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Global issues ... selling "the poor man for a pair of sandals"

Amos 2:6

In the late 1990s, the exposure of sweatshops that were dotting the international marketplace was met by public outrage. At that time, Robert A. Senser had contributed an article analyzing that topic in *America* entitled "High-priced shoes, low-cost labor." The author focused on the problem of the exploitation of workers in the developing world for the sake of increased profit margins.

Since the controversy originated with the high profile issues surrounding the manufacture of shoe and athletic equipment by foreign workers, Mr. Senser's title was a no-brainer --- "High-priced shoes ..."

With a modicum of literary license, however, an ancient text from the prophet Amos might also have filled the bill for making a case for justice on behalf of exploited workers. Against the injustice prevalent in the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8th century B.C., Amos had railed: *"Thus says the Lord: For three crimes of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke my word; Because they sell the just man for silver, and the poor man for a pair of sandals...."* (Amos 2:6)

Of course, in its historical context, "a pair of sandals" did not refer to designer brands of athletic shoes. More likely, it was a code-word for "bribes" extorted by a corrupt judicial system at the cost of the poor. Father Carroll Stuhlmuel, C.P., (d. 1994) correctly pointed out that the length of a sandal was the measure for marking off one's land. The verse condemns the

unjust practice of "the brutal enforcement of laws to pay one's debts." The land of the poor could be confiscated, even on arbitrary grounds.

Amos has been nicknamed "the prophet of social justice." In *The Conscience of Israel*, a study of the prophets in the Old Testament, the late Bruce Vawter, C.M., (d. 1986) provided a vignette of Amos and his prophetic mission in the 8th century B.C. Published in the 1960s, Father Vawter's work still provides valuable insights into the vision of the great prophets in the Bible, perspectives alive and well for present-day spiritual assimilation.

Father Vawter carefully interpreted the oracles of Amos. He viewed the prophet's words not as an attack on the wealthy or the leisure class as such but directed at wickedness, the defiance of the will of God. Amos's prophetic passion is fueled by his single-minded dedication to the will of God. It was not an explosion of class envy. The prophet denounced the rampant social injustice in Israel which had "willingly sacrificed fellow Israelites to material ends."

Under King Jeroboam II (782-753), the times in the northern kingdom enjoyed prosperity; it was a period of military victory and peace. Yet, it was an era when infidelity to covenant justice was falling into eclipse. Thus, the relationship of worship to morality had been severed. The prophet vehemently announced the harsh reality --- violation of the covenant will bring divine

judgment.

The prophet Amos described the deceitful nature of such worship: "*Upon garments taken in pledge they recline by any altar; And the wine of those who have been fined they drink in the house of their god.*" (Amos 6: 8) Father Vawter accentuated the emptiness of the ritual celebrations of the moneylenders at the sanctuary in Bethel: "Their ritual banquets were eaten from tables spread with the clothing of the poor, and were drunk in the wine squeezed from the veins of the helpless."

In a culture where injustice was flagrant in defiance of God's law, the poor lived at the mercy of the rich and the powerful, the landed aristocracy and royal officials who now were established as "a class of privilege through Israel's commercial expansion."

In more contemporary terms, Leslie Hoppe, OFM, states that "(b)y corrupting the judicial system, the wealthy were creating poverty and a permanent underclass in Israel." (Amos 2:7; 5:11)

The passion of the prophets for justice infuses the social doctrine of the Church. The principle of *preferential protection of the poor and vulnerable* or a *preferen-*

tial option for the poor is rooted in that tradition. Pope John Paul II has frequently invoked that theme in his writings.

For example, in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente (At the Beginning of the New Millennium, 2001)* the Holy Father states that the Gospel is unequivocal about the need for recognizing "a special presence of Christ in the poor, and this requires the church to make a preferential option for them." He explains that the option for the poor stems from "the nature of God's love, to his providence and mercy, and in some way history is still filled with the seeds of the kingdom of God which Jesus himself sowed during his earthly life whenever he responded to those who came to him with their spiritual and material needs." (TMA n. 49)

Pope John Paul II then confronts the contradictions of economic and technological development that encircles the lives of "a fortunate few" but banishes millions to the margins of progress to live in "conditions far below the minimum demanded by human dignity." (TMA n. 50)

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