

CST Theme 4, Part 3: “The Poor You Will Always Have With You”

This remark, made by Jesus in a moment when He was being challenged for alleged extravagance, is often used as a shrug of the shoulders to justify some level of indifference to the plight of the poor. But this is a gross misunderstanding at best, and a deliberate misdirection at worst.

The occasion was a dinner with Scribes and Pharisees (there are different versions of this story in each of three Gospels, but all have the same essence), at which a woman came to Jesus and anointed him with expensive perfumed oil. In John’s Gospel, she anoints his feet and dries them with her hair.

The Pharisees, who had invited Jesus not out of hospitality but in order to catch Him in some inconsistency or violation of religious laws and customs, immediately claimed that He should have had this woman sell her expensive perfumed oil and give the money to the poor.

So He quotes Deuteronomy, which these people knew very well: “*the poor you will always have with you,’ but you will not always have Me.*” His gracious but conniving hosts also knew the rest of the passage He was referring to: “*I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’*” (Dt 15:11)

If we are going to remember the first part of this quote, we will need to remember the rest of it as well, and that puts a completely different spin on the message: *The poor you will always have with you, so you will always need to be attentive to their needs.* (And not, as is often implied, ...so there’s nothing that can be done about it...)

All of the guests at this dinner knew another passage from Deuteronomy as well: *There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today.* (Dt 15:4-5)

God, who provides everything we have starting with life itself, provides enough for everyone to have a life of dignity as a human person. Some may have more than others, but no one, according to this and numerous other bible passages, should be left with less than basic human needs.

There are people we consider poor who do have basic human needs. But there should be no one in our society — any society — that is without the basics of shelter, food, clothing, meaningful work, and basic health care. The Preferential Option for the Poor demands that we who do have power, influence, and temporal resources work to ensure that the economic system that works for us also works for those who have nothing and no way to move forward.

As Catholic Christians, we can neither use the Word of God to justify injustice, nor tolerate such use by others, including those we elect to office. Catholic Social Doctrine is part of the Magisterial teaching of the Church. Our commitment to building a Culture of Life is empty if it does not include a Preferential Option for the Poor.

See these passages for biblical background:

Mt 26:11 / Mk 14:7 / Jn 12:8 / Prv 14:20, 14:31 / Dt 15:11

The link below has numerous scripture references that support this theme, along with some very powerful quotes from Pope Francis and others.

<https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/option-for-the-poor-and-vulnerable>