

Woe to the Rich and Powerful – Unless . . .

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Several years ago, I attended a conference during which Sister Marie Augusta Neal, SNDdeN, shared an interesting story. Marie Augusta was a sociologist and educator, well-known for her commitment to the poor. She told a story about being invited to speak to an international gathering of bishops. She explained to the bishops that she was going to read a series of quotations and that she wanted the bishops to attempt to identify their sources. The bishops listened carefully. Guessing at the sources, the bishops speculated that the quotations were the words of Marx or Lenin or some other promoter of communism. Marie Augusta explained that, in fact, all the quotations were from papal encyclicals.

This story reoccurred to me as I reflected on *Populorum Progressio*, the 1967 encyclical of Paul VI. This document offers hope and encouragement to the victims of unjust economic systems and of war. However, the encyclical also proclaims strong warnings and mandates to the rich and the powerful.

According to World Development Indicators (WDI), the World Bank's statistical portrait of people and the state of their world, a sixth of the world's population -- primarily the people of North America, Europe, and Japan -- receive nearly 80 percent of world income. At the same time, the 57 percent of the world's population in the 63 poorest countries receive only 6 percent of world income, an average of less than \$2 per day. Worldwide, a staggering 1.2 billion people subsist on less than a dollar a day. (Global Policy Forum)

2005 marked the 35th anniversary of the non-implementation of the UN goal calling for rich countries to devote 0.7 % of their GNP as Official Development Assistance (ODA). This was not an anniversary to celebrate, as many countries were further behind their commitments than they were 35 years ago. Rich countries who fall short of the goal often argue that they face severe budget constraints and for this reason have difficulties in fulfilling their commitments. But, in 2004, military expenditures increased to more than 1 trillion US\$, while ODA flows remained only at about 78 billion US\$. In the light of these trends, the argument of "budget constraints" is unacceptable. The gap between military expenditures of the richest nations and their Official Development Assistance is a scandal. (Global Policy Forum)

As a citizen of a nation with grievous offenses related to the concentration of wealth, scandalous expenditures for military purposes and abusive displays of power, it seems fitting to seriously contemplate the warnings and mandates of *PP*. The "Woes" of the Beatitudes as expressed in the Gospel of Luke (LK 6:24-26) are an appropriate preface to a re-formatting of this encyclical:

“But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full.
Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry.
Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.
Woe to you when all speak well of you,
for their ancestors used to treat the false prophets in the same way.”

In the spirit of Luke’s Gospel and of *PP*:

Woe to you with abundance if you fail to hear the cry of hungry nations! (3)

Rich nations, understand these realities:

You who colonized created economic imbalance in those countries which you dominated. (7)

You rich countries continue to leave poor countries behind. (8)

You who are powerful often fail to share power. (9)

Rich nations, know that the Church holds these beliefs:

Changing the world situation requires the concerted effort of all countries. (13)

Development is not simply an economic matter: the whole person must be developed. (14)

Solidarity has benefits and involves obligations. (17)

The desire to possess more and more can enslave persons and nations.

Avarice

blocks authentic development. (19)

“Less than human conditions are these:

The material poverty of those who lack the bare necessities of life, and the moral poverty of those who are crushed under the weight of their

own

self-love;

oppressive political structures resulting from the abuse of ownership or the improper exercise of power, from the exploitation of the worker or unjust transactions.” (21)

Woe to you who think that right to private property is absolute! “Everyone knows that the Fathers of the Church laid down the duty of the rich toward the poor in no uncertain terms. As St. Ambrose put it: ‘You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich.’” (23) Richer nations must undertake the following actions:

Assure that all created goods are equally accessible to all people. Private property and free trade are subordinate to this principle. (22)

Woe to you who appropriate surplus goods for your private use when others lack

bare necessities. Your governments should facilitate solutions when private gain and the common good are in conflict. (23)

Woe to you who store your private riches in foreign bank accounts when your country is in need. (24)

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Beware of the tyranny -- the international imperialism -- of money. Beware of

evils of unbridled capitalism. (26)

Do not think that authentic development will automatically flow from individual initiative and the interplay of competition. Woe to you who increase the power and wealth of the rich while further entrenching the poor and oppressed. (33)

Beware of the reign of “technocracy.” Assure that economic systems and technologies benefit human beings. (34)

Beware of the exclusive pursuit of temporal prosperity. Surely your relationship with God will suffer. (41)

You poorer nations must take care to reject the false values of the richer nations. (41)

All nations must realize that authentic development of each person demands the cooperative effort of the entire human family. (43) “This duty concerns first and foremost the wealthier nations. Their obligations stem from the [natural and supernatural family relationships of humankind], and present a three-fold obligation:

- 1) mutual solidarity—the aid that the richer nations must give to developing nations;
- 2) social justice—the rectification of trade relations between strong and weak nations;
- 3) universal charity—the effort to build a more humane world community, where all can give and receive, and where the progress of some is not bought at the expense of others.

The matter is urgent, for on it depends the future of world civilization.” (44)

Blessed are you who promote mutual solidarity! All wealthy nations must help to create a world where the needy Lazarus and the rich man share the same table. “On the part of the rich, it calls for great generosity, willing sacrifice and diligent effort. You must examine your conscience, which sounds a new call in our present times. Are you prepared to support, at your own expense, projects and undertakings designed to help the needy? Are you prepared to pay higher taxes so that public authorities may expand their efforts in the work of development? Are you prepared to pay more for imported goods, so that the foreign producer may make a fairer profit? Are you prepared and able to leave home in order to help the emerging nations?” (47)

You “advanced” nations must help “less developed” countries. Inaugurate these solidarity actions:

Set aside some of your goods to alleviate the needs of the poor. (48)

Give the superfluous goods of wealthier nations to the poorer ones.

Beware of continuing your avarice! You arouse the wrath of God and the poor,

with consequences that no one can foresee.

Beware of sacrificing the pursuit of excellence to the acquisition of goods. (49)

Take money from your military budget to create a world fund to relieve world poverty. (51)

Stop wasteful expenditures, lavish displays of wealth and a debilitating arms race, before it is too late! (53)

Dialogue with those to whom you offer aid. Understand their real needs. Avoid debilitating repayment schemes. (54)

Woe to you who enter into trade agreements whereby needy nations grow more destitute, while the rich nations become even richer! Know that your efforts at solidarity will be useless if your trade relations with poorer countries are unfair. (56) "It is evident that the principle of free trade, by itself, is no longer adequate for regulating international agreements. It certainly can work when both parties are about equal economically But the case is quite different when the nations involved are far from equal. (58) Free trade can be called just only when it conforms to the demands of social justice." (59)

Blessed are you who promote universal charity! Remember your duty to give foreigners a hospitable welcome. Immigrant workers also deserve a warm welcome from you. (67 - 68) When you travel to another country to offer the gift of your expertise and learning, remember that you are a guest in another's homeland and that you, too, have something to learn. (72) "Extreme disparity between nations in economic, social and educational levels provokes jealousy and discord, often putting peace in jeopardy. . . .

For peace is not simply the absence of warfare, based on a precarious balance of power; it is fashioned by efforts directed day after day toward the establishment of the ordered universe willed by God" (76)

Blessed are you if you are already responding to the needs of poor nations, you are promoters and apostles of genuine progress and true development. (86)

If you have not yet joined with those working for the true development that is peace, we beseech you to respond with all your heart. (87)

Development is the new name for peace. Woe to you with abundance if you fail to hear the cry of hungry nations!