

AFTERWORD: "THE POOR YOU WILL HAVE WITH YOU ALWAYS"

*Edward Malloy, C.S.C.**

Contemporary social theorists influence our awareness of economic realities by dividing the planet into various "worlds" or socio-economic groupings. In the most quoted scheme the notion of the "Third World" represents all of those geographic regions and national units that experience dependency, underdevelopment, or both, compared to the "First World" (the U.S., Western Europe, and Japan) and the "Second World" (the Soviet sphere of influence). Some propose a more stark and pessimistic view where there are also "Fourth" and "Fifth Worlds" which are almost incapable of overcoming their poverty even with significant assistance from the outside. In the United States, similarly, some speak of a "permanent underclass." Such formulations force us to recognize the interdependency under which we all live and the seemingly unfair advantage that the accidents of birth and geographical location give to a relatively small percentage of the human population.

Thus, we all must face the question of to what extent poverty is an inevitable condition in any given socio-economic system. The Christian Scriptures suggest that "the poor you will have with you always." One interpretation of this troubling text might lead to indifference, cynicism or self-righteousness. Poverty would be seen as a descriptive term—indicating the prosperity of some and the unequal distribution of opportunity, incentive and training. No need for alarm or critical reevaluation would be apparent. But there is a second, more palatable interpretation. This would see the existence of the poor as a challenge and as grounds for reform. No matter what the causes of their condition or their degree of personal blame, there is a responsibility that comes with citizenship that binds those who benefit from the present economic order to those who do not.

It is intriguing that the three great monotheistic religious traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—all inculcate in their adherents a special priority to respond to the needs of the poor. For the Jewish prophets, for example, one of the best tests of the prevailing standard of social justice was the treatment afforded to widows, orphans and resident aliens. In Christianity, the sharing of goods in the community and the radical questioning of prevailing social distinctions were two ways that the ministry of Jesus to the poor and outcasts was institutionalized in its ongoing life. In Islam, the practice of alms-giving won general acceptance as one of the basic religious duties.

Consistent with these teachings, the answer to the question about the existence of the poor is that we all have a responsibility to care (i.e., to relate compassionately), to share (i.e., to give of ourselves and our goods), and to repair (i.e., to seek solutions). In order to undertake this noble mission, we need to mobilize

* President, University of Notre Dame. B.A., M.A., M.Th., University of Notre Dame 1963, 1967, 1969; Ph.D., Vanderbilt University, 1975.

our collective wisdom under the rule of law, with fitting attention to the established structures of contemporary American life. No matter where we begin—homelessness, unemployment and under-employment, the elderly, single-parent families, women in the work force, levels of indebtedness—the complexity of economic inequity will become apparent. There are no quick fixes, but there are many steps that can make a difference.

Universities have a special role to play in this process. They are especially suited to evaluate policy options, to broaden the frame of reference of public discourse, and to assist elected officials in building a consensus for those policies that promise the most significant economic change. The quality of the articles in this poverty law symposium is to be applauded. As children of God, we are called upon not only to reflect on the problems of the poor, but also to respond to their plight.