

"THE FACT OF POVERTY TODAY: A CHALLENGE FOR THE CHURCH"

ADDRESS

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Let me begin by expressing my appreciation to Father Byron, President of Catholic University, for the invitation to deliver this address on the fact of poverty and the challenge it poses for the Church. Both the topic and the place of the lecture have special relevance.

The bishops of the United States are engaged in a major effort to help the Church in the U.S. in its analysis and response to the fact of poverty. The first draft of the pastoral letter, "Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy," is merely an initial step in an extended process. Its goal is to engage every level of the Church in study, discussion and decisions about how the Church can and must respond to the cry of the poor.

The opportunity for me to address an audience at Catholic University as part of this process has both symbolic and substantive significance. The Church always acts with a sense of its history and its tradition. The tradition of the U.S. Church's social teaching on poverty has been profoundly influenced by this University. To come to the intellectual home of Msgr. John A. Ryan and Bishop Francis Haas, of Father Paul Hanley Furfey and Msgr. George Higgins is to acknowledge the U.S. Church's debt to this University. It also recognizes that the social tradition continues here, symbolized

by Fr. Byron's own ministry and by the work of so many of your faculty.

My purpose this evening is to analyze the relationship of the Church to the fact of poverty in our time. I will examine where we stand as a Church, what we can bring to the struggle against poverty, and how we should proceed in this struggle precisely as the Church.

More specifically, I will address three questions: the nature of the problem we face, the role of the Church, and one aspect of the policy debate on poverty.

I. The Nature of the Problem: The Fact and The Faces of Poverty

Let me begin with two assertions: (1) much of the poverty in the world is hidden from us; (2) the poor usually live at the margin of society and too often at the margin of awareness of those who are not poor. Yet, in the world of the 1980s, although many of the poor are hidden, it is also impossible for the rest of us to hide from the poor.

The faces of poverty are all around us. Chicago and Washington are different cities, but I have lived in both of them long enough to know that the only way to hide from the poor is to stay in one's room or home. We cannot walk to work or to the bus stop, we cannot run a noontime errand without seeing the faces of poverty -- on the heating grates, in the doorways, near the bus terminal and huddled in the winter around the places which serve the cheapest cup of coffee.

After walking through the poverty of the city during the day, we are confronted with the faces of poverty on a wider scale in the nightly news. Ethiopia is an extreme case, but not as extreme as we might first think. The fact of poverty is the dominant social reality for over 100 countries of the world. Numbers can be numbing in their effect, but they can also crystallize a challenge.

The fact of global poverty means:

- 800 million people live in conditions of "absolute poverty", that is, "a condition of life so limited by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, high infant mortality, and low life expectancy as to be beneath any rational definition of human decency" (Robert McNamara, Speech to Board of Governors of the World Bank);
- 2.26 billion people -- half of the world's population -- live in countries with a per capita income of less than \$400 per year;
- 450 million people are malnourished.

Statistics illustrating the global reality of poverty could be given in much greater detail, of course. But statistics do not tell us all we need to know. The Gospel points out that these poor people are our brothers and sisters. The first draft of the pastoral letter wisely devotes a substantial section to the U.S. relationship with the rest of the world because the resources of this nation and its role in the world constitute a

serious responsibility in responding to the absolute poverty of our 800 million brothers and sisters.

My specific concern this evening, however, is not the faces and figures of global poverty, but poverty in the United States. The fact of world poverty is so massive that it can overwhelm us. The fact of poverty in the United States is a part of our national life, but it is not recognized as a dominant fact of our existence. It can easily blend into a larger picture which stresses -- not poverty -- but the power and productivity of the nation.

Poverty is surely present but, in the dominant national perspective -- provided by magazines, media and movies -- it is not a significant feature. Poverty is present but, when we plan for the future, the poor are not central to the planning. Poverty is present but, in the policy debates of the nation, the poor exercise little leverage.

The drafting of the pastoral letter on the economy is still in its early stages. However, it has already accomplished something which commentators have quickly noticed: The letter makes space in the policy debate for the fate of the poor in a way which has not been evident for some years now.

We need to make space for the faces of the poor in our personal consciences and in the public agenda because the facts tell us that poverty is not so marginal in this nation as we might think. At the end of 1983, by official government estimates,

35 million Americans were poor. That meant 15% of the nation was defined as poor. The hidden poor were another 20-30 million who lived just above the poverty line.

Who are the poor? They represent every race and religion in the nation. They are both men and women, and, so very often, they are children. The poor are a fluid population. People move in and out of poverty. With unemployment still affecting at least 7-8 million people, the condition of poverty touches millions for some part of their lives.

No group is immune from poverty, but not all share it equally. Some of the statistics in the pastoral letter are striking: blacks are 12% of the American population but 62% of those persistently poor; women who head households constitute 19% of the family population, but 61% of persistently poor families. The very old and the very young know the reality of poverty in disproportionate numbers.

The causes of poverty are a subject of honest disagreement, but the fact of poverty, even in a nation of our resources, cannot be disputed. It is the Church's response to this fact which is my major concern this evening.

II. The Role of the Church

The role of the Church in this question or any other must be shaped by the perspective of the Scriptures as these are read in the Catholic tradition. The draft of the pastoral letter

develops the Scriptural case in detail. Here I will simply indicate the lines of an argument which is self-evident to anyone who examines the biblical basis of our faith. The argument is quite simple: The poor have a special place in the care of God, and they place specific demands on the consciences of believers.

The biblical argument runs through both Testaments, as the draft of the pastoral letter has shown. The prophets, in particular, specify the theme. In spite of their different styles and personalities, the prophets converge on a single message: the quality of Israel's faith will be tested by the character of justice in Israel's life. For the prophets, the test cases for Israel are specific: The way widows, orphans and resident aliens are treated measures the link between faith and justice.

Jesus himself continues the prophetic tradition. He clearly identifies his ministry with the preaching of the prophets as, for example, in the fourth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel. He consciously finds those on the edge of society -- the "widows, orphans and resident aliens" of his time --- and lifts up their plight even as he responds to their needs. He identifies himself so concretely with the poor that the first letter of St. John can say that love of God is measured by love of neighbor.

The biblical mandate about the poor is richer and more powerful than I can convey in this address. I recommend further study of the pastoral letter because it concisely gathers these

biblical themes in its first chapter. However, I can synthesize the lesson the Church is trying to learn from the biblical perspective. It is found in a phrase which runs throughout the letter: the Church must have a "preferential option for the poor." This concept, rooted in the Scriptures, developed with originality by the Church in Latin America and now becoming a guide for ministry in the universal Church under the leadership of Pope John Paul II, illustrates how the Church learns anew from the Scriptures in every age.

The power of the phrase, "preferential option for the poor," is that it summarizes several biblical themes. As the pastoral letter states, it calls the Church to speak for the poor, to see the world from their perspective, and to empty itself so it may experience the power of God in the midst of poverty and powerlessness.

This, in all honesty, is an extraordinarily demanding view of what we should be as a Church. It is clear we have a distance to go in implementing this view of the Church's mission and ministry. Nevertheless, we have begun by taking the imperative seriously.

The option for the poor, I would suggest, will be realized in different ways according to the situation of the Church in different societies and cultures. Now we need to ask what the phrase means for the ministry of the Church in the United States.

I do not have a blueprint for determining the specific meaning of the "option for the poor" or integrating the concept into our ministry in this country. However, one dimension of the task especially interests me -- the role of the Church as a social institution in our society. The Church as a social institution has made two distinct responses to the fact of poverty. The first has been to organize itself to carry out works of mercy. The fulfillment of the command to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and care for the sick has found direct and immediate expression in the Church from the apostolic age until today. The methods of doing this work have varied, but all can be classified as direct, social service to the poor.

The manifestations of this dimension of ministry are well known in the United States. They include Catholic Charities and social services in every diocese, St. Vincent de Paul Societies in every parish, and institutions -- such as, orphanages, hospitals and shelters for the homeless -- established by communities of men and women religious and others throughout the country.

This form of social ministry is well known, but it is not the only way the Church addresses the fact of poverty. The second and complementary witness to the option for the poor is the Church's role as advocate and actor in the public life of society. The roots of this dimension of social ministry are found in the prophets who teach us to ask questions about how we organize our life as a society. The prophets asked questions in Israel about patterns of land ownership and wages, about the rules and customs

used to design the social life of the nation. The prophets did not stop at formulating the norm that the quality of faith is tested by the character of social justice. They pressed specific questions about the social patterns in the life of Israel.

The conditions of twentieth-century industrial society are radically different from eighth-century B.C. Israelite society. Nevertheless, the prophets' style of social questioning has been taken up in the Church's social teaching of this century. The purpose of this social teaching is to measure the social and economic life of society by the standards of social justice and social charity.

The leadership of the popes in this century has, in turn, produced a body of social teaching from the bishops. The best known example was probably drafted in some faculty residence on this campus by John A. Ryan when he authored the 1919 pastoral letter of the U.S. Bishops. The first draft of the 1984 pastoral letter on the economy stands in this tradition of social teaching.

These two dimensions of the Church's life -- its ministry of direct social service and its role as an advocate for the poor in society -- remain the principal channels for the Church's response to poverty. The challenge we face in making an effective option for the poor is how these two aspects of social ministry are integrated into the full life of the Church today.

In a large, complex, bureaucratic, secular society like the United States, the Church's social service role is more needed

than ever. We should not try to duplicate what society does well in supplying social services, but, in particular, we should bring two dimensions to the system of social care. First, the delivery of some social services is best done in a decentralized local model. For many social services today, only the taxing power of the state can raise sufficient funds to meet human needs. But the state is often not the best agency to minister services to people in need. The Church and other voluntary agencies can often deliver, in a humane and compassionate way, services that only the state can fund.

Second, the Church's agencies of direct social service should be a source not only of compassion but also creativity. Public bureaucracy is not known for creative innovation. Its size and complexity often prevent it from acting in anything but routine patterns. In every field from housing to health care to hospices, there is room for new creative methods of public-private cooperation to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless and heal the sick. We can do better what we are already doing. With 35 million poor in our midst, we can reach beyond what we are doing!

In saying this, I want to be correctly understood. I am aware that Catholic Charities, the Catholic health care system and other diocesan and national networks are already involved in significant efforts of creative and direct service. It is the very success of these efforts which will give us courage to extend our efforts.

There is another sense in which I want to be clearly understood. We cannot be consistent with Catholic tradition unless we accept the principle of subsidiarity. I fully support a pluralist social system in which the state is not the center of everything. Nevertheless, I do not want the principle of subsidiarity used in a way which subverts Catholic teaching on the collective responsibility of society for its poor. I am not endorsing a concept of decentralization or federalism which absolves the government from fulfilling its social responsibilities.

Both the Catholic and American traditions urge a pattern of public-private cooperation. This means the state has a positive social role, and we have social responsibilities as religious organizations. The churches alone cannot meet the social needs of this nation, and we should not try to do so. We should be prepared to play a major role, but part of our role is to enter the public debate and work for a compassionate, just, social policy.

This is the second challenge which confronts the Church today: how to fulfill the role of advocate in the public debate. This is the role which the Bishops' Conference is seeking to fulfill in its pastoral letters, first on peace and now on social justice. It is the role Bishop Malone stressed in his presidential address to the bishops last November. He argued that, on issues as diverse as abortion, Central America, nuclear war and poverty, failure of the bishops to speak would be a dereliction of civic responsibility and religious duty.

It is this role which puts the bishops in the midst of public controversy. Controversy is the companion of participation in public policy debate. That is why it should not be surprising that contributions of the scope and range of our two pastoral letters cause controversies.

At the same time, it is important to understand the purpose of the bishops' interventions. In the pastoral letters -- and in many other documents, such as congressional testimonies, speeches and letters of individual bishops -- we speak at the level of both moral principles and the application of these principles to particular policies. We regularly assert that we understand and want others to understand that the moral principles we present have a different authority than our particular conclusions. We invite debate and discussion of our policy conclusions. We know they must be tested in the public arena, in the academic community and in the professional community. We have been using the process of successive drafts to stimulate this discussion.

Since I was so directly involved in the pastoral letter on war and peace, I believe there is specific merit in joining principles and policy proposals in the same document. Its purpose is not to foreclose debate, but to foster it. The policy conclusions give a sense of how the moral principles take shape in the concrete situations our society faces. I think we would be mistaken as bishops if we did not distinguish principles from policy judgments. But I think we would fail to stimulate the public argument if we withdrew from the arena of policy choices.

Our role is not to design or legislate programs but to help shape the questions our society asks and to help set the right terms of debate on public policy.

We have an excellent example in the issue confronting the Administration, the Congress, and the general public as we begin 1985 -- the deficit debate. It is the kind of highly technical and complex question which a modern state must face. The way the question is decided will shape the life of our society. The fact is that the deficit must be cut. The choices facing the Administration and the Congress are how to cut spending to reduce the deficit.

The technical details are admittedly immense, but the general policy question is not purely technical. At the core of the deficit debate is the trade-off between military spending and social spending. How that trade-off is adjudicated requires moral discernment as well as economic competence.

In the 1980s virtually every program for the poor has been cut:

- more than 2 million poor children lost health care benefits;
- half a million disabled adults lost cash and medical assistance; and
- one million poor families lost food stamp benefits.

In general, spending for the poor is less than 10% of the federal budget, but it has sustained 33% of all budget cuts.

These cuts in social spending have been accompanied by significant, steady increases in military spending. It is the responsibility of the federal government to provide for the common defense and to promote the general welfare. Military spending will justifiably be part of the budget. But the deficit forces us as a nation to ask who will bear the burden of the deficit. Military spending should not be insulated when plans for reducing the deficit are formulated.

I have no misconceptions about bishops being competent to write a national budget. But it is not beyond our competence or role to say that the burden of reducing the deficit should not be borne by the most vulnerable among us. Programs for the poor have been cut enough! The burden must be shared by all sectors of the economy. The specifics of how to do it fall beyond my responsibility, but shaping the question of how we face the deficit is clearly part of what the Church should do as advocate in the social system.

III. The Poor and the Policy Debate -- One Issue

In the deficit debate, the fate of many of the poor is at stake. This evening I would like to focus attention on a particular group by addressing a specific dimension of poverty: the feminization of poverty. This phrase has been coined by Dr. Diana Pierce, a Catholic University faculty member who has made a significant contribution to the study of poverty. She has focused her research on the plight of women who are divorced, widowed or

unmarried. She has surfaced data which have special relevance for the Church in the policy debate about poverty.

Dr. Pierce's pioneering work has helped many begin to understand the severe economic consequences of motherhood and sex discrimination in this country. Of course, men, especially minorities and youths, also suffer from unemployment and poverty, and millions of intact families have inadequate income. However, poverty is growing fastest among women and children.

As we look at this issue, it will be helpful to remember that nearly all (94%) women marry and nearly all of them (95%) have children. Reducing the economic price of motherhood should be a priority for our society. This disproportionate burden of poverty on women and children is appalling. Current statistics reflect some of this grim picture:

- two out of three poor adults are women;
- three out of four poor elderly are women;
- almost half of all poor families are headed by women, and half of the women raising children alone are poor;
- one in four children under six is poor;
- one in three black children under six is poor.

Even if poverty did not weigh so disproportionately on women, the growth of both the number and percentage of the poor would be cause for alarm and action. For those of us in the Church, this situation is profoundly disturbing. The fact that poverty is so concentrated among women and children should

galvanize our energies and focus our attention on the conditions that create the situation.

A closer look at poverty among women reveals that it is strongly linked to two sets of factors: (1) job and wage discrimination and (2) responsibility for the support and care of children.

Job and wage discrimination leave women concentrated in the lowest paying jobs, with more problems finding full-time year-round work. But, even when women overcome these obstacles, they still earn substantially less than men. Dr. Pierce's data indicate that women college graduates working full-time and year-round still make less than male high school dropouts! Of course, most women workers are not college graduates, and so the disparity in incomes is even greater for those in the lowest paying jobs.

While this discrimination affects most women, those whose husbands are employed are partially insulated, at least temporarily, from its worst effects. For women raising children alone, of course, the situation is much worse because they are often financially responsible for most or all of their children's support. Despite some well-reported exceptions, child care and support fall mainly on women. The increased rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock births have left more women than ever solely responsible for the support of children.

Increasingly, it appears that it now takes the earnings of two adults to support a family in the United States. A single parent -- widowed, divorced or unmarried -- finds it difficult

to stay above the poverty line. When that parent faces additional obstacles, such as the cost of day care (which can easily take more than a fourth of an average woman's salary) and sex discrimination in employment, the cards are overwhelmingly stacked against her.

The job market often offers little hope to a single mother trying to escape poverty. Unfortunately, other potential sources of supplemental income are also very limited. Child support is paid regularly to only a very small proportion of eligible mothers. Welfare benefits are so low that, in most states, the combined value of Aid to Families with Children (AFDC) and food stamps doesn't even approach the poverty line. For the fifty States and the District of Columbia, the median benefit is 74% of the poverty threshold.

I cite these statistics and the case of women in poverty not because it is the only issue we must face as a Church in the policy debate but because it is one we should face with special emphasis. I am also aware that there are more fundamental remedies needed to address the feminization of poverty than the programs I have just mentioned. But I wanted to raise up these specific programs because they are so often criticized.

I have argued the case for a consistent ethic of life as the specific contribution which the Church can and should make in this nation's public debate. Central to a consistent ethic is the imperative that the Church stand for the protection and promotion of life from conception to death -- that it stand against the drift toward nuclear war which has been so evident in