



Matthew 25

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you did for me.

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Faces of Poverty in Our Community

By Clotilde Pichon, St. Mary's Social Ministry Commission and St. Vincent de Paul Society member

Although poverty in the US has a very different dimension than in developing countries, it exists everywhere, even here in Bryan/College Station. In fact, with a reported poverty rate of over 30% in 2005, Brazos County had the 6th highest poverty rate in the nation for counties with fewer than 250,000 people and Texas with a rate of almost 17% had the 5th highest poverty rate among US states. Often people in poverty are invisible to us, because they are difficult to identify. They look a lot like us. We may meet them in our everyday business, but remain unaware of their struggles.

So, who are the poor in our community and where are they? Meet Susan*, for instance. She is a single mom with four kids working as janitor. With the high utility bills of the summer, she got behind her payments. She is receiving Food Stamps for her children, but because of a mistake with her paperwork, she did not receive Food Stamps this month and had to use the money for her utilities to buy food for her children. Now if she does not pay part of her bill, the electricity will be cut off.

Joshua* and Madison* are a young couple with two little girls. Madison married young having just finished high school. She stays home to care for her daughters, because she cannot get a job that pays enough for covering the cost of day care for her children. Recently Joshua's work hours have been cut and now they are unable to pay their rent.

Joe* and Sarah* are retired, and Joe was supplementing their social security check by working part-time. He lost his job a few months ago and has been unable to find another one, so now they are struggling to pay their bills. As for Daniel*, Samantha* and their 2 children, they were doing well without too many economic worries, until Daniel suffered an unexpected medical accident and remained unable to work for weeks. Now the family is struggling to cope with medical and basic expenses.

Those are only a few examples. Poor families are not only in shelters and soup kitchens, as evidenced by the lack of space in the Twin City Mission family unit shelter since opening in July; many of them work for minimum wages and struggle to make ends meet, as attested by the fact that 51 % households served by local food pantries comprise a working adult. Many report choosing between paying for food and paying for utilities, as well as delaying medical care until their symptoms become serious. Jeannie McGuire, founder and president of Project Unity, a local nonprofit organization dedicated to helping low-income families reported to The Eagle that they have observed a growing number of families working several part-time jobs in order to try making ends meet.

How could that be in a land of plenty? There are many reasons for people to be poor: low paid jobs, lack of affordable housing. A medical emergency, a car break down, the loss of a job or a divorce can leave families unable to pay

their bills. Some circumstances are due to bad luck, other to bad choices. Most create a snowball effect with late charge or reconnection fees, and high interests on a predatory loan taken because it was the only way to avoid eviction. Sometimes people feel so overwhelmed that they are rendered helpless. Some then just give up. Food, shelter, some education and a regular income are necessary to insure a secure life for a household. When one or more of these essentials are lacking, people get trapped in a cycle of poverty. Children living in households with insecurity for basic needs experience lower ability to learn and more illnesses, and finally drop out of school. Without an education, they are less likely to find a good-paying job, and the cycle of poverty is perpetuated.

Why should Catholics care about the poor? The Gospel calls Christians to put the needs of the poor first. As Pope John Paul II reminded us in 1991 in *Centesimus Annus*, "the Church's love for the poor, which is essential for her and a part of her constant tradition, impels her to give attention to a world in which poverty is threatening to assume massive proportions in spite of technological and economic progress..... 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." Thus, the Catholic Church not only speaks on behalf of those in poverty, but also stands beside the poor to support them in fighting for their own needs and rights.

What can we do?

Catholics often respond with an act of charity: donating food or used clothes, working at the soup kitchens, preparing food baskets for Thanksgiving or buying Christmas presents for people in need, putting money in the poor box to help paying rent or utility bills. This is great, but this only helps people get through their present crisis. More needs to be done in order to break the cycle of poverty. This is difficult, but possible. For this to happen, we must work for social changes removing the root causes of poverty by creating more awareness of the problems, advocating and promoting changes in laws and policies, and programs addressing these problems. For more ideas, look in the section "What can You Do" at the back.

* indicates that the name has been changed



Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.' (Matthew 25: 35-41)

What are Catholics Doing Locally?

- The Bryan/College Station Conference of the St. Vincent de Paul Society (www.ssvdp.org/) provides immediate and temporary aid to people working through financial difficulties. Households in need of assistance receive a home visit by a team of volunteer case workers assessing their situation and needs, informing them on what help the Conference can provide and often on other available local and governmental resources. In fiscal year 2009, about \$161,000 of financial assistance was provided to the community and about \$73,000 of in-kind assistance (food, clothing, furniture, Christmas gifts).
- The Good Samaritan Gabriel Project Life Center in Bryan is a diocesan pro-life ministry serving the women of the Brazos Valley by providing caring compassionate alternatives to abortion and supporting mothers who are facing emotional and/or material difficulties. They offer counseling, up-to-date referral information, education, and emotional and material support.
- Catholic Charities of Central Texas (www.ccctx.org/) works to strengthen individuals, families and communities through direct services, community collaboration and social justice advocacy. They recently opened an office in Bryan to serve the needs of Brazos county.

Social justice and the common good are built up or torn down day by day in the countless decisions and choices we make. This vocation to pursue justice cannot be carried forward alone, but only as members of a community called to be the "leaven" of the Gospel.....All human beings have unique talents, gifts from God that we are called to develop and share. We should celebrate this diversity. People who use their skills and expertise for the common good, the service of others, and the protection of creation, are good stewards of the gifts they have been given. When we labor with honesty, serve those in need, work for justice and contribute to charity, we use our talents to show our love--and God's love--for our brothers and sisters.
(US Bishops in Everyday Christianity: To Hunger and Thirst for Justice, 1998)

Poverty Facts in 2007 (from www.census.gov)
% under the poverty line (less than \$21,834/year for a family of 4)

	US	Bryan	College Station
<i>Families</i>	9.8	21.8	15.5
<i>Children</i>	18.0	33.5	17.3
<i>Seniors</i>	10.0	9.3	3.2

What Can You Do?

Pray and reflect on how you can use your gifts in service to others.

Donate money in the Poor Box at the entrance of the Church for the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Donate gently used clothing, household items or furniture to the SVdP Thrift Store (300 N. Main in Bryan, 979-823-4369), participate in the regular drives for food and other needed items in our parish or buy a Christmas gift for a person in need in our community through the Christmas Giving Tree.

Get involved with local organizations serving the needs of the community like the St. Vincent de Paul Society (svdpvolunteers@verizon.net), Good Samaritan Gabriel Project Life Center (979-822-9340), Catholic Charities (979-204-7169) or with St. Mary's student organization dedicated to service in the community, Aggies Serving Another Person (rcadena@aggiecatholic.org), or join a group of community members of any age sharing potluck meals at Neal Park in Bryan with homeless Sat. at 5 pm and Sun. at 1 pm (dkiniry@gmail.com)

Learn about the Catholic Social Teaching. (www.usccb.org/ or www.osjspm.org) and domestic poverty issues (www.povertyusa.org, www.americanpoverty.org/)

Read the local news to learn about the issues impacting people living in poverty in our community. (www.theeagle.com)

Call or email your federal, state or local representatives to express concerns about poverty in the US. (www.usccb.org/sdwp/takeaction.shtml)

A Prayer by Mother Teresa

*Lord, open our eyes, that we may see you in our brothers and sisters.
 Lord, open our ears, that we may hear the cries of the hungry, the cold, the frightened, the oppressed.
 Lord, open our hearts, that we may love each other as you love us.
 Renew in us your spirit Lord, free us and make us one.*