

Poverty and Consumerism

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Poverty has been with us for a very long time. However, it is difficult to know exactly when it began to be a critical problem for humanity. Obviously, its effects on the global community have continued to make the lives of so many people miserable until today despite the surprisingly rapid development in science and technology. Science brought man to the moon many years ago and since then, man has continued to embark on space exploration spending billions of dollars while so many people in the third-world countries have no place to live in and no food to eat. Innumerable children die of hunger everyday.

Experts of different persuasions have tried to sort out and analyze the different causes of poverty, which range from the social and political to the religious and moral. They have suggested various ways to solve the problem of poverty. Unfortunately up to this moment, the global community has not experienced the long expected relief.

What does it mean to be Poor?

1. From a *secular perspective*, poverty can be considered both as “income deprivation” and as “capability deprivation.”

- a) *Income deprivation*: Poverty for many people is usually associated with lack of income or even total income deprivation. Those who have not inherited properties or

money to put up their own business have only their work to rely on. Their labor is their prime commodity. They earn their livelihood through their work. For this reason, they suffer poverty in direct proportion to the disparity between their actual salary and their decent living wage. If there is no work available, they become beggars – utterly dependent on the generosity of others for their existence.

In this context, any structure that contributes to the disparity between the actual salary and the decent living wage of the workers is oppressive and obviously against the social teachings of the Church. Any move that results in unnecessary under-employment or even outright unemployment of those who are already employed so that the establishment can simply “save” more and “gain” more is equally burdensome to people who have to work in order to live. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2434) quoting from *Gaudium et Spes* (67, 2), “Remuneration for work should guarantee man the opportunity to provide a dignified livelihood for himself and his family on the material, social, cultural and spiritual level, taking into account the role and the productivity of each, the state of the business, and the common good. It adds that agreement between the parties is not sufficient to justify morally the amount to be received in wages.

There are corporate practices that are good and can be adopted even by catholic institutions without moral complications. A number of corporate strategies, however, violate the social teachings of the Church. One of these unchristian corporate strategies is indiscriminate contractualization of labor. Many big corporations in the Philippines are resorting to this. They hire contractual employees from employment agencies. No employer-employee relationship is contracted. The employees are told to leave after five months or so to avoid getting regularized. They are hired again after some time. This strategy gives rise to employees who work very hard to earn a living, but never get a security of tenure in their actual work setting, and do not enjoy full benefits. In this management system, the employer saves a lot, the agency owner earns a lot, but the poor employees who have only their

labor as their commodity are getting considerably less. In truth, this is an unholy alliance between the employer and the agency owner for mutual profit at the expense of the poor laborers. It is bad enough that this strategy is employed by so many profiteering corporations; it is worse when Catholic institutions would even dream of employing this oppressive scheme.

The Book of the Constitutions of the Friars Preachers states that... "superiors must provide for the security of employees according to social justice." (n. 615) The Eighth Provincial Chapter of the Dominican Province of the Philippines (cf n. 66) exhorted school administrators to ensure that any system of hiring workers through agencies (outsourcing of contractual workers) is done only when necessary and must duly conform with the demands of justice and compassion. It is impractical to regularize all our employees including the security guards. Obviously, some types of employment need to be outsourced. However, when we do hire contractual employees, we still have the moral obligations to see to it that we pay decent wages and that the agency owners give them their due at least according to labor laws. What is objectionable is the indiscriminate conversion of many regular items into contractual employment mainly because the institutions want to save and avoid labor problems.

- b) *Capacity deprivation*: This kind of poverty is associated with a failure of some capability to function. Those capabilities may be physical, emotional, mental, moral, or religious. The person lacks the opportunity to achieve some minimally acceptable levels of functioning of those capabilities. It is assumed that a person deserves a minimum level of human development. If by some natural handicaps or social barriers, he is not able to achieve it, then he is considered poor.

This notion of poverty is broader than the first one. In a way, poverty as income deprivation, whether partial or total, can be an element of capability deprivation and can be a cause of the other aspects of poverty viewed as capability deprivation.

Many people cannot attain a minimum level of human development because they do not earn enough or they do not earn at all.*

These two notions of poverty assume that every person is entitled to a minimum level of well-being regardless of how affluent others may be. Anyone who does not achieve such level is underdeveloped and therefore, poor.

In relation to the first, poverty line is drawn across the minimum economic well-being of the person. The gravity of poverty is measured in terms of how far below that line is the living situation of the person. For example, if a family of three in Manila can live decently on P15,000 a month, that would be the poverty line. The farther a family of three earns below that amount, the poorer it is considered. In relation to poverty as capability deprivation, poverty line is drawn across the minimum well-being of man. If man's healthy well-being is normally 70%, the farther an individual develops his capabilities below 70%, the poorer he is. It is to be noted that being materially wealthy does not necessarily eradicate capability deprivation. There are instances where people are financially wealthy and yet underdeveloped in terms of capabilities.

2. From a *Christian perspective*, at least two kinds of poverty come to mind, namely, "negative poverty" and "Evangelical poverty."

In the context of the holistic concept of salvation that Jesus offered to man, it is clear that anything that is oppressive and

* There is now wide agreement on the importance of including several different dimensions of deprivation in the concept of poverty. Hence, poverty denotes the condition of people who are unable to meet the minimum standards of human well-being, and involves a range of inadequacies in economic, social, and human security capabilities. Multi-dimensional poverty was assumed both in the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit for Social Development and in the International Goals adopted in 1996. In the same vein, the World Bank has defined poverty as unacceptable human deprivation encompassing not only low levels of income opportunities as well as education, health and nutrition, but also lack of empowerment and security. Poverty is considered as deprivation of essential capabilities like long and healthy life, knowledge, and economic resources and community participation.

dehumanizing cannot be considered as something that pleases God. St. Ireneus wrote that the glory of God is man fully alive. I feel that man is fully alive negatively when there is nothing that dehumanizes him and positively, when his effort and available opportunities enable him to attain a healthy degree of human development, that is to say, his human capabilities – physical, emotional, intellectual, moral, and religious – are able to function in a healthy way.

- a) *Negative poverty*: This is a situation where man, by reason of personal handicaps and/or lack of opportunities, is not able to attain a minimum level of well-being. Man is dehumanized. His income, if at all he has, is not sufficient to afford him a decent way of life. His human capabilities do not develop to a healthy degree and consequently, do not function in a healthy way.

From the Christian perspective, poverty as income deprivation and poverty as capability deprivation are both negative and bring different degrees of misery to human life. Jesus came to liberate man not only from the slavery of sin but also from anything that oppresses and dehumanizes him including sinful structures and miserable situations related to negative poverty.

- b) *Evangelical Poverty*: There is however a notion of poverty in Christianity that is positive. Recognizing that we really have nothing and that even our life is a gift from God, we depend totally on his provident love. Our hearts are radically anchored in God with child-like trust and confidence in His goodness. We are detached from material things without, however, claiming that we do not need them, at least to a degree that we are able to live a decent life and function in a healthy way. On the contrary, we accept them as God's gifts and we use them with gratitude in a way that will promote his kingdom on earth.

This kind of poverty cannot go well with greed. Although it avoids misery on personal and communal levels, it cannot enjoy without guilt excesses in all their forms. For in reality, so many people are living miserably because others live superfluously.

"Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of God," Jesus said. Without meaning to be exclusive, I think these words refer appropriately to people who "live simply" because they trust God completely. However, this aspect of evangelical poverty is incomplete. Somebody said aptly that we must live simply that others may simply live. Evangelical poverty is meant to allow others, or at least, not to hinder them, to live decently. In this context, evangelical poverty is inseparably *confidence in God's providence and effective concern for the welfare of others*. Sharing our resources with others is an integral part of poverty in the gospels. Take note that the rich man was not condemned because he was wealthy, but because he did not give anything to eat to Lazarus – the poor and needy man.

Consumerism

There is a pervading philosophy in our times, which mass media propagates subtly and, at times, even blatantly that *being is having*. It means that our value as human persons is gauged by what we have. Mass media teaches very effectively that human dignity is measured in terms of possessions both qualitatively and quantitatively. Consequently, the wealthy are more important than the poor.

This mentality blurs the distinction between needs and desires. Slowly, it convinces us that we really need what we want. We want the latest model of a cell phone. Consumeristic philosophy, through the canine loyalty and service of mass media, makes us believe that we really need it. And since we really need it, we feel some degree of self-dissatisfaction for not having it. So we work hard to have it. Once we have it, we are satisfied, but only temporarily. Why? Well, after some time a new and more sophisticated and expensive model will come out in the market. Again, our consumeristic atmosphere nourished by mass media will make us feel unhappy for not having the most sophisticated model. After all, we "need" it. And the same cycle of blurring the distinction between needs and wants, becoming dissatisfied until we buy the object of our desire which becomes more and more expensive, happens again and again until we find ourselves buying

more and more and spending more and more for things that we don't really need.

Obviously, this consumeristic mentality is a vitamin for greed. Greed fortified by consumerism motivates or, more accurately, drives people into having more and more to feel good about themselves. Meanwhile, because some people spend superfluously, and acquire so many things to live extravagantly, others live miserably.

I think that in many cases, graft and corruption in our society are generated by greed nourished by consumeristic mentality. The insatiable desire to have more and more usually encourages people to get money and other properties that belong to the government, to institutions or to other people without proper permission – a euphemism for *stealing*.

As you may have figured out by now, business is the main proponent of consumerism – business in the context of exaggerated capitalism which implies that profit is the most important value. Business works for profit even at the expense of human dignity. Since greater consumption of goods brings in more profits, business tries everything to make people buy more and more. And what more effective strategy is there to make us buy more and more than employing mass media to make us believe that we really need what business sells? This desire to acquire more and more quantitatively and qualitatively is more strongly provoked in the area of information and computer technology. If we get along with the hidden agenda of technology business, we will find ourselves wanting to computerize everything, even procedures that are better done manually. Regularly we will purchase new softwares, new computer units, not because we really need them but because if we don't we feel outdated and outdone.

Greed, exaggerated capitalism, and consumerism are best of friends. Consumeristic mentality convinces us that our dignity consists in what we possess. The more we have, the more we are. Since we want to be more and more, we want to acquire more and more. Consequently, we buy more and more. Meanwhile, business produces more and more, and gains more and more profits. In this environment, greed flourishes most abundantly.

If we are not careful, this consumeristic attitude can slowly but effectively infect us individually and communally even in religious life. And since we are educated, we can explain it away by so many creative and convincing arguments, even by reason of our apostolate. In the end, individually and communally, we tend to accumulate things more than we really need to live decently as individuals and communities, and to do our ministry effectively.

Conclusion

The Lord died that we might all be saved. He wants us to be liberated from everything that oppresses and dehumanizes including the miseries that negative poverty brings. He wants us to trust in the provident love of God, our Father. He desires that we be fully alive, to live decently, and function in a healthy way. While it is important that we have enough to live decently and to carry out our mission effectively, it is a Christian demand that “we live simply that others may simply live.” While it is true that societies should come up with political, economic, and social strategies to alleviate the miserable plight of the poor in our midst, such strategies in the long run will inevitably fail if the diabolical monsters of greed, exaggerated capitalism, and consumeristic mentality will not be arrested.

It may be an extremely bitter pill to swallow and can upset the whole social structure including religious life. However, in the end, the truth is “blessed are the poor for they not only trust in God’s providence but they also live simply that others may simply live.” When people become poor in this way, then all shall have their fill and there will be twelve baskets of leftovers still. □