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According to a 2017 *Forbes* magazine article, the three richest Americans (Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and Jeff Bezos) collectively own more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of the domestic population, a total of 160 million people. We not only have a gigantic wealth disparity, we also have a significant income gap. The CEOs of some large corporations make more in one day than their average employees do in a year. Experts disagree on how to interpret this disparity. Some view economic inequality as a serious problem that requires governmental intervention; while others see advantages in some inequality and insist that free market forces provide the best way to deal with the situation. Implicit in this discussion is the moral question of how we as a wealthy nation can tolerate such a wide economic disparity that gives excessive political power to the wealthy and leaves millions of Americans living below the poverty line.

Catholic Social Teaching has developed certain themes that can guide our efforts to bridge the economic divide. First is the virtue of solidarity that inclines us to promote the common good. Solidarity is rooted in the empirical fact that we all share a common genetic package and in the faith conviction that we are all children of God, redeemed by Christ and animated by the Holy Spirit. It strengthens us to challenge stereotypical attitudes that see the poor as mostly lazy minorities who take advantage of the welfare system. Solidarity prompts us to refer to the poor not as “them” but as “some of us.” Some of us Americans are poor, living below the poverty line. Some of us are working full time but do not earn enough to support a family. Some of us are children, elderly and disabled who cannot work.

There are available ways of developing and practicing the virtue of solidarity. Christian service projects, sponsored by churches and schools, mobilize groups to assist the poor in a particular area. For example, a university parish organized a group of collegians to help Habitat for Humanity build a house for a poor family in Appalachia. After spending one week there, the students returned home and experienced an evening of theological reflection that included a discussion of what they learned from the poor persons they encountered. The same dynamic can be in play when parishioners adopt a poor family before Christmas and extend the relationship throughout the year or volunteer in a food distribution center and make the effort to talk to those coming for a free meal. As Christians develop the virtue of solidarity, we are less likely to neglect or patronize the poor and are more likely to empower and accompany them. Solidarity helps us learn from the poor without pretending to fully understand their situation. It moves us to recognize both the spiritual threats engendered by affluence and the responsibilities generated by privilege. Developing and practicing the virtue of solidarity is crucial to a broad-based effort to create a more just social order.

A second theme is the “universal destination of goods.” Traditionally, Catholic Social teaching has defended the right to private property as a shield against various forms of collectivism and as an incentive to work and to acquire the goods needed for the exercise of personal freedom and family autonomy. The right to private ownership, however, is not absolute, but is subordinated to the right to common use demanded by the universal destination of goods. God created the goods of this earth for the benefit of all the inhabitants of our planet. The state, which has the obligation to protect the right of private property, also has the right and duty to regulate control of private ownership for the sake of the common good. The overriding principle of common use calls on governments to make wise and just decisions about how public lands are used. It also reminds owners of their social responsibility to use their goods moderately and to share them with those in need. An early expression of this principle comes from the 4th century Doctor of the Church, St Ambrose of Milan, who said that in giving to the poor we are giving back what is properly theirs. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that owners of property have the task of “making it fruitful and communicating its benefits to others,” especially their families (2404).

We can imagine individuals who appropriate and act on the universal destination of goods. A very wealthy person could set up a foundation that makes carefully chosen grants available to targeted groups of poor persons, empowering them to take charge of their own lives. A citizen long constrained by greed could have a change of heart and start contributing generously to the annual United Way Campaign. An affluent retiree could make an arrangement with her pastor to help individuals who approach the parish for financial help, all done anonymously. An economist, who is convinced inequality retards economic growth, could increase his annual contribution to the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, not as a handout but as a way out of the depressing cycle of poverty.

The third theme is the “preferential option for the poor.“ Starting in the 1960s, Latin American theology, pioneered by Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, developed this theme, which achieved official status at the 1979 Latin Bishops Conference in Puebla, Mexico. This option is not an ideology that promotes class warfare and demonizes the wealthy. It is not meant to make well-meaning rich persons feel guilty. It does reflect the thrust of the Bible which tells us that God hears the cry of the poor and that Christ identifies himself with those in need. It does direct our attention to the plight of all those relegated to the margins of society, victims of racism, sexism and homophobia, as well as those deprived of fundamental human rights. The preferential option encourages us to experience solidarity with those of us living on the margins. It invites reflection on our lifestyle and ways we might live more moderately with greater attention to the health of our planet. The option prompts us to consider the systemic and structural causes of economic inequality with a vision to developing better policies that challenge social sin and promote a more just society. The preferential option for the poor is not a partisan ideology, but it is a call to action inviting each one of us to do what we can to assist those on the margins.

Some examples come to mind. A family physician with a flourishing practice in the suburbs, moved back into her old neighborhood and set up practice there to better serve the growing number of poor people in that area. A small business owner sacrificed financially to keep his employees working during tough economic times. Many Catholic universities sponsor a variety of Christian Service Projects that include theological reflection with their students on the root causes of the poverty they briefly encounter. A university parish sponsored a Common Ground project that brought together two Christian economists with very different political philosophies and outlooks on how best to help the poor. The Democrat argued for a higher minimum wage, Medicare for all and a more progressive tax structure; the Republican argued for more deregulation, lower corporate tax rates and increased charitable giving. A commitment to the preferential option for the poor calls us to make prudential judgments about the most effective policies and to include this in our voting decisions. Over time, this kind of practical application of the principle has the potential to create a more equitable economic order.

A fourth theme developed by Catholic Social Teaching is the principle of subsidiarity. In his 1931 encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pope Pius XI maintained that this principle is crucial to establishing a just social order. In general terms, subsidiarity insists that consultation and decisions be made at the lowest appropriate level and that higher levels intervene only when necessary to further the common good. The principle distinguishes between society, which includes all the individuals, groups and associations in a given nation, and the state, which is limited to the various levels of government. Subsidiarity can be invoked to limit government interference in the private lives of citizens and the activities of voluntary associations. It can also call for state regulation when the common good is threatened. It is society as a whole that has the task of promoting greater economic equality. There is a proper role for all: private citizens, families, labor unions, corporations, churches, voluntary associations and charitable foundations, as well as city, state, and federal governments. At the same time, the problem of U.S. economic disparity is so massive that it cannot be solved by isolated local efforts but requires governmental intervention and coordination.

According to a report by a study group at the University of Michigan, about 55 percent of Americans donated to charity in 2014 (down from more than 66 percent in 2000) with an average gift of $2,500 (up from around $2,000 in the year 2000). The researchers are worried that the number of middle-class donors may shrink, especially since the 2018 tax law takes away the charitable tax deduction from millions of taxpayers. We can hope that more Christians will appropriate the teaching of Christ and give more generously to empower the poor.

The principle of subsidiarity recognizes that the federal government must be involved in economic planning that does not stifle local initiatives but encourages and coordinates the efforts of various societal agents. Tax policy is of crucial importance in the effort to bridge the economic divide. The American bishops have at various times proposed moral principles for tax reform: caring for the poor; strengthening families; favoring a progressive tax structure; producing adequate revenue to serve the common good; avoiding cuts to poverty programs; and incentivizing charitable giving. On the basis of these principles, the bishops opposed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act signed into law in late in 2017, because it will eventually raise taxes on low income families while maintaining tax cuts for the corporations and the wealthy. Bishop Dewane, noted that, while the new law “achieves some laudable things,” such as expanding the child tax credit, it is likely to produce a $13 billion drop in annual charitable giving to nonprofits” that help the marginalized. He also expressed concern that the projected large debt increase from the tax cut will put pressure on Congress to cut existing programs that benefit the poor. We definitely need continued discussion of tax reform that will actually benefit the poor and help reduce the income disparity.

A more complete treatment of subsidiarity would examine how all the economic agents in society can work individually and collectively in a spirit of solidarity to promote the common good by a more just distribution of goods and by empowering the poor to take charge of their own lives. In this crucial task of bridging the economic divide, Christians can find encouragement and guidance in Jesus Christ, the community builder, who came to liberate the captives and preach the good news to the poor.