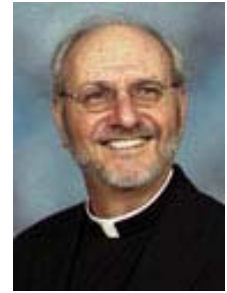


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Poverty: An Abuse of Human Rights

Dr. Arjun Sengupta, the United Nations Independent Expert on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty, traveled to the United States to study poverty. His itinerary included the homeless of the Bronx, the Immokalee farm workers of Florida, the hurricane-devastated of New Orleans, plus the ethnically and culturally diverse of the Mississippi Delta, Native Americans in upstate New York and people in the hollows of Appalachia. The purpose of the trip focused on the expressions of poverty and possible efforts to address them. The underlying assumption of the trip: poverty is an abuse of human rights.

The richest nation on earth and poverty? What about the 2.8 billion people of the world who survive on less than \$2.00 a day, those living in mud huts, those with little more than a sarong or loin cloth? Those graphic images depict absolute poverty, and charge overindulgent nations with social sin.

But, the effects of the relative poverty in the U.S. fly under the radar when people live shorter lives with no healthcare, face financial insecurity from corporate decisions, and experience their human potential halted by social and racial barriers.

Bobby in eastern Kentucky testified that he worked 30 years as a nurse's aid. Scratched on the right arm by a resident at a nursing home, he developed methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), then later, high blood pressure. Without insurance, he could not get proper healthcare which compounded his problems. He eventually had a stroke and is legally blind. Forced to declare bankruptcy, he lost his house. His family survives on Social Security Disability and food stamps, but he remains constantly behind on his rent and heavily in debt.

The subtly of poverty in Appalachia extends to the environmental degradation that comes with mountaintop removal and irresponsible strip mining. Outside

Hazard, Kentucky, Jeff showed the U.N. delegation a four foot crack in his home's chimney caused by blasting a mile away. Legally, a company can detonate 40,000 pounds of dynamite in one blast, but mining concerns routinely receive waivers for larger shots. The results: plates rattle and picture frames fall off the wall, cracks appear in chimneys and foundations. Jeff lives with the fear that some night the pillars supporting his house will shift, sending the house with him and his retired mother and father down the mountainside.

The U.N. defines poverty as a denial of a life in dignity. Because everyone has a right to live in dignity, poverty equates to an abuse of human rights. Bobby deserves healthcare and Jeff's family has a right to security.

Poverty has three dimensions. With "income poverty," a person cannot buy the essentials of life: food, clothing, shelter. On a second level, with "human development poverty" a person cannot access education, healthcare, and the basic social services that allow a person to feel spiritually alive. Thirdly, with racism, sexism and other forms of "social exclusion," a person cannot participate fully in society.

In Article 25, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted by the U.N. on December 10, 1948, implies that poverty is an abuse of human rights:

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services...."

The Church teaches that human rights arise from the dignity of being made in the image and likeness of God. Whether absolute or relative, poverty cannot be eradicated by mere charity, because it remains an abuse of human rights that calls for new structures of justice.

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The Catholic Conference of KY (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops, established in 1983. 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 388,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.