

Alfredo SALGADO

Poverty and Reconciliation

Reciprocated Interest – Ways of Approaching Poverty

Poverty has many faces. It can be involuntary and it can be chosen. It can be a curse and it can be a means of education. Poverty can concern an individual, a group, a nation or any larger group transcending national borders. Poverty is often comparative, discovered after an encounter with those more affluent than ourselves. Poverty can appear as poverty in comparison to those more wealthy than us and then appear as wealth in comparison to those more needy than ourselves. How do we distinguish which poverty is real? How do we decide which form of poverty should be most urgently eliminated? And in what way should justice and poverty be brought about between the rich and the poor?

POVERTY AS A SUDDEN STROKE – A CATASTROPHE

When poverty is caused by a natural disaster, by a war or by any other sudden blow, it is most noticeable. A sudden fall in the standard of living, a sudden shortage of necessities or even a sudden reduction of prosperity are strong blows and in many instances are perceived as injustice. An attack of poverty of this kind can affect both individuals, population groups, whole nations or even continents. In history there have been countless disasters that thrust formerly wealthy nations into poverty or made poor nations even poorer.

As an example from modern European history is the *Potato Famine of Ireland* (1845-49) that resulted in the death of nearly one million people and forced another million into emigration. The potato disease rendered Ireland largely dependent upon foreign aid. The then Prime Minister Sir Robert PEEL revoked the Corn Laws to make bread cheaper and decided to import maize that would be sold in Ireland at purchase-price. His actions, however, provoked large opposition in the owner-class and PEEL was replaced. The Potato Famine is still a vivid memory in collective Irish history. How was it possible to reconcile the wealthy with the poor in 1852, when the blight in Ireland was finally over?

BORN INTO POVERTY – NO WAY OUT?

Being born into poverty draws much less attention than large-scale poverty resulting from a disaster. It is one of the least noticeable kinds of poverty. It is “being used to poverty” as a reality of life. This is also one of the most difficult kinds of poverty to eliminate. People often do not know anything better than what they have and often there is little hope that the conditions could improve. In these situations, poverty has become a given.

In areas familiar with long-term (civil) war, people adjust to the altered circumstances and begin to accept them as normal. In areas where shortage of resources has been a reality for many years, it is hard to imagine that the future could look differently. It is especially in this case that poverty produces long-term disillusion. Those who can leave will leave and those who cannot eventually

grow bitter. The flow of refugees from areas with few prospects of improvement is often halted by outer means such as the imposition of migration restrictions and people from poor areas being denied entry into the realm of the rich.

CHOSEN POVERTY

– EDUCATION AND COMPASSION

Aside from poverty that is assigned (realised at birth or a result of a disaster), there is a poverty that is chosen. It can be chosen as a means of education, often related to religious motives, as in GANDHI’s case or in the case of hermits in many religious traditions. The idea that a life of poverty frees one’s mind from the clinging to worldly goods has been present in many philosophical systems. People who have accepted poverty in a radical way claim that such a life not only increases one’s concentration on non-material realities of life, but that it can open one’s heart for active compassion with the poor who were denied the choice. A hermit chooses poverty as an individual, but those living in poor families or nations are affected by poverty on other than just individual level. And even the most radical religious or philosophical poverty looks for moderate poverty, which is acceptable and does not exceed the individual’s capacity to bear it.

There are also instances when religiously motivated poverty cannot be regulated beforehand and is accepted in the measure in which it comes. This happens in cases where an individual or a group put themselves into the service of the needy in an unprecedented way. In this context poverty is closely linked with compassion and love and can be a great witness to the ideals of the sharing of resources as well as of suffering. The service for the needy as in the case of Mother THERESA or Albert SCHWEITZER – if it was to be a sign of hope and reconciliation – needed to be practiced in a consciously accepted poverty. Such poverty was one of the signs that the involvement of these Christians was authentic and came from a desire deeply rooted in their hearts.

ELIMINATION OF POVERTY

– A FINANCIAL MATTER?

It often seems that the elimination of poverty is closely linked with a redistribution of material resources. In many cases it is really so. But in cases where such a requirement is unrealisable for the time being other instruments need to be employed. Poverty is often linked with



phenomena that can appear secondary. One usually admits that political oppression and totalitarianism can be primary sources of long-term stagnation, but there are more subtle ways of inhibiting people's involvement in the creation of both material and cultural goods and items.

It has often been the case that classes of the population were deprived of civil freedom, property rights, economic liberty, political and social influence, which resulted in a long-term demotivation of these classes in relation to their economic and cultural creativity. The marginalisation of slaves and foreigners in ancient societies, exploitation of the cheap or free labour of "inferior" races and the exclusion of women from decision-making are notorious examples of how the wealth of one group was built on the poverty of the other.

These ample examples of segregation of the rich and the poor must be taken into account when examining why certain portions of population suffered from a lack of economic and cultural creativity for some time after their "liberation" by their former "masters". The same goes for countries and regions that were treated as colonies and seen as deposits of raw materials and depots of cheap labour. Their "liberation" from the yoke of exploitation often meant an abrupt change from one form of dependence to another. In this situation I am curious to ask what role education is supposed to play in the elimination of poverty.

POVERTY AND EDUCATION

Municipal charity reforms of the XVIth century (eg. in Valladolid, Rouen or Paris) tried to eliminate poverty in different ways. One of them was expelling as many paupers as possible from the city. In Rome the poor were supposed to live in a segregated area. Prisons were often institutions dealing primarily with beggars, rather than outlaws. In many cases the problem of poverty proved to be such an overwhelming issue that those in power applied cheap but effective solutions. Even if it is at times difficult to suggest alternative solutions, there have been other ways of approaching the problem of poverty. These ways, however, were devised mainly by those whose real power was utterly limited.

In his book "The Tragedy of American Compassion" Marvin OLASKY argues that poverty relief work essentially needs an educational element. Or in other words – purely material compassion in which the elements of *love* and *hope* are missing is just a short-term input that evaporates with the vapor of the distributed hot soup. OLASKY argues:

"Poverty fighters hundred years ago were more compassionate – in the literal meaning of "suffering with" – than many of us are now. They opened their own homes to deserted women and children. They offered employment to nomadic men who had abandoned hope and human contact. Most significantly, they made moral demands on recipients of aid. They saw family, work, freedom, and faith as central to our being, not as life-style options. No one was allowed to eat and run. Some kind of honest labor was required of those who needed food or a



place to sleep in return.

Even if the option presented by OLASKY is not applicable in all contexts, it tells us an important truth. People whose motivation and creativity are low or almost non-existent need more than just the basics necessary for their survival.

They need encouragement to go on in a different way. This encouragement, including an element of hope, can be mediated by those who dispose of appropriate instruments that can be offered for an improvement of the situation of the individual struck by poverty. Only at the beginning can there be one-sided giving and encouraging. Afterwards two-sided activity is needed for further continuation of the mutually conceived idea of stepping out of the past.

POVERTY AND RECONCILIATION

Even if those more prosperous often feel the duty to share, they may be forgetting about their duty to learn. People who approach the poverty of others by choosing the same option for themselves – like Mother THERESA – acknowledge that there is much to learn from the reality of being poor. On the other hand, relief workers, who work with the poor but come from an affluent society, often do not look for a lesson coming from the environment of the poor. They give goods and expertise and receive gratitude. But is that enough? Learning from the poor, from their reality, is in many cases a unique chance to come nearer to the essentials of life. Their choices, their expertise of management of resources, their search for the peace of mind, their relationship with transcendence, their creativity – all these are meaningful realities that can teach those more wealthy a lesson they hardly can be taught in their own context.

Reconciliation between the poor and the rich is therefore a reality that requires reciprocity – reciprocated interest and reciprocated instruction. Even if cases of emergency short-term help and cases of longer-term co-operation differ so much from each other, relief work can always be an opportunity to be instructed by new views, approaches and values. The equality of all humans has always been at the roots of relief work. Compassion and knowledge that something similar can happen to us have also been deeply rooted in the idea of helping the ones in need. Learning about ourselves from those who seem to have little to give is, however, another element that should not be overseen when bringing the light of hope into a house where there are already many other lights burning without us knowing.

Suggested Reading

GEREMEK Bronislaw, *Poverty – A History*. Oxford, 1994.
 LANDES David, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor*. New York, 1998.
 OLASKY Marvin, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*. Washington DC, 1992.

Alfredo SALGADO is a Roman Catholic from Zaragoza, Spain. He is currently studying Social Sciences in Madrid. His main focus is the development of social institutions in modern Europe. He has been involved in social programmes aimed at incorporating immigrants into the Spanish society. He has also participated in research programs among asylum-seekers in eastern Spain. He is a member of Amnesty International. His email address is alfredosalgado@todochat.zzn.com.

