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In his message for the 6th World Day of the Poor, Pope Francis invites Christians to greater solidarity and responsibility for the poor in society, stressing the importance of putting our faith into practice through personal involvement that cannot be delegated to others.

By Benedict Mayaki, SJ

The World Day of the Poor is commemorated annually on the 33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time in the liturgical calendar, which this year falls on 13 November.

In this year's message for the annual observance themed "For your sakes Christ became poor (2 Cor. 8:9)", Pope Francis recalled the words of St. Paul to the Christians of Corinth, in order to encourage their efforts to show solidarity with their brothers and sisters in need.

The Pope noted that the World Day this year comes "as a healthy challenge, helping us to reflect on our style of life and on the many forms of poverty all around us."

Covid-19, war in Ukraine

Reflecting on current events in the world, Pope Francis pointed to the Covid-19 pandemic from which the world is emerging, including showing signs of an economic recovery that could benefit millions made poorer by the loss of their jobs.

He lamented that “another catastrophe” – the war in Ukraine – “has destined to impose on our world a very different scenario.” This, he added, is made more complex due to the direct intervention of a “superpower” aimed “at imposing its own will in violation of the principle of the self-determination of peoples.”

Pope Francis also highlighted the great poverty produced by the “senselessness of war” and how violence “strikes those who are defenceless and vulnerable.”

In this regard, he considered the deportation of thousands of persons, “in order to sever their roots and impose on them another identity,” and the millions of women, children and elderly people “forced to brave the danger of bombs just to find safety by seeking refuge as displaced persons in neighbouring countries.” More so, many remain in war zones, living each day with fear, lack of food, water, medical care and human affection.

“In these situations,” he added, “reason is darkened and those who feel its effects are the countless ordinary people who end up being added to the already great numbers of those in need.”

Responding to the needs of the poor

The sixth World Day of the Poor, celebrated in the midst of this situation, invites us to reflect on the summons of the Apostle to “keep our gaze fixed on Jesus” who though rich became poor so that by his poverty we might become rich, the Pope said.

He recalled that when St. Paul’s visited Jerusalem he met with Peter, James and John, who urged him not to forget the poor, and the Apostle set about organizing a great collection to aid the community of Jerusalem that was experiencing a great hardship due to food shortages. In the same manner, every Sunday during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, said the Pope, we have done the same thing, “pooling our offerings so that the community can provide for the needs of the poor”- something that Christians have always done “with joy and a sense of responsibility.”

Renewing initial motivation

Pope Francis pointed out that St. Paul wrote to the community of Corinth, asking them to relaunch their collection after their initial outburst of enthusiasm began to falter and the initiative proposed by the Apostle had lost some of its impetus.

On this note, the Holy Father thought of the generosity that has led entire populations “to open their doors to welcome millions of refugees from wars in the Middle East, Central Africa and now Ukraine,” with families opening their homes to make room for other families and communities generously accepting many in order to enable them live with dignity.

However, he acknowledges that “the longer the conflicts last, the more burdensome their consequences become” and the people who offer welcome find it increasingly difficult to maintain their relief efforts past the emergency stage.

“This is the moment for us not to lose heart but to renew our initial motivation,” the Pope urged. “The work we have begun needs to be brought to completion with the same sense of responsibility.”

Solidarity

Solidarity, the Pope explained, “is sharing the little we have with those who have nothing, so that no one will go without.” The sense of community and of communion as a style of life increases and a sense of solidarity matures, he added.

He invited Christians to consider that in some countries, over the past decades, families have experienced a significant increase in affluence and security as a positive result of private initiatives, economic growth and concrete incentives to support families and social responsibility. The benefits of these, in terms of security and stability “can now be shared with those who have been forced to leave behind their homes and native countries in search of safety and survival,” the Pope said.

“As members of civil society, let us continue to uphold the values of freedom, responsibility, fraternity, and solidarity. And as Christians, let us always make charity, faith and hope the basis of our lives and our actions.”

He noted that St. Paul did not oblige Christians in Corinth to perform works of charity but was prompted by the need for concrete assistance. The Apostle, instead, was “testing the genuineness of their love by the earnestness of their concern for the poor” – a sign of love shown by Jesus Himself.

“Generosity towards the poor has its most powerful motivation in the example of the Son of God, who chose to become poor,” the Pope said.

Be doers, not hearers only

The Pope went on to underline that St. Paul’s teaching finds an echo in the words of St. James who urged Christians to “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

“Where the poor are concerned, it is not talk that matters. What matters is rolling up our sleeves and putting our faith into practice through a direct involvement, one that cannot be delegated.”

He, however, cautioned against a kind of laxity that can creep in and lead to inconsistent behaviour and indifference against the poor, noting that it happens to some Christians who, “out of excessive attachment to money, remain mired in a poor use of their goods and wealth.”

The Pope insisted that the issue is not money itself but rather, the value that we put on money, because “attachment to money prevents us from seeing everyday life with realism; it clouds our gaze and blinds us to the needs of others.”

The Holy Father further warned against approaching the poor with a “welfare mentality”, stressing rather that we ensure “that no one lacks what is necessary.” He underlined that it is not activism that saves but a “sincere and generous concern that makes us approach a poor person as a brother or sister who lends a hand to help me shake off the lethargy into which I have fallen.”

In this perspective, Pope Francis stressed the urgent need to find solutions that can go beyond the approach of social policies conceived as “a policy *for* the poor, but never *with* the poor and never *of* the poor, much less part of a project that brings people together.”

Poverty that sets free

“True wealth does not consist in storing up “treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break in and steal,” the Pope said, but rather in “a reciprocal love that leads us to bear one another’s burdens in such a way that no one is left behind or excluded.”

This, Pope Francis stated, clashes with our human way of thinking that there exists a form of poverty that can make us rich.

Explaining, the Holy Father said that the message of Jesus, “shows us the way and makes us realize that there is a poverty that humiliates and kills, and another poverty, Christ’s own poverty, that sets us free and brings grace.”

Distinguishing between the two, he said that the poverty that kills is “squalor, the daughter of injustice, exploitation, violence and the unjust distribution of resources” – a hopeless and implacable poverty, imposed by the throwaway culture that not only reduces people to poverty but also “corrodes the spiritual dimension.”

On the other hand, the poverty that sets us free “is one that results from a responsible decision to cast off all dead weight and concentrate on what is essential.”

“Encountering the poor enables us to put an end to many of our anxieties and empty fears, and to arrive at what truly matters in life, the treasure that no one can steal from us: true and gratuitous love,” said the Pope, adding that the poor, “before being the object of our almsgiving, are people, who can help set us free from the snares of anxiety and superficiality.”

Christ’s poverty makes us rich

Pope Francis added that the theme of the World Day of the Poor presents us with the great paradox of our life of faith, that “Christ’s poverty makes us rich” because he became poor for our sakes so that our lives are illumined and transformed, taking on “a worth that the world does not appreciate and cannot bestow.”

Therefore, “if we want life to triumph over death, and dignity to be redeemed from injustice, we need to follow Christ’s path of poverty, sharing our lives out of love, breaking the bread of our daily existence

with our brothers and sisters, beginning with the least of them, those who lack the very essentials of life.”

This is the way to “create equality, to free the poor from their misery and the rich from their vanity, and both from despair,” the Pope insisted.

Concluding, the Holy Father held up the example of St. Charles de Foucauld - a man born rich who gave up everything to follow Jesus – who urged everyone not to despise the poor, the little ones and the workers, because “not only are they our brothers and sisters in God, they are also those who most perfectly imitate Jesus in his outward life.”

“May this 2022 *World Day of the Poor* be for us a moment of grace,” the Pope prayed. “May it enable us to make a personal and communal examination of conscience and to ask ourselves whether the poverty of Jesus Christ is our faithful companion in life.”

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