

# Assisting the Poor and Afflicted

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## **The Leadership Forum**

*The Harvard Club, One Federal Street, Boston*

*by Paul Swope*

### **Approach of Lay Catholic Businessmen**

I find this to be a difficult topic, a personally challenging one. And my sense of these conferences is that we want to approach topics from ground level, not as academics (I ain't one), not as theologians (I isn't), but as lay Catholic men, lay Catholic businessmen. So I am going to approach it in a more informal way, and share how I have struggled with this issue. **IN ORDER TO ASSIST THE POOR, WE HAVE TO IDENTIFY THEM FIRST. DO WE INCLUDE OURSELVES ON THE LIST? EVERYONE HAS ASPECTS OF LIFE IN WHICH THEY ARE POOR. DO WE RECOGNIZE THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE SUFFERING THAT MATERIAL POVERTY BRINGS AND THAT WE SHOULD ATTEMPT TO ERADICATE AND THE SPIRITUAL POVERTY THAT WE ARE ALL CALLED TO ASPIRE TO?** I'll go over material poverty, almsgiving, cultural poverty, and spiritual poverty, and hopefully mention some practical points in each area that might be of help.

### **Christ's Example of Material Poverty**

I don't know about you, but whenever I go on a retreat, there is a talk on living poverty, and I think people squirm more than at other talks. And small wonder – just consider: Jesus Christ, the son of the living God, chose to be born in a stable, in a cave, and live among the poor, in a poor village, living as a simple carpenter. Dying as a criminal. His chosen pillars of the Church were predominantly fishermen, illiterate, and He said things like “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Or consider another blunt phrase, “You cannot serve God and money.” Then there is the story of the rich young man who turned away from Christ – I believe the only scene where someone in personal dialogue with Christ rejects him. And that man lived by the commandments, and he had good intentions. These are thoughts that should give us pause as followers of Christ. Not too reassuring is it? **ALSO, FOXES HAVES DENS, BIRDS HAVE NESTS BUT THE SON OF MAN HAS NOWHERE TO LAY HIS HEAD.**

### **We are Among the Wealthiest in History**

After all, make no mistake, you and I are among the wealthiest humans beings to ever walk the face of the earth, in terms of security, comfort, freedom, mobility and resources at our command. What are we to do? Better put, what are we to do in the next 30 minutes together to make some advance on this issue?

### **Talk title – Arena Image – Gifts/Graces**

Well, I admit that even the title of this talk made me uncomfortable: “The poor and afflicted – who are they, and, Is it just about money? Unfortunately in our culture, or in our language, when we say “the poor,” it has the sense of “those” poor, a kind of “us” and “them” mentality, as if we are the lucky ones. The image that comes to mind is men at an arena, looking down into the pit of life and deciding which charities will receive our dimes that we will toss down with our blessing. Nonsense! Every one of us in this room has been given a great deal in terms of natural gifts, as well as the supernatural gift of faith. Just look at the

riches we have been given – good families, good health, clear understanding of the faith, a free country, vast financial resources, coherent minds, relative peace. Now on judgment day God will not ask about our income level, he may ask about the gifts and graces we were given and how we have used them. And from that perspective, I consider myself one of the poorest of men. In my view, we may well stand before God as the most naked of men, because we have the most to answer for.

I start with this focus because we need to shift the debate, away from just material considerations, and to not assume that we are on the “good” side of the ledger.

### **Material Poverty - Catechism**

However, the attempt to deepen our spiritual lives would not be advanced if we just shrug off the problems of material or financial poverty, as something almost irrelevant next to the questions of spiritual poverty, or cultural poverty.

In fact, the catechism makes this quite clear: [Read 2448-2449] ...Now, having said all that about material poverty in general, I think we can make a couple of points about almsgiving:

- 1) **Become Personally Involved.** I think we would all agree that addressing poverty is not done very successfully at a bureaucratic level. Shoveling money at the poor through impersonal government welfare programs is not generally proven to improve the situation, but may make it worse. For example, there seems to be a correlation between welfare dependency and the skyrocketing of single parent households, as lower income men appear to have abdicated their role as fathers and providers for their family, leaving that to the mothers and the government.

A more appropriate approach to assisting the poor and afflicted is to support charities that we are actually involved in. (Example: a parent at local start-up Catholic school donated musical instruments for each student.)

- 2) **Tithe.** Tithing is a profoundly Biblical concept – the idea of taking 10% of what we earn and donating that back to the community or those less fortunate. Allow me to put you all on the spot and ask, “Do you tithe?” and if not, “Why not?”
- 3) **Edges of Life.** As to who are the poor and afflicted, we might frame the issue with three questions: 1) who are those whose human rights are most violated? 2) who are the most defenseless? and 3) who are those we are most practically able to help? At this point in our cultures evolution, or dissolution, our Holy Father has been fairly clear that those on the edges of life are those most needing our support. In fact, today you might say conceived humans swimming in a pitri dish are the poorest of the poor. This type of debate is especially urgent because it is still being formed. Universal suffrage is a finished issue, as is desegregation of schools, etc. – but cloning, stem cell research, euthanasia, abortion -- this is where your single voice can make a difference.
- 4) **Children and Family Size.** Speaking of the cutting edge.... Another angle on living poverty in our modern age is being generous in bringing life into the world. Instead of giving up something material (and thinking we are saints), consider giving something precious TO the world, namely, an eternal soul. I am speaking about a spirit of generosity in family size. **THE FAMILY IS A WORKSHOP IN THE FORMATION OF VIRTUES, AS WORK ITSELF CAN BE AS WELL.**

You know, Mother Theresa has called America one of the poorest nations. I’m not sure of her exact words on the subject, but I can list two ideas why this is so: a) most industrialized nations are below their replacement level. Talk about poverty – good

heavens we are headed for extinction! b) Even more important, because it is not just about numbers, is that the traditional family is under attack. And in any culture, any civilization, anywhere, the family unit is the most fundamental building block of any civilized society, so the stakes could not be higher.

What will make a lasting difference (rather than living poverty in solidarity with lower income levels) is to bring a child into the world who is well formed, raised in a home with a mother AND father. So not just an eternal soul, but one raised in the Catholic church, in freedom, in health....Is there any other gift even close to that?

“But kids are so expensive these days....” Are we mad? Never has any nation had such abundance, it is nearly suffocating us! You and I should politely but firmly help to dispel that scandalous view that, baldly put, puts more value on bank accounts than eternal souls.

That being said, raising a large family is NOT easy. Welcome to the spirit of poverty properly lived and understood in the modern world, by lay catholic businessmen! In fact, (jumping ahead) what is the deepest poverty? Isolation, loneliness, selfishness – what will you never be if you have a large family? Isolated, Lonely, or selfish! There, end of discussion – it is all taken care of at once!

- 5) **A New Personalist Approach.** I have been involved, professionally, with the PL movement for going on 20 years. And it occurred to me that often we seem to focus on legislative or political change, and not really try to understand and persuade the women who might face the abortion decision. Perhaps, on occasion, we love our message more than the person who needs to hear it. Put another way, we try to decrease supply, rather than demand. We seek legislative rather than personal solutions. And I believe this is one of the main reasons I was asked to give this talk – clearly the unborn are at or near the cutting edge of who is truly “poor” in our civilization.

The Caring Foundation has revolutionized how we can address this moral crisis. Not by shoveling money at political furnaces, but at focusing on the interior life of the person most affected by the issue, and trying to create a strategy that will impact their decision making process. You might call it the subjectivist approach. For example, we started (or rather the research lead us to) the noble instinct for self-preservation. By just trying to shut down her options, we only aggravate that instinct and make her feel more alienated and isolated (remember the definition of poverty?) Instead, we create ads that help to affirm her and support her, but suggest that options other than abortion are more in her own self interest.

This ties in very closely with John Paul II phenomenology, which some have called personalism and subjectivism (in the good sense) – the idea of starting our analysis of reality with the existential experience of the human person, as a person, not as an object, or an animal, or a theory, but as an experienced, integrated state of consciousness.

This gets a bit heavy, and we don’t have time for a decent treatment of the matter, but I there is a passage from Chesterton’s “The secret of Fr. Brown” that I think gets at this point in a very entertaining yet clear way.

[time permitting, Father Brown selection]

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**Cultural Development.**

So, we have covered the “which” (personal involvement), the “how much” (tithing), the “who” (marginalized and current issues), and to some extent, the “how” (considering the subjective and personal approach and not just the legalistic or political one). I’d like to briefly cover what you might call cultural poverty. Again we go back to John Paul II’s inspiration and leadership. He is a towering champion of the importance of cultural development in building up a culture of life, in being the primary engines of societal change. In fact, his writings over the last decade clearly suggest that the primary means of change in modern societies lies in cultural revolution, rather than political systems or military operations or monetary structures. WE CHANGE THE CULTURE ONE PERSON AT A TIME. THIS IS ENTIRELY CONSISTENT WITH THE MESSAGE OF BL JOSEMARIA ESCRIVA REGARDING APOSTOLATE AS A CHRISTIAN. THE CULTURE BENEFITS AND WE BENEFIT BY THE PERSONALISTIC APPROACH TO DEALING WITH THOSE AROUND US. RELATES SOMEWHAT TO THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY.

**Exam of Conscience.** Do we set the example to our children of men deeply involved in cultural activities? Do they see us reading the classics, attending concerts, visiting art galleries, playing an instrument, discussing history, writing or reading poems, painting, sculpting, etc.?

I assume your reaction is like mine – you have got to be kidding. I am part of a large family, one or more demanding businesses to stay on top of, civic and church duties...there just isn’t time. As the modern saying goes: Just do it.

**Problem of Guilt.** But you may have another reaction: namely, when you do give time to these types of activities you feel... - guilty. I, for example, love to play classical piano, Frederick Chopin to be exact. But it seems like a futile and rather selfish activity – I started as an adult and really don’t have any polish to my playing. I mentioned this to a friend of mine, and he said something I never forgot. “The logic of your approach is that only pagans should be good at the piano, or involved in culture...” He is so right. We must make time for cultural activities, or our society will become so shallow and hollow, that it will collapse.

THE PROBLEM OF GUILT FOR ENJOYING CULTURE AND FOR FINANCIAL SUCCESS.

The same applies to financial wealth, if we feel guilty at our financial position, we are implicitly saying that only pagans should have money, only pagans should be the leaders of politics, economics, business, and so forth. Since that is obviously nonsense, it follows that our reasoning is nonsense. We should not feel guilty of our position, but at the same time, as mentioned earlier, we have a profound responsibility on our hands.

### **Expanding the Definition of Poverty**

So, in the few minutes remaining, let’s ask again “Who are the poor and the afflicted, and is it just about money? Human poverty is ultimately, the lack of what makes us human. The less human, the poorer we are. And this cuts across socio-economic, racial, and national lines. This view certainly does not suggest that wealthy westerners have an edge (my experience in travel). Interestingly, lack of money has nothing to do with our humanness, whereas lack of culture, and lack of a spiritual life is very much at the heart of what makes us human. [Time permitting – ask how we are made in God’s image and discuss the trinitarian nature of the human person, the pattern of gift of self. Poverty is that which fractures the ability to make the gift of self.] Material wealth is so dangerous because it tends to obfuscate that deeper dimension, that deeper reality, of the human person. Starvation and unemployment can paralyze the person, but even more so can excessive comfort and self-centeredness - small wonder Mother Theresa called us the poorest of nations.

## **Spiritual Poverty and the Spirit of Detachment**

That gift of self is meant to be practiced with co-workers and family, but of course also with God. There is very little time, but I can just throw out a couple of points regarding how to live the spirit of poverty as catholic lay businessmen:

1) **The gift of self is meant to include God.** That does not mean believing the right things, or just avoiding evil. It means giving God perhaps our most precious gift – our time. Do we take time out of each day to talk to Our Lord, alone, in private, about whatever is on our mind? We can't impress God with our good deeds and deep piety, but we can and should give him our time. Living poverty is not so much giving the church money as giving God your time.

2) **Living Detachment.** As mentioned earlier, God needs people of means and people in leadership positions to act as Christian leaven in society. But we are meant to live in the midst of that comfort and wealth in a spirit of detachment. This is best done in little things that are not noticed by others. For example, when I worked at a large office building, I would take the stairs rather than the elevator. It could be anything that restrains our tendencies to indulge – not reading the gossip sections of the paper, not turning on the radio every time you get in the car to listen to talk radio or your favorite station, not watching a useless TV show. Little things.

Here is a wonderful quote from blessed JoseMaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, which makes a subtle but very powerful point. It is from *The Way*, #635: “You don't have the spirit of poverty if you don't select for yourself what is worst, when you are able to choose in such a way that it will not be noticed.” [Example chocolate chip cookies next to chocolate covered ants –crunchy!]

What is interesting is that you more than likely are thinking these are kind of wimpy examples. My challenge, pick just one, and try to do it consistently, day in and day out, and you will be amazed how hard it is, and grow enormously in humility and self-knowledge.

3) **Good Stewardship.** Take good care of the things you have. This was another aspect of the spirit of Opus Dei that I found very helpful. One might think that living the spirit of poverty would mean not having much regard for things, but that is more likely to develop a spirit of carelessness and laziness. It is a more mature and difficult task for a lay catholic to really treat things well. So shine the shoes, clean the car, brush the teeth... We take care of things because they are not ours, our body is not ours, or our mind, -- all these things are on loan, and taking care of them shows our respect. So you might examine your own behavior, and see if there is some area you could improve. Again, it may seem easy, but try doing it regularly and you will see....

### **St. Gregory quote**

I'd like to end with a wonderful quote from St. Gregory with which I am sure most of you are familiar, which helps to get at the kernel idea here: “All of us who enter the arena of the faith are committed to fight against evil spirits. The devils possess nothing in this world and therefore, since they enter the lists naked, we too must fight naked. Because, if someone who is clothed fights against someone who goes naked, he will soon be dragged down, since his enemy has something to get a grip on. And what are the things of this world if not a kind of apparel?”

Each of us has a different answer, of what constitutes “clothes” should we step into the arena.

And you can be sure, given the talents and graces we have been given, given the degree of influence that each of us could potentially exert in our society, that the devils have us in their sights. Each of us carries a great responsibility, but also a great opportunity for joyfully working in Our Lords vineyard, and I hope I have provided some food for thought on this topic of the day. Thank you.

THE VIEW OF PROFESSIONAL WORK AS MEANS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE CORRECT SPIRIT OF POVERTY. IF WE VIEW OUR WORK IN THE CONTEXT OF OUR CONTRIBUTION TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY, EITHER BY THE GENEROUS USE OF THE FUNDS WE EARN OR BY THE EFFORT PUT FORTH TO HELP OTHERS, OR BY VIEWING OUR EFFORTS AS CUSTODIANS OF THE WORK ENTRUSTED TO US.

CONCLUSION: WHAT, AT FIRST GLANCE MAY APPEAR AS A RATHER STRAIGHTFORWARD TOPIC IS CERTAINLY MUCH MORE PROFOUND, MUCH MORE ENCOMPASSING THAN WE MIGHT HAVE IMAGINED. IF WE ARE TO FULLY ABSORB THE CHRISTIAN MEANING OF POVERTY, IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT WE TAKE THIS TOPIC TO OUR PRAYER LIFE. QWE