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and  
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“You Always  
Have the Poor  
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# “You Always Have the Poor with You”

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One evening, the evangelist Mark recounts, Jesus was eating in the house of Simon the leper when a woman came to the table and poured a flask of “very costly” nard over his head, anointing him with it. Some men sitting with him around the table, including Judas, murmured indignantly to one another “‘This ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor’” (Mark 14:5). It appears to us a legitimate question, but Jesus did not think so; he reprimanded them for their thinking. “She has done a beautiful thing to me,” he said. “For you always have the poor with you and, whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me” (14:7). The woman, he insinuated, had anointed him for his coming death. It is not that pre-death anointing, however, we wish to focus on here. We wish to focus on Jesus’ statement that we will always have the poor with us, and ask ourselves and our readers what are we to do about that?

## POVERTY

Poverty is not a new reality in history and neither is the scandalous inequality between rich and poor. We would expect it, therefore, to feature in the ancient scriptural sources of Catholic ethics, and so it does. To understand the meanings of the ideas expressed in those scriptures, we must first understand the differences between the culture of their times and the culture of our times today. Western culture today, including Irish culture, tends to be individualistic, holding to the impossible value that every individual should be able to stand unaided on his/her own two feet. The Mediterranean culture in which the scriptures were written was and is quite

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different. It values, not individualism but communal belonging to some family, some tribe, some society and the members of a family, a tribe, or a society are honor-bound to help the other members, including economically. Two principles, one anthropological, the other theological, underlie everything that is said about poverty and wealth in both Old and New Testaments. The anthropological principle is a principle of belonging to a tribe or society, most fundamentally to a nuclear family in which parents and their children are bound tightly together as mother, father, brothers and sisters. The theological principle is that everything in the world that the God of Israel created belongs to God, and men and women are only stewards of what they own.

In ancient Israel that fundamental family belonging was extended to embrace as brothers and sisters all members of Israelite society, all those who were descended from the slaves God liberated from Egypt under Moses and settled in the land where “milk and honey flow” (Deut 26:9). The followers of Jesus, Israelites remember, extended family kinship to embrace all those who believed in Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one of God, and embraced each other as brothers and sisters (Matt 25:40; Luke 6:41-42; 1 Cor 8:13). This pattern is very much in play in everything the scriptures of both Old and New Testaments say about poverty and the obligation of Jews and Catholics to care for the poor and vulnerable. The God in whom both Jews and Catholics believe is a God who acts in human history, who liberated Israel from Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead, validating his life and everything he said about how to be “rich toward God” (Luke 12:21). Jews and Catholics are both called to respond to God’s saving actions in history with ethical actions in their own history, specified by the observance of God’s commandments. When we ask what those actions are to be, both the Jewish and Catholic scriptures leave us in no doubt.

The Old Testament reveals that the power of the God who led Israel from slavery in Egypt continues in defense of contemporary “slaves,” the defenseless and vulnerable poor. God is “father of the fatherless and protector of widows ... God gives the desolate a home to dwell in” (Ps 68:5-6). To know God is not, as it is in ancient Greece and modern Ireland, to know *that* God is and *what* God is; it is to act like God. In Gustavo Gutierrez’ pregnant judgment, “to know God as liberator is to liberate, is to do justice.”<sup>1</sup> To know God as Father of the poor is to act on behalf of the poor, always remembering how God intervened in Egypt on behalf of Israelite slaves. That memory and the actions in history that it demands return again and again. The book of Deuteronomy instructs:

1 Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (New York: Orbis, 1983), p.8.

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You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore, I command you to do this. When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, the widow; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the works of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, the widow (Deut 24:18-22).

What Jewish Jesus in the New Testament would later advance as a reciprocal relationship between God and “the least of these my brothers” (Matt 25:40) has always been embedded in his Jewish tradition as a reciprocal relationship between God and the poor and vulnerable. The prophets consistently link these two and proclaim that to truly know and love God demands action on behalf of the poor, both individually and societally, and against every injustice perpetrated against them. Jeremiah, for instance, proclaims this prophetic message. “Thus, says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel. Amend your ways and your doings ... For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless, the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place ... then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever” (7:2-7). The reciprocation could not be made clearer: knowledge and love of God is proved in practice by action on behalf of justice for the poor and vulnerable, those whom Pope Francis calls the “excluded.” The Book of Proverbs offers an axiomatic statement about this preferential option for the poor: “He who mocks the poor insults his Creator” (Prov 17:5).

Isaiah’s messianic formulation of the intimate connection between God and justice for the poor and excluded leads us into the New Testament, for in Luke’s gospel Jesus chooses it for commentary in his home synagogue of Nazareth. “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives...to comfort all who mourn ... for I the Lord love justice” (Is. 61:1-8). This predilection for the poor and vulnerable, Isaiah prophetically proclaims, will be characteristic of the coming Messiah, the righteous one of Israel. That the Messiah has come in Jesus is proclaimed in Luke’s commentary on the text: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

The confession of the followers of Jesus was and is that he is the promised Messiah, in Greek the Christ (Mark 1:1; Matt 1:1),

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the one anointed by God “to bring good tidings to the afflicted.” The gospels announce that he is the Messiah in the passage that narrates his baptism by John the Baptizer, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him, and his designation as “beloved son” (Mark 1:9-11; Matt 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22). Immediately following his baptism, he proclaims the advent of the kingdom or the reign of God (Mark 1:15), a reign of justice in favor of the poor and the excluded. Jesus’ proclamation of this reign, not only in words but more importantly in actions, is what led him, first, to his death on the cross, and then to his being raised by God (1 Cor 15:4; Rom 6:4 and 8:4; Col 2:12; Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15). His disciples’ “eyes were opened” (Luke 24:31) by his being raised from the dead by God (Acts 2:24, 32; Rom 6:04; 1Cor 15:15). In his resurrection God verified both that Jesus’ words and actions were right with God and that he was, indeed, the “holy and righteous one” (Acts 2:14).

The eyes of Jesus’ followers were so well and truly opened by his resurrection that, ultimately, they confessed not only that he was the Christ, the just one sent by God, but also that he was God in human form dwelling among us (John 1:14). The universal biblical reciprocation between God and the poor reaches an unsurpassable personification and high point in Jesus who, in Gutierrez’ telling phrase, is “God become poor.”<sup>2</sup> It is in his life on behalf of his poor and excluded sisters and brothers that Jesus is finally recognized as God’s beloved Son. It is in their lives on behalf of his poor and excluded sisters and brothers that Catholics and all Christians, too, will be recognized as God’s beloved daughters and sons, for Jesus “taught the sons of God to treat one another as brothers” and sisters (*Gaudium et Spes* 32; henceforth *GS*). In twenty-first century Ireland there is proof every day of the need for such ethical action; our streets are full of the homeless needing to be housed, the hungry needing to be fed, the poor of every colour needing some help or other.

Like every good Jew of his time Jesus upheld the reciprocal relationship between God and the poor and insisted that to know and love God is to act on behalf of the poor and excluded, and to act against every injustice perpetrated against them. Matthew makes this position clearest in his Sermon on the Mount: “Not everyone who *says* to me ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven but the one who *does* the will of my Father who is in heaven” (7:21). That will is to care for the poor and excluded. The disciples who responded to Jesus’ invitation to “follow me” (Mark 1:17; Matt 4:18), and that includes every person today who claims to be a Catholic, were and are bound to uphold the same reciprocal relationship and to ensure that it is lived not only in words but

2 Ibid., p. 8.

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also in actions. Matthew makes this clearest in his powerful final judgment scene.

*Then he will say to those at his left hand "depart from me you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not minister to you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me" (Matt 25: 41-45).*

Matthew's final comment is a chilling condemnation for those who, both then and now, do not recognize the reciprocation between God and the poor and excluded, and a blessing for those who do: the former "will go into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt 25:46). The righteousness that God and God's Christ demand of those who believe in them is not easy for, "although he was made by God in a state of holiness, from the very dawn of history man abused his liberty at the urging of personified evil ... As a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness" (GS 13). That describes the great mystery of sin against which every human being struggles. Catholics, however, share the promise of their Christ who gives them "power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:9-12).

James, as radically Jewish as Jesus, has his own formulation of the reciprocation between God and the poor. "What does it profit," he asks, "if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:14-17). *Gaudium et Spes* also has its own formulation of this sentiment: "Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him you have killed him" (GS 13). Martin Luther sparked a false debate between Lutherans and Catholics about the respective values of faith and good works, as if Lutherans valued *only* faith and Catholics valued *only* good works. That debate has now been formally laid to rest by the agreement between Lutherans and Catholics articulated in their *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine*

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of *Justification*. The theological reality is that Luther and the theologians who follow him never doubted that faith is proved in actions, in other words that faith must work; and the Catholic Church never doubted that faith concretized in works of charity is necessary for salvation.

There is another Catholic behaviour highlighted throughout the New Testament, intimately related to the reciprocation between God, God's Christ, and God's poor. That behaviour is one of service to others, especially to the poor and excluded, which Jesus exemplifies in his life and unceasingly strives to inculcate in his disciples. The gospel Christ articulates the perspective unequivocally: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28). Service of others is Christ's way of relating to others; service of others is what he strives to inculcate in his disciples of every generation. He instructs them that “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all” (Mark: 10:42-44; Matt 20:25-7). *Gaudium et Spes*' interpretation of that perspective is that “The fundamental purpose of productivity must not be the mere multiplication of products. It must not be profit or domination. Rather it must be the *service* of man [and woman] and, indeed, of the whole person ... and every group of people of whatever race and from whatever part of the world” (GS 64). How far Catholics are from being truly Catholic today is summed up in another conciliar statement. “If the demands of justice and equity are to be satisfied, vigorous efforts must be made ... to remove as quickly as possible the immense inequalities which now exist” (GS 66). Those immense inequalities are starkly highlighted by the fact that “while an enormous mass of people still lack the absolute necessities of life, some, even in less advanced countries, live sumptuously or squander wealth. Luxury and misery rub shoulders” (GS 63). Present-day Catholics must shoulder a share of blame for this situation. There are even some, comfortably middle class, who chastise Pope Francis for his support of the poor and who invite him to return to the business of the gospel. They must never have read the clear gospel teaching we have just exposed or else they have chosen to ignore it.

### EUCCHARISTIC COMMUNION

The evangelist John's last-supper narrative highlights Jesus' emphasis on service. The narrative describes Jesus washing his disciples' feet, a prophetic action that reveals Jesus' will to be remembered as servant and challenges those who remember him at the supper to be and do the same. Lest this point be missed, as it has been regularly missed in Catholic history, John's Jesus underlines

the challenge in his final testament. "I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you" (13:15). Jesus, he of righteousness and ethical action, who lived a life of neighbor-love (Lev 19:18; Mark 12:31) in service to others, challenged his disciples, then and now, to do the same. The memory of Jesus that Catholics celebrate in their eucharist recalls them to the service and care of their brothers and sisters, God's poor and excluded.

Ministry to the poor is already evident in the Jerusalem church that devoted itself to "the apostles' teaching and communion" (Acts 2:42) and "had everything in common" (Acts 4:32). Paul makes clear that communion is not just between the members of a local community but reaches out to embrace all the churches, telling us that the churches in Macedonia and Achaia "have been pleased to make communion" for the church at Jerusalem (Rom 15:26; see 2 Cor 8:4) and praising "the generosity of your communion" (2 Cor 9:13). Such communion among disciples sharing the eucharistic meal, Paul argues, is a necessary precondition for authentically celebrating the Lord's Supper. When there is no such communion between believers, as there is not at Corinth and perhaps Dublin, neither is there any holy communion with the Christ whom they *say* they confess as Lord. In such circumstance, Paul judges, "it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat" (1 Cor 11:20). That judgment ought not to come as a surprise given the final Judge's declaration that "as you did it not to one of the least of these you did it not to me" (Matt 25:45). When there is no servant-communion in the Church, embracing the poor and excluded, neither is there communion with Christ and Christ's Father in heaven. Leaning on this notion of communion, *Gaudium et Spes* teaches that in our world "it grows increasingly true that the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person," contributes to the common good, "according to his own abilities and the needs of others" (GS 30).

The commitment of Catholics to the service of the poor has continued to the present day. The modern theologians who have most detailed the connection between eucharistic communion, church communion, and everyday Catholic life are the liberation theologians of South America. These theologians correctly interpreted the biblical data we have exposed as a preferential option for the poor and enunciated this option first as a theological doctrine which later was verified as a church doctrine of the South American Catholic Church. It is not a surprise that an Argentinian Pope Francis would highlight this doctrine in his papal words and actions. Among the signs of authentic Catholicity, South American bishops taught, is "preferential love and concern for the poor." They pledged themselves and their churches "to make clear through our



lives and attitudes that our preference is to evangelize and serve the poor.” They also taught that a “preferential option for the poor represents the most noticeable tendency of religious life in Latin America.” The questions being asked today about the “novel” words and actions of Pope Francis with respect to a Church of the poor and a poor Church are all answered for those with eyes to see in the gospels and in the teaching of South American bishops.

An Asian liberation theologian, Tissa Balasuriya, writes of eucharist that it is “spiritual food in so far as it leads to love, unity, and communion among persons and groups. Today this requires love among persons and *effective* action for justice. The eucharist must also lead us to a response to the suffering of the masses, *often caused by people who take a prominent part in the eucharist*. Unless there is this twofold dimension of personal love and societal action, the eucharist can be a sacrilege.”<sup>3</sup> The phrase we have underscored, and which is beyond debate demonstrable throughout the Catholic world, illustrates the Second Vatican Council’s confession that the Catholic Church is a Church of sinners in her membership and is, therefore, “at the same time holy and always in need of being purified” and renewed in its commitment to the Christ and to the God he reveals (*Lumen Gentium* 8). It is a sad commentary on the Catholic Church that several liberation theologians so dedicated to the poor and excluded were condemned for their teachings as contrary to Church doctrine, though their condemnations were later lifted through the influence of Pope John Paul II. Pope Francis speaks out of the biblical tradition and the best of the Catholic tradition when he teaches that “alleviating the grave evil of poverty must be at the very heart of the Church’s mission. It is neither optional nor secondary.”<sup>4</sup>

Pope John Paul II draws attention to a temptation that Catholics “have not always known how to avoid,” the temptation to separate their Catholic faith from their everyday life, to separate their acceptance of the gospel from the actual living of the gospel in various situations in the world. What the Pope implies is that, to be faithful to their vocation to follow Christ, Catholics need to reach out in active love to the women and men around them, preferentially as always to the poor and excluded. This essay underscores that the demand to do so does not come from only Pope John Paul or Pope Francis who do no more than interpret the ancient Jewish-Christian scriptural teaching for the situations of their time and place. No, the demand comes from Jewish Jesus and the Catholic tradition that follows him as servant of God’s

3 Tissa Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1979), p. 22, emphasis added.

4 See Bishop Robert W. McElroy, “A Church for the Poor,” *America* (October 21, 2013), p. 13.

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poor and excluded. Pope Francis, a faithful interpreter of both the gospel and the Second Vatican Council, puts the point pointedly: “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. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 53). *Gaudium et Spes* has the final word here. “Mindful of the Lord’s saying: ‘By this will all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ (John 13:35), Catholics cannot yearn for anything more ardently than to serve the men [and women] of the modern world ever more generously and effectively .... Not everyone who cries ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the Father’s will and take a strong grip on the job at hand” (GS 93). The job at hand is the job of anointing the now-risen Jesus, not with expensive nard but with the actions of a faith that does justice to God’s poor and excluded.

We do not want to give the impression that Jesus’ call for commitment to justice for and service of the poor, echoed by Pope Francis, is a call only to individuals; it is a call also to societies to transform sinful social structures that perpetuate poverty. Societal commitment requires local, national, and international bodies that have the power to change the underlying structures that perpetuate poverty to effect such change. Individuals cannot think that they can do acts of justice toward the poor and simultaneously support unjust political policies and laws that perpetuate injustice toward the poor. Individual and societal actions must be consistent, and individuals must support and vote for candidates and political policies that advance a preferential option for the poor rather than a preferential option for individual and/or societal pocketbooks. Justice for the poor demands both societal and individual action to eradicate poverty and to create a more just and equitable society.

## RICHES

In conclusion, we switch focus briefly from an ethical consideration of poverty and the demands it makes on every Catholic to an ethical consideration of riches. The switch is a critical one, from the ethical obligations of Christians towards others who are poor to the ethical obligation towards themselves if they are rich. Everything we have argued, of course, is still relevant; rich followers of Jesus have the obligation to act in charity to provide for the poor followers of Jesus and, indeed, of all the world’s poor, and to act in justice to transform unjust social structures that perpetuate poverty. Jesus’ attitude to riches is very clear and is articulated in several stories in all three synoptic gospels. We choose a story from Luke.

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The story is of a rich landowner with great possessions. His land had “brought forth plenitude and he thought to himself “what will I do for I have nowhere to store my crops?”” (Luke 12:16-17). Then he hit on a brilliant idea: “I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry” (Luke 12:18-19). God then visits him, Luke recounts, and tells him: “Fool. This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared whose will they be?” (Luke 12:20). Jesus comments that every man/woman “who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” is in the same situation as this fool of a landowner (Luke 12:21). Men and women become ethically rich toward God by following the Jesus tradition that demands care for God’s poor and excluded. There is no ethical problem whatsoever with being rich; there is a major ethical issue with what one does with one’s riches. Riches become unethical only when they usurp God’s role as source and guarantor of both one’s riches and one’s Catholic life. That life, Jesus demands, is to be a life of preferential option for the poor both societally and individually.

**Beatitudes.** The Beatitudes are like a Christian’s identity card. So, if anyone asks: ‘What must one do to become a good Christian?’, the answer is clear. We have to do, each in our own way, what Jesus told us on the Sermon on the Mount. In the Beatitudes, we find a portrait of the Master, which we are called to reflect in our daily lives. The word ‘happy’ or ‘blessed’ thus becomes a synonym for ‘holy’. It expresses the fact that those faithful to God and his word, by their self-giving, gain true happiness

– AIDAN DONALDSON, *The Beatitudes of Pope Francis* (Dublin: Veritas) p.12.