

HOW SHOULD WE THINK ABOUT *the* POOR?

A Bishop Reflects

By Kenneth E. Untener

On March 26, 1991, Bishop Kenneth E. Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, issued a "decree" that from that day forward, until July 1, 1991, all meetings held under Church auspices, at the parish or diocesan level, no matter what their purpose, must begin with the agenda item: How shall what we are doing here affect or involve the poor? The following are his reflections as he looks back on the decree.

The decree on the poor was in effect for 97 days. Never in my life had I talked about and listened to so much about the poor. On some days I had four or five meetings, and each began with: the poor.

I learned a lot, not only about the poor, but also about us, and how we think about (or don't think about) the poor. Believe me, I am no expert on the poor. But I learned eight things in particular during those 97 days.

1) We tend to forget the "poor" poor.

A typical scenario: The chairperson begins the meeting by saying something like, "Well, the bishop has asked that we begin each meeting with a discussion about how this affects or involves the poor. So we're going to spend a few minutes doing that. I'll throw it open for anyone who would like to say something."

Silence.

Then someone says, "Well, people can be poor in a lot of different ways. There are some people, for example, who don't have friends, and they are poor..."

I interrupt. "I agree with you. But this decree has to do with the 'poor' poor. They are the ones who get left out, because they're usually not part of what we did yesterday or today. The other kinds of poor people are part of our lives, and we need to be concerned about them. But I want us to connect with the 'poor' poor. If we deal with them, all the rest will follow. The 'poor' poor are the ones who rarely if ever are first on an agenda. So let's talk about them."

Mental note: Always start with the "poor" poor.

2) The poor are often "invisible."

We rarely sat too long through those awkward group pauses that drive everybody nuts. Thankfully, someone

was always present who could speak firsthand about an experience with a poor person. Once they did, others began to think of things to say about the poor.

The real-life poor do not come as easily to mind as, say, the sick. After the ice was broken, a person might say, "Well, now that you mention it, I did hear about such-and-such family, and how they haven't been around much lately, and that they've been having a hard time of it." Then somebody else would tell of someone they knew or heard about, and we would all be somewhat surprised. We didn't expect poor people to be in our neck of the woods.

Poor people are everywhere, and once we tune in to them, a whole new world opens up. Tuning in to the poor, however, is no small trick.

The poor around us (as opposed to the ghetto, or some distant country) are often invisible. They aren't in our same "networks."

- They aren't at the same gatherings.
- They don't belong to councils or committees.
- They don't always go to church (and if they do, they try hard not to look poor).
- They don't bump into us at the mall or the supermarket.

Take tuition assistance at schools. We offer help for those who cannot pay full tuition—or cannot pay any tuition. But the poor often do not come forward. Why? It is announced in the parish bulletin. There are even fliers about it.

But the poor don't get the parish bulletin. They don't see or respond to the fliers. If you want the poor to take advantage of help to the poor, you must reach out to find them.

To find the poor, you must go out of your way. You must look with different eyes, for the poor feel that we do not want them in the normal parts of our lives. So they disguise themselves or absent themselves.

Mental note: It takes initiative and creativity to reach the poor.

3) The biggest problem is the "undeserving poor."

Place a child before us with a hungry face and ragged clothes and we jump at the chance to help.

Children, you see, haven't done anything to make themselves undeserving. They haven't made the bad choices that landed them in this mess. They can't be blamed for failing to do what they can to help themselves, because children can't help themselves anyway. They really can't help it if they are poor.

Poor children don't make it hard to help the poor. Poor adults who have had bad luck don't make it hard to help the poor.

The "undeserving poor" are the ones who make it hard to help the poor. They are the ones who have made the bad choices, or failed to make any choice at all. They are the ones who have been helped before—and it didn't help. They are the ones who seem to expect us to bail them out,

Edited by
Jack Wintz, O.E.M.
Designed by
Julie Lonneman

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JEROME FRIAR

and who hardly say “thank you” when we do. They are the ones who seem to take advantage of the system, or other people.

Help them anyway. If you start to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor, you are finished—at least as far as the gospel is concerned. Who is really to decide if they are undeserving?

I do not mean that we shouldn't try to help them help themselves. As the saying goes, “Give me a fish and you feed me for a day. Teach me to fish and you feed me for life.”

We should always try to help the poor help themselves. But be careful about metering out your help too carefully. Jesus was never overly careful about metering out his mercy. He was criticized for his largess, his “reckless” mercy toward undeserving sinners. The memory of Jesus helps us deal with the “undeserving poor.”

The “undeserving poor” remind us that something deeper needs to change—whatever it is that makes them feel so hopeless and helpless. We need to address that something deeper. In the meantime, help them. Do not be judgmental or overly careful.

Mental note: If you're going to err, err on the side of largess.

4) If you try to help the poor, you will sometimes get taken.

Every parish minister can tell stories of people who have come with a sad tale. You check it out very carefully, give them money—and later find out that they did the same thing at three or four neighboring parishes.

Helping the poor has its risks. You will sometimes get taken. (The same is true of forgiveness. If you try to forgive 70 times seven, you will sometimes get stepped on.) It's a darn shame. Be generous anyway. Don't be foolish, but don't overdo the safety rules.

It's like playing racquetball. You're going to get hit with the ball now and then, and it hurts. You can learn how to step out of the way of certain shots—but you are still going to get hit sometimes. The only way to avoid it is to stand in the corner and never get into the game.

If you are going to be generous to the poor, you are sometimes going to get taken. The only alternative is to “stand in a corner” and never really get into helping the poor.

Mental note: Learn to write off your losses.

5) Helping the poor is not always a pleasant experience.

It's no picnic helping the poor. There is often no feeling of fulfillment. It's work—like a lot of virtue is work—like taking care of an elderly parent is work.

The poor, as fate would have it, are just like us. They are mixtures of virtues and vices. Like us, they are not always grateful. Like us, they don't always trust. Like us, they don't always respond. Like us, they are both generous

and greedy. Like us, they are sometimes wonderful and sometimes awful. Whatever happened to the noble poor? Some are out there, but mostly they are in Charles Dickens.

The “poor” poor are not always so noble, and they are the hardest to deal with—which is probably why we don't.

Mental note: When you help the poor, you always receive more than you give—but it may not seem that way at the time.

Pope John Paul II on the Poor

Because of our “love of preference for the poor,” we “cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future. It is impossible not to take account of the existence of these realities. To ignore them would mean becoming like the ‘rich man’ who pretended not to know the beggar Lazarus lying at his gate (Luke 16:19-31).”

“Unfortunately, instead of becoming fewer the poor are becoming more numerous, not only in less developed countries but—and this seems no less scandalous—in the more developed ones too. It is necessary to state once more the characteristic principle of Christian social doctrine: The goods of this world are originally meant for all. The right to private property is valid and necessary, but it does not nullify the value of this principle.”

Encyclical on Social Concerns (1988)



“The Church's love for the poor, which is essential for her and part of her constant tradition, impels her to give attention to a world in which poverty is threatening to assume massive proportions in spite of technological and economic progress. In the countries of the West, different forms of poverty are being experienced by groups which live on the margins of society, by the elderly and the sick, by the victims of consumerism, and even more immediately by so many refugees and migrants.”

“Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice.”

Centesimus Annus (1991)

6) Food baskets at Thanksgiving, toys at Christmas are good as far as they go—but they don't go very far.

People easily talk about direct help to the poor on special occasions—clothes, food, money. Those fine things shouldn't be taken lightly. But that is the easy part. The hard part is trying to do something about the poor's state in life.

The discussion always slowed when we tried to focus on this. Where do you begin? What do you do?

It's hard when you deal with the causes. How can we give them basic skills to manage their lives? Can we make loans available to them through our own credit unions—at considerable risk? Shouldn't the state make better provision for dependent children? What about health insurance? How do we help them find work? How do we help them find work that pays a living wage? Why are single parents,

usually women, abandoned so easily by a spouse?

Mental note: Direct assistance is good. Tackling the causes is better.

7) Sometimes the poor are overwhelmed into inaction.

People who deal with the poor can tell a hundred stories about how they waste money and opportunities. You bring food to their home—and notice a large-screen TV. You give them money—and they buy groceries at the nearby convenience store (where prices are much higher). You have their car fixed—and find out it is a Buick Skylark. Whenever you visit, they are watching TV.

Why? Let's try to put ourselves in their shoes.

You are thinking about cleaning the garage (or the basement, or your desk). Actually, you have been thinking about it for weeks. Well, to tell the truth, you have been

thinking about it since last winter when you were trying to find room in the garage for the snow blower.

It is a hopeless mess, but today is the day you are going to tackle it. Getting started is the problem, because with a mess like that, there is no logical place to begin.

So you decide to have a beer first, and watch a couple innings of the ball game. Hold that thought. Right there, in that moment, you are in their shoes. You may spend only half an hour watching the game, and you will eventually get to your task—but in those 30 minutes of doing nothing, you know exactly how they feel all day every day. At least with cleaning the garage, there is an end in sight. But for the poor, the task seems to have no beginning and no ending. They can't get enough together even to get started—a down payment, transportation, protection from an abusive husband, an education.

Their life is like that all the time. It is too big a mess even to know where to begin. So they try to forget it by enjoying some "luxuries," having a beer, watching TV, etc.

Mental note: Don't judge their "laziness" too quickly.

8) The poor also help the poor.

People who work with the poor can tell a hundred stories about the "generous poor." A hundred stories. A family takes in a neighbor's child without a second thought, because the child needs to be taken in somewhere. A person who has next to nothing gives money to someone who has nothing at all, simply saying, "Well, they need it more than I do." A poor family in a small house takes in another family because they had their heat turned off in the dead of winter. Food is shared even though there isn't enough to begin with.

There are countless true stories about the "generous poor." The widow's mite wasn't a parable that Jesus made up. It was a true story that unfolded before his eyes. And it still happens every day in poor communities.

Mental note: God loves a cheerful giver, which is one of the reasons why God loves the poor.

Putting our insights into action

When the 97 days had ended, I asked myself, "Is it all over? Can we now get back to normal?"

Yes. We can get back to normal by realizing that "normal" means talking about the poor at normal meetings, and finding ways to translate our words into actions. "Normal" means focusing on the poor as much as Jesus did.

I hope that the decree simply primed the pump. I hope we have only just begun, for there is more to learn, more to do.

The decree was successful, but it was like the success of someone who joined Weight Watchers and reached their goal by losing 37 pounds. They are congratulated, cheered by all at the meeting and given a pin. But the true measure of success is whether they will change their eating habits in the weeks and months and years ahead. Some do, and some don't.

The Church of Saginaw achieved its goal of talking about the poor at all meetings for 97 days. Now we must see if we have changed our meeting habits, and if we will think and act differently. The true measure of success lies in the months and years ahead.

May God, who has begun this good work in us, sustain us along the way as we strive mightily to live what we have learned. ■

Bishop Kenneth E. Untener, a native of Detroit, was ordained to the priesthood by Cardinal John Dearden in 1963. After parish and chancery work, he obtained a doctorate in theology from the Gregorian University in Rome and then returned to Detroit. In 1977 he was appointed rector of St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Michigan. In 1980 he became bishop of the Diocese of Saginaw. A writer and a popular lecturer, Bishop Untener regularly conducts retreats for priests and gives talks around the country.

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