

III. A SOCIAL CHALLENGE

In discussing social measures to relieve or prevent poverty, we shall present objectives and programs from a religious and moral point of view. It is not our concern as religious leaders to deal with problems that are purely economic, political, or technical.

If we are to help the poor to help themselves, we must above all be concerned about work. Avoiding job discrimination is but one step. It is equally vital to be sure that work is available and that the poor are educated and trained to do useful work. We are heartened at the concern of civil authorities, on every level of government, as they contemplate this problem. We pledge to them our full support in an unrelenting war against poverty. But this struggle, to be fully successful, must adapt itself to the natural patterns of each community. It must use the schools, welfare agencies, and other community activities that are already doing good work in combatting ignorance, illiteracy, and demoralization. These local institutions should be assisted and supplemented, whether they be governmental or private in nature.

In the area of housing, we ask for sensitivity for the rights of the poor. Slum clearance and urban renewal programs are good in themselves, both as civil projects and as aid in the rooting out of poverty. But let us not approach these needs merely as engineering blueprints, ignoring the human element involved. It is heartless to uproot hundreds of families in the name of slum clearance, if no suitable alternate housing is available. Indeed, many experts today counsel us to salvage and renovate an area, if at all possible, so as to keep intact the thousands of human contacts that make life more bearable. As religious leaders, we hesitate to discuss such technical problems, except that social scientists themselves have warned of the moral factors involved in such planning.

Our special concern should be for young persons who lack the training and opportunity to secure useful work. Unemployment is tragic at any age, but life-long damage can be inflicted when the young are unable to secure worthwhile jobs. Undoubtedly we must redouble our efforts to encourage such persons to secure at least a high-school diploma. We should seriously consider the worth of youth camps or special training projects directed to the need of young adults. Here we note the insight of Pope Pius XII, who observed that society spends millions because of crime and social demoralization, when timely measures of prevention would have prevented both the personal tragedy and the social waste.

We also note with concern the fact that nearly 2 million farm families, and hundreds of thousands of farmworkers, are among the poorest of Americans. Great religious leaders, such as the late Pope John XXIII, have extolled the spiritual and moral value of farm living. But they also asserted that such values cannot compensate for grinding poverty. Our farming poor need different types of economic help. Some can be given the training and the finances which will enable them to become self-supporting in agriculture. Others may need at least part-time employment in industries located in poorer rural areas. Still others must seek urban industrial work, but they cannot secure this without adequate training. It is a commonplace among vocational advisers that good education pays its costs many times over in the average lifetime. Surely our society can afford such an investment.

It is not difficult to persuade a homeowner to repair a leaking roof, even when he feels he can ill afford the cost. He knows that rain can damage his house and furnishings irreparably, costing him far more than any preventive repairs. In the same way, citizens must realize that urban blight and decay; the myriads of evils surrounding our slums; the effects of delinquency, vice, and crime; and the results of human demoralization constitute heavy financial losses to our society, as well as poignant personal tragedies. They demand heavy outlays from tax funds and lead to losses in deteriorating property, as well as the loss of goods and services that could have been produced by the unemployed. What our consciences dictate as morally right, our economic judgment reinforces as socially profitable.

Yet it would be unfortunate, even in this area of social action, were we to confine our activity solely to approving legislation, paying taxes, and contributing to organized social-welfare programs. Many Americans have time and energy which they would willingly contribute to the needs of their fellow men, if they could see the chance to do this. There are retired persons who wish to be active and useful. Mothers of grown children may have time on their hands. Many of our teenagers wish to be challenged with something truly useful in their leisure time. The spirit and dedication that characterized our Peace Corps can