

Footnotes

1 C René Padilla, 'The Church of the Poor' (unpublished paper, 1999), p. 4.

2 Richard Tiplady, 'Let X = X: Generation X and World

Mission' (unpublished paper, 2000).

3 Tearfund UK, *Operating Principles* (1999).

4 Emil Brunner, *The Mediator* (London: Lutterworth, 1934), p. 435.

What is poverty after all?

BY SAUL CRUZ

Poverty has always been one of the most prevalent problems of all humanity. It has affected all countries and all the peoples of the world without respect to sex, religion, race or age, and as we are nearing the new millennium, it is growing worse. More and more people are stricken by poverty and the death toll that this produces is alarmingly large. One thing is evident: the economic experiments of the last decade have only made the rich richer and the poor poorer.

But, what is poverty after all? Defined by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, poverty is 'The lack of means to satisfy a person's basic needs for nutrition, housing, clothing, and other essentials of life. Such needs may be defined narrowly as those necessary for survival or more broadly as determined by the prevailing standard of living in the community.' If this is the case, it seems that we all know what poverty is and, if asked, we could respond with the correct definition.

I dare to think, however, that our definitions are so saturated by the media's influence and so full of contemporary trends, philosophical justifications and economic and political accommodations that it is very likely that we do not recognize true poverty when we see it. I also wonder if we really understand anything of the meaning of poverty as presented in the biblical texts. In the best of cases we have come to accept the maximisation of some features of poverty, and to minimize others that we find socially challenging.

It is our responsibility as Christians to question what is considered normal and acceptable, fashionable and respectable in both knowledge and behaviour and assume a critical thinking perspective. This is vital in the case of poverty. Perhaps, that is precisely the problem in this area; we have stopped thinking critically or reflecting upon and reconsidering our ways of action. In spite of all the money and time that have been spent, and the innumerable programmes that have been launched to alleviate poverty, presently or in the past, very little has been done to stop its growth or revert it. Providing what the poor lack materially is not enough. Establishing repetitious programmes and projects, which function and provide the manageable elements and results that we desire is not enough either.

Where, then, should we look for answers? Jesus can

show us what poverty is. Consider the words of Matthew 9:36: 'But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were **weary** and **scattered** (NKJ), **distressed** and **downcast** (NAS), **harassed** and **helpless** (NIV), **fainted**, and were scattered abroad (KJV), **worried** and **helpless** (GNB), like sheep having no shepherd.' What Jesus saw in the multitudes, which moved him to compassion, is truly significant. In the first place, the two words used to describe what he saw, **eskulménoi** and **errimménoi**, are so rich that five important different translations of the New Testament in the English language use eight different English words to translate them. Jesus had eyes to see, and what he saw were crowds of people in intense suffering and tragic isolation because poverty is much more than a lack of means.

In practice, we have observed and learnt that all these notions are true and that they express themselves in so many horrifying faces. We have seen this in the death of a famished child or in the eruption of violent problems in families who thought they had escaped poverty and its consequences because they had managed to acquire more money or a better house in a better neighbourhood. We have seen that poverty has many causes and combines many meanings. On one hand it can be the result of laziness and personal corruption but on the other hand we know from personal experience that there are many, many millions in the world who suffer as innocent victims of poverty. They are the poor who, in spite of their hard work, their desire to save and prepare for the future and their personal honesty remain in the trap of poverty. What is the reason for this? Is it sin? Yes, but sin committed against the poor rather than by them.

To understand poverty there are four distinctive features that we need to understand if we are to make any progress in mitigating its vicious consequences:

- **A story of present or past exploitation.** Are we Mexicans so poor because we are all lazy and stupid? I don't think so, but we have certainly been considered so over the last seven centuries. Firstly, we were dominated for two hundred years under the totalitarian Aztec regime.

Secondly, the Spanish, conquered us, then exploited us as their colony for four centuries. Thirdly, even when independence from Spain came we still lived for one century between war, invasions and totalitarianism. The last century we had to live without democracy that we finally achieved this year (2000)! Many of the countries we see today as having the most migrant societies are victims of present or past exploitation. It is these people who out of desperation abandon their original lands and go in search of a new life. Who can blame them for fleeing towards those places of prosperity where it seems they will be able to solve all their problems? The root of it all is enemy invasions and conquest, or the killing of local leadership; the dismantling of local systems of education to establish a colonial system; the imposition of a foreign language and alien values on colonised nations who have diverse cultures and languages; the oppression of powerful neighbours; the interest demanded from extortionist creditors or the abuse by foreign investors who have double standards for labour. A good example of the last point are those people who in their own countries demand to be treated fairly and expect a fair return for work: social and medical services, retirement funds and so on, but do not give the same kind of benefits to those who work for them in a 'Third World' country. They pay the minimum wage in order to take the lion's share of the profit back to their own land and then refuse to reinvest a significant part of their profit in the country that is enlarging their riches.

- **Isolation.** This may be the worst evidence today of past exploitation or abuse, when people were kept scattered and ignorant because it was too dangerous to see them getting organized. This is also one of the clearest symptoms of social pathology today. It is seen in the selfishness and individualism that is expressed, for example, in the desire to keep a hold of the reins of power or to retain the exclusivity of educational institutions. But, is it not a contradiction to speak of crowds that are scattered? The problem of a 'scattered crowd' is lack of organization or community and all the consequences of it. We, the privileged, take for granted our communities and their services – although we may remember they are there only when we have to pay taxes. The poor, in contrast, are on their own. Even worse, people who are not organized surround them. They live without order or limits. Consider the case of a single mother whose children are sick in the middle of the night. Her husband has gone over the border illegally to seek a job. She has no one to look after her children but the children themselves. Where is she going to get a doctor? How can she get to a hospital if there is no

reliable transportation? How can she make a phone call without a public telephone service? Will she be safe in the middle of the shanty where she lives that is one of the most dangerous sections of the mega-city? Will she get raped or killed as she goes out of her shanty in the middle of the night? Who can help her children? Literally, this mother and her children are 'like sheep without a shepherd'. But how did she get where she is? What brought her and so many like her to the place of isolation where there is no community to support her? Communities get lost or become extinct because of the historic separation of ethnic minorities from the main social group to which they belong. Fragmentation happens when ethnic groups are limited to geographical reservations, or are forced to live only with the same ethnic group or to express themselves in their own language only within their territory. This hinders the possibility for these peoples of developing a sense of integration with the rest of society and encourages a sense of identity limited to their territory. Isolation within their territory leads to a lack of educational opportunities by which they can preserve their knowledge and traditions and also have reliable sources of information translated into their own languages, including the Bible, dictionaries, maps and so on. This cultural poverty within their territory also creates a pressure to migrate into the even more isolated setting of urban slums.

- **Lack of true choices or equal opportunities.** How can the poor compete or participate in a given society if the values of the dominant groups or their language, education, clothing, and so on, are so excluding? They have to rely on their own abilities which do not give them any real chance to compete in their own society. If you are a home servant you will always be treated as a servant and your children will always be the children of a home servant. Thus, if there are not possibilities for the acquisition of new skills or education, people will take the only available option and keep on being a home servant, a waiter, a carrier, but in a richer society where they will be paid much more for the same kind of occupation. That will mean taking all the risks of leaving one's country and becoming an illegal alien and leaving the family behind for years. The one who leaves becomes more isolated and the family left behind suffers even more isolation, but it is the only choice. The fact is that the poorer you are, the fewer 'degrees of freedom' you have, the fewer choices you can make and you are left with fewer alternatives even for the most ordinary, repetitive daily needs.
- **Powerlessness.** What can the poor do? The problems I have already listed are linked and affect each other. If you are exploited and isolat-

ed you cannot organize to fight injustice or prepare to avoid a terrible natural disaster. If you don't have many choices because of your personal story or the limitations which your larger society imposes on you, and if ignorance and even language and lack of knowledge of the love of God keep you all next to total collapse, you are powerless. If we who are not poor were suffering these same problems we could resort to our natural communities for help; we can turn to prayer, to the Bible for guidance, to our Pastors or counsellors for comfort. We could always look for help from our friends and relatives who live at a reasonable distance. We could use our credit cards or bank credit, assets, insurance, well polished professional abilities, and so on – but the poor are powerless.

Thus, based on biblical-theological considerations, our learning from many other Christians and our work among the poor throughout the last fifteen years, Armonia* has come to the following working and provisional definition of poverty, as our knowledge and understanding has deepened:

Human poverty is a state of such isolation, injustice and powerlessness to make vital and free choices that it brings the physical, mental, spiritual and social lives of people to undignified, subhuman conditions of existence that put them at risk of losing all they have, including their lives.

All these realities oppress the poor so that they are trapped inside a closed box. If that is so, what can we do? In Isaiah 1:16b-17a, we read:

... wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong,

learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. (NIV)

Our action should be twofold:

1. Stop doing wrong. Fight the consequences of historical sin, present sin and our own sin against the poor. We must pull down the walls that oppress the poor because of sin and evil.

2. Learn to do right. We can bring them the good news of the gospel so that they can get to know the loving, forgiving, self sacrificing, transforming God. We can serve them as we walk alongside them. We can become the reliable Christian family they need and we can also teach them to live in communities and in soci-

ety according to the Lord's will.

An additional way of fighting poverty would be organizing with other members of our country or other countries to participate in groups and networks of influence so that:

- Governments have to set priorities with respect to education, health, transportation, electric power and many other parts of the neglected infrastructure of the economy.
- Governments must seek to attain the highest level of aggregate investment compatible with monetary stability and must abstain from using an excessive share of the investment funds for the public sector.
- Underdeveloped countries should become democratic.

At a personal level, we Christians also need to manifest contemporary Christian actions against poverty with actions such as,

- Giving with generosity (2 Corinthians 9:10, 11)
- Giving to those who are really in contact with the needy and have been accountable for their work among the poor.
- Consider our own **involvement in a concrete situation of need.**

There are many vocational opportunities to bring about changes in the lives of the poor and to glorify the Lord by seeking ways of facilitating social change and Christian social transformation. What is most important of all is that, in following the example of Jesus, we refuse to consider our life style as something to which we should hang on at all costs, no matter how good it may be. We must be ready to make their lack our lack, their fears our fears, and their problems our own until we, by God's grace, can empower them so that there is no more isolation, no more exploitation, no more powerlessness or lack of choices but an abundant life in Christ.

*Armonia is an agency serving the neediest people in the main situations of poverty in Mexico. It is directed by Mexican Christians with a strong sense of indigenous responsibility, in partnership with Christian groups from the United Kingdom, the United States and Mexico itself, who share the common vision of taking the whole gospel to the poor.

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