

Catholic

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JANUARY 2020

Understanding the Poor

INSIGHT AND ACTION

We are bombarded daily with news of the disadvantaged. The extent of the need can feel overwhelming. We may wonder how we could possibly have any helpful impact. Nobody can do everything, but everybody can do something. The question is, what is that something?

Before we address that question, let's answer this one first: Who are the poor? By exploring this through the lens of who the poor were in New Testament times, we'll address several key points: Did *poor* refer to economic or social status, or both? What part of the population was considered poor? How did people become poor? We can gain clarity by understanding the communal plight of biblical times. Pope Francis shares in the sentiment: "The centuries pass, but the condition of rich and poor remains constant, as if history has taught us nothing."



SHUTTERSTOCK

Who Are the Poor?

The Greek language has two terms for *poor*: *penes* and *ptochos*. *Penes* refers to a person who does manual labor. The workers (*penetes*), are contrasted in social or honor status with a *plousios*, a member of the class who does not need to work or earn an income. The *penetes* needed to work in shops or in the fields and were consequently without the leisure characteristic of the rich gentry, who were free to give their time to politics, education, and war. This represents an elite perspective that implies that the leisured classes were of another species than the masses, the working people.

A *ptochos*, however, refers to a person reduced to begging, that is, someone who is destitute of all resources, especially farm and family. One gives alms to a *ptochos*. A *penes*, who has little wealth yet has sufficiency, is not called poor in the same sense of the word as a *ptochos*.

Historically, we can think of a *ptochos* as someone who had lost many or all of his family and social ties. He often was a wanderer, therefore a foreigner to others, unable to tap for any length of time the resources of a group to which he could contribute very little or nothing at all. Thus the “begging poor” person is bereft of all social support as well as all means of support.

At the top of the social stratification of ancient society were monarchs and/or aristocratic families (1 to 2 percent). A rung down the ladder is the retainer class: tax gatherers, police, scribes, priests, and others (5 to 7 percent). The bulk of the population (75 percent) consisted of merchants, very few of whom were well off; artisans, almost all of whom lacked worldly goods; and farmers and fishermen, some of whom owned various amounts of land. At the bottom were the untouchables (15 percent)—beggars, cripples, prostitutes, and criminals—who lived in the hedges outside the cities.

The Begging Poor

The rise of cities and empires in antiquity took place because peasants were able to produce an agricultural surplus. Of course, they never kept it, for in the pecking order there were always stronger and more clever folks who took it away from them, either by plunder or by taxes. The kinds of taxes common in the Greco-Roman period were the head and land taxes, requisitions (including the surrender of food and animals for military use, impressed labor), tolls on all manufactured products and produce brought to market, and tithes. For instance, Jonah the fisherman and his sons, Peter and Andrew, paid a fee to fish, yet could only do so in specific areas. They paid a tax to toll collectors to take their

catch to market, and they paid a tax when they sold the fish. On top of all of this, the tax collector came annually to collect the other common taxes. Even if they caught a boatload of fish (Luke 5:6–7), after tolls and taxes there could not be much left. Taxes might take 30 to 40 percent from peasant farmers and artisans.

Because taxes were so high, life for peasants was at best subsistent. They were able to store only several months of food. The “wolf” was always at the door. And of course there were no helpful government programs like there are today (Social Security, etc.) The state took the surplus of peasants and gave them nothing in return. Roman taxation of Palestine became so oppressive that it created a flood of debtors who finally lost their lands because they could not pay the taxes. They became the “begging poor.”



A boy and his family's chicken outside their home in Steele, AL
(CNS PHOTO/KAREN CALLAWAY, CATHOLIC NEW WORLD)

In the Gospels, Jesus further defines the begging poor when he responds to John the Baptist's messengers through action—healing the blind, lame, and lepers, and raising the dead. Jesus affirms his love and generosity for the least in the land by saying: “...Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). The urban begging poor and the outcasts represent the bottom of the population, but they find favor with Jesus, just as “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” who should be invited to one's table (Luke 14:13). People without any social or material resources, such as the disguised person referred to in Matthew 25:35–45, are the begging poor.

Insight Leads to Action

"Loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern" (Pope Francis' *The Joy of the Gospel* [*Evangelii Gaudium*, 199], November 24, 2013).

In a message on November 17, 2019, in recognition of the Third World Day of the Poor, the Pope affirms that one of the greatest gifts we can give the poor is hope. Here are some ways he says we can do that.

Move beyond seeing one's obvious material needs. Strive to "discover their inner goodness...and in this way initiate a true fraternal dialogue."

In all situations, make God and his love visible. The poor need "more than our offer of a warm meal....The poor need...to feel anew the warmth of affection [and] our presence, to overcome loneliness. In a word, they need love."

Refrain from judgment. For the poor, judgment always seems to be lurking around the corner. "They are not allowed to be timid or discouraged; they are seen as a threat or as useless, simply because they are poor."

Often little is needed to restore hope. "It is enough to stop for a moment, smile, and listen....The poor save us because they enable us to encounter the face of Jesus Christ."



Pope Francis blessed and helped inaugurate a new shelter, day center, and soup kitchen for the poor in Palazzo Migliori, near St. Peter's Square in November 2019. The facility, funded by the papal almoner's office, will be staffed by volunteers from the Community of Sant'Egidio and was inaugurated in time for the World Day of the Poor. (CNS PHOTO/VATICAN MEDIA)

Made Poor for the Sake of Jesus

Jesus' original Four Beatitudes included mention of the poor, the hungry and thirsty, the mourning, and those cast out. If we start with the last of these, we discover the chief reason why these disciples might be poor, hungry, thirsty, and mourning. The last beatitude calls honorable those disciples of Jesus whom their families disown and excommunicate for their loyalty to Jesus. Remember to shift cultural gears when reading about the poor in the Bible. It was far more than an economic calculation, because the most valuable thing one possessed then was family who alone provided food, clothing, shelter, loyalty, and support. To lose family meant an immediate descent into the ranks of the begging poor.

Similarly, think about people Jesus told to "look at the birds in the sky...learn from the way the wild flowers grow" (Matthew 6:26, 28). Males worked in the fields to grow grain,

which they harvested and gathered into barns; but this male, who has no more land, looks at the birds that God feeds. A wife tasked with clothing production but who has no sheep and thus no wool and no loom looks at the flowers to see that God clothes them.

With only a few exceptions, the disciples of Jesus and Paul were all working poor. The occasional person of means was prevailed upon to open his house for group assembly, but nothing indicates that he ever fed anyone. Being poor was never a virtue or value; one's choice to follow Jesus might imply a choice to leave all, family included, and to lose one's life for the kingdom. Yet this was always balanced with a calculus that the "poor" status that resulted would be resolved by the prospect of a heavenly Father who promises a new family with a hundredfold heavenly resources.

In all situations, make God and his love visible.

A Valiant Example

In the world today, we have seen that individuals are profoundly linked to one another. We are always together. But take a look at the communities around you. Look at your neighborhood, your city, and the nation as a whole. Scan the horizon of your place of work, your social clubs, and even your parish. You're certain to see a pattern: people are not treated equally.

Instead, there seemingly exists a power differential—a kind of intrinsic momentum that pulls attention and concern toward those who already have it. The rich, the powerful, the educated, and the healthy tend to still receive a disproportionate amount of attention and concern.

The response of the Catholic tradition is a preferential option for the poor. While some may be irritated by this ideology and argue that it sounds unfair, by answering this call the Church is imitating Jesus. Remember the story Jesus told of the landowner who hired workers early and late in the day. At day's end, he paid those hired late a full salary, which made those who worked all day think they would get more. They didn't, and they were angry. The landowner's response: "Are you jealous because I am generous?" So the Church, in following Jesus, thinks much more in categories of generosity than merely of fairness. In



PHOTO BY ICONO.COM FROM PEXELS

the words of Pope Francis on the World Day of the Poor in 2019: "If the disciples of the Lord Jesus wish to be genuine evangelizers, they must sow tangible seeds of hope."

Jesus himself reflected on much older Jewish tradition. Repeatedly in the words of the prophets of Israel, we read that the measure of true faith is caring for the widow and the orphan. This is to say that in showing concern for those who are without resources we show our realization of God's true love for all. Given the power differential, with its momentum toward the rich, a preferential option for the poor is about the only way to achieve a truly level playing field. It serves fairness by behaving with generosity. For all these reasons, then, let us embrace this Catholic tradition, which, in its social ethic, consistently challenges us to look outside ourselves and to focus on those in need.

As affirmed by a statement from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, this mission is not new. "More than two thousand years ago, Jesus in his hometown synagogue read the words from Isaiah that outlined his work on earth, as well as the Church's mission through the centuries and the special tasks of Catholic educators and catechists today: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor...liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free....' Sharing our social tradition more fully and clearly is an essential way to bring good news, liberty, and new sight to a society and world in desperate need of God's justice and peace."

Prayer for Those in Poverty

As disciples of Jesus, most of us would acknowledge our obligation to pray for the poor. In Jesus' Beatitudes in Luke and Matthew, the poor are referred to as "blessed." A Catholic campaign for human development, sponsored by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, offers a prayer on behalf of those in a state of fallen plight.

God of Justice, open our eyes
to see you in the face of those in poverty.
Open our ears to hear you
in the cries of those exploited.
Open our mouths to defend you
in the public squares as well
as in private deeds.

Remind us that what we do to the least
ones, we do to you.
Amen.

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THE CATECHISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE,
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Imprimi Potest: Stephen T. Rehrauer, CSsR, Provincial, Denver Province, the Redemptorists.

Catholic Update sources: Liguori Publications' *Scripture from Scratch* article "Who Is Poor in the New Testament"

by Jerome H. Neyrey, SJ (October 2002), and *What Does the Church Teach about Social Justice?* by Timothy O'Connell.

Scripture texts in this work are from the *New American Bible*, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC

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