

Serving the Christ among Us Our Fundamental Option for the Poor

My experiences with the poor

The poor man asking me for a handout at Marquette
The hitchhiker on Neil Street

What the Bible says:

Old Testament

- God is on the side of the poor.
- Israel must take special care of the poor. In harvesting, they must leave the gleanings for the poor. Every Jubilee Year all debts would be forgiven.
- The people must treat the poor justly before their sacrifices will be accepted.
- Being fair and just to the poor is more important than holocausts and sacrifices.
- The good man is kind to the poor whereas the wicked exploits them.

New Testament

- Blessed are the poor for the Kingdom of heaven is theirs.
- Perfection calls for giving everything away to the poor.
- Christians cannot discriminate against the poor.
- The poor are invited to the banquet of the Lord.
- Christians must do good to those from whom they cannot expect anything in return.
- Christ became poor to make us rich.
- If we do not love the brother we can see, we cannot claim to love the God we cannot see.
- We will be judged by the way we reach out to those in need. What we do to the poor and needy, we do to Christ Himself.

Some Facts and Myths

- The gap between the rich and the poor is constantly increasing.
- It is far more difficult to be poor in America than elsewhere.
- Nations spend much more on the military than on education.
- The Catholics in this country are more concerned about moral purity and doctrinal orthodoxy than genuine concern for the poor.
- Just because I don't see it, it does not mean that poverty does not exist.
- It is not someone's fault that they are poor.
- We are losing patience with the poor.

- The height of a civilization must be judged by the way it cares for the weak and the poor, and not by the way it cow-tows to the rich and the powerful.

The Christian Perspective

There are three levels of loving our neighbor:

1. He/she is a human being like me. So, I respect him/her.

Justice: Give everyone his due.

I am a human too. So, I must treat him/her as I would like to be treated.
Empathy: Golden Rule -- Treat others as you would like them to treat you.

* Franz Kafka and the child -- letters from a doll

This position is inspired the words of John Donne in his Devotions:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod is washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

2. He/she is the child of God. I should treat him/her as she would like to be treated.

Compassion: Try to feel the pain of others.

You should walk a mile in the other person's moccasins, before you judge him/her.

* painting by Raphael hangs in a gallery in Florence, Italy, called "The Madonna of the Barrel" The great talent of Raphael was to see the face of God in ordinary things, in simple folk.

3. He/she is Christ to me. I must treat him/her as I would treat Christ himself.

Christ-attitude: As long as you did it to one of these, you did it to me.

* Mother Teresa and Pandit Nehru

- Give him his fifty cents and tell him to go to hell.

What can we do?

1. *Know the facts. Get to know them on a personal basis.*
 - Don't keep yourself insulated from the poor.

- Every chance you get, expose yourself to their reality.
 - Read about them, talk to them, and interact with them.
 - Jean Vanier: "We are afraid of the person in misery because he constitutes a danger to us. His poverty and his needs challenge our riches. So we raise the barriers to keep him from our sight."
2. *Treat the poor person as your equal.*
 - My experience on the train with the railroad workers...
 - The Italian poem: My white friend...
 - Never insult the poor person
 3. *Always and everywhere make people your number one priority. Take interest in people.*
 - Don't allow material concerns to take over your life.
 - Give people the pride of place in your life.
 - A famous psychiatrist - the most hopeless case came to him: as a last resort, go and see that very funny clown in the circus, he will cheer you up. "Sir, I am that clown!"
 4. *Be aware of your stewardship.*
 - Be humble in your successes and achievements.
 - Don't take your life for granted.
 - Be thankful for whatever God has given you.
 5. *Be critical.*
 - Things are never what they seem.
 - Probably Americans are far less critical than the others in the West.
 - Question the policies of your government.
 - Being a Christian necessarily calls on us to be prophets.
 6. *Work towards a consistent moral vision.*
 - The conservatives don't seem to have patience with the poor and they want the poor to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps.
 - The liberals seem to champion the poor but do not seem to have any moral values.
 - We need to strike a balance.
 7. *Take the side of the poor. Be their champion.*
 - If you have the possibility to work for the poor, do it. The case of Mike Cafferty – wants to be an attorney to champion the cause of the handicapped.
 - Henri de Lubac: "When you choose an ideology, you can never be sure of not being mistaken, at least in part. When you submit to an ideology, you are never sure of having chosen the right party. But when you have chosen the poor, you are always sure -- doubly sure -- that you have made the right choice, for you have chosen as Jesus would, you have chosen Jesus himself."
 8. *Be idealistic.*

- The story of Martin Luther King – only because he was idealistic that when the occasion presented itself, he became a hero.
 - Robert Kennedy: "Some see the things that are and ask why. Others dream the things that are not and ask why not."
 - Don't grow up too fast and give up your dreams.
9. *Serve them in whatever way you can. Get your hands dirty.*
- It is not the amount or type of service that you do that matters.
 - Remember the story of the Irishman.
 - Even a smile will do.
 - However, it is important to dirty our hands serving the poor.
10. *Work towards embracing the whole world. Break down barriers of every kind.*
- Both Gail Sheehy and Scott Peck talk about maturity as breaking down barriers and reaching out to the whole of humanity.
 - In my own life, I have seen how God wants me to embrace everyone.

Conclusion

Korean Legend

This life is a dress rehearsal and God gives us challenges to love. To the extent I have enlarged my heart I have lived well.

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.

- Dwight D. Eisenhower, U. S. General and 34th President (1890-1969)

Charles Thompson invites us to avoid self-centered prayer:

You cannot pray the Lord's prayer
 And even once say "I."
 You cannot pray the Lord's prayer
 And even once say "My."
 Nor can you pray the Lord's prayer,
 And not pray for another;
 For when you ask for daily bread,
 You must include your brother.
 For others are included
 In each and every plea:
 From the beginning to the end of it,
 It does not once say "Me."

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October 6, 2009