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“Do Not Leave to the Poor the Crumbs of Your Feasts” ...John Paul II

The Department of Social Development and World Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops publishes a fact sheet entitled “The Faces of Poverty around the World.”

The expansive prosperity in a global economy stands in stark contrast with the conditions of absolute poverty in the poor nations of the world. A sampling of the data reveals disturbing inequities: 1) the earnings of 3 billion poor people amount to less than \$2.00 per day; 2) the total incomes of 57% of the world’s poorest are matched by the wealth held by only 1% of the world’s richest people; 3) the average incomes in the richest 20 countries are 37% higher than income levels in the poorest 20 developing nations.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church succinctly sums up the social doctrine of the Church on justice and the international common good, specifically in regard to the relationship of the rich nations to the poor: “Rich nations have a grave moral responsibility toward those which are unable to ensure the means of their own development by themselves or have been prevented from doing so by tragic historical events. It is a duty of solidarity and charity; it is also an obligation in justice if the prosperity of rich nations has come from resources that have not been fairly paid for.” (CCC n. 2439)

The “In Brief” summary of the essential teaching of this section of the Catechism on the issue of social justice and socio-economic activity raises a challenge: “How can we not recognize Lazarus, the hungry beggar in the parable (cf. Lk 17: 19-31), in the multitude of human beings without bread, a roof or place to stay? How can I fail to hear Jesus: ‘As you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me’ (Mt 25:45).” (CCC n. 2463)

The New Testament metaphor drawn from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus symbolizes Christian moral responsibility for the “invisible poor” of the nation and the world.

As a previous column pointed out, Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II adopted that metaphor in their major encyclicals on social justice in order to accentuate the urgency of

the international state of the social question.

In *Populorum Progressio* (“On the Development of Peoples,” 1967), 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 impoverishment. The pursuit of justice aims at 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 entails generosity, sacrifice, and effort on the part of the advantaged nations.

Two decades later, in commemorating *Populorum Progressio*, Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (“On Social Concern,” 1987) again alluded to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in speaking of the option or love of preference for the poor. At this moment of history, Pope John Paul II repeated the charge of his predecessor, namely, that 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)

In *Incarnationis Mysterium* (“The Mystery of the Incarnation,” 1998), the papal document inaugurating the visionary renewal program for the Great Jubilee of 2000, Pope John Paul II warned against delaying the time “when the poor Lazarus can sit beside the rich man to share the same banquet and be forced no more to be fed from the scraps that fall from the table.” (IM n. 12)

In particular, on two memorable occasions during visits to the United States, the late Holy Father had appealed to the imagery of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus as a poignant call to the responsibilities of justice and charity.

“Do Not Leave to the Poor the Crumbs of Your Feast,” the title of his homily at Yankee Stadium on October 2, 1979, was taken from that biblical story (Lk. 16:21). As a response to the urgent needs stemming from world poverty,

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.

Pope John Paul II praised the network of charitable works undertaken by the Catholic Church in the United States.

But, over and beyond such enviable generosity in charitable outreach to those in need regionally and worldwide, Pope John Paul II challenged U.S. Catholics to respond to the demands of justice. He observed: "...[Y]ou will also want to seek out the structural reasons which foster or cause the different forms of poverty in the world and in your own country, so that you can apply the proper remedies."

Catholics should not resist engagement with necessary reforms "of attitudes and structures that may prove necessary in order to re-create over and over again the conditions needed by the disadvantaged if they are to have a fresh chance in the hard struggle of life."

Moreover, Catholics should recognize impoverished people as brothers and sisters in Christ, both on the global horizon as well as on the national scene. That gospel vision issues a radical call: "You must never be content to leave them just the crumbs from the feast. You must take of your substance, and not just of your abundance, in order to help them. And you must treat them like guests at your family table." The allusion to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is clear (Lk. 16: 19-31).

In that parable, the rich man was condemned in the afterlife not on account of his riches but because of his failure to notice the poor man Lazarus.

In this story Jesus does not condemn the mere possession of wealth but indicts "those who use their possessions in a selfish way, without paying attention to the needs of others."

This Lukan parable must be active in Christian consciousness to effect the formation of consciences in the spirit of the Gospel: "Christ demands openness to our brothers and sisters in need—openness from the rich, the affluent, the economically advanced; openness to the poor, the underdeveloped and the disadvantaged."

There is a need for humanity to apply this parable in a contemporary context — "in terms of economy and politics, in terms of all human rights, in terms of relations between the 'First,' 'Second,' and 'Third World.'"

Pope John Paul II concluded that "[w]e cannot stand idly by, enjoying our own riches and freedom if, in any place, the Lazarus of the 20th century stands at our doors." In other words, the parable enjoins a specific responsibility on wealth and freedom for Christians — "Riches and freedom create a special obligation."

During his 1987 visit to the United States, Pope John Paul II addressed the leaders in Catholic higher education of the United States. In that address on September 12, 1987 at Xavier University of New

Orleans, Pope John Paul II again invoked the image of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Catholic educators in the universities have a special opportunity "to introduce your students to a powerful experience of community and to a very serious involvement in social concerns that will enlarge their horizons, challenge their lifestyles and offer them authentic human fulfillment."

Students can be inspired to embrace a readiness to respond to the Gospel invitation "to go out of themselves, to reject introversion and to concentrate on the needs of others." Thus, higher education should provide an opportunity for students to "readily grasp the relevance for today of Christ's parable of the rich man and Lazarus." A commitment to that Gospel vision is indispensable for the multifaceted transformation of the social order and the formation of just structures in economics, politics, the defense of human rights and societal relationships.

Pope John Paul II cautioned that the Gospel calls for much more than offering "to the disadvantaged of the world crumbs of freedom, crumbs of truth, and crumbs of bread." The parable of the rich man and Lazarus confronts "the conscience of humanity and, today, in particular, the conscience of America."

The Social Development and World Peace fact sheet, referred to above, provides a statistical snapshot of "the faces of poverty around the world." With a similar analogy, in her interpretation of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Dominican Sister Barbara E. Reid notes that this story of Jesus "puts a human face on wealth and poverty."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church incorporates the image of this parable in its exposition of the petition in the Our Father — "Give us this day our daily bread." The presence of the hungry who lack sufficient bread in our midst contributes a depth of meaning to that petition: "This petition cannot be isolated from the parables of the poor man Lazarus and of the Last Judgment (Cf. Lk. 16: 19-31; Mt. 25: 31-36)." (CCC n. 2831)

Again, in treating death and judgment, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "The parable of the poor man Lazarus and the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief, as well as other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul — a destiny which can be different for some and for others." (CCC n. 1021)

The message of this Lukan parable of the rich man and Lazarus is powerful and candid — "Be converted while time remains."

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