

2014 Bishop St.Paul Otsuka's New Years Pastoral Letter

“Option for the Poor”

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■ “Do not forget the poor”

After the resignation of Benedict XVI the conclave of cardinals elected Cardinal Bergoglio as the 266th Vicar of Christ. The new Pope took as his name Francis, a name that would clearly indicate that he was devoted to the poor. This name struck home to us personally. Naturally we associate this name with Francis of Assisi, who was devoted to poverty and helping the poor. And in these times when there are so many conflicts in the world we also associate Francis with peace, since his life was devoted to bringing about peace in this world.

It is providential that we have been blessed with a pope such as this in our times. The Second Vatican Council in the Constitution on the Church called for a Preferential Option for the Poor in the Church, and in the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World the Council encouraged the Church to become poor as a witness to its commitment to fighting poverty. Now is the time to make that commitment.

The word poverty by itself leaves much room for interpretation. We can think of poverty as being the opposite of wealth or abundance. But it could be interpreted differently. We could think of poverty as a lack of material possessions, or as a poverty of spirit. We could make a distinction of positive or negative.

For instance: we could think of negative poverty as something that radically eliminates the spirit of a person.

But it could also be interpreted as the poverty of spirit that deeply religious persons undertake when they submit themselves to evangelical poverty, such as is called for in the gospels.

Again, negative spiritual poverty could mean the state of a soul that has become such a slave to material possessions that the value of spiritual things is lost to them.

Also, positive poverty could point to that complete confidence in God where the person accepts any and all situations with humility and meekness.

This year I would like to take up the theme of “material poverty,” and leave the theme of “spiritual poverty” to the following year.

1. In order to save the poor we must become poor.

[In the sense of Poor Character]

In the Old Testament God is presented as a God who hears “The Cry of the Poor,” and in other places the emphasis on God’s doing justice for the impoverished and oppressed. In the

New Testament the theme goes even further: in order to save the poor God took on our poverty. God sent his only begotten Son into this world to take on our poverty and weakness. This is God's "Fundamental Option for the Poor." Mary proclaims this in her Magnificat when she quotes the Old Testament as saying that God will lift up the poor.

In the Beatitudes Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor. For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." This is God's promise to the poor, and this "promise" is also a gift. What is more it is an "invitation" that we can accept or reject.

Pope Francis is calling the Church of the modern world to respond to this invitation individually so that we imitate the poverty of Christ and live for the marginalized by meeting them on the same level. Let us take up this challenge.

2. Regard for the Poor

[Perceptive sense]

The sin of people in the modern world is their disregard for the poor. This unconcern was severely reprimanded by Jesus, such as can be seen in the parable of the Good Samaritan where the priest and the Levite pass by the victim on the other side of the road. (Luke 10, 31), and in the story of the rich man who was unconcerned about the plight of Lazarus who was languishing outside his front gate. By His association with the poor of His time Jesus taught us to have respect for the impoverished. Luke goes on to quote Jesus as saying, "Woe to you who are rich because you have already received your consolation." (Luke 6, 24), and in Matthew 19, 23 Jesus says, "I assure you that it is only with difficulty that a rich man will enter the Kingdom of Heaven." We cannot forget how severely Jesus reprimanded those who were amassing wealth in this world. (Luke 16, 19-31)

All over the world people are suffering from hunger, thirst, sickness and outright neglect. Mass media continually reminds us of the plight of refugees. Even within our own towns we can find people bereft of this world's basic necessities. We have grown too used to the sight of poverty and simply pass it off as being something that cannot be helped. This disregard for the impoverished shows how we have become impervious and outright cold toward the less fortunate. The sight of poverty should prick our conscience, and move us to be concerned about the suffering of our fellow human beings. We should open our eyes to the suffering of people in the dregs of society, and see the reality of this blight on our society. We must admit our indifference and with humble repentance have a deep regard for the poor.

3. Preach the Good News to the Poor.

[In the sense of conscience]

Jesus taught us that we should look at poverty, not simply as an economic phenomenon,

but as the object of our evangelization. In Jesus' era the poor were not only despised for their materialistic paucity, but also for their religious and social impoverishment. Look at the outcasts and despised people such as the tax collector Zacharias, the sinner Mary Magdalene, the people suffering physically and socially from leprosy, and the pagan Phoenician woman, as well as many others who were outcasts and considered despicable. (James 1, 9-11; 2,1-13) And in I Corinthians 11, 17-22 where St.Paul speaks of the uselessness of boasting about religion, culture, pedigrees, and the likes, we must remember how much a part of people's egos these things were at that time.

In the present day there are many causes of poverty, which is the source of so much suffering and hardships. People are thrown into inhuman states of life bereft of the very essentials for living at a standard of life essential for basic dignity, alienated from society, and even their own homeland as they join the ranks of refugees, suffering the loneliness of individuals cut off from family and friends. This is not to mention the spiritual agony of the people, whose poverty forces them into a state of exhaustion, losing any meaning to life, and sinking into despair. Their very reason to exist evaporates with their last breath of hope. In any era poverty is violence, a social violence, often unperceived on the surface of things.

Therefore the Church must proclaim to the poor and belittled that God has given them priority as the objects of salvation. Jesus Himself said that He was sent to preach the good news of salvation to the poor. (Isaiah 61, 1; Luke 4, 18) Jesus Himself said that the signs of the coming of the Kingdom will be that "The blind will see, the lame will walk, lepers will be cleansed, the deaf will hear, the dead will be raised up to life anew, and the poor will have the good news of salvation preached to them. (Matt, 11, 5; Luke 7, 22) Since Jesus prioritized the evangelization of the poor we must make the poor the object of our work of salvation, not just with words, but with action that will give credence to our love.

4. To be Poor as Jesus was Poor

[In the sense of christology]

In order to identify with us Jesus became poor. Although Jesus was our Savior He was born in poverty, (Luke 2, 7), lived in poverty (Matt. 13, 55) preached the gospel in poverty (Matt 8, 20), and as the Son of God died in poverty.(Matt. 27, 54) He wanted to become small among us "little ones" (Matt.23, 20), and wishing to be united with us. He deigned to live a life of poverty in order to be one of us. He Himself became poor to make us prosper. Therefore St. Paul was able to say of Him, "For your sake He made himself poor although He was rich, so that you might become rich by His poverty. (II Cor. 8, 9)

St. John emphasizes this saying, "The Word became flesh." (The fact of the Incarnation) But St.Paul says briefly that Jesus deigned to come to us in the form of a slave by being a humbled human being, and emptied Himself through obedience to the extent of offering Himself on the cross. (Philippians 2, 7-8) From the dire poverty of the manger to the ultimate

offering of Himself as a holocaust on the cross His self-abandonment is evident in every aspect of His life.

However, the poverty of Christ was voluntarily accepted. In contrast to the stringent poverty of John the Baptist, we find Jesus eating, drinking, and enjoying human company. Jesus said that to offer one's life for a friend is the height charity (John 15, 13) and willingly became the model of this "poverty" by His offering of Himself on the cross. But in no way did He boast of His poverty. What was Jesus' motive in electing to be poor? It was to show His love and saving work to His fellow humans. As followers of Christ we owe it to Him to be carried away with this same love by putting into practice this fundamental option for the poor.

5. Finding Christ in the Poor.

[Sacramental sense]

In Matthew's parable of the last judgment the King says to them, "I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me." (Matt. 25, 40) By these words he assures us that we will be blessed in discovering Christ Himself in the poor we help. "Come, you have my Father's blessing! Inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world." (Matt. 25, 33) Considering that the Last Supper was a prelude to the banquet in heaven we see that this sharing of the Body of Christ is a foretaste to the community in heaven sharing God's blessings. In the same way at the Last Judgment when all that is hidden will be made manifest we will see that these "little ones" are ineffably united with Christ. It was St. John Chrysostom who saw completely this phenomenon. He says, "Do you want to adore the Body of Christ? Well, then, don't despise His nakedness on the Cross. For, if you do, you will forget the countless naked people outside the Church suffering from the cold, and focus on the Christ robed in fine silk within the Church."

Just as Jesus is in the Blessed Sacrament and other sacraments, He is also in the midst of the poor. Unfortunately the poor do not always discover this Christ living within them. Blessed Mother Teresa said, "When we uncover that figure of Christ hidden within the poor, we should receive Christ as we would receive Him as if in Communion." If a Christian truly loves Christ he will accept His presence in the poor. By accepting Christ in the poor we will give testimony to our love of Jesus.

6. Imitate Christ by loving the poor

[In the sense of taking action]

Our present national economy is focused on profit and prosperity to the extent that a small handful of people obtain an inordinate amount of wealth to the detriment of the majority who

are poor and neglected. In no way must we divert our eyesight from this unpopular reality. We must extend our hand of generosity to these unfortunate people in the depth of poverty immediately. Jesus does not simply encourage us to do this, He demands it. Poverty is not something God desires. It must be clearly defined as an evil in our secular community. We must fight poverty. The Church must assist the poor, pursue justice, and stamp out the systematic evil by evangelizing our society.

The Christian must imitate Christ by loving the poor. This means that we must take great steps to help the poor by reinstating their human value and recognizing their dignity. Here in Japan, in the Christian Era, great emphasis was placed on putting into practice the love of God. In our own day there is a movement to canonize “Justo Takayama Ukon” on the basis of his fervent efforts to assist destitute people of that era such as the ailing and poverty stricken.

As Pope Paul VI encouraged us to do, we must evangelize the whole world through living lives of integrity, “lives of simplicity, a spirit of prayer, a love that encompasses all, obedience, humility, mortification, and self-sacrifice.” In the year 2011 a devastating earthquake and the ensuing tsunami, plus the meltdown of the atomic power plant was the cause of a call for greater frugality in our consumption of electrical power, and instigated a movement away from atomic energy. This was a wakeup call especially to us Christians to take more seriously the injunction of Christ to live a simple life.

7. United with the Poor

[Salvific sense]

Evangelization, more than a teaching, should be considered a call and a witness to be aware of the presence of God among us. Christians must put this into a practice of poverty by a life of complete dependence on God. The Church proclaims that Jesus won salvation for the entire world by His sacrifice on the cross. The Cross is God’s poverty. The Cross retrieves the abundance that we have lost. “I have come so that the sheep may have life, and have it more abundantly.”(John 10, 10) The purpose of the Cross is to give us life in abundance. Therefore St.Paul says, “You are well acquainted with the favor shown you by our Lord Jesus Christ: how for our sake he made himself poor though he was rich, so that you might become rich by his poverty.” (II Cor. 8, 9)

God chose the poverty of the redeemer as the means of restoring the original human nature of Adam that was lost when he committed sin. “Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at.” (Phil. 2, 6) He took on the exact opposite of what God “should be,” namely impoverishment, weakness, and foolishness, as the method of redeeming fallen humanity. St.Paul intuited this method of evangelization as God’s plan. “Since in God’s wisdom the world did not come to know him through “wisdom,” it pleased God to save those who believe through the absurdity of the preaching of the

gospel.”(I Cor. 1, 21) In order to save humans God cast off His glory and chose poverty and weakness as His “foolish” gospel.

Since this is God’s plan for salvation we cannot disengage poverty from the Church’s task of evangelization. Christians have been chosen for this foolish evangelization. “Did not God choose those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom he promised to those who love him?” (James 2, 5) Let us all join with all in seeking the glorious life by daring to take up voluntarily solidarity with the poor in choosing poverty.

8. Choosing Poverty with Joy

[Synthesizing sense]

The Christian’s poverty is not asceticism. Christian poverty does not point to something negative. On the contrary, Jesus’ poverty is filled with the joy of finding a treasure of inestimable value in the gospel message. This is the meaning of the parable of the hidden treasure in the field. (Matt. 13, 44) Jesus does not tell us to go seek the treasure after we have sold all our possessions, but that we will be able to dispose of our possessions after we have uncovered the treasure which is none other than the Kingdom of God. We will not be able to choose this path of poverty unless we have first encountered the Kingdom of God. Disposing of our material possessions is by no means the price we pay for possessing the Kingdom of God. Poverty is the result of finding the Kingdom. This is evangelical poverty.

The parable of the pearl of great price (Matt. 13, 45-46) carries the same message. Once a person has discovered the value of the Kingdom he/she immediately choose it and by all means possible try to gain it. Once the person has grasped it he/she will change their life-style. The person who has discovered the Kingdom of Heaven gives priority to the spiritual rather than the material, to things invisible rather than things of the visible world, and eternal things rather than temporal. Let us have a living faith whereby even in the midst of suffering we choose with joy the treasure of the gospel which money cannot buy.

9. Freely Living Poverty

[Critical sense]

The evangelical poverty we choose for the Kingdom is not some kind of an abstract ideal or charisma, but touching the very mystical character of Christ, the mysterious intimacy of Christ’s existence. That’s because the Kingdom of God in this world exists in the word and character of Jesus. Therefore, for the person who follows Christ there is no Christ without poverty, and without Christ one cannot be poor in this sense. Peter said to Jesus, “We have put aside everything to follow you!” (Mark 10, 28) But Jesus did not in any way demand that people embrace poverty. He encouraged them. Jesus blessed those who embraced poverty

freely. By this heavenly promise the Heavenly Father draws people to himself. We Disciples of Christ come to realize that the things of this world have little value (Eschatological Motivation). Let us accept voluntarily this apostolic, prophetic poverty.

Christ is not demanding this dramatic decision of all people. Rather, He is waiting for us to take up this realistic poverty. Christians, religious, monks, lay people alike depending on their position in the Church and circumstances in life, should choose their particular style of poverty. This evangelical council is not an obligation but elective. This is the basic vow of religious to poverty, obedience and chastity. What is important for everyone is “to be for the poor.” There is a balance between “being poor” and “being for the poor.” In order that we do not lose the valuable pearl that is the Kingdom of Heaven let us bathe ourselves with that light.

10. Becoming a Poor Church

[In the sense of Community]

“Those who believed shared all things in common; they would sell their property and goods, dividing everything on the basis of each one’s need. “ (Acts 2, 44-45; 4,32-35) We may observe the spirit of material poverty among the Christians of the primitive community as they spared no effort in sharing possessions with one another motivated by mutual service. Pope Francis encourages us to have an open Church, where the Church’s outreach extends to all poor people even in the far, hidden corners of the world. (Pope’s sermon on Pentecost, 2013). All Catholics should cooperate and support one another in this practical effort to make relief from poverty a priority.

All Catholics belong to this Church which is becoming poor. This is all part of the effort to put into practice the admonitions of Jesus that we become poor in order to enter His Kingdom, and that we make ourselves poor so that our proclamation of the gospel may be credible. We may recall how Jesus encouraged His disciples to take nothing with them on their missionary journey (Luke 10, 4) so that they may have no materialistic impediments to the proclamation of the gospel. We experience the spiritual thrill of being in association with Jesus as we devote ourselves to the mission of accompany the marginalized on their journey to faith without relying on material possessions or wheedling authority, but only relying on God’s grace. To be witnesses of the gospel we must be constantly aware that the grace of God transcends all the “valuable things” of this world, such as so called common sense and a system of values that puts high priority on material possessions. This “new Evangelization” calls for us make the value system of the Kingdom of God credible by living faithfully a life of poverty that will proclaim the gospel’s message.

11. Praying to the Holy Spirit for the Love of the Poor.

[Pneumatological sense]

The option for a life of poverty on the part of a Christian will lead people by the fruit that it bears. The life of a person who conscientiously carries out evangelical poverty will expose the futility and injustice of consumerism and hedonism that prevails in our modern society, as well as the injustice of the people's unconcern for the plight of the impoverished. The underlying power of the principle of evangelical poverty and its incentive to carry out the fight against poverty lies in the fruit of the Spirit, namely love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness and self-control. (Gal. 5, 22-23)

Our Heavenly Father tells us to walk with the poor, to be for the poor, and through poverty evangelize in humility and openness of heart in virtue of the helping gift of the Spirit. "There is more happiness in giving than in receiving." (Acts 20, 35) as St. Paul says quoting Jesus Himself. This "giving" is not simply a moral precept or command, but none other than that power of the Spirit of Love urging us and empowering us from within.

When a Christian pursues this material poverty it forms a part of the structure of the new evangelization. Jesus' injunction to love one another goes far beyond the peripheries of the Old Testament Commandments. It is not that the new commandment to love one another is more stringent, but that it is accompanied by the enlightenment of faith and the power of the Holy Spirit given to each one individually. The moral teachings of the gospels are nothing more than dead letters on a printed page if they are not accompanied by the grace of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. The same Spirit dwells within us urging us to love the poor as Jesus loves them. Therefore, we pray to the Holy Spirit that we may love the poor as Jesus loves them.

■ Walking with Pope Francis

"We cannot be like 'unbending Christians enshrouded by over-starched shirts', elite theologians pondering esoteric problems of theology while quietly sipping tea'. But we must be courageous like the incarnate Jesus Himself who sought out the poor." (On the Vigil of Pentecost, May 18, 2013) From the day of his inauguration as Pope Francis has insisted that poverty be the foundation of the Church's efforts to evangelize. And as if to prove that dedication, even as Pope, he has continued to conduct himself in a simple manner of life that befits a pontiff who preaches poverty, not with words but with example.

In the spirit of Pope Francis let us rebuild our modern Christian communities into Churches of the poor and humble, the concept of the weak ones of this world (Anawin), the marginalized of our society. It was they whom Mary in her Magnificat proclaims will be lifted up by the Almighty. And in imitation of the Heart of Mary let us proclaim the coming of the Kingdom among the poor, living a life of poverty in solidarity with them.