



CHAPTER FIVE A CONSTANT CHALLENGE

103. I have chosen to recall the age-old history of the Church's care for the poor and with the poor in order to make clear that it has always been a central part of her life. Indeed, caring for the poor is part of the Church's great Tradition, a beacon as it were of evangelical light to illumine the hearts and guide the decisions of Christians in every age. That is why we must feel bound to invite everyone to share in the light and life born of recognizing Christ in the faces of the suffering and those in need. Love for the poor is an essential element of the history of God's dealings with us; it rises up from the heart of the Church as a constant appeal to the hearts of the faithful, both individually and in our communities. As the Body of Christ, the Church experiences the lives of the poor as her very "flesh," for theirs is a privileged place within the pilgrim people of God. Consequently, love for the poor — whatever the form their poverty may take — is the evangelical hallmark of a Church faithful to the heart of God. Indeed, one of the priorities of every movement of renewal within the Church has always been a preferential concern for the poor. In this sense, her work with the poor differs in its inspiration and method from the work carried out by any other humanitarian organization.

104. No Christian can regard the poor simply as a societal problem; they are part of our "family." They are "one of us." Nor can our relationship to the poor be reduced to merely another ecclesial activity or function. In the words of the Aparecida Document, "we are asked to devote time to the poor, to give them loving attention, to listen to them with interest, to stand by them in difficult moments, choosing to spend hours, weeks or years of our lives with them, and striving to transform their situations, starting from them. We cannot forget that this is what Jesus himself proposed in his actions and by his words." [114]

The Good Samaritan, once again

105. The dominant culture at the beginning of this millennium would have us abandon the poor to their fate and consider them unworthy of attention, much less our respect. Pope Francis, in his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, challenged us to reflect on the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. *Lk* 10:25-37), which presents the different reactions of those confronted by the sight of a wounded man lying on the road. Only the Good Samaritan stops and cares for him. Pope Francis went on to ask each of us: "Which of these persons do you identify with? This question, blunt as it is, is direct and incisive. Which of these characters do you resemble? We need to acknowledge that we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak. Let us admit that, for all the progress we have made, we are still 'illiterate' when it comes to accompanying, caring for and supporting the most frail and vulnerable members of our developed societies. We have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, and ignoring situations until they affect us directly." [115]

106. It is important for us to realize that the story of the Good Samaritan remains timely even today. "If I encounter a person sleeping outdoors on a cold night, I can view him or her as an annoyance, an idler, an obstacle in my path, a troubling sight, a problem for politicians to sort out, or even a piece of refuse cluttering a public space. Or I can respond with faith and charity, and see in this person a human being with a dignity identical to my own, a creature infinitely loved by the Father, an image of God, a brother or sister redeemed by Jesus Christ. That is what it is to be a Christian! Can holiness somehow be understood apart from this lively recognition of the dignity of each human being?" [116] What did the Good Samaritan do?

107. These questions become all the more urgent in light of a serious flaw present in the life of our societies, but also in our Christian communities. The many forms of indifference we see all around us are



in fact "signs of an approach to life that is spreading in various and subtle ways. What is more, caught up as we are with our own needs, the sight of a person who is suffering disturbs us. It makes us uneasy, since we have no time to waste on other people's problems. These are symptoms of an unhealthy society. A society that seeks prosperity but turns its back on suffering. May we not sink to such depths! Let us look to the example of the Good Samaritan." [117] The final words of the Gospel parable — "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37) — represent a mandate that every Christian must daily take to heart.

An inescapable challenge for the Church today

108. At a particularly critical time in the history of the Church in Rome, when the imperial institutions were collapsing under the pressure of the barbarian invasions, Pope Saint Gregory the Great felt it necessary to remind the faithful: "Every minute we can find a Lazarus if we seek him, and every day, even without seeking, we find one at our door. Now beggars besiege us, imploring alms; later they will be our advocates... Therefore do not waste the opportunity of doing works of mercy; do not store unused the good things you possess." [118] Gregory courageously denounced contemporary forms of prejudice against the poor, including the belief that they were responsible for their plight: "Whenever you see the poor doing something reprehensible, do not despise or discredit them, for the fire of poverty is perhaps purifying their sinful actions, however slight they be." [119] Not infrequently, our prosperity can make us blind to the needs of others, and even make us think that our happiness and fulfillment depend on ourselves alone, apart from others. In such cases, the poor can act as silent teachers for us, making us conscious of our presumption and instilling within us a rightful spirit of humility.

109. While it is true that the rich care for the poor, the opposite is no less true. This is a remarkable fact confirmed by the entire Christian tradition. Lives can actually be turned around by the realization that the poor have much to teach us about the Gospel and its demands. By their silent witness, they make us confront the precariousness of our existence. The elderly, for example, by their physical frailty, remind us of our own fragility, even as we attempt to conceal it behind our apparent prosperity and outward appearance. The poor, too, remind us how baseless is the attitude of aggressive arrogance with which we frequently confront life's difficulties. They remind us how uncertain and empty our seemingly safe and secure lives may be. Here again, Saint Gregory the Great has much to tell us: "Let no one consider himself secure, saying, 'I do not steal from others, but simply enjoy what is rightfully mine.' The rich man was not punished because he took what belonged to others, but because, while possessing such great riches, he had become impoverished within. This was indeed the reason for his condemnation to hell: in his prosperity, he preserved no sense of justice; the wealth he had received made him proud and caused him to lose all sense of compassion." [120]

110. For us Christians, the problem of the poor leads to the very heart of our faith. Saint John Paul II taught that the preferential option for the poor, namely the Church's love for the poor, "is essential for her and a part of her constant tradition, and impels her to give attention to a world in which poverty is threatening to assume massive proportions in spite of technological and economic progress." [121] For Christians, the poor are not a sociological category, but the very "flesh" of Christ. It is not enough to profess the doctrine of God's Incarnation in general terms. To enter truly into this great mystery, we need to understand clearly that the Lord took on a flesh that hungers and thirsts, and experiences infirmity and imprisonment. "A poor Church for the poor begins by reaching out to the flesh of Christ. If we reach out to the flesh of Christ, we begin to understand something, to understand what this poverty, the Lord's poverty, actually is; and this is far from easy." [122]

111. By her very nature the Church is in solidarity with the poor, the excluded, the marginalized and all those considered the outcast of society. The poor are at the heart of the Church because "our faith in



Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society's most neglected members." [123] In our hearts, we encounter "the need to heed this plea, born of the liberating action of grace within each of us, and so it is not a matter of a mission reserved only to a few." [124]

112. At times, Christian movements or groups have arisen which show little or no interest in the common good of society and, in particular, the protection and advancement of its most vulnerable and disadvantaged members. Yet we must never forget that religion, especially the Christian religion, cannot be limited to the private sphere, as if believers had no business making their voice heard with regard to problems affecting civil society and issues of concern to its members. [125]

113. Indeed, "any Church community, if it thinks it can comfortably go its own way without creative concern and effective cooperation in helping the poor to live with dignity and reaching out to everyone, will also risk breaking down, however much it may talk about social issues or criticize governments. It will easily drift into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk." [126]

114. Nor is it a question merely of providing for welfare assistance and working to ensure social justice. Christians should also be aware of another form of inconsistency in the way they treat the poor. In reality, "the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care... Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care." [127] Yet, this spiritual attentiveness to the poor is called into question, even among Christians, by certain prejudices arising from the fact that we find it easier to turn a blind eye to the poor. There are those who say: "Our task is to pray and teach sound doctrine." Separating this religious aspect from integral development, they even say that it is the government's job to care for them, or that it would be better not to lift them out of their poverty but simply to teach them to work. At times, pseudo-scientific data are invoked to support the claim that a free market economy will automatically solve the problem of poverty. Or even that we should opt for pastoral work with the so-called elite, since, rather than wasting time on the poor, it would be better to care for the rich, the influential and professionals, so that with their help real solutions can be found and the Church can feel protected. It is easy to perceive the worldliness behind these positions, which would lead us to view reality through superficial lenses, lacking any light from above, and to cultivate relationships that bring us security and a position of privilege.

Almsgiving today

115. I would like to close by saying something about almsgiving, which nowadays is not looked upon favorably even among believers. Not only is it rarely practiced, but it is even at times disparaged. Let me state once again that the most important way to help the disadvantaged is to assist them in finding a good job, so that they can lead a more dignified life by developing their abilities and contributing their fair share. In this sense, "lack of work means far more than simply not having a steady source of income. Work is also this, but it is much, much more. By working we become a fuller person, our humanity flourishes, young people become adults only by working. The Church's social doctrine has always seen human work as a participation in God's work of creation that continues every day, also thanks to the hands, mind and heart of the workers." [128] On the other hand, where this is not possible, we cannot risk abandoning others to the fate of lacking the necessities for a dignified life. Consequently, almsgiving remains, for the time being, a necessary means of contact, encounter and empathy with those less fortunate.

116. Those inspired by true charity know full well that almsgiving does not absolve the competent authorities of their responsibilities, eliminate the duty of government institutions to care for the poor, or



detract from rightful efforts to ensure justice. Almsgiving at least offers us a chance to halt before the poor, to look into their eyes, to touch them and to share something of ourselves with them. In any event, almsgiving, however modest, brings a touch of *pietas* into a society otherwise marked by the frenetic pursuit of personal gain. In the words of the Book of Proverbs: "Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor" (22:9).

117. Both the Old and New Testaments contain veritable hymns in praise of almsgiving: "Be patient with someone in humble circumstances, and do not keep him waiting for your alms... Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from every disaster" (*Sir* 29:8,12). Jesus himself adds: "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys" (*Lk* 12:33).

118. Saint John Chrysostom is known for saying: "Almsgiving is the wing of prayer. If you do not provide your prayer with wings, it will hardly fly." [129] In the same vein, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus concluded one of his celebrated orations with these words: "If you think that I have something to say, servants of Christ, his brethren and co-heirs, let us visit Christ whenever we may; let us care for him, feed him, clothe him, welcome him, honor him, not only at a meal, as some have done, or by anointing him, as Mary did, or only by lending him a tomb, like Joseph of Arimathea, or by arranging for his burial, like Nicodemus, who loved Christ half-heartedly, or by giving him gold, frankincense and myrrh, like the Magi before all these others. The Lord of all asks for mercy, not sacrifice... Let us then show him mercy in the persons of the poor and those who today are lying on the ground, so that when we come to leave this world they may receive us into everlasting dwelling places." [130]

119. Our love and our deepest convictions need to be continually cultivated, and we do so through our concrete actions. Remaining in the realm of ideas and theories, while failing to give them expression through frequent and practical acts of charity, will eventually cause even our most cherished hopes and aspirations to weaken and fade away. For this very reason, we Christians must not abandon almsgiving. It can be done in different ways, and surely more effectively, but it must continue to be done. It is always better at least to do something rather than nothing. Whatever form it may take, almsgiving will touch and soften our hardened hearts. It will not solve the problem of world poverty, yet it must still be carried out, with intelligence, diligence and social responsibility. For our part, we need to give alms as a way of reaching out and touching the suffering flesh of the poor.

120. Christian love breaks down every barrier, brings close those who were distant, unites strangers, and reconciles enemies. It spans chasms that are humanly impossible to bridge, and it penetrates to the most hidden crevices of society. By its very nature, Christian love is prophetic: it works miracles and knows no limits. It makes what was apparently impossible happen. Love is above all a way of looking at life and a way of living it. A Church that sets no limits to love, that knows no enemies to fight but only men and women to love, is the Church that the world needs today.

121. Through your work, your efforts to change unjust social structures or your simple, heartfelt gesture of closeness and support, the poor will come to realize that Jesus' words are addressed personally to each of them: "I have loved you" (*Rev* 3:9).

*Given in Rome, at Saint Peter's, on 4 October, the Memorial of Saint Francis of Assisi, in the year 2025,
the first of my Pontificate.*

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[114] Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, *Aparecida Document* (29 June 2007), n. 397, p. 182.

[115] Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (3 October 2020), 64: AAS 112 (2020), 992.

[116] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (19 March 2018), 98: AAS 110 (2018), 1137.

[117] Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (3 October 2020), 65-66: AAS 112 (2020), 992.

[118] Gregory the Great, *Homilia* 40, 10: SC 522, Paris 2008, 552-554.

[119] *Ibid.* 6: SC 522, 546.

[120] *Ibid.* 3: SC 522, 536.

[121] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (1 May 1991), 57: AAS 83 (1991), 862-863.

[122] Francis, *Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements* (18 May 2013): *L'Osservatore Romano* 20-21 May 2013, 5.

[123] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 186: AAS 105 (2013), 1098.

[124] *Ibid.*, 188: AAS 105 (2013), 1099.

[125] Cf. *ibid.*, 182-183: AAS 105 (2013), 1096-1097.

[126] *Ibid.*, 207: AAS 105 (2013), 1107.

[127] *Ibid.*, 200: AAS 105 (2013), 1104.

[128] Francis, *Address at the Meeting with Representatives of the World of Labor at the Ilva Factory in Genoa* (27 May 2017): AAS 109 (2017), 613.

[129] Pseudo-Chrysostom, *Homilia de Jejunio et Eleemosyna*: PG 48, 1060.

[130] Gregory Nazianzus, *Oratio XIV*, 40: PG 35, Paris 1886, 910.