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## The Rich Man and Lazarus ...Global Dimensions of the Option for the Poor

Robert Frank's *Richistan: A Journey through the American Wealth Boom and the Lives of the New Rich* is called an entertaining kaleidoscope surveying the nation of the "new rich." Millionaires are the *nouveau riches* who make up the demographics in Richistan. The population explosion of the new "Gilded Age" traced to the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century continues to swell the ranks of the superrich in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Although Frank's work is regarded as "a revealing and funny journey through Richistan," the last chapter, "The Wealth Gap and the Future of Richistan," raises some sobering issues. Questions are surfacing about the growing inequities in a society where "[t]he richest 1 percent control more than 33 percent of the total wealth, and their wealth is greater than the bottom 90 percent of Americans."

Is it conceivable that, in the long run, such disparities might generate "a new wave of social and political unrest, as in the Gilded Age and the Roaring Twenties?" Or will the growing economic and social distance between the "Richistani" and the majority at the lower rungs of society be placidly tolerated as an acceptable advancement of global capitalism?

However, when the "micro" state of the question moves to the "macro" arena of the global economy, the challenge to social responsibility moves onto center stage of the social question. For, without doubt, the absolute poverty of the Third World and the so-called "Fourth World" eclipses the relative poverty that exists in the developed nations of the West.

Since the 1960s, the social encyclicals of Pope John XXIII and *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, engaged Catholic social teaching with the issue of the "rich nations" and the "poor nations."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that Catholic Social teaching "proposes principles for reflection; it provides criteria for judgment; it gives guidelines for action." (CCC n. 2423) Catholic doctrine constitutes a moral framework of principles and criteria for assessing the na-

tional and global implications of "superdevelopment" and "underdevelopment" from a Gospel perspective.

On the national scene, *Economic Justice for All*, the 1986 pastoral letter of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, identifies basic justice as a call "for the establishment of a floor of material well-being on which all can stand." That responsibility is incumbent on society as a whole and creates "particular obligations on those with greater resources." Although justice does not demand equality of income and wealth, it does "challenge economic arrangements that leave large numbers of people impoverished." Extreme socio-economic inequality can also undermine "the social solidarity of the human community, for great disparities lead to deep social divisions and conflict." (EJ n. 74)

In the context of a call to examine lifestyles in light of the needs of the poor, the pastoral quotes the prophetic words of Pope Paul VI who in *Populorum Progressio* ("On the Development of Peoples," 1967) denounced greed or avarice as "the most evident form of moral underdevelopment [PP n.19]." (EJ n.75)

That encyclical focused on the international common good and the call for justice. After recounting the ravages of hunger and destitution worldwide, Pope Paul VI envisioned the building of a world in which every man and woman and child can live a fully human life, one liberated from the impoverishment inflicted either by others or by ineffectively controlled natural forces. Justice pursues the creation of a world of genuine freedom "where the poor man Lazarus can sit down at the same table with the rich man." (PP n. 47) Such a moral vision demands generosity, sacrifice, and effort on the part of the advantaged nations.

Twenty years later, with an even more intense sense of urgency, Pope John Paul II reconfirmed *Populorum Progressio* in the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* ("On Social Concern," 1987). In some respects, Pope John Paul II's commemorative encyclical was a more forceful criticism of the "structures of sin" created by prevalent economic and po-

*The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.*

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litical ideologies dominating the international scene. His theological reading judged the gap between superdevelopment and underdevelopment globally as morally indefensible.

In speaking of the option or love of preference for the poor, Pope John Paul II also alluded to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Thus, to ignore the immense number of the hungry, the needy, and the homeless, of people deprived of medical care, and of those without hope for a better future would "mean becoming like the 'rich man' who pretended not to know the beggar Lazarus lying at his gate." (SRS n. 42)

The invoking of biblical imagery in these passages from the social encyclicals of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II enriches the moral argument in ways not open to a purely rational-deductive approach to ethical questions. It is a distinctive mark of a faith-based ethic which infuses a natural moral law approach with a biblical vision.

The New Testament parables disclose glimpses of God's reign with their evocative power to shatter the preconceptions of the listener and to open up a new possibility to seeing the world as God intends it. Similar to other parables, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus fascinates and disconcerts as the story unfolds in two scenes of stark contrast. (Lk 16:19-31)

The first part (vv. 19-26) portrays a rich man absorbed in a self-indulgent lifestyle. At his gate sits a beggar: starving, ulcerated, and desperate—whose only possession is his name, Lazarus. The etymology of the name is translated as "he whom God helps." The beggar is the only character in a Gospel parable with a proper name, one that augurs promise.

In his earthly life, the rich man pursues the good life and neglects the beggar at his gate. From a literary angle, a gate can function by allowing people in or excluding them. Bernard Brandon Scott comments that the gate serves as a pathway to the neighbor in the reign of God.

The second part (vv. 27-31) narrates a complete reversal of the two men's fortunes at death. While the rich man's lot is the torment of the netherworld, the beggar now has fellowship with Abraham. The false security of the rich man's wealth had blinded him to the misery at his gate. Ironically the rich man has become a beggar in the afterlife.

Such a reversal would disengage Jesus' listeners from the conventional preconceptions of religious folklore which assumed that the rich man's fortune was a sign of divine favor. The parable discloses that God is on the side of the poor. Extravagance and human insensitivity in this life become indigence in the life to come.

Several commentators believe that the crux of the story is the dialogue between the rich man and

Abraham. In popular tradition Abraham symbolized hospitality. (Gen. 18:1-15) In this scene of the afterlife, Abraham refuses the rich man's plea to send a warning to his still living brothers. The response is definitive: the living have the Law and the prophets. *Economic Justice for All*, the 1986 pastoral letter on the economy from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops notes: "[W]hen the rich man finally 'sees' Lazarus, it is from his place of torment and the opportunity for conversion has passed." (EJ n. 48)

The contemporary reader can find a touch point in the parable by "reimagining" one's economic and political attitudes in the light of the story.

For Luke, this parable is included in Chapter 16, a section which serves as an instruction on the proper use of wealth and on the obligation to help the poor. Jesus has uttered a radical saying about the impossibility of serving God and money. (Lk.16:13) The Pharisees are depicted as scoffing or jeering at the teaching of Jesus because they are lovers of money." (Lk. 16:14)

But the story line is not judgmental or vengeful. Rather, the rich man is more a pathetic figure, not one presented in terms of class conflict or envy. The paradox of the parable confronts the moral imagination of the listener/reader to search out the meaning of authentic life in the kingdom of God—"Would you want to be this sort of person?"

In its treatment of the moral principle of the universal destination of goods and private property, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) sums up Church social doctrine: "Owners who heedlessly idolize their goods (cf. Mt 6:24, 19: 21-26; Lk 16:13) become owned and enslaved by them. Only by recognizing that these goods are dependent on God the Creator and directing their use to the common good, is it possible to give material goods their proper function as tools for the growth of individuals and peoples." (CSDC n.181)

The rich man's wealth was not the point of condemnation. Neglect of the teaching of the Law and the Prophets blinded him to the beggar at his gate.

The rich man as a protagonist had forgotten that wealth is held in trust from God, on loan to be used for the good of all. Consequently, the "geography of poverty" was reversed in death."

In its teaching on the gravity of sin, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that "[f]eigned ignorance and hardness of heart do not diminish, but rather increase, the voluntary character of sin. In a footnote, the Catechism cites the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16: 19-31) in reference to "hardness of heart." (CCC n.1859)

September 2007