

The Response of Catholic Educators to Poverty

"Catholic educators must wage a war against the hyperindividualism of American society," Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, N.M., said in his keynote address Feb. 13 to the Mile-Hi Religious Education Congress in Denver. At the same time, he urged educators to have confidence in Catholic people. "As long as we educate according to the message of justice inherent in the Gospel, our people will respond; they are smart enough, astute enough and resourceful enough to come up with creative ways in which to implement economic justice," Ramirez said. He encouraged a two-pronged response of Catholics to social inequities: "to educate the non-poor about the poor, but also the poor about their rights and privileges as human beings." Among their tasks, Catholic educators must come up with creative ways to invite, welcome and keep children of poor families in Catholic schools, he said. Ramirez said that in educating the non-poor, educators need to realize that "there are simply too many stereotypes out there regarding the poor," stereotypes which need to be addressed. His text follows.

"The just will ask him: 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or see you thirsty and give you drink?' ... Then those on the left in turn will ask: 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or away from home or naked or ill or in prison and not attend you in your needs?'" (Mt. 25).

These are challenging as well as haunting words. Every time that we listen to these words or read them in Scripture we cannot help but be moved to the marrow of our bones. "I assure you, as often as you neglected to do it to one of these least ones, you neglected to do it to me." Because the Gospel is so full of radical statements we could very well remain immune to the shock effect of this text, especially since we have heard it again and again and heard countless sermons and homilies based on it. Nonetheless, it is important that we come back to these words and be moved not only by way of insight, but also, and most important, to action on behalf of the poor in our midst.

I am so very much aware that a topic of this sort can be very depressing and negative. You are probably suspecting that this speaker is going to paint a very dismal portrayal of the present situation of the poor. Well, you are right. However, I also would like to inform you at the outset that I have struggled in preparing this presentation to give you

hope and to provide at least a few avenues of response to these signs of the times to specific and concrete responses.

Before we leave the text with which we are beginning this morning, I would call your attention to the questions Jesus provoked in the minds and mouths of both the just and the unjust in the parable. The question is, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or away from home or naked or ill or in prison?" In other words, the provocation is emphatically on the issue of *seeing*. The decisions of all of us to act on behalf of the least of our brothers and sisters are dependent not only on acting, but first of all on seeing, on being aware and not only at the level of intellect and factual knowledge: *Seeing* in the biblical sense means seeing in a holistic way and even experiencing that which we are called to see. Those who are most moved to act in charity and justice are those who have experienced the plight of the poor, the homeless, the neglected of our society.

I am full of admiration for our returning missionaries from the Third World, whether they return from Latin America, Asia or Africa. These returning men and women bring with them the rich perspective and deep insight on the world from the viewpoint of the poor. But their insight is always unavoidably connected to their commitment on behalf of charity and justice. Some of these people are probably present among you, and even though sometimes terribly difficult to live with, nonetheless, they egg us on to accept what is surely the most challenging of all statements of the Gospel.

The problem then is that we simply do not see. This probably comes not so much from not being able to see, but most likely from the fact that we do not want to see because what is around us is painful and ugly. When Archbishop Roger Mahony took over the Archdiocese of Los Angeles a couple of years ago, he stressed that very often we do not see the poor because we are so busy scurrying about our own business: We drive on our efficient freeways, we go so fast we do not see — we drive over the reality down below, and we simply miss the truth of it all. Sometimes we read statistics in the newspapers and magazines and we forget that behind the cold, hard, statistical facts are the faces of neglected and forgotten children, elderly, the unemployed and hungry who are very much part of the reality of our present world.

I myself am a good example of this sad state of affairs. It was only after

two or three years of my being in Las Cruces that I came to realize just how poor the surrounding area of Las Cruces actually is. It finally dawned on me that I lived in one of the poorest areas of the United States, that it has one of the highest unemployment rates and some of the poorest children in our society.

We probably do not see in the real way that I am trying to describe because there are simply too many images before us on the television screen and in our newspapers. We hear so many words day in and day out that it is difficult to make out the sound of people hurting and difficult to discern the cry of the poor. We see so many faces from one moment to another that we easily pass over the faces of fear and hopelessness that characterize the poor. It is too bad that sometimes we regard the poor as humble and quaint, happy without the baggage that the rich have to carry in the way of luxury items and material comforts.

In debating with a married couple of middle-class means in my own diocese regarding the plight of the farm workers in the Las Cruces Valley, I was shocked by the wife, who said, "Bishop, we should not be concerned about those people. After all, they work out here on the farms and don't have the expenses of the people who work in the city. For example, they don't have to worry about buying lunch in a restaurant like we do. And, if you don't mind my saying, bishop, doesn't the church have more important things to do than to get involved in these matters?"

But this attitude exists not only in Las Cruces or only in our own country. When I was in the Philippines, on one occasion I gave a retreat to a very wealthy group of people, and after my talk on social justice one of them asked me, "Father, why are you so concerned about the poor? Didn't our Lord say that the poor we will always have with us?" It was as if to say the Lord himself said they would be here; therefore, there is nothing we can do about it.

Where did the words Jesus said about the poor come from? Most of the things that Jesus said and that are written in the New Testament have their origins in the Old Testament. Of course, Jesus builds on what is said in the covenant of Moses, although he often departs radically from the older Jewish teaching tradition. The current difficulties with the apparent violation of human rights in what is now Israel could make us forget that the rich tradition in economic and social justice has its roots in Jewish tradi-

tion. The wisdom of Jewish tradition, in turn, is based upon centuries of profound reflection on God's word, a reflection that went hand in hand with human experience. That wisdom comes from people who themselves experienced injustice and the violation of human dignity. They *saw*, in the deepest sense of the word, and therefore could reflect deeply upon that experience and pass on that reflection to future generations, including our own.

The pastoral on the economy issued by the Catholic bishops of the United States begins with a biblical perspective. We begin with the basic premise that "the dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is a criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured."¹ Human personhood, we state, must be respected with a reverence that is religious.

When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. An expression of this regard for the other person can be seen when we go to holy communion and realize that when we say "amen" after the eucharistic minister says "the body of Christ," we are affirming not only that God is present in this holy bread, but that God is also present in me as a person created in God's image and likeness and, further, that God is present in the person who is giving me communion, in the person who just went to communion, in the person about to go to communion after me and in all those who will not be going to communion with us. In other words, the same reverence that I give to Christ, I must give to everyone; and I must bow before every one of my brothers and my sisters and do so in all humility because in every individual, young or old, black, brown or white, poor or rich, is the attraction, excitement, beauty and fascination of the burning bush before which I must remove my sandals and kneel in worshipful reverence.

The Scriptures contain many passages that speak directly of economic life. Together with the Bible's understanding of God, of the purpose of creation, is the repeated theme of the dignity of human life in society. The fundamental conviction of our faith is that human life is fulfilled in the knowledge and love of the living God in communion with others. The call to faith response is both to God and the human person. We cannot approach God, the origin of creation, without a merciful regard for God's creatures. We can only be in communion with God if we are in communion with those around us. In other words, we can be neither holy nor whole unless we are moved by the presence of those around us and unless we accept their touch.

We discover in Scripture that

God does not abandon any one of God's children. Isn't this, after all, the great teaching of Jesus himself regarding the kingdom? His kingdom excludes absolutely no one. Every single person who enters into this world, no matter in what condition, is the object of God's love. How can I love God and not love the objects of God's love?

What I am talking about is the starting point of the bishops in the economic pastoral. At the heart of the pastoral's message is a carefully thought out reflection on the covenant of Israel and of the covenant of the reign of God as announced by Jesus:²

"When the people of Israel, our forerunners in faith, gathered in thanksgiving to renew their covenant, they recalled the gracious deeds of God. When they lived as aliens in a strange land and experienced oppression and slavery, they cried out and the Lord, the God of their ancestors, heard their cries, knew their afflictions and came to deliver them. By leading them out of Egypt, God created a people that was to be the Lord's very own. They were to imitate God by treating the alien and the slave in their midst as God had treated them."

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In other words, the people of Israel remembered. But their remembering was not a simple exercise of the memory. It was a recollection that was accompanied by compassion, mercy and commitment. Their remembering echoed the mind and heart of Yahweh toward those who suffer. The calling to mind of the deeds of the God of Israel evoked in the Hebrews an attitude of mercy toward the hurting in their presence much as Yahweh had been moved to mercy with their ancestors. As we study the demands of the covenant and the law of Israel, we cannot but notice the constant and persistent recurrence of the themes of respect, compassion, justice, benevolent regard for those who suffer.

Even though the bishops do not refer explicitly to the Book of Job, I believe that we can find there the same theme of economic justice as is found in the books of Isaiah, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah and others. When Job is giving his final argument about the goodness of God even though he has been beset by trial after trial, he refers to his own uprightness precisely because he has been a practitioner of justice and compassion. The following quote is

from the heart of Job's argument:

"When I went forth to the gate of the city and set up my seat in the square — then the young men saw me and withdrew, while 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. 29:7-20).

These words are echoed in the Beatitudes as Jesus himself describes the kingdom of his Father:

"How blessed are the poor in spirit; the reign of God is theirs. Blessed too are the sorrowing; they shall be consoled. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for holiness; they shall have their fill. Blessed are they who show mercy; mercy shall be theirs. Blessed are the peacemakers; they shall be called children of God" (Mt. 5:3-12).

This is the challenge to be as God is. This section of Matthew ends with the Beatitude: "Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful." To walk in the ways of justice and love is to live out the dual command of love, of loving God with our whole hearts, minds and souls and our neighbors as ourselves. This dual command of love is at the basis of all Christian morality, and the neighbor described in the parable of the good Samaritan is not only the person in need, but also the person who helps, the one who, not withstanding his or her racial or social background, assists with unbelievable benevolence the one who was crying for mercy. In other words, your neighbor is your brother or your sister who exercises compassion. Your neighbor might just be a Mormon or a Jehovah's

contrary to popular belief, poor people work. The problem is that they either do not work enough because they cannot find full-time employment or else they are not paid enough for the work they do.

Did you know that most of the poor people in the United States do not receive welfare?

Do you realize that children constitute the poorest age group in the United States?

Do you know that most of the poor in the United States are white?

In 1986, whites represented 69 percent of the poor; blacks represented 28 percent; and other races represented 3 percent. Nevertheless, it is true that people of color of all ages are disproportionately poor. While the 1986 poverty rate for white Americans was 11 percent, the poverty rate for blacks was 31.1 percent and for Hispanics 27.3 percent.⁹

Another interesting item is that farmers have the highest poverty rate in the country. Most of today's homeless people are not deinstitutionalized mental patients; over two-thirds of the homeless are not suffering from severe emotional problems. Many people do not know, and perhaps there are some among us today, that many Americans are going hungry. In 1985, according to the Physicians' Task Force on Hunger, about 20 million people in the United States, including 3 million children, were hungry at some point each month. It goes without saying that poor people in our country are getting poorer; there is an increasing number of poor.

The other side of the coin is that the rich families are getting richer and receive a bigger portion of the American pie. In 1986, for example, the poorest fifth of all U.S. families received 4.6 percent of the total national family income. At the same time, the wealthiest fifth received 43.7 percent of the total. Even the middle class is caught in the crunch. In 1986, the middle fifth of all U.S. families received only 16.8 percent of the total national family income, the lowest share recorded for this group since 1947.¹⁰

I ask you, religious educators of Catholics in the United States, what would happen if the 52 million Catholics of this country were educated and mobilized around the concern for economic justice? Suppose we would educate only half of the Catholics or one-quarter of the Catholics or even 10 percent of the Catholics? (I feel like Abraham in the Book of Genesis!) What would happen if our religion textbooks would have a heavy dose of the principles expressed in the letter on economic justice?

What would happen if at least 10 percent of our families would sit down and talk about these matters every so often? It is being suggested by the of-

fice of implementation for the pastoral letter that family members be invited to pray regularly before meals for people in need or to contact their local Aid to Families with Dependent Children office, ask how much assistance a family similar in size to theirs might receive and reflect on the difficulties of living on this amount.¹¹

What would happen if all our Catholic institutions or at least 10 percent of them were to constantly examine their structures and policies in the light of economic justice (including chanceries)?

The same office for implementation for the economic pastoral letter will soon be inviting the Catholics of the United States to sign a statement and thus publicly declare support for the pastoral's message. This will be a modest but sure beginning. We must in this entire process of implementation have confidence in our own Catholic folks. I do not think there is a need to guide our Catholic people by the hand; as long as we educate according to the message of justice inherent in the Gospel, our people will respond; they are smart enough, astute enough and resourceful enough to come up with creative ways in which to implement economic justice. Let's give credit where credit is due. Let's challenge one another with the conviction that our people have enough wits to interpret the signs of the times and respond in the most concrete and effective ways possible.

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The most solid ground in the U.S. bishops' economic pastoral is not in any particular economic theory nor in a particular partisan approach nor even does it lie in a unique episcopal insight; its foundation stone is the Gospel of Jesus Christ and traditional teaching that emanates from that Gospel. The Gospel calls us to love, but in truly loving we only have the example of God, a God who is rich in mercy and compassion (*hesed* and *emeth*). Our love of other men and women completes us, and it makes us whole — we are not made whole alone. This only happens in the company of our brothers and sisters.

We can't do anything that is specifically human without taking the other into consideration. Talking involves the other, listening involves the other, feeling and touching involve the

other. We can't live a human life alone. We can't sing alone, we can't really pray alone, we can't love alone, we can't be happy alone, we can't give alone, we can't receive alone, we can't shout alone, we can't be festive alone, we can't even die alone.

We may be able to do all of these things privately, but that does not mean that we do them by ourselves alone without affecting others. In fact, we carry the sign of our need for others with us all the time. It happens to be our belly button. It is a constant reminder that the human family has everything to do with my coming into the world, with my really being alive in this world. I will die with this belly button as a reminder that I entered, lived and left this world in conjunction with others.

Nearly 400 years ago, the English poet-clergyman John Donne wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in humankind and therefore, never seek to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

We all know what solitary confinement does and what happens to a baby who is not cradled and rocked, who is not held in the warm arms of someone. We simply cannot survive without the other. Let me take this one step further. The totally other is the other who is hurting, the other who is crying out of human pain and sorrow. It is easy to love and touch those who love us and touch us, those who are immediately lovable. It is much more difficult to reach out to those who cannot touch us, cannot do anything for us. These are the totally other, the poor, the helpless and hopeless, those who shock me to my stomach, who make my heart bleed, whose misery moves my total being. In Spanish we use the word *con-mover*, which carries the implication that I am moved in a total way by the suffering other: emotionally, intellectually and behaviorally. *Estar con-movido*, to be totally moved, means that I must do something, do what I can, all that I can. In the classical spirit of Albert Schweitzer, Dorothy Day, John XXIII, Mother Teresa, St. Damien before the lepers, John Vanier in his treatment of the mentally handicapped and John Paul II in his compassionate love for the AIDS victims of San Francisco.

And so, my dear friends, we have before us two radical challenges, that of seeing and that of being. We must see in the faces of the forgotten and neglected poor the very face of the Lord.

Dom Helder Camara of Recife is another one who belongs on our list of those who champion justice. In a recent interview he shares that a prayer of Cardinal John Henry Newman is one that he prays constantly, often more than

once a day. It goes like this:

"Lord Jesus, I have the joy and responsibility of believing that ever since my baptism we are one. Do not extinguish the light of your presence within me. O Lord, look through my eyes, listen through my ears, speak through my lips, walk with my feet. Lord, may my poor human presence be a reminder, however weak, of your divine presence. For, to the degree that others notice me, it is a sign that I am, unfortunately, still opaque and not transparent."¹²

We are called to be like Newman and Dom Helder, transparent enough so that Christ can be seen through our actions and words, so that others may see through our lowly human presence the divine presence of God. We can pray

with Dom Helder that God take away whatever is opaque in us and help us to become transparent so that we will allow our works to shine before the world, that they may glorify our God, who is in heaven. May God bless you.

Footnotes

¹ U.S. bishops, "Economic Justice for All," *Origins*, vol. 16, no. 24, Nov. 27, 1986, p. 28.

² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 30-60.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴ Robert Drinan, SJ, "Challenge to Catholics: The Poor Are Back," *National Catholic Reporter*, vol. 24, no. 12, Jan. 15, 1988, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Willmar Thorkelson, "Weakland: Individualism Fights Economic Justice," *National Catholic Reporter*, vol. 24, no. 14, Jan. 29, 1988, p. 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Michael Harrington and others, *Who Are the Poor?* Justice for All National Office, 1334 G St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20005, 1987, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹ Susan Hansen, "Brochure Will Invite Commitment to Implement Economic Pastoral," *National Catholic Reporter*, vol. 24, no. 14, Jan. 29, 1988, p. 20.

¹² William Skudlarek, OSB, "A Most Transparent Life: An Interview with Dom Helder Camara," *Sojourners*, vol. 16, no. 11, December 1987, p. 17.