

Advent 2004 Reflection: Who Belongs to Our Moral Community?

Adapted from an article by T. Michael McNulty, SJ

Christ was born into a marginalized community, a child whose family had no voice in the economic and political structures of that time and place. Advent is a time to reflect on this fact and on the Option for the Poor, which is so central to Catholic Social Teaching. Can we accept the challenge to spend at least part of our Christmas preparation time considering the plight of those in poverty in the contemporary world? Are we willing to look more deeply into the plight of the poor, or do we dismiss them by giving a few holiday donations and then turning back to our exclusive communities to “celebrate” Christmas? How can we authentically celebrate Christ’s birth by listening to those outside of our usual communities? Where do we hear the voices of the poor and marginalized today, the victims of global economic forces that inflict terrible suffering? How can we grow in understanding about the economic structures that must be transformed, as Catholic Social Teaching declares, to bring justice to those?

What is Happening to the Poor

People who are poor and marginalized are the victims of historical forces over which they have no control. They are in this sense “absent from history.” The social, political and economic forces that form the present world situation are partially the result of the adoption of a certain world view on economic activity and international trade. For example, although NAFTA was structured to improve the volume of trade with Mexico, the benefits for large corporations are small comfort for the thousands of small Mexican farmers who have been driven to bankruptcy as a result.

In other Latin American countries, the redirection of land once used for cultivation of beans to the production of flowers for export has had dire consequences for impoverished local populations. The cultivation of flowers is profitable for some because of the demand for cut flowers in the industri-

alized North, but it can result in an increase in the price of beans in the local market (because of a lowered supply) that prices them out of the range of local consumers, resulting in malnutrition (especially of children) and its accompanying woes. Although Catholic Social Teaching emphasizes that economic activity should always promote people over profit, the cries of the victims grow louder as the profits ring up.

Be patient, the poor are told. Eventually life will be better even for those on the bottom of the economic pile. Unfortunately, the evidence so far is not encouraging. Indications are that things are getting worse: for many countries the 1990s were “a decade of despair. Some 54 countries are poorer now than in 1990. In 21, a larger proportion of people is going hungry. In 14, more children are dying before age five. In 12, primary school enrolments are shrinking. In 34, life expectancy has fallen. Such reversals in survival were previously rare.” (UNDP *Human Development Report* for 2003) The UNDP describes the distribution of goods in terms of the now-famous champagne glass image: the top 20% of the world’s population control more wealth than the bottom 80% (UNDP 1992). The fact is that hard work and perseverance, even by very talented people, will not bring success in the absence of favorable social, economic, and historical circumstances. A young peasant in Chalatenango, El Salvador, has no hope of bettering his or her circumstances unless he or she can somehow find a way to “El Norte” (the U.S.), legally or (more likely) illegally, to become one of the “working poor” in this country.

Compassion and Solidarity

The crucial question we must ask as we look forward to marking Christ’s birth is, whom are we willing to include under the pronoun “we,” who belongs to our moral community? Such inclusion depends “not only on our willingness to

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help those people but on belief that one is able to help them.” But to help them, we must truly see them. Will we continue to treat those in poverty as outside our “moral requirements, unable to play a part in our moral life[?]. The rich and lucky people will quickly become unable to think of the poor and unlucky ones as their fellow humans, as part of the same ‘we.’”¹

Consider the possibility that we can only help those with whom we share moral community. The issue is not our moral obligation to help so much as the recognition of the other as a fellow-human. It is not in abstract principle but in human interaction that we find the connections of compassion and solidarity that make for practical community. Theologian Henri Nouwen defines compassion as follows: “Compassion manifests itself in solidarity, the deep consciousness of being part of humanity, the existential awareness of the oneness of the human race, the intimate knowledge that all people, however separated by time and space, are bound together by the same human condition.”² Compassion is the recognition that everyone else is just like me.

It is therefore the cry of the victim that creates the bond of community, for as the French writer Simone Weil says, “at the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him.”³

The reality of the world is one of poverty, disease, economic exploitation, hunger and political oppression for the majority of people on this earth. Our relationship to them can be external, so that it involves only economic contributions. But in fact the externalization of the relationship with the victims, those who are poor and marginalized, is at the same time a part of their dehumanization. Taking the victims’ side, mod-

eling the world from the perspective of the reality that daily oppresses them, transforms both the victims and ourselves. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, Superior General of the Jesuits, noted that the option for the poor results in seeing their humanity: “For the option for the poor is above all a relationship, an alliance, a casting of one’s lot with them.”⁴

The Struggle to Change our Hearts

We should not delude ourselves that this change in perspective will be easy. There is a kind of staging that people go through: 1) horror - “My God, I didn’t know it was so bad”; 2) determination - “Let’s fix it”; 3) despair - “We can’t fix it. Let’s forget it”; 4) solidarity - “They” is replaced by “We,” “those people” by “my people.” Getting past stage three is the real challenge for those in affluent societies. It involves in the first place that we ourselves strive for solidarity, and each must find his or her own path. We can take time this Advent to read, reflect, discuss and pray about those in poverty and the structures that must be transformed so justice can be a gift we share. We honor Christ’s birth when we see that to take the victims’ side is to give them a voice in the conversation, to be, in Romero’s powerful words, “the voice of those who have no voice.” Individually and collectively, we must accept the struggle of those in poverty as our own. It is our contribution to the building of a human community that includes *all* of humankind.

1 Richard Rorty, “Moral Universalism and Economic Triage.” UNESCO (1996), available at <<http://www.unesco.org/phiweb/uk/2rpu/rort/rort.html>>.

2 Henry Nouwen, “Compassion: The Core of Spiritual Leadership,” *Worship* 51(1977), 13.

3 Simone Weil, “Human Personality,” available at <<http://www.pendlehill.org/pdf%20files/php240.pdf>>.

4 Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, “The Option for the Poor in the Face of the Challenge of Overcoming Poverty,” printed in Peter J. Henriot, SJ, *Opting for the Poor: The Challenge for the Twenty-First Century*, Center of Concern, 2004.



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Reflection and Discussion Questions

Which of these stages are we in on the road to solidarity and inclusion: 1) horror - "My God, I didn't know it was so bad"; 2) determination - "Let's fix it"; 3) despair - "We can't fix it. Let's forget it"; 4) solidarity - "They" is replaced by "We," "those people" by "my people."

In what ways do we construct "safe" communities for ourselves?

Why is it easy to be exclusive and shut out the needs of others, especially those we do not seem, and do not wish to see, every day?

What attitudes and virtues do we have to practice to be able to become more inclusive?

How can communities of faith work on becoming more inclusive in all ways?

What steps can we take this Advent to become more aware and more inclusive of God's marginalized and suffering children around the world? What would be an appropriate birthday gift to the Child born in similar conditions?

Advent Prayer

Christ, your mother and father were excluded by all who they sought shelter with on the night you were born. You came into this world as a marginalized person, part of the "they" who were being counted by those in power for their own ends.

This Advent, open our eyes to see how many of your children are still in similar situations. Open our minds to understand their struggles, open our hearts and help us begin the journey to worship you by practicing inclusion. Guide us in the dark night to your Light, which shines for all. Amen.