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International debt --- "releasing those bound unjustly ..." (Isa. 58:6)

On Sunday, February 6, 2005, the news media reported that the "Group of 7" nations had reached a consensus with regards to alleviating the debt burden of the poor countries of the world. The "G-7" governments ---Great Britain, the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan ---are ranked among the most developed industrialized countries of the world. By contrast, nations numbered among the poorest of the world are saddled with debt beyond their capacity to recover solvency needed for economic progress.

The specifics of programs for reducing or eliminating the economic crisis resulting from international debt remain open-ended questions. Notwithstanding the pressures of geopolitics, the comment of the British finance minister at least appears to echo an ethical tone: "It is the rich countries hearing the voices of the poor."

Coincidentally, the Old Testament reading at Mass for that Sunday, a passage which pulsates with prophetic passion in its call to confront structural injustice, could effectively activate such concern for justice. For, the first reading for the Fifth Sunday of the Year (A) selected from the Book of Isaiah (Isa 58:7-10) directly confronts social sin head-on --- "*This, rather is the fast I wish: releasing those bound unjustly ...*"

In his Collegeville Commentary on the Book of Isaiah, John J. Collins explains that the prophet did not oppose ritual of fasting as such but denied intrinsic value to religious practices

unless they are lived out as "an expression of a just society." Here Isaiah dramatically spells out the essence of genuine biblical religion --- "free the oppressed, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked." Accordingly, these words of Isaiah anticipate Jesus' criteria for final judgment set forth at the end the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 25:31-46)

During the troubled times after the return from exile, this prophetic oracle decried worship that was severed from the pursuit of covenant justice. The prophet's criticism of conventional piety demanded an authentic religious practice, one tied to ethical mandates: "This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless ..."

In the spirit of Amos and the other great prophets in Israel, Isaiah had uttered the accusation against the formalism of the observance of the Sabbath and days of fast --- "... look, you seek your own pleasures on your fast days and you exploit all your workmen..." (Isa 58:3 NJB)

Monika Hellwig's homiletic reflection on this Isaian reading in *Gladness Their Escort* distills the core of the prophet's bold advocacy for justice in the name of God. Such practices do not establish favor with God because "(t)he fast that God wants is the liberation of the burdened and the oppressed ... and readiness to accept responsibility for others' need, most particularly that of the wretched."

In *There Shall Be No Poor Among You: Poverty in the Bible* (2004), Leslie J. Hoppe, O.F.M., analyzes chapters 56-66 of the Book of Isaiah ("Third Isaiah"). At that historical moment, the social conditions within the Jewish community in the post-exilic period had created a situation where the great wealth of a few was accrued by exploiting the economic dependency of the majority of people.

From this perspective, the prophet engaged in an argument about a misdirected religious practice, a national fast to restore the promises of the covenant. His critique had not so much been ignited by contending theological outlooks but rather had signaled "a conflict over the just distribution of the few material resources that were available to the community." In this context, Father Hoppe contends that "the careful observance of practices like prayer and fasting provided these people with a veneer of religiosity." That mask of religiosity, however, cannot hide the injustice perpetrated on the poor by the split between piety and justice.

Economic Justice for All (1986), the pastoral letter of the U.S. bishops on the U.S. economy, observes that the biblical vision measures the justice of a community is "by its treatment of the powerless in society, most often described as the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the stranger (non-Israelite) in the land." (EJ n. 38)

From a biblical and a moral perspective, then, the special place of the poor means that "meeting the basic needs of the millions of deprived and hungry people in the world must be the number one objective of international policy." (EJ n. 258)

In the present global economy, the economically suffocating burden of external debt incurred by the world's poorest nations is a case in point. As a matter of record, Church social teaching on that pressing problem is extensive. Approaches to workable solutions are complex.

Almost 20 years ago in 1986, the Pontifical Commission "Iustitia et Pax" issued *At the Service of the Community: An Ethical Approach to the International Debt Question* (December 27, 1986). Pope John Paul II had treated the question of international debt in several major social encyclicals: *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) n. 19 and *Centesimus Annus* (1991) n. 35.

Sollicitudo Rei Socialis ("On Social Concern") commemorated the 20th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* ("On the Development of Peoples, 1967). Consistent with his predecessor's thought on the interdependence between the developed and the less developed nations, Pope John Paul II now had identified the question of international debt. He linked this problem to the overarching moral platform of the development of peoples. Unfortunately, by the late 1980s, the hopes for achieving extensive economic progress from the investment of capital in development projects were strewn over the field of broken dreams of many of the poorer countries.

The Holy Father analyzed the reversal of fortunes: "Circumstances have changed, both within the debtor nations and in the financial market; the instrument chosen to make a contribution to development has turned into a counterproductive mechanism. This is because the debtor nations, in order to service their debt, find themselves obliged to export capital needed for improving or at least maintaining their standard of living. It is also because, for the same reason, they are unable to obtain new and equally essential financing." Not only has excessive indebtedness halted development but "in some cases has even aggravated underdevelopment." (SRS n. 19)

Centesimus Annus ("On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*," 1991) marked the 100th anniversary of the first papal social encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. On that occasion of the centenary, Pope John Paul II acknowl-

edged the positive initiatives on the part of the international community in offering opportunities for the underdeveloped nations to attain economic and political stability. Yet those measures remained hampered "by the still largely unsolved problem of the foreign debt of the poorer countries." (CA n. 35)

In this regard, Pope John Paul II set forth a précis of the ethical state of the question. Without questioning the justice of the principle of repayment of debts, he states a qualification: "However, it is not right to demand or expect payment when the effect would be the imposition of political choices leading to hunger and despair for entire peoples. It cannot be expected that the debts which have been contracted should be paid at the price of unbearable sacrifices."

The Holy Father encouraged the developed nations of the world to search for "ways to lighten, defer or even cancel the debt, compatible with the fundamental right of peoples to subsistence and progress."

Consciousness about the issue of external debt of the poorer nations of the world became heightened during the preparation for Jubilee 2000. In *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* ("On the Coming of the Third Millennium," 1994), the Holy Father discussed the Church's preferential option for the poor. Within that context the Pope challenged Christians to raise their voice on behalf of the poor of the world. The Jubilee was proposed "as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not canceling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations." (TMA n. 51)

On the American scene, *Economic Justice for All* had developed a moral analysis of the debt crisis in its section on the global economy. (EJ nn. 271-277). More than a decade later, in April 1999, the Administrative Board of the U.S. Catholic

Conference specifically addressed the problem of international debt in "A Jubilee Call for Debt Forgiveness." Both documents could be recommended as required readings in any course on social justice. In particular, "A Jubilee Call for Debt Forgiveness" included a comprehensive summary of principles and perspectives from Catholic social teaching pertaining to the debt crisis along with specific criteria for evaluating debt relief programs.

On January 27, 2005, Bishop John Ricard, chairman of the U.S. bishops' International Policy Committee, forwarded a letter to John Snow, the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, in support of "proposals for up to 100 percent cancellation of the debt of the heavily indebted poor countries to multilateral creditors." Bishop Ricard stated that the bishops' "support for debt cancellation stems from our moral obligation to promote the life and dignity of every human being, especially the most vulnerable."

The conclusion of "A Jubilee Call to Debt Forgiveness" articulated a response to the plight of some of the poorest and most forgotten people on the face of the earth, a response rooted in Christian solidarity. In line with Pope John Paul II's Jubilee challenge to promote foreign debt relief, the bishops pointed out that debt is not simply a matter of mortgages, loans, credit card balances as viewed through the lens of American lifestyles. Rather, the crisis of international debt ought to fixate moral consciousness on the life and death issues "about how children live and die half a world away." It raises questions "about what kind of world we live in." In the last analysis, the foreign debt of the poor and underdeveloped nations must become a call to action.

February 2005