory factor or a compounding element in conflicts, including armed ones. In turn, these conflicts fuel further tragic situations of poverty. “Our world shows increasing evidence of another grave threat to peace: many individuals and indeed whole peoples are living today in conditions of extreme poverty. The gap between rich and poor has become more marked, even in the most economically developed nations. This is a problem which the conscience of humanity cannot ignore, since the conditions in which a great number of people are living are an insult to their innate dignity and as a result are a threat to the authentic and harmonious progress of the world community.”

If it were a question of material poverty alone, then the social sciences, which enable us to measure phenomena on the basis of mainly quantitative data, would be sufficient to illustrate its principal characteristics. Yet we know that other, non-material forms of poverty exist which are not the direct and automatic consequence of material deprivation. For example, in advanced wealthy societies, there is evidence of *marginalization*, as well as *affective, moral and spiritual poverty*, seen in people whose interior lives are disoriented and who experience various forms of malaise despite their economic prosperity. On the one hand, I have in mind what is known as “moral underdevelopment”, and on the other hand the negative consequences of “superdevelopment”. Nor can I forget that, in so-called “poor” societies, economic growth is often hampered by *cultural impediments* which lead to inefficient use of available resources. It remains true, however, that every form of externally imposed poverty has at its root a lack of respect for the transcendent dignity of the human person. When man is not considered within the total context of his vocation, and when the demands of a true “human ecology” are not respected, the cruel forces of poverty are unleashed, as is evident in certain specific areas that I shall now consider briefly one by one.

In the **Encyclical Letter Centesimus Annus**, John Paul II warned of the need to “abandon a mentality in which the poor – as individuals and as peoples – are considered a burden, as irksome intruders trying to consume what others have produced.” The poor, he wrote, “ask for the right to share in enjoying material goods and to make good use of their capacity for work, thus creating a world that is more just and prosperous for all”. In today's globalized world, it is increasingly evident that peace can be built only if everyone is assured the possibility of reasonable growth: sooner or later, the distortions produced by unjust systems have to be paid for by everyone. It is utterly foolish to build a luxury home in the midst of desert or decay. Globalization on its own is incapable of building peace, and in many cases, it actually creates divisions and conflicts. If anything it points to a need: to be oriented towards a goal of profound solidarity that seeks the

good of each and all. In this sense, globalization should be seen as a good opportunity to achieve something important in the fight against poverty and to place at the disposal of justice and peace, resources which were scarcely conceivable previously.

The Church's social teaching has always been concerned with the poor ... new forms of poverty were gradually explored, as the scope of the social question widened to reach global proportions. This expansion of the social question to the worldwide scale has to be considered not just as a quantitative extension, but also as a qualitative growth in the understanding of man and the needs of the human family. For this reason, while attentively following the current phenomena of globalization and their impact on human poverty, the Church points out the new aspects of the social question, not only in their breadth but also in their depth, insofar as they concern man's identity and his relationship with God. These principles of social teaching tend to clarify the links between poverty and globalization and they help to guide action towards the building of peace. Among these principles, it is timely to recall in particular the "preferential love for the poor", in the light of the primacy of charity, which is attested throughout Christian tradition, beginning with that of the early Church (cf. *Acts* 4:32-36; *1 Cor* 16:1; *2 Cor* 8-9; *Gal* 2:10).

"Everyone should put his hand to the work which falls to his share, at once and immediately", wrote Leo XIII in 1891, and he added: "In regard to the Church, her cooperation will never be wanting, be the time or the occasion what it may." It is in the same spirit that the Church to this day carries out her work for the poor, in whom she sees Christ, and she constantly hears, echoing in her heart, the command of the Prince of Peace to his Apostles: "*Vos date illis manducare – Give them something to eat yourselves.*" (*Lk* 9:13) Faithful to this summons from the Lord, the Christian community will never fail, then, to assure the entire human family of her support through gestures of creative solidarity, not only by "giving from one's surplus", but above all by "a change of life- styles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies." At the start of the New Year, then, **I extend to every disciple of Christ and to every person of good will a warm invitation to expand their hearts to meet the needs of the poor and to take whatever practical steps are possible in order to help them. The truth of the axiom cannot be refuted: "to fight poverty is to build peace."** *Benedict XVI*

The Word of God

God, give your own justice to the king, your own righteousness to the royal son,
so that he may rule your people rightly and your poor with justice.

Let the mountains and hills bring a message of peace for the people.

Uprightly he will defend the poorest, he will save the children of those in need,
and crush their oppressors.

In his days virtue will flourish, a universal peace till the moon is no more.

He will free the poor man who calls to him and those who need help,
he will have pity on the poor and feeble and save the lives of those in need;

he will redeem their lives from exploitation and outrage, their lives will be precious in his sight.

Prayer will be offered for him costantly, blessings invoked on him all day long.

Grain everywhere in the country, even on the mountain tops,
abundant as Lebanon its harvest, luxuriant as common grass!

Blessed be his name for ever, enduring as long as the sun!

May every race in the world be blessed in him and all the nations call him blessed!

Blessed be Yahweh, the God of Israel, who alone perform these marvels!

Blessed for ever be his glorious name, may the whole world be filled with his glory!

Amen, Amen!