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Written Text
Dialogue on “The Pope and the Poor”
Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life
Georgetown University
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Introduction

Thank you Vice President Banchoff for that warm and gracious introduction. Thank you as well for your great assistance in establishing the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life. From the very first moment President DeGioia so warmly welcomed us to Georgetown, Dr. Banchoff has been our ally and advocate helping this Initiative to get off to a tremendous start.

The Initiative

When John Carr and several of us, including a number of leaders here tonight, began to explore this idea, we had no idea that our efforts would be blessed by the remarkable leadership and example of our new Pope Francis. Our Holy Father is offering a unique moment and tremendous momentum for our efforts to share the wisdom of Catholic Social Teaching and reach out to the next generation of Catholic leaders.

This work is crucial and timely. It is essential for our Church, important for our country and vital for this University. It is directed by a uniquely qualified and skilled leader. John Carr and I have worked together for many, many years, and there is no one more respected and trusted for his knowledge, balance and skills in sharing and applying Catholic Social Teaching. Over 25 years he served our bishops conference so well, but this may be the most important work John has ever done.

I am proud to be a small part of this Initiative and am convicted this is the right mission, in the right place, with the right leadership and at the right time. This is evident in the tremendous response to the Initiative, demonstrated by the remarkable attendance and spirit at the first dialogue and by the impressive turnout tonight. Who would have thought a year ago we could gather so many on the Monday after Thanksgiving break for a discussion on the pope and the poor. Thank you for coming and thank you for your support of this essential Initiative.

The Place of the Poor in the Joy of the Gospel

This wide-ranging reflection insists the Gospel is “good news” and we ought to act like. It places care for and commitment to the poor and vulnerable at the very center of the Church’s evangelizing mission and all of Catholic life. Pope Francis wants “a Church which is poor and for the poor.” In this exhortation, Pope Francis sets the agenda and charts a path forward for tonight’s discussion and for the Church’s continuing solidarity with those who are poor and vulnerable.
From the moment of his election, in his choice of the name Francis, in what he says and what he does, our Holy Father is placing solidarity with the poor and vulnerable at the heart of his leadership. In his visit to Lampedusa, the isle of tears for so many migrants, to the favelas of Rio, to Assisi and in his stunning everyday outreach to the disabled and disfigured, Francis shows us the way. He mirrors Jesus in his compassion. He exemplifies what the Church preaches about the priority for the poor and the imperative of justice. He doesn’t reach out to “the poor” but to individual sisters and brothers, touching them and loving them as Children of God and members of our one human family.

This exhortation is lengthy and wide-ranging, weaving together scripture, Catholic teaching and reason. It covers how to preach a homily, warns against pessimism and polarization. It talks of the roles of women and the “conversion of the papacy” in our Church. I urge you to read it, read it all and resist the temptation to try and fit Pope Francis into our own ideological and ecclesial preferences and prejudices. He affirms and challenges all of us. The Pope sometimes speaks simply, warning against Christians becoming “disillusioned pessimists and sourpusses” (85) or “mummies in a museum.” He also offers much more abstract warnings against “gnosticism” and “self-absorbed promethean neopelagianism” (94).

Francis builds on and extends the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and his predecessors, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. It was Blessed John Paul who outlined the advantages and limitations of markets and the need for moral framework to guide their work. It was Benedict who said concern for the poor was one of three essentials that made the Church Catholic, along with proclaiming the Gospel and celebrating the sacraments. What is different may be Francis’ passion, shaped in his work in the slums of Buenos Aries, or his simple language and contemporary references to “trickle down economics,” or the” idolatry of money” or frankly the openness of secular media to hear this new Pope.

Francis defends religious freedom, the rights of the Church to live with integrity in a pluralistic society. He also defends the sacredness of marriage and the stability of the family” (62) as necessary for society to overcome poverty and injustice. He lifts up the rights and dignity of migrants and victims of human trafficking. He is crystal clear about the humanity of

unborn children, the most defenseless and innocent among us. Nowadays efforts are made to deny them their human dignity ... taking their lives and passing laws preventing anyone from standing in the way of this.” ... It is not “progressive” to try to resolve problems by eliminating a human life.”

Francis makes clear it is “not the task of the Pope to offer detailed and complete analysis of contemporary reality,” but he reads the “signs of the times” and calls us to the age old mission of the Church to serve, stand with and defend “the least of these”, the poor, the vulnerable and the victims of injustice.

In setting a framework for our discussion of “the Pope and the Poor”, I offer our Holy Father’s own words on the challenges we face in four distinct yet interrelated areas:

- Personally
- Ecclesially
- Economically
- Politically
Personally

In terms of our personal responsibility, Francis could not be more clear:

*Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society.*

He warns each of us:

*Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us (54).*

And he calls every one of us to work

*to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter (188).*

He singles out those of us in ecclesial and academic life, insisting there is no excuse for indifference or inaction:

*No one must say that they cannot be close to the poor because their own lifestyle demands more attention to other areas. This is an excuse commonly heard in academic, business or professional, and even ecclesial circles. ... none of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice (202).*

He reminds us that”

*Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programmes of promotion and assistance, not an unruly activism, but above all ... a loving attentiveness which entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, and in their ways of living the faith (199).*

According to Pope Francis, we have a duty to defend the rights and dignity of those who are poor, and also to love them, listen to them, treat them as members of our family, as sisters and brothers.

Ecclesial

This applies especially to the Church of Jesus Christ which should “never lack the option for those who are least, those whom society discards” (195). Pope Francis insists:

*Any Church community, if it thinks it can comfortably go its own way without creative concern and effective cooperation in helping the poor to live with dignity and reaching out to everyone, will ... risk breaking down ... It will easily drift into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk (207).*
Francis warns that

> the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God .... Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care (200).

He powerfully and vividly says:

> I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security (49).

**Economy**

A Church in the streets, that is a field hospital for the hurting, a source of mercy and hope will confront an economic status quo where “the majority of our contemporaries are barely living from day to day” (52).

Pope Francis is blunt and direct:

> Just as the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. ... Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape (53).

Pope Francis insists:

> While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. This imbalance is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation. Consequently, they reject the right of states, charged with vigilance for the common good, to exercise any form of control. ... To all this we can add widespread corruption and self-serving tax evasion (56).

He warns against

> trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world”

Pope Francis calls for us to
“go beyond a simple welfare mentality” (204). Welfare projects, which meet certain urgent needs, should be considered merely temporary responses. The need to resolve the structural causes of poverty cannot be delayed. … Inequality is the root of social ills (202).

The pope outlines overall policy goals:

We are not simply talking about ensuring nourishment or a “dignified sustenance” for all people, but also their “general temporal welfare and prosperity”. [159] This means education, access to health care, and above all employment, for it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labour that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives. A just wage enables them to have adequate access to all the other goods which are destined for our common use (192).

Political

Working for a “new political and economic mindset which would help to break down the wall of separation between the economy and the common good of society” (205). It clearly requires political participation which the Pope praises … quoting from the US Bishops on Faithful Citizenship:

People in every nation enhance the social dimension of their lives by acting as committed and responsible citizens, not as a mob swayed by the powers that be. Let us not forget that “responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation.” [180] (220).

He declares:

A financial reform open to such ethical considerations would require a vigorous change of approach on the part of political leaders (58).

And

But the current model, with its emphasis on success and self-reliance, does not appear to favour an investment in efforts to help the slow, the weak or the less talented to find opportunities in life (209).

In a message particularly appropriate for Washington in these days of stalemate and partisan gridlock, Pope Francis asks

God to give us more politicians capable of sincere and effective dialogue aimed at healing the deepest roots – and not simply the appearances of – the evils in our world! Politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity …

I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, the lives of the poor! It is vital that government leaders and financial leaders take heed and broaden their horizons, working to ensure that all citizens have dignified work, education and healthcare (205).
Conclusion

This is but a small portion of the faith, hope and love Francis shares with us. It challenges all of us, whatever our place in society, our role in the Church, our economic ideology or political preferences. The pope says:

*If anyone feels offended by my words ... I speak them with affection and with the best of intentions, quite apart from any personal interest or political ideology. My words are not those of a foe or an opponent. I am interested only in helping those who are in thrall to an individualistic, indifferent and self-centered mentality to be freed from those unworthy chains and to attain a way of living and thinking which is more humane, noble and fruitful, and which will bring dignity to their presence on this earth (208).*

I suggest these themes challenge our nation in unique and paradoxical ways. We have the most powerful economy on earth and it is producing too few jobs and too little growth, not enough opportunity and too much inequality to permit all Americans to live in dignity. High levels of joblessness, poverty, dependency, and family dysfunction are undermining our promises of mobility and opportunity and our pledge of “liberty and justice for all.”

We need to build common purpose and common action to address the moral imperative of overcoming so much poverty in our own nation. This is an inescapable task for followers of Christ and members of His Church.

As Pope Francis said so clearly:

*An authentic faith which is never comfortable or completely personal always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better that we found it. ... If indeed “the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics”, the “Church cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.” [150] (183).*