

## **Addressing Poverty and Social Exclusion**

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The theme of social justice is infused in scripture from the book of Genesis and the story of creation. God in His infinite wisdom created a perfect world from a formless void. He created human beings in His own image and likeness, perfect. It was to these human beings (all of us) that God gave 'dominion' over the world - of all the seed bearing plants and animals. Herein lies the problem, to rule the world like God rules, with love and justice.

We are entrusted with stewardship over the earth and all that is in it - taking care of one another – economically, socially, culturally, psychologically, and emotionally; taking care of our environment – the rivers, the seas, the air, the forests, and our neighbourhood. We are admonished in Genesis that the earth is given for the use and benefit of ALL humankind – the past, the present and future generations.

When the resources/goods of the earth are captured by a few to the detriment of the majority who are left to share the remainder, this is inherently an unjust situation.

In 2006 the World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations undertook the first global study to chart wealth distribution in every country using all the most significant components of household wealth, including financial assets and debts, land, buildings and other tangible property. Together all these assets totalled \$125 trillion globally.

The study found that the richest 1% of adults in the world own 40% of the planet's wealth and that the richest 10% of adults accounted for 85% of the world total of global assets. Half the world's adult population, however, owned barely 1% of global wealth.

The ensuing global reality is stark and obscene to say the least with 25% of the planet's population, 1 billion people, living in hunger and extreme poverty. In Trinidad and Tobago 16.7% of our population live below a poverty line of \$665 per adult person per month (2005 Survey of Living Conditions). This translated to just over 215,000 persons in 2005 who lived below the poverty line. If anything, this figure must have increased since then.

One of the effects of poverty is social exclusion. Social exclusion means "a lack of belonging, acceptance and recognition. It relates to the alienation or disenfranchisement of certain people (the poor, people with a disability, to minority men and women of all races, to the elderly, and to youth (Youth Exclusion) within a society. It is often connected to a person's social class, educational status, relationships in childhood and living standards and how these might affect access to various opportunities. Additionally, communities may self-exclude by removing themselves physically from the larger community, for example, in the gated community model." (Wikipedia).

As Catholics, followers of Jesus, we are called, rather, mandated by God to have a preferential option for the poor. In fact, because justice in a society, as in the Scriptures, is tested and judged by how we treat the poor and vulnerable, it is not optional. We must "...create conditions for marginalized voices to be heard, to defend the defenceless, and to assess lifestyles, policies and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor. The option for the poor does not mean pitting one group against another, but rather, it calls us to strengthen the whole community by assisting those who are most vulnerable." (Centre for Social Concerns).

The most effective way of addressing poverty and social exclusion has to be at the parish level. The parable in Matthew's Gospel – chapter 25, instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable (least of our brothers and sisters) first. The US Bishops have proposed to their church - and maybe this should be adopted in our church in T&T and the Caribbean - that, "Our parishes should be measured by our help for the hungry, the homeless, the troubled, and the alienated-in our own community and beyond." The following are some initiatives that might be relevant in our parishes:

**First of all we must change our attitude to the poor, vulnerable and socially excluded.**

This is difficult since we operate in a culture and mindset of exclusion in how we manage our parishes, how we operate our parish groups, even how we conduct our liturgies. We often see the poor and vulnerable as objects to be acted upon. But Jesus shows us a different attitude and way. Like Jesus we must situate ourselves among those who are poor, marginalized and vulnerable and work with them, include them in the decision making process, treat them as subjects where they become agents of their own transformation. This requires a spirit and attitude of inclusiveness and respect - a full restoration of human dignity.

Secondly, since unemployment is seen as a key cause of social exclusion and poverty, **our parishes must become places where the unemployed, the underemployed, the unskilled, illiterate can regain and have the dignity of decent work.** Through decent work the poor and socially excluded can regain their self worth and dignity. Our pastoral plans must include strategies to address the poverty, unemployment and social exclusion in all its manifestations. On the one hand, we are challenged to make individuals at risk of exclusion more attractive to employers, i.e. more "employable". On the other hand, we must seek to encourage (and/or oblige) employers to be more inclusive and just in their employment policies and practices.

Thirdly, the Catholic Church has a long history of producing social entrepreneurs – these are people 'with innovative solutions to society's most pressing social problems. They are ambitious and persistent, tackling major social issues and offering new ideas for wide-scale change. They are both visionaries and ultimate realists, concerned with the practical implementation of their vision above all else.' (Ashoka Foundation) **The parish must be the source of this innovation and creativity in addressing the social scourges afflicting our communities.** Our parishes must once again become the fertile base for nurturing social entrepreneurs infused with values based on the Gospel of Jesus.

Fourthly, social scourges now require not only innovative individuals but innovative methodologies. Social businesses are becoming popular as a creative and sustainable approach to tackling social ills. These Companies [Social Businesses] “must cover all costs and make profit, at the same time achieve the social objective, such as, healthcare for the poor, housing for the poor, financial services for the poor, nutrition for malnourished children, providing safe drinking water, introducing renewable energy, etc. in a business way.” (Yunus centre) Here again the **parish can nurture the development of social businesses.**

As Catholics we are called to envision a society which resembles the Eden as created by God – a world in harmony – human beings in harmony with one another, the human person in harmony with his/her environment, the human person in harmony with his/her creator. Anything that disrupts this harmony is not pleasing to God but is insulting to Him and we must reject and seek to reverse that disruption. According to the Church Fathers,

“... Whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, [social exclusion], arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury.” (The Church and the Modern World, #27).

Therefore once we follow God’s plan there should be no poverty, human indignity, abuse of human rights, social exclusion, social scourges, racial, religious and cultural discrimination. There is no doubt that the world is no longer the Eden created by God that fashioned and nurtured human life and our work as Catholics is to restore that Eden.