

**ADDRESS OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE  
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
“THE POOR AT THE HEART OF DEVELOPMENT”:  
POVERTY IN THE MAGISTERIUM OF POPE FRANCIS  
IX DIPLOMADO INTERNACIONAL DE DOCTRINA SOCIAL DE LA IGLESIA  
ST. JOHN’S UNIVERSITY – QUEENS, NEW YORK  
JULY 22, 2024**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am very happy to be with you for this Diplomado on the Social Doctrine of the Church. We are, of course, inspired in our work by the Holy Father Pope Francis; and I am happy to represent him to all of you, assuring you of his spiritual closeness.

During the 2013 conclave, when Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio had just achieved the number of votes needed to ensure his election as the next Pope, his friend, a Brazilian Franciscan, the late Cardinal Cláudio Hummes, embraced Bergoglio and said to him, “Don’t forget the poor!” Reflecting on that scene a few days later, the Holy Father said: “That is how the name came into my heart: Francis of Assisi. For me, he is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation [...]. He is the man who gives us this spirit of peace, the poor man ... How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!”<sup>1</sup>

And so, we have gathered here to ask ourselves the question: *How can we be a Church which is poor for the poor?* Looking at the reality in this world, our first question might actually be: Is such a thing possible? And yet, if we are to follow the dream of Pope Francis – and even more fundamentally, if we are to take seriously the Gospel – then we have to say: **To be a Church that is poor and for the poor is necessary if we are to make Christ fully present in the world. To be a Church with and for the poor is necessary if we are to have any great success at evangelization.**

Our theme has been titled “The Poor at the Heart of Development”. The main purpose of my address is to place before us the magisterium of Pope Francis on the poor: to gather together some prominent themes in his teaching on poverty, and to let ourselves be guided by these principles in our personal, social, and ecclesial

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Address to Representatives of the Communications Media, 16 March 2013.

action. I will begin with a reminder of the biblical foundations which inform our approach to poverty as Christians. Then, I will draw out a few of the major principles that Francis gives us in his teaching on the poor – especially those which come from his Messages for the World Days of the Poor. After that, I will touch on the ways that other contemporary problems such as war, climate change, and polarization exacerbate the problems of the poor. Lastly, I will offer an indication of how we can bring the Pope’s message about the poor into the concrete circumstances of our social and ecclesial involvement.

### **BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR CHRISTIANS’ APPROACH TO POVERTY**

And so, first of all: What does the New Testament teach us disciples about poverty and the poor? We might well begin with a story told by Saint Paul in his *Letter to the Galatians*, which I was reminded of when considering the exhortation by Cardinal Hummes to Cardinal Bergoglio. Just like Hummes told Bergoglio, “Don’t forget the poor!” – so St. Paul, having gone up to Jerusalem and having been confirmed in his mission to the Gentiles by the other Apostles, was told “to be mindful of the poor, which,” Paul wrote, “is the very thing I was eager to do.”<sup>2</sup>

This is an important point. Everybody knows Paul as the great “Apostle to the Gentiles”, the missionary to the Roman Empire, part of the early “magisterium” of the Church, and one of the Church’s first “theologians”. And yet, we shouldn’t forget that from the very beginning of the Church’s mission to teach and to preach, that mission was carried out in evangelical poverty. Poverty was not an optional “extra”, but it was *an essential characteristic of the Gospel mission*. In imitation of Christ, the preacher was to *be* poor, and he was to pay special attention *to* the poor.<sup>3</sup> To put it simply: poverty is at the heart of evangelization. Paul lived the Gospel of poverty by working with his own hands to support himself rather than accepting payment. Here was a man who, in the first century of the Church’s mission, lived evangelical poverty for the sake of the poor – for the sake of all who were in need of the saving message of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> *Galatians* 2:10.

<sup>3</sup> See also *Luke* 10:1-12, in which Jesus instructs the seventy-two to “Carry no money bag” nor to take anything more than what was essential for their mission.

But we must take a step back from Paul, to remember why the Apostles considered mindfulness of the poor so essential to their mission in the first place. And of course, the reason was what Jesus himself had taught them:

“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you? And the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’”<sup>4</sup>

Saint Paul wasn’t present to hear those words first-hand, but Jesus gave him his own private lesson on the road to Damascus when he implored him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”<sup>5</sup> The “me”, in this case, was the believers whom Saul was persecuting – which meant that Christ was present *in* his believers.

Christ lives in the poor and in the least ones. This was the radical and paradigm-changing message that the disciples received from the Lord. It was a message that changed the world. No previous religion had ever made the claim that the God of the universe existed, was *really present*, in the human beings he had created. And not just in the great and mighty, but especially in the weakest, the most vulnerable, those most in need. To the first Christians, the presence of Christ in the poor of this world was central to the Gospel they preached. This truth was central to the message, because it was based on the mystery of the Incarnation.

In virtue of the Incarnation, the Church’s mission to the poor is based on something even more fundamental than the *command* of Christ; it is based on the *human nature* which Christ assumed. “Poverty for us Christians,” says Pope Francis, “is not a sociological, philosophical or cultural category, no.” He says that poverty is first of all a *theological* category, because we worship a God who “made himself poor to walk along the road with us”.<sup>6</sup> Saint Paul expresses this when he says: “For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake he became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”<sup>7</sup>

In light of this reality, to say “I want a poor Church for the poor” is equivalent to saying: *I want a Church that is in union with Christ. ... I want a Church that*

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 25:37-40.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 9:4.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, Address on the Vigil of Pentecost to the Ecclesial Movements, 18 May 2013.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:9.

*touches the flesh of Christ ... that lives with the reality of his Incarnation.*<sup>8</sup> It is simply the nature of the Church, which is the Body and the Bride of Christ, that she be both poor and that she live *for* the poor.

## THEMES IN THE MAGISTERIUM OF POPE FRANCIS ON POVERTY

Attention to the poor – and more than attention, *attunement* to the poor – has been a hallmark of the papacy of Pope Francis. His concrete gestures have included meetings with the poor on his apostolic voyages, hosting meals for the homeless, and providing personal care and hygienic resources for them on Vatican property. To those gestures he has added words. Beginning in 2017, he inaugurated an annual World Day of the Poor which is celebrated each November, with a message released on the Memorial of St. Anthony of Padua in June. These messages are as challenging as they are fundamental to the Gospel. In his Message for the First World Day of the Poor in 2017, the Holy Father said:

“Love has no alibi. Whenever we set out to love as Jesus loved, we have to take the Lord as our example; especially when it comes to loving the poor. The Son of God’s way of loving is well-known, and John spells it out clearly. It stands on two pillars: God loved us first (cf. *1 Jn* 4:10.19), and he loved us by giving completely of himself, even to laying down his life (cf. *1 Jn* 3:16). Such love cannot go unanswered.”<sup>9</sup>

### *The Globalization of Indifference*

“Love has no alibi.” This is a strong challenge to what the Holy Father, from the beginning of his pontificate, has called “a globalization of indifference”. Beginning with his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope explained that this phenomenon – the globalization of indifference – is what occurs when we “assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world”. When this doesn’t automatically happen, the Pope says:

“Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Address to the Ecclesial Movements, 18 May 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, Message for the First World Day of the Poor (19 November 2017), 13 June 2017, 1.

responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.”<sup>10</sup>

The Holy Father’s Fourth Message for the World Day of the Poor, written in the midst of the global pandemic, had as its theme, “Stretch forth your hand to the poor.”<sup>11</sup> This command, he said, “challenges the attitude of those who prefer to keep their hands in their pockets and to remain unmoved by situations of poverty in which they are often complicit. [...] If they stretch out their hands,” he said, “it is to touch computer keys to transfer sums of money from one part of the world to another, ensuring the wealth of an elite few and the dire poverty of millions and the ruin of entire nations”.<sup>12</sup>

Because of challenging words such as this, Pope Francis has been accused by some of being opposed to free market economies. What he is really opposed to is what he calls “an economy of exclusion and inequality.” “Such an economy kills,” he says. And he asks:

“How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? [...] Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a ‘throw away’ culture which is now spreading.”<sup>13</sup>

In teaching about the economy, Francis calls us to more than an analysis of money, markets, and profit. The “economy” of which he speaks is holistic, and it always centers on the human person and the common good. The “authentic nature of the economy,” the Pope says, is

“a place of inclusion and cooperation, a continuous generation of value to be created and shared with others. The small needs the big, the

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<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Sirach* 7:32.

<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, Message for the Fourth World Day of the Poor (15 November 2020), 13 June 2020, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 53.

concrete needs the abstract, the contract needs the gift, and poverty needs shared wealth.”<sup>14</sup>

### *Mere Alms, or a Shared Life?*

This choice for poverty is especially modeled by those women and men who take the vow of poverty as part of a consecrated life. In this way they become living signs within the Church of the poverty that is essential to God’s Kingdom. But Pope Francis has emphatically reminded us, from the outset of his pontificate until now, that “being a poor Church for the poor” is not the exclusive call of consecrated religious people. If we leave to consecrated men and women the task of being poor among the poor, then a great portion of society’s poor will not be reached. It is those who are living “in the world” who, in fact, encounter the majority of the world’s poor and marginalized. And so, the Holy Father continues to speak of his “dream” of a Church that is reoriented to be what Christ calls us to be. That choice of Christ and his saints – to become poor so as to be with the poor – is a call for each of us Christians.

When we think of our Christian call to love and serve the poor, we may immediately think of the Gospel’s injunction to give alms. And certainly, give alms we must. As Christians, it is not enough for us to be content with having what we need and having some surplus. As Christians, we recognize that what is ours is not “ours” in an absolute sense; but rather, charity and justice command that we share some of what we have with those who have too little.

For many of us, even this is a challenge. Do we give alms adequately? And yet, when we read the Pope’s messages on the World Days of the Poor, we come to understand that his challenge to us goes even deeper than almsgiving. Giving alms, he says, can become for us a way of satisfying our own consciences, but it can remain impersonal and disconnected from the actual lives of the people to whom we give. But as he said in his Ash Wednesday homily this year: “Almsgiving is not a hasty gesture performed to ease our conscience, to compensate for our interior imbalance; rather, it is a way of touching the sufferings of the poor with our own hands and heart.”<sup>15</sup> If, when we give alms, we treat the “other” – the poor person to whom we

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, Message to the Participants in the Fourth Annual Meeting of “The Economy of Francesco”, Assisi, 6-8 October 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Homily at Holy Mass of Ash Wednesday, Basilica of Santa Sabina, 22 February 2023.

give – as merely the “recipient” of our alms, while seeing ourselves as simply the “giver”, we have stopped short of the *mutual sharing* and solidarity that Christ teaches us by his choice to *become* poor.<sup>16</sup> For the Fifth World Day of the Poor in 2021, His Holiness said: “It is not a question of easing our conscience by giving alms, but of opposing the culture of indifference and injustice we have created with regard to the poor.”<sup>17</sup>

What Pope Francis teaches us is an extension of what Jesus says to his disciples when he tells them, “The poor you will always have with you.”<sup>18</sup> To be *with* the poor means seeing the poor person not merely as someone who is the *object* of my giving – and who, thereby, could end up feeling demeaned in his or her own humanity – but realizing that this person, who happens to have little in the way of material goods, possesses a dignity and their own personal gifts – including spiritual gifts – which can be a teacher and a guide to me. Pope Francis reminds us that the poor evangelize us, which stands to reason, since they are among the first ones to whom Jesus himself evangelized.<sup>19</sup>

When we realize how essential the lives of the poor are to the core of the Gospel message, our consciences rightly convict us that we can’t really carry out our Christian lives while forgetting the poor, or even treating the poor as another “category” of Christian service.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, we must look to the poor always in order to discover where Christ is in our midst, and in what direction he is leading us. To be a poor Church for the poor means Christian disciples who live their daily lives as co-disciples of those who are poor and whom the logic of this world marginalizes. Sometimes that poverty is manifested as a lack of money and possessions, but it can appear also as addiction, mental illness, or any other of the expressions of poverty which the world treats as an annoyance or inconvenience.

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<sup>16</sup> “None are so poor that they cannot give something of themselves in mutual exchange. The poor cannot be only those who receive; they must be put in a position to give, because they know well how to respond with generosity. How many examples of sharing are before our eyes!” (Pope Francis, Message for the Fifth World Day of the Poor [14 November 2021], 13 June 2021, 6.)

<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, Message for the Fifth World Day of the Poor [14 November 2021], 13 June 2021, 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Mark* 14:7.

<sup>19</sup> “As I never tire of repeating, the poor are true evangelizers, for they were the first to be evangelized and called to share in the Lord's joy and his kingdom (cf. *Mt* 5:3).

The *poor*, always and everywhere, *evangelize us*, because they enable us to discover in new ways the true face of the Father. ‘They have much to teach us. Besides participating in the *sensus fidei*, they know the suffering Christ through their own sufferings. It is necessary that we all let ourselves be evangelized by them’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 198-199).” (Pope Francis, Message for the Fifth World Day of the Poor [14 November 2021], 13 June 2021, 2.)

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Message for the Fifth World Day of the Poor, 4.

A good summary of this teaching can be found in the Holy Father’s Message for the Fifth World Day of the Poor in 2021. If you’ll allow me to quote at some length from that document, he wrote:

“Jesus not only sides with the poor; he also *shares their lot*. [...] The poor will always be with us, yet that should not make us indifferent, but summon us instead to a mutual sharing of life that does not allow proxies. The poor are not people ‘outside’ our communities, but brothers and sisters whose sufferings we should share, in an effort to alleviate their difficulties and marginalization, restore their lost dignity and ensure their necessary social inclusion. On the other hand, as we know, acts of charity presuppose a giver and a receiver, whereas mutual sharing generates fraternity. Almsgiving is occasional; mutual sharing, on the other hand, is enduring. The former risks gratifying those who perform it and can prove demeaning for those who receive it; the latter strengthens solidarity and lays the necessary foundations for achieving justice. In short, believers, when they want to see Jesus in person and touch him with their hands, know where to turn. The poor are a sacrament of Christ; they represent his person and point to him.”<sup>21</sup>

### *The Poor: Objects or Subjects of the Gospel?*

To be *with* the poor leads to the next, necessary step for becoming the Church that Christ calls us to be. We must make space in our ecclesial “way of being” for the poor to be *protagonists* in the mission of Christ and his Church. In his homily for the Fourth World Day of the Poor in 2020, Pope Francis said:

“Do not forget: the poor are at the heart of the Gospel; we cannot understand the Gospel without the poor. The poor are like Jesus himself, who, though rich, emptied himself, made himself poor, even taking sin upon himself: the worst kind of poverty. The poor guarantee us an eternal income. Even now they help us become rich in love. For the worst kind of poverty needing to be combatted is our poverty of love.”<sup>22</sup>

Serving the poor, and putting the poor in a position to lead in the service of the Gospel, means more than settling on one specific area in which to help the poor.

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<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis, Message for the Fifth World Day of the Poor [14 November 2021], 13 June 2021, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis, Homily at Holy Mass for World Day of the Poor, 15 November 2020.



Serving the poor cannot be one “category” of the Church’s mission. It must be infused in the whole of the Church’s mission. We must re-imagine *all* of our ecclesial structures – parishes, schools, small groups, religious communities, faith formation groups, *etc.* – so that the poor are welcomed, included, and invited to share in the responsibility for the mission. This requires that we as Church make the fundamental shift, across the board, from being inward-looking, closed in on ourselves, to being outward-looking. It is only by looking outside of our closed circle that our institutions will see the poor; and it is only by *going* outside of ourselves that we will make contact with the poor and include them in our ecclesial life.

But the call is even broader than ecclesial life. We must bring the poor also into the center of our public activities and organizations. As the Pope said last month in his address to bankers and businesspeople: “The challenge is to include the poor in businesses, to make them resources for the benefit of all. *This is possible*. I dream of a world in which the discarded can become protagonists of change, yet it seems to me that Jesus has already accomplished that, don’t you think?”<sup>23</sup>

### **CONTEMPORARY FACTORS WHICH EXACERBATE POVERTY**

If the effort to bring the poor into the center of the life of the Church and the world is to be successful, then we must address the ways in which the current mindset and practice must change. Some of the means by which nations seek to consolidate power and wealth are bound to deepen the poverty of those who are already poor. War and the ceaseless production of arms, limitless material production and consumption, and the maintenance of business and industrial practices that further harm the planet: all of these activities are able to be undertaken by the world’s wealthiest and most powerful nations, but meanwhile the poor are the first to suffer the consequences of such irresponsibility.

#### *War*

Our world is plagued by war, and the hardest hit are those who are already poor. Nearly 60 years ago, the Church decried the proliferation of weapons in Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, when it said:

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<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis, Greetings to Managing Directors and Employees of Major Companies and Banks, 15 June 2024.

“While extravagant sums are being spent for the furnishing of ever new weapons, an adequate remedy cannot be provided for the multiple miseries afflicting the whole modern world. Disagreements between nations are not really and radically healed; on the contrary, they spread the infection to other parts of the earth. New approaches based on reformed attitudes must be taken to remove this trap and to emancipate the world from its crushing anxiety through the restoration of genuine peace. Therefore, we say it again: the arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which ensnares the poor to an intolerable degree.”<sup>24</sup>

Pope Francis, while calling what we are seeing today “a third world war fought piecemeal”,<sup>25</sup> does not cease to implore the leaders of nations to stop the wars they are fighting and seek more rational means for charting a path to peace. In speaking recently to aid agencies for the Eastern Churches, he said:

“To those who fuel the spiral of conflicts and reap profit from them, I once more say: Stop! Stop, because violence will never bring peace. There is urgent need for a ceasefire, for meetings and dialogue to permit the coexistence of different peoples. This is the only possible path to a stable future. With war, a senseless and inconclusive venture, no one emerges a winner: everyone ends up defeated because war, from the very beginning, is always already a defeat.”<sup>26</sup>

In this year’s Message for the Eighth World Day of the Poor, the Pope has emphasized the effect of war, pointing out how it both creates further poverty and summons us even more urgently to go to the aid of the afflicted. He said:

“The violence caused by wars clearly shows the arrogance of those who consider themselves to be powerful before men and women, but they are poor in the eyes of God. *How many more people are impoverished by misguided policies involving weapons!* How many innocent victims! Yet we cannot turn our backs to this reality. The disciples of the Lord know that each of these ‘little ones’ bears the image of the Son of God and each one must receive our support and expressions of Christian charity. ‘Each individual Christian and every community is called to be

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<sup>24</sup> Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965, 81.

<sup>25</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See, 8 January 2024. This is only one of the more recent instances in which the Holy Father has described the world situation in this way.

<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Participants in the Meeting of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches, 27 June 2024.

an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 187)."<sup>27</sup>

The Holy See has been saying that we need to rethink the concept of a “just war”, and this is certainly the case with regard to the poor. For them especially, what “justice” is there in war?

### *Climate Change*

The care for our common home is another area of urgency in our evangelical mission, not only because of the grave impact that a rapidly warming climate is having on the whole human family, but especially because of the disproportionate burden it is placing on the world's poor. As the Pope explained in his Encyclical *Laudato Si'* in 2015, the worst impact of climate change

“will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades. Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited. [...] There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever. [...] Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.”<sup>28</sup>

The Holy Father also addresses in *Laudato Si'* the existing imbalance among nations that demands greater action from the more affluent countries. He writes:

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<sup>27</sup> Pope Francis, Message for the Eighth World Day of the Poor (17 November 2024), 13 June 2024, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, 25.

“The poorest areas and countries are less capable of adopting new models for reducing environmental impact because they lack the wherewithal to develop the necessary processes and to cover their costs. We must continue to be aware that, regarding climate change, there are *differentiated responsibilities*. As the United States bishops have said, greater attention must be given to ‘the needs of the poor, the weak and the vulnerable, in a debate often dominated by more powerful interests’. We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference.”<sup>29</sup>

“Both everyday experience and scientific research,” points out Pope Francis, “show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest.”<sup>30</sup>

### *Ideological Polarization*

In addition to war and climate change, another factor in today’s society which impacts the poor disproportionately is ideological polarization. The more that leaders of warring political parties entrench themselves in immovable positions which admit of little room for negotiation and compromise, the less likely it is for changes in law to reach the real-time needs of people who are suffering from poverty, displacement, forced migration, and exploitation. A partisan interest in maintaining power and political influence, which never seems to threaten the basic needs and wellbeing of those in power, does have the effect of neglecting those who lack the most basic human goods. As Pope Francis said in his annual address to diplomats in 2020:

“Greater polarization does not help to resolve the real and pressing problems of citizens, especially those who are poorest and most vulnerable, nor can violence, which for no reason can be employed as a means of dealing with political and social issues.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 52; citing United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, 15 June 2021.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 48; citing Bolivian Bishops’ Conference, Pastoral Letter on the Environment and Human Development in Bolivia *El universo, don de Dios para la vida*, 23 March 2012, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See, 9 January 2020.

## WHAT CAN WE DO? INDICATIONS FOR LIVING THE GOSPEL FOR THE POOR

### *A “Eucharistic” Spirituality: Christ’s Real Presence in the Poor*

When we look at the scope of poverty and the enormity of the evils that perpetuate and increase people’s suffering, it seems that none of us, by ourselves, are capable of making a large impact against poverty. But instead of being discouraged from entering into this call from the Lord, we should remember that we never act alone.

First, when our choice to enter into the lives of the poor is motivated by the call of Christ, then Christ himself is with us. He is with us through the Spirit who places love in our hearts, and he is with us in the person to whom our love impels us. What we experience, in fact, is an encounter with the “real presence” of Christ – an extension of that real presence that we find in the Eucharist.

Second, the challenge to encounter and *be with* the poor leads us to seek partnerships with one another in this good work. Jesus sent his Apostles on their mission of evangelization two by two. We can enter into our Gospel mission among the poor with greater power and encouragement when we do so in communion with others.

Underlying everything that Pope Francis says about poverty is the truth that he enunciated at the beginning of his pontificate: the joy of the Gospel. It is hard to deny the fact that the richer our society becomes...the more comforts and pleasures we have at our fingertips...the more means we have to isolate ourselves...to be self-referential...and to become indifferent to the needs of people outside our own chosen “bubble”: then the more susceptible we become to depression, anxiety, fears, worries, mutual recriminations, confusions, doubt, and polarization. Even if only in desperation, a person might say: “Why not give poverty a chance?” It’s true: poverty, voluntarily entered into with Christian motivation, so that we can share the *involuntary* poverty of those whom the worldly promise of a self-reliant salvation has failed, really does provide a pathway to a greater experience of joy for us who follow it. It really is the joy of the Gospel. We, as a people in the most affluent society in the history of the world, are more averse to the sacrifices and inconveniences that lie along this path. And yet, a “leap of faith” will allow us to discover, through a real experience, that even those sacrifices and inconveniences carry their own hidden joy, because we re-discover what it means to be human –

what it means to be created in the image of the First-born, who became poor for our sakes, that we might become rich.<sup>32</sup>

### *Poverty as Evangelical Counsel*

It is also worth remembering that other kind of poverty – the voluntary, evangelical poverty that is for some people a part of their specific vocational call by God to consecrated life. Evangelical poverty has been taken up in different forms by all the saints, and in a particularly eloquent and radical way by people such as Francis of Assisi, Damien of Molokai, and Mother Teresa. These are ones who, after the example of Christ, *became* poor, taking on the likeness of the people whom they served. This voluntary poverty, motivated by divine love, is a means through which Christ and his saints enter into a mutual sharing with people who are afflicted by that *other* kind of poverty of which we have been speaking: the *involuntary* poverty which befalls them because of the sorrowful conditions that weigh on the human race due to the effects of sin and a lack of fraternal love. Christ, by becoming poor *for our sake*, is able to live in an immediate, personal, and genuine solidarity with those who find themselves poor because of circumstances that are not in their control. That is also what people do who choose to follow Christ’s example of poverty: by being poor themselves, they are the companions of the poor and fellow protagonists with the poor in the search for God’s Kingdom.

### *Conclusion*

I began this address by asking the question: *How can we be a Church which is poor for the poor?* And is this even possible? By returning to the New Testament source of the call of Jesus to his disciples, and by drawing out some of the major points of the Church’s magisterium, especially that of Pope Francis, on the theme of poverty, I have endeavored to make clear that being a Church who enters into the reality of poverty is not just an “option” for our mission, but more than that: it is *essential* to being who we are, and essential to our mission of evangelization.

Entering into the reality of poverty and sharing our lives with the poor is also a practical effect of the “Eucharistic Revival” that the Church in the United States has been engaging. Our encounter with Christ, truly present in the Eucharist, if it is

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9.

to be real and transformative, must be connected to our encounter with Christ present in his people, and in a special way, those who are “poor” in any sense of that term. If the Eucharist does not lead us to see the mysteries of the Lord’s incarnation, passion, resurrection, and ascension in the reality before us, then we have missed the point. The Eucharist is not only something to admire as if from the outside. To be one with the poor, and at the same time to experience our own poverty, is to get “inside” the Eucharistic mystery, where Christ really dwells, and where we are called to dwell with him.

As the Holy Father points out, the ongoing existence of involuntary poverty in our world, which only continues to increase alongside the increase of wealth for others, is a scandal pointing to our failure to embody fully the Gospel of Jesus. But it is also a perpetual opportunity for us to live the Gospel by exercising a preferential option for the poor. For the sake of the joy of the Gospel, we can embrace this opportunity to be with Christ in his “least ones”. And we can realize, in the process, that we are also among “the least” – and for that reason, we are among the blessed.