

Walking in Another's Shoes: The Experience of Poverty

Prayers and Reflections

OPENING PRAYER

God of justice and compassion, help us walk with others who suffer from hunger and from poverty. Help us to feel a little of what they feel; help us to share their hope as well as their pain. Help us step out of the boxes of our own lives so we can understand with our hearts as well as our minds what it means to experience poverty. Then let us respond with love and open arms to our sisters and brothers who long for the light.

REFLECTIONS

Describing the good Samaritan, Jesus asks, "Who was neighbor to him?" The one "who showed mercy . . . go, and do thou likewise." (Luke 10:36-37)

"If a brother or a sister be naked," says Saint James; "if they lack their daily nourishment, and one of you says to them: 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' without giving them what is necessary for the body, what good does it do?" Today no one can be ignorant any longer of the fact that in whole continents countless men and women are ravished by hunger, countless numbers of children are undernourished, so that many of them die in infancy, while the physical growth and mental development of many others are retarded and as a result whole regions are condemned to the most depressing despondency.

Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, #45

CLOSING PRAYER

The night is nearly over,
daylight is on the way;
Let us throw off everything that belongs to the darkness,
And prepare ourselves for the light.
We reach out to all,
To bring our sisters and brothers with us
Into the light of hope, peace and justice.
Stay awake and stand ready.

Send out your light and your truth.
They shall be my guide,
To lead me to your holy mountain,
To the place where you dwell,
In love and compassion for all.
The night is nearly over.
Stay awake and stand ready

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
Speak up for the rights of all who are destitute.
Speak up and judge fairly,
Defend the rights of the poor and needy.
Daylight is on the way.
Stay awake and stand ready.

We come from the East, the North,
the South and the West.
We are your people, God of Hope.

Loving God, teach us your ways.

We will walk in the path of the Lord.
We will walk with our sisters and brothers.
We will walk in the light of Christ,
And create your Kingdom as we go.



Activities

Goal: To have participants experience the indignities of poverty, yet recognize the dignity the impoverished have as children of God.

- 1) Begin with the opening prayer and reflections on page 1 of this unit.

- 2) Copy and distribute the “Becoming a ‘Poverty Statistic’” process on page 3.
 - a) Ask participants to close their eyes as you read the page out loud; ask them to try to imagine what it feels like to be stripped of so many “essentials.”

 - b) Have each participant take a few minutes to write what the experience of poverty might feel like if they had to live like many people in the developing world. Have them write in the first person (“I feel, I think, I am . . .”)

 - c) Next, copy and distribute page 4. Have a participant read out loud the definitions of poverty on this page. Ask participants to consider how these definitions expands their sense of what being impoverished means.

 - d) Have the participants share what they have learned from this exercise.

- 3) Copy and distribute page 5. In small groups, have participants go over the discussion questions and then share some of their responses with the entire group.

- 4) Discuss why it is important to have a good understanding of poverty and the principle of human dignity when they work with impoverished people to transform the unjust structures that keep them impoverished.

- 5) End with the closing prayer on page 1.

Becoming a “Poverty Statistic”

To imagine that you are impoverished, a “poverty statistic,” go through the following process. It will give you some insight into the experience of poverty and help you imagine how a typical United States family, living in a small suburban house, can be transformed into a typical family of a developing country.

First, in your imagination, strip your house of its furniture. Everything goes: beds, chairs, tables, television sets, lamps. Leave the family with a few old blankets, a kitchen table, a wooden chair. Each member of the family may keep his/her oldest suit or dress, a shirt or a blouse. A pair of shoes goes to the head of the family, but none for the wife and children. In the kitchen, the cabinets and their contents must go. A box of matches may stay, a small bag of flour, some sugar and salt. A few moldy potatoes already in the garbage must be hastily rescued because they will provide much of tonight’s meal. Leave a handful of onions, a dish of dried beans. Take away all the rest; the meat, the fresh vegetables, the canned goods, the chips, the candy.

Strip the house of all amenities: the bathroom is dismantled, the running water shut off, the electric wires taken out. Next take away the house. The family moves to the tool shed.

Communications must go next. No more newspapers, magazines, books—and the family’s ability to read them goes, as well.

Now government services must go. No more mail carrier, no more fire fighters. There is a school, but it is three miles away and consists of two classrooms. Since the school costs money, your family’s children do not attend. There are, of course, no doctors, dentists, or hospitals nearby. The nearest clinic, with only very basic services, is ten miles away and is tended by a midwife. It can be reached by bicycle, but it is a very difficult ride. Or one can go by bus—not always inside, but there is room on top.

Finally money: The family can keep five dollars, which must last them for more than a week. Meanwhile, the head of the family must try to earn what little he can. As a peasant cultivator with three acres to tend, he may raise the equivalent of \$100 to \$300 worth of crops a year if he doesn’t go out of business due to unjust trade laws, which allow subsidized Northern agribusinesses to dump their inexpensive food products onto the market, thereby undercutting his and his neighbors’ unsubsidized crops. If he is a tenant farmer, which is more than likely, a third or so of his crop will go to his landlord and probably another ten percent to the local money lender.

And so our typical United States family is down to what they may consider “the bottom.” It is, however, a bottom in which we can find more than a billion people.

Adapted from Robert Heilbroner, *The Ascent* (New York: Harper, 1963)

Poverty Is . . .

Poverty is:

- to experience denial of access to land, water, and to basic opportunities to create a better life.
- to experience the lack of the basic necessities of employment, shelter, food, health care; it is to experience that survival is always a struggle and that one's economic human rights are ignored.
- to experience what it means to be insignificant or undesirable for whatever reason: gender, sexual identity, class, race, lack of education, lack of material goods, past history or reputation.
- to experience being pushed away or excluded from society.
- to lack social and political power and to experience inability to participate in decision-making processes.
- to experience being a faceless person, someone without a name, someone whose reality is invisible to the majority of people, someone whose life does not matter to people with power and money, and perhaps not to anyone in the global community.
- to come to believe that not only is this the way things are, but that this is the way things are supposed to be. The final indignity of poverty is that it can rob people of hope in the possibility of a better way of being.

Adapted from Estelle Demers, "Our One World Reality: Poverty and Wealth"

"There is a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of human persons, who stand above all things and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable. They ought, therefore, to have ready access to all that is necessary for living a genuinely human life: for example, food, clothing, housing, . . . the right to education, and work . . ."

Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, #26

Voices of Those in Poverty

Miriam is 18 and lives in a shanty town near Santiago, Chile.

“I like living here. It is more honest. We know what life is really like. And there is much more simplicity, solidarity and equality. I hate the fact that we have no decent education here, or health care, and that there’s rubbish everywhere, but at least we work together to try and make things better. I’d rather be like this than be rich and have no idea how people really live.”

From Christian Aid, *It’s Not Fair*; Rushden: Stanley Hunt Printers, LTD., 1993

Veronica is 16 and lives in a slum in a large city in India. After a group of students from upper middle class families visited the area, Veronica felt that the group, while well-meaning, had been so disgusted by the conditions there that they hadn’t seen the people as real human beings at all. She wrote to the teacher who brought the class.

“You want to help us! Good! Yesterday you talked among yourselves and said: ‘We can have nutrition classes, saving schemes. Classes on child care, etc.’ Are these our needs? Our needs are more fundamental. We want understanding from you, not contempt. Not annoyance. Not even pity . . . No charity please! Perhaps something else. Accept us as people! Can you see us this way?

Yours very sincerely, Veronica”

From Christian Aid, *It’s Not Fair*; Rushden: Stanley Hunt Printers, LTD., 1993

Gary is a 22-year-old homeless person in London.

“My name is Gary. But no one wants to know. I am homeless and everybody’s stereotype. Sat in my doorway, I am all things to all passers-by. To one I’m a drop-out, avoiding life’s responsibilities. To another, an alcoholic or a junkie, frightening and disease ridden. To another I’m mentally ill. Or an aggressive beggar. A criminal, perhaps. To none am I an individual, and that’s what really hurts. Homelessness is blamed on many things. But your callousness is your responsibility. I’m not just a ‘homeless person,’ I am an individual. I’d like to talk to you, or anyone, about that, but no one is brave enough to tell me their name.”

From CAFOD, *Celebrating One World*, London: Harper, 1998

Discussion Questions

Clearly, many people in the developing world, and also in the developed world, feel misunderstood by images commonly held of them.

What are your usual images of people living in poverty?

Where do these images come from? Why are they so common?

Do the young adults quoted above fit common images of people in poverty?

What elements of dignity do the young adults quoted above demonstrate?

What factors do you think are necessary for a person to experience his/her own dignity?

What does our faith teach us about human dignity?

How do I develop my own human dignity when I recognize the dignity of others, including those in poverty?

