

"Poverty as a Spiritual Challenge: Do Catholics know the Face of the Poor?"

FADICA Conference, Salt Lake City, Utah

June 1, 2001

INTRODUCTION

Thank you so much for inviting me to the "mountain top" today and share some of your precious moments together.

There are many types of poverty. It's interesting that even in the two versions of the beatitudes of Jesus, the one in Matthew and the one in Luke, there two interpretations. In Matthew, where the theme of this symposium takes its name, we find the expression, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Luke simply states, "Blessed are the poor." I have heard from scripture scholars that Luke refers to the literally and materially poor, while Matthew makes it more inclusive to embrace everyone deprived of anything. In this way, we are all poor, for in different ways, and at different times, we are all deprived of something.

In this symposium we will, I presume, focus on the materially poor and the deprivations which this poverty brings to peoples' lives.

I. SEEING THE POOR NOT AS PROBLEM BUT AS PRINCIPAL BUILDERS

I remember a Latin American theologian saying that there are five kinds of poor. First, there are those who are born with a physical or mental handicap. Secondly, there are those who suffer from a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, a flood or a hurricane. Thirdly, there are those who are poor because they are lazy. He explained that there were relatively few of these. Fourthly, there are those who are poor because they are kept poor, through injustice and poor treatment. Finally there are those who are poor because they dedicate themselves and give their lives to the cause of the poor.

When I think of the poor, my memories go back to my missionary experiences as a seminarian and young priest in Mexico. My first trip to the missions in Mexico took me to an impoverished shanty town just outside of Mexico City. The poorest part of that poor town was an area called Los Hornos, the name for kilns or ovens used for firing crude and cheap bricks. The fuel used were old discarded tires. When they fired the brick, the entire town was engulfed in toxic, ugly, black, smelly smoke. I dreaded visiting people there. The people, including the children, seldom washed or bathed. The soot seemed to be caked on the children's faces. They drank pulque, a strong potent fermented cactus juice, whose smell made me want to empty my stomach.

One morning, another seminarian and I were visiting families in Los Hornos. We noticed a small group of people gather in front of one of the adobe shacks. Thinking it was some kind of family fiesta, we approached them. They were in no festive mood. We were invited to come in and there we saw the body of the principal breadwinner, the husband and father, laid out on the floor. Everyone in the one-room house was crying. Just crying. We discovered they didn't know what to do. They seemed completely helpless. They didn't know how they would bury the deceased,

much less what they would do to survive later on. We were able, through other parishioners, to get the poor man buried.

What struck me is that the very poor are helpless, chronically helpless. Poverty is so insidious it affects the very soul, the heart and every emotion of the human person. Yet, most human persons are so resilient, fundamentally grounded in an intuitive sense of their dignity, that, in my opinion, it doesn't take much to empower them and help them help themselves. They are even capable of helping the rest of us see and touch the living God. For we are told in scripture that in the face of poor, we will find the face of Jesus. In the psalms, there is the recurrent prayer, "I long to see the face of God." In seeing the face of God we are made whole. In seeing the face of God we are made holy. I firmly believe this.

Something more can be said about the poor being our salvation. For one thing, their presence and their efforts to break the cycle of poverty are a reminder to us not to be overly anxious with the allurements of this world.

The Holy Father, on the advent of the Jubilee Year, spoke of the opportunity that people living in poverty present to all of humanity:

"The advancement of the poor constitutes a great opportunity for the moral, cultural, and even economic growth of all humanity. Let us look at the poor not as a problem, but as people who can become the principal builders of a new and more human future for everyone."

I believe that this is borne out in the immigrant stories of our own families. The strong nation that we enjoy is due to the struggles, toil, and ingenuity of our immigrant families. The Pope's vision is correct, poor people themselves become the builders of a more human future for all of us. Empowering the poor is the best investment we can make for what the Holy Father often calls the "civilization of love."

In this line, I very much want to share what Father Gustavo Gutiérrez told us once. The most radical expression of the New Testament is the "Our Father," because there we acknowledge that since there is one Father, we are all his family, brothers and sisters all. As Father, God does not want any of his children to take advantage of one another. On the contrary, he wants us to care for each other and make sure that no one is deprived of anything they need. As parent he wants there to be peace among his children, as any parent would want. Father Gutiérrez went on to say that since evangelization is bringing the Good News that God is our Father, we know we have preached the Good News effectively when the poor themselves begin to evangelize. For me this means that evangelization for the poor involves more than just words.

II. THE CALL TO HOLINESS AND THE ISSUE OF POVERTY

I will, first of all, try to address the issue of poverty in connection with the call to holiness. This is another way of speaking of the challenge of holiness, that wholeness to which we are all called. One of the major landmarks of the Second Vatican Council was its message on the "universal call to holiness." Actually St. Paul had said it almost two thousand years before: "God

chose us in him before the world began, to be holy and blameless in his sight, to be full of love..." (Ephesians 1:4).

In his interventions at the Synod on the Laity some years ago, the Cardinal Primate of Ireland said, "Patty O'Shea was a good man. He never missed Mass on Sunday. Patty O'Shea died and went to hell for what he did on Monday."

For me, this expression speaks volumes on what spirituality or holiness is all about. Our spiritual selves cannot be separated from our lives. Our lived out discipleship in what we say and do is as much an expression of our spirituality as are our precious quiet moments by ourselves dedicated to personal communion with God.

On the one hand, our active lives can suffer from the lack of meaning, direction, depth and authenticity, if they are not fed by personal prayer and private reflection. On the other, our spiritual selves can be meaningless and empty if they do not spill out into works of justice, charity, and solidarity. The way we relate with others is the test of our relationship with God. In his first letter, St. John says it very clearly: "One who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen" (I Jn. 4:20).

St. Matthew gives the same idea: "None of you who cry out, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of God but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt. 7:21). For me this transcends the oft-quoted phrase, "Accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior." Matthew gives his message within the context of the sermon on the mount that included the greatest challenges of Jesus as found in the beatitudes. They begin with the theme of this symposium: "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt. 5:3).

Christian spirituality concerns and embraces the whole life of a person, a life renewed, transformed and transfigured by the Spirit of God. It is not simply the "interior life." It is directed towards the implementation of both commandments of Christ, to love God and to love neighbor.

The prophets in the Old Testament often refer to the poor and their treatment by the powerful and the wealthy. But one of the greatest of the prophets is not included among the prophetic books. I am referring to the Book of Job, found in the Bible in the "wisdom" books. My contention that Job is a prophet is based on the dramatic story of his life. He "had it all" and then lost it all. Through his ordeal of losing his wife, children, livestock and all his possessions, he held on to his faith. He is challenged again and again by his inquisitors and when he gives his final argument about the goodness of God, Job explains that his righteousness is due to his practice of justice and compassion. The following words are at the heart of Job's defense.

"When I went forth to the gate of the city and set up my seat in the square... the elders rose up and stood: the chief men refrained from speaking and covered their mouths with their hands; the voice of the princes was silenced, and their tongues stuck to the roofs of their mouths.

"For me they listened and waited; they were silent for my counsel. Once I spoke, they said no more, but received my pronouncement drop by drop. They waited for me as for the rain; they drank in my words like the spring rains. When I smiled on them they were reassured; mourners

took comfort from my cheerful glance.... whoever heard of me blessed me; those who saw me commended me. For I rescued the poor who cried out for help, the orphans, and the unassisted; the blessing of those in extremity came upon me, and the heart of the widow I made joyful. I wore my honesty like a garment; justice was my robe and my turban.

"I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame was I; I was a father to the needy; the rights of the stranger I studied, and I broke the jaws of the wicked man; from his teeth I forced the prey. Then I said; 'In my own nest I shall grow old; I shall multiply years like the phoenix. My root is spread out to the waters; the dew rests by night on my branches. My glory is fresh within me, and my bow is renewed in my hand'" (Jb. 29:720).

The message of Job is simply this to be right with God, one must be right with everyone else.

III. HOW WELL DO WE KNOW THE FACE OF THE POOR?

The prevalence of poverty is of course, global. The UNICEF report on children issued at the end of the year 2000 says that in 1999, eleven million children under the age of five died from causes traceable to poverty, most in Africa, and that many of the illnesses that killed them are easily preventable with the right combination of hygiene and medicine. The numbers are staggering: 30,500 children under five die every day, representing 1,270 child fatalities every hour, 21 every minute, or one every three seconds.

In this country, especially during the waves of immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries, we as Catholics were very familiar with families and individuals who struggled with poverty. Perhaps our parents and grandparents struggled with poverty themselves. As many recent historical studies have shown, many American Catholics have moved into the mainstream of American economic and political life.

As many Catholics have moved to the suburbs they have distanced themselves from the poor and are very likely to miss seeing their face. Of course numerous Catholics in our country still struggle with poverty, especially children, the elderly, the immigrant, and they can be found in urban as well as in rural settings.

The poor that I face are along the U.S.-Mexican border. The other day I had to meet with one of my neighboring bishops on the Mexican side. We met in Palomas, a small town just south of the border from Columbus, New Mexico, which, by the way, is the only place on the continental United States ever attacked by foreigners. Pancho Villa and his troops did so on March 8, 1916, during the Mexican Revolution.

In Palomas, there must have been hundreds of men walking, seemingly aimlessly, around the town, other sitting around the town plaza. When I asked what they were doing, I was told they were waiting to cross the border into the U.S., legally or illegally. The local parish would like to have a soup kitchen for these people. All they can do is give them a can of food, and sometimes they have a hard time opening the can for lack of a can opener. For me this was sad and a small sample of what's going on a daily basis from the California to the South Texas border.

Incidentally, as reported in a recent series of bi-lateral U.S.-Mexico conversations held before President Bush and President Fox who met a few months ago, the present immigrant influx from whatever part of the world, will be very important for our country in the future. The American work force, without the present arrival of immigrants, will not be enough to support the funding through our Social Security system to take care of those who will qualify for Social Security benefits in the future.

Many legal residents live in the surrounding area of Las Cruces, New Mexico, in what are called colonias. These are unincorporated settlements along the border with Mexico. In our area there are 37 of these colonias, many of which have never had running water, sanitary sewer systems, or other basic infrastructure systems. Residents of these settlements are almost all legal. Their homes are ramshackle old trailers and crude houses. These people share seemingly insurmountable obstacles that keep them from economic advancement, racial discrimination and exploitation, scarce housing, inaccessible roads, and the lack of sanitary water and sewer services. The school bus won't stop on the rutted dirt roads to pick up their children. The field workers receive incredibly low wages for the tedious and hard work in the chile and onion fields.

The Diocese of Las Cruces was instrumental in starting the "Colonias Development Council" with help from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). The main idea behind the Council's community organization, leadership development and educational efforts is that of recognizing that the people themselves have the greatest asset: that of their intelligence, their collaboration and hard work.

An example of what they can do to help themselves is what they are doing to bring in potable water to their colonias. In the Milagro colonia the neighboring town officials refused to build the infrastructure necessary. They said the colonia wasn't "dense" enough. The people were told they would have to come up with \$1.4 million. With the technical assistance of Border Water-Works, Inc., they were able to do the job with \$125,000 which over an extended period of time, they raised. They learned to operate backhoes and make the proper connections. "Sweat equity" they call it.

Mr. Antonio Luján, founder of the Colonias Development Council, shares an important wisdom learned from this and similar experiences:

"Don't romanticize the poor, they aren't noble savages. There may be an inequitable distribution of resources, but there's an equitable distribution of personalities. Our commitment to contribute is because they are poor, not because they are saints. You have to see beyond any immediate obstacles to the long-term common good. Meet people where they are, not where you want them to be."

In all this the words of St. Paul come to mind: "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may prove what is the will of God - what is good, and acceptable, and perfect."(Rom. 12:2).

IV. THE REALITY OF POVERTY IN THE U.S.

How really present is poverty in this country? Hasn't poverty passed us by, with all of the stock market and technological booms of the last several years? There are some interesting contrasts both between the U.S. and the world and within our own country.

In 1975, with 5.2 percent of the world's population, the United States produced approximately 12 percent of the world's income and enjoyed about one-quarter of the globe's collected wealth. In 1999, with 4.1 percent of the world's population in the United States, 29 percent of the world's income and one-third of the world's wealth found its way to this country. Given facts like these, one might conclude that this nation is composed primarily of wealthy people. However, the prosperity here is concentrated in a small proportion of the population, and many others find it necessary to struggle in order to make ends meet in this very wealthy nation.

So what to do? And where do we see progress and find hope? The Pope gave us a hint and some hope in this message:

"It is my hope that Christians at every level will become promoters of practical initiatives to ensure an equitable distribution of resources and the promotion of the complete development of every individual."

I find my hope in those practical initiatives that promote full human development, many of which our Church, and many of your foundations, have supported and which we will hear about just this morning in our panel.

I also found great hope during my time as Chairman of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development in the projects that we are able to support, through the generosity of Catholics in the annual Catholic Campaign parish appeal. We are able to give out \$10 million every year, given dollar by dollar from Catholics around the country. Through CCHD we serve as a grant maker - supporting projects which poor people themselves initiate and lead in their communities, projects which attack the very causes of poverty and work for full human development.

The Catholic Campaign also has an education mission, because the bishops at its founding felt that the solidarity of non-poor Catholics with those who were poor was an important factor in the alleviation of poverty. As part of this effort, we launched a public education campaign last January, and designated January as Poverty in America awareness month. The campaign is called "Poverty USA" and consists of an excellent media campaign centered around the concept of poverty as a state in this country. If poverty were a state, the 32 million people living in it would make it the second largest state in the country, bigger than Texas, Florida or New York - and with more people than the states of Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, and Nevada combined.

For a family of four, the federally defined poverty level was \$17,184 in 1999. Although this is the official poverty level, a 2000 poll revealed that most Americans believe it takes at least \$35,000 annually for a family of four to make ends meet. There is an excellent cyber-tour that you can take of "Poverty USA" on the campaign's website, www.povertyusa.org, that enables you to imagine what it would be like to live on this income with a family of four. I urge you to try it.

The ranks of the poor in our country include:

- 23 percent of African American and Hispanic families; 7.7 percent of white non-Hispanic families;
- 20 percent of farmers;
- higher numbers of people living in the South and in urban areas;
- 20 percent of non-naturalized immigrants;

I was informed by Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Gallup, New Mexico, that there is a 30 percent unemployment rate in the diocese, with 50 to 75 percent unemployment rate in the Native American reservations. The living conditions of the Native Americans are the same as they are for the colonias in the Las Cruces area as described above. Catholic Charities says that there are many social ills associated with poverty among the Native Americans such as alcoholism, domestic violence, high school drop-out rates, and a high rate of teen pregnancies.

In addition, the elderly of our country are hard hit. Among those age 65 years or over, 9.7 percent live in poverty. But more children than seniors live in poverty: 16.9 percent of children under age 18 are poor. That number rises to 50 percent for children under age six living in a female headed household. Nearly half of all poor people in the U.S. suffer from "chronic poverty," which means that they have lived or will live below the poverty level for more than two years.

By age 35, about 31 percent of the U.S. population will have experienced a year in poverty. By age 65, the figure rises to 51 percent, and by age 85 it exceeds 66 percent.

Young people have confirmed their innate agreement with papal and episcopal - not to mention Gospel - teachings on poverty issues. In a survey conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) during the Jubilee Year, 79 percent of young Catholics indicated that "helping those in need is very important to what it means to be Catholic" and 48 percent stated that "opportunities to help the poor and needy make them more likely to participate in parish life." Here our very own young people are calling us back to Jesus' principle: a preferential option for the poor.

The effects of poverty, moreover, go far beyond the raw data which we just reviewed. Because of reduced access to quality health care, poor people are more susceptible to disease and death at any age; the infant mortality rate among the poor is almost double that among the affluent population in this country. Malnutrition, hunger, and homelessness are daily threats to those who are poor. These same people must travel further and pay more to obtain food and household goods. They are more likely to be crime victims and, when they commit crimes, serve longer sentences than those who are not poor. Poverty often translates into decaying housing, unstable relationships, uncomfortable and inconvenient transportation, and the inability to plan ahead for more than a few days. Poverty threatens not just human dignity, not just spiritual development, but life itself, and the quality of life, of those who are poor.

In 1989, a Medical Missionary, Sister Myrtle Keller, Ob-Gyn, came to work at our city-county hospital. Sister Myrtle found the living conditions of the people in the colonias to be at the third-

world poverty level as she had found in her missionary work in Africa. It was as bad as anything she had ever seen. Sister Myrtle found that 48 percent of the women who delivered infants came to the emergency room without any pre-natal care. She decided to do something about this. As an ob-gyn, she began pre-natal care for these women that same year.

In 1991, under her inspiration, the hospital began a pediatric clinic. A few years later, they began what is called the "First Step Express," a mobile unit that goes out to the colonias several times a week in order to care for these women and children who do not have transportation to travel to the hospital. Since 1989, with the "First Step" pre-natal program, 14,000 infants have been delivered, which translates to 55 percent of all children that were delivered at the hospital, the only hospital in the county. Since the pre-natal care program began, the hospital has seen approximately 145,000 patients. In the year 2000, the "First Step Express" saw 22,000 patients.

Presently, the pediatric clinic is housed in pre-fabricated units, and we are searching for monies to build more adequate facilities. This effort may be the most important pro-life project in our part of the world.

Again, Our Holy Father gives us some excellent food for thought - in his same message at the close of the Jubilee Year - and calls us into relationships of solidarity with people who are struggling to break the cycle of poverty:

"Christians must learn to make their act of faith in Christ by discerning his voice in the cry for help that rises from this world of poverty ... Now is the time for a new 'creativity' in charity, not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by 'getting close' to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters." (*Tertio Millenio Ineunte*, #50)

When I was working at the Mexican American Cultural Center, we had a special sabbatical program for women religious. Many of these had been teachers in Catholic colleges and high schools. Some had been administrators in hospitals, and others in leadership positions in their various religious communities. Hardly any of them had ever worked in poverty situations. The program they underwent included several days in the poverty stricken area in the Rio Grande valley in south Texas. They included visits to the poor urban areas of San Antonio, Texas, and lectures and presentations by those involved directly in poverty programs. At the end of the program, I remember asking these women what they were going to do with what they had received. I remember in particular the answer of one sister who, all her religious life, had worked with middle-class Catholics. She said, "Father, I don't think I could ever work directly with the poor. After seeing their plight, I could never live like them nor work in their living environment. But what I believe I am able to do is to be an advocate for them, and in my work with the well-off, I can tell them about what I learned in this program."

This is probably where many of us are. We can relate with the honest expressions of that sister, yet it would not be a bad idea for some of us to spend some time with directly living and working, at least for a short while, with the poor, and that way we can say that we have walked in their shoes and have been in solidarity with them in ways other than simply writing out checks.

Eliminating poverty, even just in this country, is a formidable task. One of the greatest challenges we have is to raise the consciousness of all Americans about the presence of poverty and what a responsibility it demands. Americans are among the most generous in the world when it comes to giving to charity; it is with issues having to do with the roots of poverty where we balk. How are we going to educate our people to think beyond charity and enter the Gospel realm of justice? This means giving attention to the economic structures which have a negative impact on the situation of the poor. As I explained at the beginning of this paper, some are poor because they are kept poor through oppression and unjust situations.

The church cannot do it alone, neither can the government. Even groups of strong foundations, such as FADICA, cannot do it alone. The corporate world, even those who operate with a social conscience - and many do - cannot, by themselves, do it alone. It will take a joint effort of all of us together, and even so, there will be many Americans who will fall through the cracks, but we would have at least done our best to relate with the final message of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew:

"The sheep he will place on his right hand, the goats on his left. The King will say to those on his right: 'Come. You have my Father's blessing! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me, in prison and you came to visit me.... I assure you as often as you did it for one of my least brothers (and sisters), you did it for me.'" (Mt. 25:33-40)

And we look forward to hearing examples of our Church and sisters and brothers in solidarity with God's poor in this morning's panel.