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**Pope Francis on Caring for the Poor**

Pope Francis is not an economist nor is he interested in academic discussions of economic theories. He is of no help in determining the differences between the Chicago school still drawing on Milton Friedman and the Austrian school represented by Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek. The pope addresses economic issues as a pastor, serving a large transnational church, deeply concerned that existing economic systems promote the common good and care for the marginalized. For him, “realities are more important than ideas.” He is interested in how operative economies are actually impacting people, especially the poor. He addresses economic issues from a moral perspective rooted in the Gospel and Catholic social teaching.

As a Jesuit priest and bishop in Argentina, Jorge Bergoglio took seriously the commitment to serve the poor and work for justice that became a dominant theme for Jesuits under Pedro Arrupe, who served as Superior General from 1965 – 1983. At their 32nd General Congregation in 1974, the Jesuits adopted the Fourth Decree, which declared: ”The Mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement.” Having personally appropriated this general theme of his religious community, especially justice for the poor, Bergoglio has consistently lived it in his various roles as parish priest, religious superior, seminary rector, archbishop of Buenos Aires and, starting in March of 2013, Bishop of Rome. In this regard, Francis has made it clear: “I feel a Jesuit in my spirituality.”

Latin American liberation theology provides another context for understanding the approach to economics espoused by Pope Francis. The seminal insight for this theological movement came from Gustavo Gutierrez, who attempted to apply the contemporary theology he leaned during his studies in Europe to his pastoral work in Lima, Peru, only to find that it did not speak to the poor people he served. That theology was designed to address people tempted to non-belief by modern secularization. The parishioners in Lima had very different concerns. They were clearly people of faith with a strong sense of popular religiosity. Their real problem was that they were treated as non-persons, people of no account pushed to the margins of society, treated unjustly by sinful institutions and oppressive systems. With the existential concerns of his parishioners in mind, Gutierrez refocused on liberation themes in the Bible: the Exodus, through which Yahweh granted political, social and economic freedom to an enslaved people (Ex 14); the prophetic message that true religion demands justice for all and care for the oppressed, including the widows, orphans, and aliens (Isa 1:17); the claim of Jesus that he came to bring liberty to captives and to preach the good news to the poor (Lk 4:18); and the final judgment scene in which Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, thirsty, homeless and imprisoned (Matt 25:31-49).

Gutierrez and his colleagues also reinterpreted major doctrines. God is the Compassionate One who hears the cries of the poor. Christ is the liberator of those held captive. The Holy Spirit directs the works of justice by serving as our inner wellspring of spiritual energy. The Church is a servant community charged with the mission to spread the Kingdom of justice and peace in the world. The Eucharist joins us to the crucified and risen Christ and strengthens us to participate in his liberating mission. Christian morality, which emphasizes the essential unity of love of God and love of neighbor, takes on a social character. It recognizes the existence of social sin, which is embedded in societal institutions and cultural patterns, producing false consciousness. It also calls us to transform social sin into liberating grace manifested in structures and institutions that serve the common good and the needs of the marginalized. Liberation morality has an inner logic that leads to the preferential option for the poor, which calls Christians to serve the poor in their efforts to become active agents of their own liberation and full participants in society. We carry out this mission with eschatological hope that one day all people will share in the abundance of the heavenly banquet.

These themes have influenced the development of Latin American liberation theology as well as other liberation theologies (black, Asian, African, feminist) which speak to people banished to the margins. Although it is true that some liberation theologians have used Marxist categories to analyze the oppressive situations of their people, the real thrust of the movement comes from refocusing scripture and retrieving liberation themes in the tradition. This leads to *orthopraxis,* that is, correct or proper action on behalf of the poor, which involves seeing their situation by experiencing it as much as possible, judging it by Christian norms, and acting collaboratively to improve it.

Within the broad framework of liberation theology, there has been a movement in Latin America known as “the theology of the people,” which embraces the option for the poor but with variations in methodology and points of emphasis. In his book*, Pope Francis and The Theology of the People* (Orbis 2017), Rafael Luciani, gives credit to the priest-theologian Lucio Gera for providing a broad outline of a theology of the people. It starts with direct contact with “the people,” a term that includes all those who belong to a particular nation as well as all the faithful, especially those who are poor. It does not use Marxist categories to analyze the oppressive situation, but seeks to discern the mission of the church on the basis of its option for the poor. It does include both a careful study of the people’s common culture to determine what is impeding the healthy development of the people and prudent discernment of the positive values of the people that should be preserved against the threats posed by globalization and alien ideologies. The holy faithful people, who share a common history and culture, demonstrate in their popular piety an “evangelical instinct,” which promotes solidarity and rejects violence. The Church carries out its mission by evangelizing specific cultures based on an understanding of the popular religiosity or “daily mysticism” of the people.

The themes common to the theology of the people can be found in the declarations made by the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) meeting in Medelin (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992) and especially Aparecida (2007), where Archbishop Bergoglio played an important role in drafting the concluding document. It included a chapter on the preferential option for the poor highlighting its evangelizing and pastoral significance. It also insisted that the Church should provide Catholic professionals with ethical guidance so they can promote economic development and higher employment rates.

Drawing on his experiences as an Argentine Jesuit influenced by variations of liberation theology, Pope Francis has developed his own distinctive pastoral approach to economic issues. The pope insists, with great passion, that economic systems must do a better job of serving the cause of the poor. Although he at times acknowledges recent progress in reducing abject poverty, his passion is with those still banished to the margins. For him, the preferential option for the poor is not an abstract ideal, but is a moral imperative that should guide economic policies. He puts a high priority on eliminating extreme poverty in developing countries. Francis, in his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel,* has said: “As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural cause of inequality, no solution will be found for the world’s problems or, for that matter, to any problems. Inequality is the root of social ills” (202). The pope has harsh words for what he calls ”unfettered capitalism,” which excludes the poor and creates inequality, declaring: “Such an economy kills” (52). It “tends to devour everything that stands in the way of increased profits,” which renders the poor “defenseless before the interests of a deified market.” Christians are called to give “voice to the cry of the poor, so that they are not abandoned to the laws of an economy that seems at times to treat people as mere consumers.” Human rights are violated by unfair economic structures that create huge inequities.

Although Pope Francis does not offer specific solutions to the problem of poverty, his Apostolic Exhortation does suggest some helpful general approaches. The essential dignity of every human being, including the poor, “ought to shape all economic policies” (203). As Christians, we are called to be “docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid” so that they can be “fully a part of society” (187). We must be careful that the culture of prosperity does not “deaden” us, so that we become “incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor,” seeing their plight as “a mere spectacle” or as “someone else’s responsibility” (54).

Positively, the pope urges us to cultivate the virtue of solidarity, which recognizes deep bonds with the poor, who “have much to teach us” since in their difficulties, they “know the suffering Christ” (198). Since God gave the goods of the earth for all people, “solidarity must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them” (189). This means “working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty” as well as providing “small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter” (188). The pope encourages “financial experts and political leaders” to ponder the words of Saint John Chrysostom: “Not to share one’s wealth with the poor is to steal from them and to take away their livelihood. It is not our own goods which we hold, but theirs” (57).

In his 2013 message for World Food Day, Francis challenges us to “educate ourselves in solidarity, to rediscover the value and meaning of this very uncomfortable word” and “to make it a basic attitude in decisions made at the political, economic and financial levels.” Solidarity overcomes “selfish ways of thinking and partisan interests.” It cannot be reduced to “different forms of welfare” but makes every effort ”to ensure that an ever greater number of persons are economically interdependent.” For Francis, solidarity is a fundamental attitude which promotes structures, policies and practices that enable the poor to take charge of their own lives and become active participants in the political and economic life of the community. The pope trusts that cultivating the virtue of solidarity will enable people of good will to develop specific concrete ways of empowering the poor.

In his encyclical *Laudato Si*, Francis calls for a “generational solidarity” which prompts us to find comprehensive solutions and to take concrete actions to preserve the earth, our common home for the sake of the next generation, especially the poor, who suffer the most from environmental degradation. For the pope, there is an intrinsic connection between care for the earth and care for the poor, which demands comprehensive solutions, such as the international Paris Agreement, since we cannot rely on “market forces” or “ a magical conception of the market” to protect the environment so we can provide a habitable planet for future generations.

Suggesting that we can learn a “valuable lesson in solidarity” from the humble poor, Francis encourages people of affluence and power, “never tire of working for a more just world, marked by greater solidarity.” In advocating for the poor, he draws on the principle of Catholic social teaching known as “the universal destination of goods,” which insists that the goods of God’s creation are given for the benefit of the whole human family. The pope argues for a more equitable distribution of wealth on moral grounds: “Working for a just distribution of the fruits of the earth and human labor is not mere philanthropy. It is a moral obligation. For Christians, the responsibility is even greater: it is a commandment.” We all bear this responsibility and must find our own distinctive ways to work for greater justice which benefits the poor.