

Pastoral Aid for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Poverty Awareness Month – January)

January 27, 2019

<http://www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/poverty-education/poverty-awareness-month.cfm>

Reflection on the Sunday Readings

Introduction:

- January is Poverty Awareness Month. This month, and our readings today, invite us to recognize God's closeness to and love for those experiencing poverty.
- Today's readings remind us that the good news God proclaims is proclaimed to all our brothers and sisters. This gospel message challenges us to create systems and structures that allow all to thrive.
- This is a perfect message for Poverty Awareness Month, as these readings emphasize God's love and care for members of society who have been marginalized or oppressed. Both the Old and New Testament readings call for a preferential option for the poor. Let us pray especially for them as we meditate on these passages.

First Reading (NEH 8:2-4A, 5-6, 8-10):

- Ezra was a Jewish priest who returned with the Israelites from Babylonian Exile (a period of almost fifty years in which God's people were in captivity). In this passage, he reads and explains the Scriptures to the people.
- Ezra addresses not just men, the traditional heads of the household, but also the women and the children, demonstrating that all people are meant to hear God's word, not just those in leadership positions (8:2).
- Nehemiah makes this day a day of celebration of God's mercy in bringing them back from Exile. The day of celebration is for everyone, not just for those who can afford to celebrate it. Thus, the people are instructed to "allot portions to those who had nothing prepared" (8:10).
- Poverty Awareness Month is a time when we, too, can ask how we include and accompany members of society who are often isolated from the community, such as those who experience poverty.

Psalm (19:8,9,10,15)

- In today's Psalm, the psalmist proclaims that the Lord is his "redeemer." In Hebrew, the word "redeemer" refers to one who is the next of kin or a close family member who will aid the family if someone dies (19:15).
- God's word is a deeply personal connection to those who are oppressed or in need. A redeemer often provides financial and social stability to a family, including a widow,

when someone dies. In the same way, God is close to the oppressed and provides for their needs.

Second Reading (1 COR 12:12-30)

- In the second reading, St. Paul develops one of the most well-known images of the Church: The Body of Christ. The comparison to Christ's body with many different parts conveys two meaningful messages. First, it reminds listeners of their own intrinsic worth and role in the Body of Christ (v. 15-17), and second, it reminds listeners to never look at any other member as less honorable because of the role they play (v. 21-24).
- At a time when the church in Corinth was experiencing division and disagreement about who should be included, St. Paul emphasizes the dignity of every member of the Body of Christ.
- This passage demonstrates the preferential option for the poor: "the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are all the more necessary, and those parts of the body that we consider less honorable we surround with greater honor" (v. 23-24). Those who are poor should not be isolated or taken advantage of, but instead embraced and shown the love of God. Christians are to imitate God in his closeness to the poor.

Gospel (LK 1:1-4; 4:14-21)

- In this gospel passage, Luke lays out both the reasons for writing his Gospel and the reason for Jesus' ministry. Luke writes his gospel as a narrative of the life of Christ in order that others may know and understand Jesus' life and teachings (1:1-4). Jesus' ministry is led by the Holy Spirit and in fulfillment of the Scriptures, to bring good news to the oppressed.
- Then, Jesus quotes from two passages of Isaiah:
 - "The spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the LORD and a day of vindication by our God, to comfort all who mourn" (Is. 61:1-2).
 - "This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke" (Is. 58:6).
- The practice of the teacher reading from the scroll of Scripture publicly goes back to the passage of the Hebrew Bible read in the first reading. As Ezra proclaims good news and a day of celebration to all of the Israelites, so too does Jesus proclaim good news to all of creation.
- A common theme throughout Luke is very clearly demonstrated in this passage: that Jesus's saving message is to be proclaimed in a special way to those who have been cast out from society. The poor feature prominently throughout Luke's gospel, including in the Magnificat when Mary praises God for "lift[ing] up the lowly" and sending the rich away empty" (1:46-55) and in the Beatitudes where Jesus proclaims, "Blessed are the poor, for the kingdom of God is yours" (6:20).

- As a Church, especially during Poverty Awareness Month, how do we share the good news with those who experience poverty and bring release to the oppressed?

Application:

- If one thing should be clear from these passages, it is that God's saving word and law are meant to be spread to all people, regardless of age, gender, social status, or ability. All are called to follow the word of God, and all are called to celebrate God's love and mercy. How can you share the love and mercy of God with those most impacted by poverty in your community? Or, how can you help people in poverty in your community raise their voices to call attention to their dignity and needs?
- Many people throughout the world are experiencing poverty due to unjust systems of oppression that trap them in cycles of poverty, such as through mass incarceration or unjust wages. The bishops' recent pastoral letter against racism, [*Open Wide Our Hearts*](#), points out the need to transform unjust systems that continue to prevent some from getting ahead. Paul's epistle makes clear that everyone has dignity in Christ, no matter their socioeconomic status. As we work together as one body of Christ, we must care for each other in love. How do you care for other members of the body of Christ? How do you stand with those whose dignity is at times not recognized?
- Upholding the dignity of persons who are poor is more than just sharing charitable goods or services with other members (although the corporal works of mercy are a key part of how the body of Christ should act). In the Gospel, Jesus says that he was sent by the Father to release those who are poor from their bonds of oppression. How can we help remove the structures of oppression that cause persons to be poor in the first place? [Watch \(or show\) this video](#) and reflect on how you can live out our call to charitable actions and advocacy.
- As members of the Body of Christ who are called to love and value each of our members, we too must remove the structures of oppression and systemic roots of poverty. The work of [the Catholic Campaign for Human Development](#) does just that by supporting the work of grassroots organizations that help communities living in poverty support themselves and end the systemic problems that keep communities in poverty.
- The month of January is [Poverty Awareness Month](#). Nearly 40 million people in the United States experience poverty. Proclaim God's justice to all people this month by working to transform the systems that impact those most vulnerable. At [PovertyUSA.org](#), a website of the Catholic bishops in the United States, you can learn facts about poverty, watch videos, and read stories about how faith communities are responding. Find out more about how you can get involved today and help to end the cycle of poverty in the United States.

Quotes

"The times talk to us of so much poverty in the world and this is a scandal. Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education, so many poor persons. Poverty today is a cry." (Pope Francis, "Meeting with Students of Jesuit Schools"—Q & A, 6/7/13)

"The Church's love for the poor . . . is a part of her constant tradition." This love is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, of the poverty of Jesus, and of his concern for the poor. . . . "Those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a preferential love on the part of the Church which, since her origin and in spite of the failings of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defense, and liberation." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2444, 2448, quoting *Centesimus Annus*, no. 57, and *Libertatis Conscientia*, no. 68)

Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice. (St. John Paul II, *On the Hundredth Year [Centesimus Annus]*, no. 58)

The primary purpose of this special commitment to the poor is to enable them to become active participants in the life of society. It is to enable all persons to share in and contribute to the common good. The "option for the poor," therefore, is not an adversarial slogan that pits one group or class against another. Rather it states that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community. The extent of their suffering is a measure of how far we are from being a true community of persons. These wounds will be healed only by greater solidarity with the poor and among the poor themselves. (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, no. 88)

Many people, especially in economically advanced areas, seem, as it were, to be ruled by economics, so that almost their entire personal and social life is permeated with a certain economic way of thinking. Such is true both of nations that favor a collective economy and of others. At the very time when the development of economic life could mitigate social inequalities (provided that it be guided and coordinated in a reasonable and human way), it is often made to embitter them; or, in some places, it even results in a decline of the social status of the underprivileged and in contempt for the poor. While an immense number of people still lack the absolute necessities of life, some, even in less advanced areas, live in luxury or squander wealth. Extravagance and wretchedness exist side by side. While a few enjoy very great power of choice, the majority are deprived of almost all possibility of acting on their own initiative and responsibility, and often subsist in living and working conditions unworthy of the human person. (The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, no. 63).

"Yes, the poor we are always going to have with us, Our Lord told us that, and there will always be a need for our sharing, for stripping ourselves to help others. It will always be a lifetime job.

But I am sure that God did not intend there be so many poor. The class structure is of our making and our consent, not His. It is the way we have arranged it, and it is up to us to change it." (Dorothy Day, "[Poverty Is to Care and Not to Care](#)")

Bulletin announcement

January is [Poverty Awareness Month](#). Nearly 40 million people experience poverty in the United States. Respond to the call to work for justice and proclaim the good news of the Gospel by learning more about how poverty affects families and communities and how the Church is responding by visiting [PovertyUSA.org](#), a website of the U.S. Catholic bishops.

Note: If your bulletin contains a "message from the pastor" column, consider focusing on the call to love and care for all members of society, especially those who have been marginalized or oppressed. Consider localizing the examples of marginalized persons to include those affected by issues in your community.

Prayers of the Faithful

Possible Responses:

- Lord, hear our prayer.
- In your mercy, hear us Lord.
- In your compassion, answer us God.

Possible Prayers:

For our Holy Father, Pope Francis, our bishop, N., and all church leaders, that they will continue to proclaim Christ's love and compassion for those in poverty, and that the Church will continue to teach about the need to work for justice in our world. We pray to the Lord.

For our public officials, that they will strive to work for fair education, adequate housing, and equal opportunities for employment for all. We pray to the Lord.

For our community, that we may have the wisdom to receive the stories and experiences of those different from ourselves and to respond with respect and love. We pray to the Lord.

For the men and women who are not able to find stable employment, we pray for their continued perseverance and determination as they continue to seek ways in which to participate in God's creation and work. We pray to the Lord.

For the nearly 40 million men, women, and children in the United States who suffer from our lack of solidarity in their daily struggle to escape the cycle of poverty. May we be aware of our responsibility to be in relationship with our brothers and sisters in our communities. We pray to the Lord.

For each one of us, that we receive the strength to open our hearts to the grace to see every human being as a child of God, regardless of race, language, ability, or economic situation. We pray to the Lord.

Parish Activity Suggestions

- **Play the Poverty Tour video.** Play [this video](#) after mass, in the parish hall, at religious education classes, etc. to help parishioners learn about the reality of poverty.
- **Share educational materials from PovertyUSA.org** with catechists, religious educators, youth ministers, and others who can help share information about the reality of poverty and our Catholic response. Some of these educational materials include:
 - [PovertyUSA Poverty Education Center](#)
 - [Learning activities on poverty from WeAreSaltAndLight.org](#)
 - [Creating on the Margins: a youth art contest to help youth learn about poverty and our Catholic response](#)
 - [Poverty Awareness Month calendar and reflections](#)
- **Host a panel discussion about poverty in your community.** Invite guest speakers from local community organizations who can talk about the causes of poverty, and how we can help.
- **Share one or more of the following at the above events, or as bulletin inserts.**
 - [Primer on Poverty and the Option for the Poor and Vulnerable](#)
 - [Background on Just Wage and the Federal Minimum Wage](#)
 - [Selected Quotes of Pope Francis by Subject](#)