

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEACONS

SECOND WORLD DAY OF THE POOR

HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

*33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
18 November 2018*

This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him

1. “This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him” (*Ps 34:6*). The words of the Psalmist become our own whenever we are called to encounter the different conditions of suffering and marginalization experienced by so many of our brothers and sisters whom we are accustomed to label generically as “the poor”. The Psalmist is not alien to suffering; quite the contrary. He has a direct experience of poverty and yet transforms it into a song of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. Psalm 34 allows us today, surrounded as we are by many different forms of poverty, to know those who are truly poor. It enables us to open our eyes to them, to hear their cry and to recognize their needs.

We are told, in the first place, that the Lord listens to the poor who cry out to him; he is good to those who seek refuge in him, whose hearts are broken by sadness, loneliness and exclusion. The Lord listens to those who, trampled in their dignity, still find the strength to look up to him for light and comfort. He listens to those persecuted in the name of a false justice, oppressed by policies unworthy of the name, and terrified by violence, yet know that God is their Saviour. What emerges from this prayer is above all the sense of abandonment and trust in a Father who can hear and understand. Along these same lines, we can better appreciate the meaning of Jesus’ words, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (*Mt 5:3*).

This experience, unique and in many ways undeserved and inexpressible, makes us want to share it with others, especially those who, like the Psalmist, are poor, rejected and marginalized. No one should feel excluded from the Father’s love, especially in a world that often presents wealth as the highest goal and encourages self-centredness.

2. Psalm 34 uses three verbs to describe the poor man in his relationship with God. First of all, “to cry”. Poverty cannot be summed up in a word; it becomes a cry that rises to heaven and reaches God. What does the cry of the poor express, if not their suffering and their solitude, their disappointment and their hope? We can ask ourselves how their plea, which rises to the presence of God, can fail to reach our own ears, or leave us cold and indifferent. On this *World Day of the Poor*, we are called to make a serious examination of conscience, to see if we are truly capable of hearing the cry of the poor.

To hear their voice, what we need is the silence of people who are prepared to listen. If we speak too much ourselves, we will be unable to hear them. At times I fear that many initiatives, meritorious and necessary in themselves, are meant more to satisfy those who undertake them than to respond to the real cry of the poor. When this is the case, the cry of the poor resounds, but our reaction is inconsistent and we become unable to empathize with their condition. We are so trapped in a culture that induces us to look in the mirror and pamper ourselves, that we think that an altruistic gesture is enough, without the need to get directly involved.

3. The second verb is “to answer”. The Psalmist tells us that the Lord does not only listen to the cry of the poor, but responds. His answer, as seen in the entire history of salvation, is to share lovingly in the lot of the poor. So it was when Abram spoke to God of his desire for offspring, despite the fact that he and his wife Sarah were old in years and had no children (cf. *Gen 15:1-6*). So too when Moses, in front of a bush that burned without being consumed, received the

revelation of God's name and the mission to free his people from Egypt (*Ex* 3:1-15). This was also the case during Israel's wandering in the desert, in the grip of hunger and thirst (cf. *Ex* 16:1-6; 17:1-7), and its falling into the worst kind of poverty, namely, infidelity to the covenant and idolatry (cf. *Ex* 32:1-14).

God's answer to the poor is always a saving act that heals wounds of body and soul, restores justice and helps to live life anew in dignity. God's answer is also a summons to those who believe in him to do likewise, within the limits of what is humanly possible. The World Day of the Poor wishes to be a small answer that the Church throughout the world gives to the poor of every kind and in every land, lest they think that their cry has gone unheard. It may well be like a drop of water in the desert of poverty, yet it can serve as a sign of sharing with those in need, and enable them to sense the active presence of a brother or a sister. The poor do not need intermediaries, but the personal involvement of all those who hear their cry. The concern of believers in their regard cannot be limited to a kind of assistance – as useful and as providential as this may be in the beginning – but requires a “loving attentiveness” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 199) that honours the person as such and seeks out his or her best interests.

4. The third verb is “to free”. In the Bible, the poor live in the certainty that God intervenes on their behalf to restore their dignity. Poverty is not something that anyone desires, but is caused by selfishness, pride, greed and injustice. These are evils as old as the human race itself, but also sins in which the innocent are caught up, with tragic effects at the level of social life. God's act of liberation is a saving act for those who lift up to him their sorrow and distress. The bondage of poverty is shattered by the power of God's intervention. Many of the Psalms recount and celebrate this history of salvation mirrored in the personal life of the poor: “For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; and he has not hid his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him” (*P*s 22:24). The ability to see God's face is a sign of his friendship, his closeness and his salvation. “You have seen my affliction, you have taken heed of my adversities... you have set my feet in a broad place” (*P*s 31:7-8). To offer the poor a “broad space” is to set them free from the “snare of the fowler” (*P*s 91:3); it is to free them from the trap hidden on their path, so that they can move forward with serenity on the path of life. God's salvation is a hand held out to the poor, a hand that welcomes, protects and enables them to experience the friendship they need. From this concrete and tangible proximity, a genuine path of liberation emerges. “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. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 187).

5. I find it moving to know that many poor people identify with the blind beggar Bartimaeus mentioned by the evangelist Mark (cf. 10:46-52). Bartimaeus “was sitting by the roadside to beg” (v. 46); having heard that Jesus was passing by, “he began to cry out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me’” (v. 47). “Many rebuked him, telling him to be silent; but he cried out all the more” (v. 48). The Son of God heard his plea and said: “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “Master, let me receive my sight” (v. 51). This Gospel story makes visible what the Psalm proclaims as a promise. Bartimaeus is a poor person who finds himself lacking things as essential as sight and the ability to work for a living. How many people today feel in the same situation! Lack of basic means of subsistence, marginalization due to a reduced capacity for work, various forms of social enslavement, despite all our human progress... How many poor people today are like Bartimaeus, sitting on the roadside and looking for meaning in their lives! How many of them wonder why they have fallen so far and how they can escape! They are waiting for someone to come up to them and say: “Take heart; rise, he is calling you” (v. 49).

Sadly, the exact opposite often happens, and the poor hear voices scolding them, telling them to be quiet and to put up with their lot. These voices are harsh, often due to fear of the poor, who are considered not only destitute but also a source of insecurity and unrest, an unwelcome

distraction from life as usual and needing to be rejected and kept afar. We tend to create a distance between them and us, without realizing that in this way we are distancing ourselves from the Lord Jesus, who does not reject the poor, but calls them to himself and comforts them. The words of the Prophet Isaiah telling believers how to conduct themselves are most apt in this case. They are “to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke... to share bread with the hungry and bring the homeless and poor into the house... to cover the naked” (58:6-7). Such deeds allow sin to be forgiven (cf. *1 Pet* 4:8) and justice to take its course. They ensure that when we cry to the Lord, he will answer and say: “Here I am!” (cf. *Is* 58:9).

6. The poor are the first to recognize God’s presence and to testify to his closeness in their lives. God remains faithful to his promise; and even in the darkness of the night, he does not withhold the warmth of his love and consolation. However, for the poor to overcome their oppressive situation, they need to sense the presence of brothers and sisters who are concerned for them and, by opening the doors of their hearts and lives, make them feel like friends and family. Only in this way can the poor discover “the saving power at work in their lives” and “put them at the centre of the Church’s pilgrim way” (*Evangeli Gaudium*, 198).

On this *World Day*, we are asked to fulfil the words of the Psalm: “The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied” (*Ps* 22:26). We know that in the Temple of Jerusalem, after the rites of sacrifice, a banquet was held. It was this experience that, in many dioceses last year, enriched the celebration of the *first World Day of the Poor*. Many people encountered the warmth of a home, the joy of a festive meal and the solidarity of those who wished to sit together at table in simplicity and fraternity. I would like this year’s, and all future *World Days*, to be celebrated in a spirit of joy at the rediscovery of our capacity for togetherness. Praying together as a community and sharing a meal on Sunday is an experience that brings us back to the earliest Christian community, described by the evangelist Luke in all its primitive simplicity: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need” (*Acts* 2:42.44-45).

7. Countless initiatives are undertaken every day by the Christian community in order to offer closeness and a helping hand in the face of the many forms of poverty all around us. Often too, our cooperation with other initiatives inspired not by faith but by human solidarity, make it possible for us to provide help that otherwise we would have been unable to offer. The realization that in the face of so much poverty our capacity for action is limited, weak and insufficient, leads us to reach out to others so that, through mutual cooperation, we can attain our goals all the more effectively. We Christians are inspired by faith and by the imperative of charity, but we can also acknowledge other forms of assistance and solidarity that aim in part for the same goals, provided that we do not downplay our specific role, which is to lead everyone to God and to holiness. Dialogue between different experiences, and humility in offering our cooperation without seeking the limelight, is a fitting and completely evangelical response that we can give.

In the service of the poor, there is no room for competition. Rather, we should humbly recognize that the Spirit is the source of our actions that reveal God’s closeness and his answer to our prayers. When we find ways of drawing near to the poor, we know that the primacy belongs to God, who opens our eyes and hearts to conversion. The poor do not need self-promoters, but a love that knows how to remain hidden and not think about all the good it has been able to do. At the centre must always be the Lord and the poor. Anyone desirous of serving is an instrument in God’s hands, a means of manifesting his saving presence. Saint Paul recalled this when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth who competed for the more prestigious charisms: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (*1 Cor* 12:21). Paul makes an important point when he notes that the apparently weaker parts of the body are in fact the most necessary (cf. v. 22),

and that those “we think less honourable we invest with the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require” (vv. 23-24). Paul offers the community a basic teaching about charisms, but also about the attitude it should have, in the light of the Gospel, towards its weaker and needier members. Far be it from Christ’s disciples to nurture feelings of disdain or pity towards the poor. Instead, we are called to honour the poor and to give them precedence, out of the conviction that they are a true presence of Jesus in our midst. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40).

8. Here we can see how far our way of life must be from that of the world, which praises, pursues and imitates the rich and powerful, while neglecting the poor and deeming them useless and shameful. The words of the Apostle Paul invite us to a fully evangelical solidarity with the weaker and less gifted members of the body of Christ: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together” (1 Cor 12:26). In his Letter to the Romans, Paul also tells us: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly” (12:15-16). This is the vocation of each of Christ’s followers; the ideal for which we must constantly strive is ever greater conformity to the “mind of Jesus Christ” (Phil 2:5).

9. Faith naturally inspires a message of hope. Often it is precisely the poor who can break through our indifference, born of a worldly and narrow view of life. The cry of the poor is also a cry of hope that reveals the certainty of future liberation. This hope is grounded in the love of God, who does not abandon those who put their trust in him (cf. Rom 8:31-39). As Saint Teresa of Avila writes in *The Way of Perfection*: “Poverty comprises many virtues. It is a vast domain. I tell you, whoever despises all earthly goods is master of them all” (2:5). It is in the measure in which we are able to discern authentic good that we become rich before God and wise in our own eyes and in those of others. It is truly so. To the extent that we come to understand the true meaning of riches, we grow in humanity and become capable of sharing.

10. I invite my brother bishops, priests, and especially deacons, who have received the laying on of hands for the service of the poor (cf. Acts 6:1-7), as well as religious and all those lay faithful – men and women – who in parishes, associations and ecclesial movements make tangible the Church’s response to the cry of the poor, to experience this *World Day* as a privileged moment of new evangelization. The poor evangelize us and help us each day to discover the beauty of the Gospel. Let us not squander this grace-filled opportunity. On this day, may all of us feel that we are in debt to the poor, because, in hands outstretched to one another, a salvific encounter can take place to strengthen our faith, inspire our charity and enable our hope to advance securely on our path towards the Lord who is to come.

From the Vatican, 13 June 2018

Memorial of Saint Anthony of Padua

Francis

Pope Francis specifically mentions the ministry of deacons “who have received the laying on of hands for the service of the poor” in his message for the Second World Day of the Poor which will be observed on 18 November.

PHOTO’S if available