

These words of Pope Pius XII make abundantly clear the vital distinction between the poverty blessed by the church and the wretched destitution that endangers soul and body alike. We must view abject poverty as we view physical sickness, as an evil that must be prevented when possible and certainly cured as soon as possible. Our Blessed Lord did not tell the sick that they were blind or deaf or crippled because of the unchanging laws of the universe. Rather He used His infinite power to heal, thus inspiring us to use both science and compassion in the service of the sick.

In the same way, His Holy Church views poverty as a challenge, not merely to our compassion and charity, but also to intelligent social action aimed at eradicating the many causes of human failure. It is a tragic commentary upon the world today that nations are forced to spend billions for ghastly weapons of war, and yet cannot find the funds to eliminate slums. Our ingenuity can cope with the almost unbelievable difficulties of sending a rocket to the moon. But we seem unable to come up with workable plans to aid human beings created in the image and likeness of Almighty God.

To face this challenge intelligently, we must make some important distinctions in regard to those who are poor. There are some persons whose poverty stems from personal conditions that cannot readily be changed. They are not able to earn a living today, nor is it likely that most of them can ever produce enough to secure a proper livelihood. In this class are many of our aged, some who are physically or mentally handicapped, or mothers who are the sole support of young children. Such persons need help given in a way that fully respects their human dignity.

On the other hand, there are those who are poor largely because of external conditions that have prevented their earning a decent living. They have both the native ability to work and the desire for a good job, but they lack either the training or the opportunity to earn a fitting salary. Such persons include the uneducated and the unskilled, victims of racial discrimination, farmers without adequate resources and training, many unemployed persons over 40, and those who live in areas of declining industry. In these cases, we seek methods and techniques that will enable them to become productive members of our economic society.

Another important distinction concerns the method of affording assistance for each of these groups. There is a form of aid that is intensely personal. Here the stress is upon contact between individuals. Such help does not preclude organization and planning, yet it is basically a person-to-person apostolate.

There are other problems that must be met primarily by social action, whether this be private or governmental. Here the basic concern is the removal of social conditions that breed poverty and destitution. It is obvious, for example, that economic policies that stimulate the demand for workers will make it much easier to retrain and relocate the unemployed.

Whatever distinctions might be made, however, in the Christian understanding of poverty, in practice any attack on poverty must be universal. The heart of the true Christian goes out to all in need. For charity knows no limits. Such has been the pattern, for example, of the Catholic Relief Services. Not only is the entire world its area of operation, but all men, of all races and of all religions, are the beneficiaries of its programs of aid. The only criterion is their need. So, too, as we face this problem of poverty in our country, there must be no restriction of race, religion, or politics. Nor should there be any inhibiting of those who seek to help the poor, whether they be individuals, or private agencies or offices of government. In the spirit of the Good Samaritan, who taught us that every man is our neighbor, we must seek the opportunity to serve the stranger wounded in the struggle of life.

We wish to illustrate these principles by noting both the individual and the social responsibility of Americans confronted with poverty in an affluent society.

II. INDIVIDUAL RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT

What, then, does the church ask of the concerned Christian, as it directs his attention to this basic problem of poverty in this wealthy Nation? First, and above all, it asks that we make this a matter of personal concern and involvement. In older and simpler societies, it was fairly easy for any person who wanted to help his neighbor to know what was needed. Today it is possible to live in our sanitary suburbs, rush to work without really seeing our city surroundings, spend our days in an office or factory, and never even know what life is like for 35 million fellow Americans who live in poverty. We can discuss the