



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 27 October 1999

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The Second Vatican Council underscores a specific dimension of charity which prompts us, following Christ's example, to reach out to those who are most poor: "Christ was sent by the Father "to bring good news to the poor ... to heal the contrite of heart' (*Lk* 4: 18), "to seek and to save what was lost' (*Lk* 19: 10). Similarly, the Church encompasses with her love all those who are afflicted by human misery and she recognizes in those who are poor and who suffer, the image of her poor and suffering founder. She does all in her power to relieve their need and in them she strives to serve Christ" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 8).

Today let us look closely at the teaching of Sacred Scripture about the reasons for the Church's preferential love of the poor.

2. It should be noted first of all that there is a development from the Old to the New Testament in evaluating the poor and their situation. In the Old Testament we often see the common human conviction that wealth is better than poverty and is the just reward for the upright and God-fearing person: "Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments.... Wealth and riches are in his house" (*Ps* 112: 1, 3). Poverty is considered a punishment for those who reject the instruction of wisdom (cf. *Prv* 13: 18).

However, from another perspective, the poor become the object of special attention as victims of perverse injustice. The prophets' invectives against the exploitation of the poor are famous. The prophet Amos (cf. 2: 6-15) includes oppression of the poor among his accusations against Israel: "They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes - they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted" (*ibid.*, vv. 6-7). The connection between poverty and injustice is also stressed in Isaiah: "Woe to those who decree

iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey" (*Is* 10: 1-2).

This connection also explains why there are numerous laws defending the poor and those who are socially the weakest: "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry" (*Ex* 22: 22-23; cf. *Prv* 22: 22-23; *Sir* 4: 1-10). To defend the poor is to honour God, Father of the poor. Generosity to them is therefore justified and recommended (*Dt* 15: 1-11; 24: 10-15; *Prv* 14: 21; 17: 5).

In the developing reflection on the theme of poverty, the latter acquires a religious value. God speaks of "his" poor (cf. *Is* 49: 13) who are identified with the "remnant of Israel", described as a humble and lowly people by the prophet Zephaniah (cf. 3: 12). It is also said of the future Messiah that he will take the poor and the oppressed to heart, as Isaiah states in the famous text about the shoot that would sprout from the stump of Jesse: "With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" (*Is* 11: 4).

3. This is why in the New Testament the good news of deliverance is announced to the poor, as Jesus himself stresses, applying to himself the prophecy of the Book of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (*Lk* 4: 18; cf. *Is* 61: 1-2).

To possess the "kingdom of heaven", it is necessary to have the interior attitude of the poor (cf. *Mt* 5: 3; *Lk* 6: 20). In the parable of the great feast, the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame - in a word the most suffering and marginalized social categories - were invited to the banquet (cf. *Lk* 14: 21). St James would later say that God has "chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him" (*Jas* 2: 5).

4. "Evangelical" poverty always implies great love for the poorest of this world. In this third year of preparation for the Great Jubilee, we must rediscover God as the provident Father who has compassion on human suffering in order to relieve all who are afflicted. Our charity too must be expressed in sharing and in human development understood as the integral growth of each person.

Throughout history Gospel radicalism has spurred many of Jesus' disciples to seek poverty to the point of selling their own goods and giving them as alms. Poverty here becomes a virtue which, besides alleviating the lot of the poor, becomes a spiritual path to true wealth, that is, to an unending treasure in heaven (cf. *Lk* 12: 32-34). Material poverty is never an end in itself, but a means of following Christ, about whom Paul said to the Corinthians: "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 *Cor* 8: 9).

5. Here I can only stress again that the poor represent today's challenge especially for the wealthy peoples of our world, where millions of people are living in inhuman conditions and many are literally dying of hunger. We cannot proclaim God the Father to these brethren without the commitment to work together in Christ's name to build a more just society.

The Church, especially in her social Magisterium from *Rerum novarum* to *Centesimus annus*, has always strived to address the theme of the very poor. The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 must be another opportunity for deep conversion of heart, so that the Spirit may raise up new witnesses to this cause. Christians, together with all people of good will, must contribute, by appropriate economic and political measures, to those structural changes which are so necessary for humanity to be freed from the plague of poverty (cf. *Centesimus annus*, n. 57).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I warmly greet the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood. I extend a special welcome to the members of the Catholic Police Guild, and to the group of Judicial Vicars from Great Britain. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Great Britain, Ireland, the Philippines, Japan and the United States of America, I invoke the abundant blessings of almighty God.