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Editorial

The Poor in Democracy

When the poor are excluded and treated as though they are to responsible for their situation, Pope Francis stated that “the fundamental concept of democracy is threatened” (Catholic News Agency, 2021).

The pope called for a new global response to poverty in his World Day of the Poor message, which was issued on June 14, 2021.

“This is a challenge that governments and international organizations must meet with a long-term social model capable of combating the new kinds of poverty that are now sweeping the globe and will have a significant impact in the coming decades,” he said.

“If the poor are ostracized, as if they are to fault for their predicament, democracy is imperiled, and all social policies will fail.”

You will Have the Poor with You

The theme of this year’s World Day of the Poor is Jesus’ comments in Mark 14:7 when a woman anointed him with valuable ointment, “The poor you will always have with you.”

While Judas and others were offended by the gesture, the pope explained that Jesus welcomed it because he understood it as a reference to the anointing of his body following his crucifixion.

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“Jesus was telling them that he is the poorest of the poor, since he symbolizes all of them.” “The Son of God welcomed the woman’s gift also for the sake of the impoverished, the lonely, the marginalized, and the victims of discrimination,” the pope wrote.

“Only a woman’s sensitivity allowed her to comprehend what the Lord was thinking. That anonymous woman became the first of those women who were significantly present during the highest events of Christ’s life: his crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection, possibly to represent all those women who would be silenced and endure violence over the centuries.”

“Women, who are frequently discriminated against and barred from positions of responsibility, are recognized in the Gospels to play a significant part in the history of revelation,” the pope stated.

“Jesus then goes on to link that woman to the great evangelizing effort, saying, ‘Amen, I say to you, wherever the Gospel is preached to the whole globe, what she has done will be told in memory of her’ (Mark 14:9).”

Propensity to Ignore the Poor

Against the backdrop of the coronavirus epidemic, the pope bemoaned what he called a growing propensity to ignore the poor.

“There appears to be a rising sense that the poor are not only to blame for their predicament, but also that they are an intolerable burden for an economic system that prioritizes the interests of a few privileged people,” he said.

“A market that rejects ethical norms or selectively applies them produces inhumane conditions for those who are already in desperate positions.” New traps of poverty and exclusion are being created by unscrupulous economic and financial actors who lack a humanitarian conscience and social responsibility.”

”Last year we experienced yet another scourge that multiplied the numbers of the poor: the pandemic, which continues to affect millions of people and, even when it does not bring suffering and death, is nonetheless a portent of poverty,” he continued, referring to COVID-19, which swept the world in 2020.

“Some nations are suffering exceptionally severe consequences from the pandemic, resulting in a lack of basic necessities among the most vulnerable of their people,” the pope wrote. Long lineups in front of soup kitchens are a visible indicator of this decline.”

“The poor have grown disproportionately, and they will continue to do so in the coming months,” says the report. According to a World Bank report released in October, the epidemic could push an additional 115 million people into poverty by 2021. It predicted that global extreme poverty, defined as living on less than \$1.90 per day, would climb for the first time in more than two decades in 2020.

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“At the global level, there is an obvious need to discover the most appropriate measures of combatting the virus without supporting political objectives.” He added: “It is especially critical to provide real replies to the unemployed, who comprise a large number of fathers, mothers, and young people.”

The Poor as Means of Redemption

In his apostolic letter *Misericordia et misera*, delivered in 2016 at the end of the Church’s Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis founded the World Day of the Poor. He came up with the idea during the Jubilee for Socially Excluded People, he explained.

In 2017, the pope wrote in his first World Day of the Poor message, “At the conclusion of the Jubilee of Mercy, I wanted to offer the Church a World Day of the Poor, so that throughout the world Christian

communities can become an ever greater sign of Christ's charity for the least and those most in need."

Every year on the 33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, a week before the Feast of Christ the King, the Day is commemorated. The Vatican was compelled to trim back its commemoration of World Day of the Poor in 2020 due to coronavirus limitations. As in past years, it was unable to host a "field hospital" for the destitute in St. Peter's Square. It did, however, provide 5,000 gifts to the destitute in Rome and 350,000 masks to schools.

Pope Francis kept his tradition of celebrating the day with a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica. Archbishop Rino Fisichella, who delivered the papal message at a Vatican press conference on June 14, 2021 reported that the pope cited St. Damien of Molokai as an example. In Hawaii, the Belgian priest, who was canonized in 2009, ministered to leprosy patients.

"Pope Francis recalls this saint's witness as confirmation of so many men and women, including hundreds of priests, who have been willing to share completely in the suffering of millions of infected people in this COVID-19 drama," said the president of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization.

The pope claimed in the message, which he signed on June 13, the feast day of St. Anthony of Padua, that people in rich countries are "less willing than in the past to address poverty."

"The relative wealth to which we have become used makes accepting sacrifices and adversity more difficult. People are willing to go to any length to avoid being deprived of the benefits of easy wealth," he claimed.

"As a result, they develop resentment, spasmodic uneasiness, and demands, which lead to fear, anxiety, and aggression in certain situations." This is not how we should build our future; those views are types of poverty in and of themselves, which we must not ignore."

"We must be alert to reading the signs of the times, which prompt us to seek for new methods to be evangelists in the modern world. Immediate aid in meeting the needs of the poor must not prohibit us from foresight in putting in place new expressions of Christian love

and charity in response to the new forms of poverty that mankind is experiencing today.”

The pope expressed his hope that World Day of the Poor observance will spark a fresh evangelization campaign aimed at helping the poor. “We cannot wait for the destitute to come knocking at our door; we must reach them in their homes, in hospitals and nursing homes, on the streets and in the dark corners where they often hide, in shelters and reception centers,” he wrote (Catholic News Agency, 2021).

The pope concluded his message by mentioning Fr. Primo Mazzolari, a prominent 20th-century Italian priest whom he honored in 2017. “Let us adopt Fr. Primo Mazzolari’s passionate plea: ‘I urge you not to ask me if there are impoverished people, who they are, or how many there are, because I feel that those questions are a distraction or an excuse for making a plain appeal to our consciences and emotions...’ I’ve never counted the poor because they can’t be counted; the poor should be embraced rather than counted.’

“We are surrounded by the destitute. How wonderful it would be if we could honestly declare, “We, too, are poor,” for only then will we be able to fully identify them, make them a part of our lives, and use them as a means of redemption” (Catholic News Agency, 2021).

From Partisanship to Participation

Pope Francis has issued a warning about countries abandoning democracy and asked citizens to transition from “partisanship to participation” in order to defend society’s most vulnerable members. On Saturday, December 4, 2021, the head of the Roman Catholic Church addressed political leaders in Athens, Greece, as part of a three-day visit to Greece.

Francis also warned against populism and chastised politicians who make false promises in their “obsessive search for popularity,” though he did not identify any specific person or country.

“We cannot avoid noting with concern how we are witnessing a retreat from democracy today, and not only in Europe,” the pontiff remarked at the country’s presidential palace.

“Democracy necessitates everyone’s engagement and involvement. As a result, it necessitates perseverance and hard work “Francis stated his opinion.

“It’s complicated, whereas authoritarianism is absolute, and populism’s simple solutions appear appealing,” he continued (Roche 2021).

Francis appeared to take aim at nationalism, saying that the European community is “prone to kinds of nationalistic self-interest, rather than being an engine of solidarity,” as he has been critical of former President Donald Trump’s policies.

”Europe appears at times obstructed and disjointed,” the pope observed. The Western society is “stuck” in a “frenzy of a thousand earthly concerns and the unquenchable hunger of a depersonalizing consumerism,” according to Francis.

He referenced to democracy’s history—Athens is widely regarded as the birthplace of the form of government—and called for a revival of “the art of the common good” and a shift from “partisanship to participation” that would focus on “the weaker strata of society” (Roche 2021).

The way the poor and the marginalised are respected in a country points to its democratic spirit. Inspired by enlightened and liberal education, as well as Christian vision, European countries had tried to establish a political system that was egalitarian, just and democratic. In such a system, each individual is treated with respect. There the dignity and worth of the individual can never be sacrificed.

Such an ideal is threatened today by the short-sighted vision of politicians who seeks partisan benefits and seek popularity and power at the larger expenses of the poor. The killing of so many migrants is a powerful but tragic reminder of this one-sided approach to human beings.

As the Pope reminds us, we need to understand that the poor are not to be blamed for their poverty. The larger system, of which each one of us is a member, is also at least partly responsible. We need to remind ourselves that we have created an economic, political and cultural system that seeks to devour itself! Putting the blame on the poor and the helpless is not going to solve the larger problem, of which we are all part of.

“Europe appears at times obstructed and disjointed,” the pope observed. The Western society is “stuck” in a “frenzy of a thousand earthly concerns and the unquenchable hunger of a depersonalizing consumerism.”

Thus while we need to embrace the poor with compassion, we also need to set up and humane system that takes care of each individual and the larger eco-system. This is the challenge of being a Christian and being a human today!

What the father of the nation told us in 1948 is valid today also: “I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to *swaraj* [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.”

May the new year be a blessed one for all of us, especially those affected with the pandemic!

The Editor

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