Global Poverty: What Can We Do?
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The bottom billion. From the title of a book(1) to a frequently used description. A harsh phrase, but a much harsher reality. Who are the bottom billion? They are the billion women, men, and children who live in extreme poverty, without sufficient food, clean water, and other basic necessities of life.

Despite such staggering suffering, recent UN reports actually do offer some hope. Global initiatives are working to meet the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals, including reducing world poverty by 50% by 2015. The number of people living in extreme poverty has been reduced by millions. More children are participating in primary education. People suffering with AIDS or malaria are receiving more help.(2)

Still, many gains are being eroded by the recent worldwide recession. The poorest suffer the most. Gaps between the rich and the poor are increasing; 1.4 billion people struggle to survive on less than $1.25 a day; every day 24,000 children die due to poverty.(3) This litany could go on and on.

The Complexity of Poverty

Let one story symbolize millions.(4) Nsanga, a woman in her twenties with two children, had been married to a schoolteacher. Because of structural adjustment measures instituted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the government of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) was forced to make cutbacks in its expenses, including laying off teachers and health workers. Nsanga’s husband lost his job, was not able to find a new one, began spending their small resources on drinking, and finally simply disappeared.

Nsanga was very poor, as were her living conditions. She lived in a “single room which was part of a corrugated-roofed block surrounding an open courtyard. The yard contained a shared water tap, a roofless bathing stall, and a latrine, but no electricity…. Mosquitoes were ubiquitous in the neighborhood, and malaria and diarrheal diseases were common causes of death in young children. Many families ate only one meal per day and children were especially undernourished.”(5)

Nsanga, like most poor women in Kinshasa (the capital city with a population of more than a million people at the time), had only a few years of education in primary school. She unsuccessfully tried to find employment and so did small jobs in the neighborhood. These were not enough to pay for rent and food, so Nsanga began exchanging sex for subsistence.
For a year, her lover was a married man who paid her rent. After she became pregnant, he left her, so Nsanga had to find more partners. At the time, the “neighborhood rate was equivalent to U.S. fifty cents per brief encounter;”(6) so two partners per day would produce about $30 a month.

Though experiencing the symptoms of AIDS, Nsanga was never tested. “Abandonment, divorce, and widowhood force many women who are without other resources into commercial sex work. In the presence of HIV, however, this survival strategy has been transformed into a death strategy.”(7)

Nsanga’s story points to the pervasive power of poverty. It also highlights the impact of socioeconomic and political conditions, including the consequences of IMF policies and the cultural oppression of women.

Clearly, the harsh realities of global poverty demand attention, but may also lead many people to wonder what individuals or small groups can do. The complex issues seem overwhelming. What can we do?

Unexamined Assumptions

First, we must ask ourselves what it is that we see and hear. We have heard the statistics and stories; we have seen the heartrending photos. But how do we filter those stories and photos? Do our own political and cultural values or some unexamined convictions color our perceptions and judgments?

The thought of Karl Rahner, S.J., offers some guidance here. In his Theological Investigations XVIII, Rahner points to what he calls “global prescientific convictions,” unexamined assumptions, mostly cultural in character, that shape moral views and analyses.(8) These prejudgments mold people’s moral imaginations and perceptions of basic values, sometimes making it difficult to live gospel values. Everyone receives many messages that contradict the gospel, from media and politics, business and families. One’s vision of life and responses to world events often are based on these values rather than on the Scriptures and Christian tradition.

In other words, in some situations for some Christians, another set of values and convictions becomes more important than the gospel; for example, maximization of profits trumps solidarity and care for the poor. Often the individuals are not really aware of what is happening, for the values are rooted in unexamined assumptions, in what another author calls “unconsciously absorbed prejudices.”(9)

So, our first step in answering “What can we do?” is the careful examination of the values and convictions that form the foundation of our perceptions and judgments. We may find that in some situations our gender or class or political party is more influential than the gospel—although we desire and even profess that our lives are rooted in the biblical tradition, especially the gospel.

Indeed, two contemporary expressions of this tradition can both help us refine and refocus our values and convictions and also inspire our concrete actions regarding global poverty: 1) the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter, Economic Justice for All, and 2) the Consistent Ethic of Life.
This year, 2011, is the 25th anniversary of the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*. Revisiting the letter is certainly a fitting way to celebrate the anniversary. While many specific issues have changed in those 25 years (globalization probably being the most significant), the basic perspective and convictions of the letter remain relevant and challenging, offering insight and hope for responding to global poverty.

The letter claims that economic life is one of the chief areas where people live out their faith, love their neighbor, and fulfill God’s creative design. Economic decisions affect the quality of people’s lives, even to the point of determining whether people live or die (as we saw in Nsanga’s story).

In response to massive problems of homelessness, unemployment, poverty, and starvation, the bishops offer a Christian vision of the economic life. The basic criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured is the dignity of the person along with the community and solidarity that are essential to this dignity. *Economic Justice for All* first turns to the Scriptures for developing the specifics of this sacredness of human beings, and then spells out familiar social justice themes of rights, duties, and the common good.

In developing the biblical theme of discipleship, *Economic Justice for All* explains the contemporary phrase, “preferential option for the poor.” The bishops point out that in the New Testament salvation is extended to all people. At the same time, Jesus takes the side of those most in need, physically and spiritually. Contemporary followers of Jesus, then, are challenged to take on this perspective: to see things from the side of the poor; to assess lifestyle and public policies in terms of their impact on the poor; to experience God’s power in the midst of poverty and powerlessness.

Following the tradition of Catholic social teaching, *Economic Justice for All* considers the global economy from the perspective of human dignity, justice, and the common good. Although the social teaching does not demand absolute equality of wealth, it does challenge the shocking inequality between the rich and the poor.

Because of its wealth and power, the United States has a primary role in reforming the international economic order, particularly in relation to the developing world. It must work with other influential nations, with multilateral institutions, and with transnational banks and corporations. *Economic Justice for All* reviews five major areas where reform is needed and possible: 1) development assistance through grants, low-interest loans, and technical aid; 2) trade policy that is especially sensitive to the poorest nations; 3) international finance and investment, with special attention to the debt crisis of developing nations; 4) private investment in foreign countries; 5) an international food system that increases immediate food aid and develops long-term programs to combat hunger. (Action steps for ordinary people will be discussed below.)

This critique of capitalism (also expressed by John Paul II in his writings, especially *On Social Concern* and *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum*, and by Benedict XVI in *Charity in Truth*) may surprise many people in the developed world. Perhaps without even being aware of it, these people have internalized the market values of their society. Gospel values, as developed and applied by the social teachings, may seem idealistic and out
of touch with reality—or simply be rejected as some form of communism or socialism. *Economic Justice for All* and the papal encyclicals, then, offer serious content for the prayerful examination of our convictions and our follow-up actions.

**The Consistent Ethic of Life**

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the late archbishop of Chicago, began discussing the consistent ethic of life in the early 1980s as he worked to bring together those seeking an end to abortion and those trying to prevent nuclear war. Already in his first lecture on the topic, he realized that commitment to life cannot be limited to one or two issues but must extend across the whole life span. From womb to tomb, life must be protected, nourished, and cherished. He stated:

> If one contends, as we do, that the right of every fetus to be born should be protected by civil law and supported by civil consensus, then our moral, political and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth. Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker. Such a quality of life posture translates into specific political and economic positions on tax policy, employment generation, welfare policy, nutrition and feeding programs, and health care. Consistency means we cannot have it both ways. We cannot urge a compassionate society and vigorous public policy to protect the rights of the unborn and then argue that compassion and significant public programs on behalf of the needy undermine the moral fiber of the society or are beyond the proper scope of governmental responsibility. (14)

Recognizing the dignity and sanctity of all of life and of every life, the consistent ethic of life challenges all views that contradict the message and meaning of Jesus. Indeed, the Catholic tradition’s emphasis on solidarity with the whole human family, on special concern for the poor and vulnerable, on economic justice and the common good often distinguishes Catholic principles from the lived values in our U.S. culture and from elements of the platforms of both major political parties.

Cardinal Bernardin also acknowledged that issues are distinct and different. Global poverty, for example, is not the same as abortion. Nevertheless, the issues are linked. The valuing and defense of life are at the center of both issues. “When human life is considered ‘cheap’ or easily expendable in one area, eventually nothing is held as sacred and all lives are in jeopardy.” (15)

Along with his consistent linking of distinct life issues, Cardinal Bernardin stressed that an individual or group, while concentrating on one issue, must not be seen “as insensitive to or even opposed to other moral claims on the overall spectrum of life.” (16) The consistent ethic of life rules out contradictory moral positions about the unique value of human life—and it would be contradictory, for example, to be against abortion but for capital punishment or to work against poverty but support euthanasia.

This linkage of all life issues is, of course, the very heart of the consistent ethic of life. This linking challenges us to pull together issues that we might have kept apart in the past. Often our convictions seem to cluster around “conservative” or “liberal” viewpoints—as in the
above examples. But the consistent ethic of life cuts across such divisions, challenging us to examine our assumptions and convictions and calling us to respect the life in the womb, the life of a criminal, the life in a slum, the life of the dying.

Although this linking of issues was not always popular with particular interest groups, the consistent ethic of life became a centerpiece of the moral teaching of the U.S. Catholic bishops. More recently, it has been deemphasized, perhaps the victim of growing polarization in the Church. This life ethic confronts believers, calling them to live gospel values more faithfully and authentically in all aspects of their lives. Retrieving its balance and emphasis could offer both renewed insight into global poverty's threats to life and also direction and energy for action steps.

What Can We Do?

Besides beginning this retrieval, what are some other action steps? Both Economic Justice for All and the consistent ethic of life were developed to offer moral guidance including, in part, participation in shaping public policy. Political policies and economic structures provide the means to address global poverty by creating a societal environment that promotes the flourishing of life. Trade agreements, aid to developing nations, political relations and tensions, climate change all deserve careful attention. In the domestic scene, there is need for more jobs with adequate pay and decent working conditions, for immigration reform, for continued healthcare reform, for improved education. Clearly then, how we vote, the advocacy groups we support, our own involvement through letters to elected officials, the values our churches and schools and families teach and embody—all these are ordinary but real action steps we can take to address global poverty in the spirit of the gospel as expressed in the pastoral letter and in the consistent ethic of life.

Some direct experience of poverty expands our horizons and allows us to encounter real people and real poverty. Many different possibilities are available. Here are just a few examples: at home, working with St. Vincent de Paul groups; volunteering at a Catholic Worker house, food pantry, or homeless shelter; beyond our borders, participating in an immersion experience in the developing world instead of a tourist vacation; developing a plan to spend several years living and working among the extremely poor; as a bridge between home and beyond, sponsoring a child and developing a relationship with the family; a parish program that supports micro-financing projects in the developing world.

In preparation for all these action steps (or at least as a response to them), we need to search out accurate information, recognizing that some information may be influenced by values contrary to the gospel. We try to pay attention to trustworthy sources, especially those working directly with the poor.

For example, in the debate about trade agreements we heard many positive things in the media from corporations and government about neoliberal globalization. This view stresses privatization, decreased regulation by governments, the lowering of barriers to international trade. The Jesuit superiors of Latin America offered a different view, rooted in their actual experience and in their commitment to the Church's social teachings. They list some of the destructive results of neoliberal globalization: “the immense imbalances and perturbations neoliberalism causes through the concentration of income, wealth and land ownership; the multiplication of the unemployed urban masses or those surviving in
unstable and unproductive jobs; ... the destruction and forced displacement of indigenous
and peasant populations; ... the disappearance of food security; and increase in criminality
often triggered by hunger.”(19) Especially for those of us who have not experienced extreme
poverty first-hand, such testimony is invaluable for the formation of our consciences.

As we consider what we can do, we need to be realistic in what we are able to do; we need to
be honest in what we ought to do. Cardinal Bernardin offered a realistic reminder in his
many talks on the consistent ethic of life. He affirmed that no individual or group can pursue
all issues, but they can do something; and in doing that one thing they must respect all life.
Scripture scholar Walter Wink expresses a similar insight in terms of vocation, urging us “to
seek the specific shape of our own divine calling in the day-to-day working out of our
relationship with God.” He explains, “We are not called to do everything, to heal everything,
to change everything, but only to do what God asks of us. And in the asking is supplied the
power to perform it. We are freed from the paralysis that results from being overwhelmed
by the immensity of the need and our relative powerlessness, and we are freed from
messianic megalomania, in which we try to heal everyone that hurts.”(20) However, we can
and must do something.

We ought not underestimate the challenge of being pro-life in the full sense of the term. In
his encyclical The Gospel of Life Pope John Paul II urged all persons to choose life—
consistently, personally, nationally, globally.(21) This invitation, as we have already seen, is
really a profound challenge: to look deeply into ourselves and to test against the gospel
some of our own deeply held beliefs and practices and then to act.

There is much to do, much that we can do. Even as we begin to discern our unexamined
assumptions and to enter into the realities of global poverty, an appropriate first response is
lament. Be gracious to us, O God. Enter our lament in your book. Store every tear in your flask
(see Psalm 56). More words of wisdom from Walter Wink: “We are so interconnected with
all of life that we cannot help being touched by the pain of all that suffers. ... We human
beings are far too frail and tiny to bear all this pain. ... What we need is a portable form of
the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, where we can unburden ourselves of this accumulated
suffering. We need to experience it; it is a part of reality. ... But we must not try to bear the
sufferings of the creation ourselves. We are to articulate these agonizing longings and let
them pass through us to God. Only the heart at the center of the universe can endure such a
weight of suffering.”(22)

Lament helps us to speak out against suffering and oppression, ultimately renewing and
deepening our relationship with God. Lament is also necessary for life in society, raising
questions of power and calling for change in unjust situations.(23) Lament is an
appropriately human and a profoundly religious response to global poverty.
Lament leads to action. We have considered the inspired vision of Economic Justice for All
and the consistent ethic of life, guiding our action steps. This is the fast that I wish: untying
the thongs of the yoke, sharing your bread, not turning your back (see Isaiah 58:5-7).
Following the prophets and Jesus, we discern the implications of our vocation, including the
specific means of criticizing and changing oppressive structures and of energizing people’s
hopes and actions.(24)

People of faith can work with many others, searching in solidarity for creative and
courageous ways to overcome poverty and its causes. People of faith also bring their own
particular motivation and vision, rooted in their religious beliefs. Ultimately, Christians can
face suffering and political and economic challenges and take action because they trust in God. Do not let your hearts be troubled; trust in God (see John 14:1). This is not a pie-in-the-sky optimism, but a profound conviction about the God revealed by Jesus. (25) This God suffers with us, leads us as individuals and as community in resisting evil, and brings us all to the fullness of life.

Awareness, lament, action, trust—we can do this for justice and life for the bottom billion and all God’s creation!

ENDNOTES


17. See, for example, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2007); in this document, issued in preparation for the 2008 presidential election, the phrase “consistent ethic of life” is used only once.

18. See, for example, www.kiva.org.


