



Proclaiming the reign of God in a suffering world: The movement from development to liberation

Missiology: An International Review

2017, Vol. 45(1) 88–102

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DOI: 10.1177/0091829616682525

journals.sagepub.com/home/mis



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Abstract

Today's missionary, whether long-term or short-term, church-based or part of a faith-based NGO, is faced with grinding poverty and the extreme isolation and marginalization of vulnerable populations. This article will develop a theological foundation that calls missionaries to address the root causes of poverty as a key element of proclaiming the Good News, and will conclude with specific and concrete recommendations for doing so. The article places liberation theology in dialogue with Catholic Social Teaching and with the experiences of faith-based development agencies. Particular attention is given to the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Pope Paul VI's document, *Populorum Progressio*. The article will illustrate the ways that liberation theology has challenged Catholic Social Teaching in its thinking about how to respond to economic marginalization, insisting that charitable aid is insufficient and highlighting the difference between "development" and "liberation."

Keywords

liberation theology, development, social justice, poverty, Catholic Social Teaching, Pope Francis, Pope Paul VI, Haiti, *Populorum Progressio*, solidarity

I live on Capitol Hill, the center of government at the center of much of the world's wealth. It is also a place where the homeless congregate. Each day, I see homeless people. They gather in the small park that sits between my home and the commercial blocks, and they hang around the bus stops and the subway.

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It is extremely difficult to pass people by every day without offering direct assistance. This past year, during the season of Advent, I decided to try something new. I purchased gift cards for a couple of shops in my neighborhood, a coffee shop and a sub shop, to give away to the homeless in my path.

I quickly learned that giving away the cards would require a direct encounter, not just the passing greeting that I was accustomed to offering. I remember every one of them: a woman on the street on Christmas Eve asking for help for her children, an elderly gentleman by the Metro, a man in a wheelchair. One horrible rainy December evening, I was walking home and there was a man trying to keep dry against the outside of a building. He was soaked, I was soaked. He asked for help. I gave him a Starbucks card. He instantly walked across the street into the Starbucks. I was thrilled that my gesture had gotten him out of the December monsoon. On another occasion, New Year's Eve, I was standing in line at the train station when a man walked over and asked for a cup of coffee. I remembered I had one last Starbucks card: I could help! When I handed it to him, he took my hand, looked me right in the eye, and thanked me.

I really liked the feel-good part of this exercise, but did it accomplish anything? The direct encounters were good for *me*. I am sure the coffee and sandwiches people bought were good for them in the moment—and maybe better fare than what they get in the local soup kitchen or shelter. I could keep doing it and continue to make all of us feel good in the moment. But as a missionary seeking to engage in social transformation, I am unsatisfied with feeling good in the moment.

“The poor you will always have with you,” we read in Mark, Matthew, and John; in Matthew's Gospel we find this passage (26:11) shortly after chapter 25, where Jesus separates the sheep from the goats and informs his disciples that “just as you did it to the least of these members of my family, you did it to me.” “The poor you will always have with you,” and “you did it to me” existing side-by-side is vexing. It cannot be the case that God allows unspeakable misery to continue so that the privileged may have the opportunity to serve.

The challenge of poverty

There is nothing new about poverty.

From the beginning of recorded history, people survived on subsistence agriculture and a barter economy. There were always a few wealthier families, but for the most part almost everyone lived in a condition of insecurity, and life expectancy was low. With the Industrial Revolution, owners and managers began to accumulate more wealth, laying the foundation for the vast disparities between rich and poor that we experience today (see Myers, 2011: 23). Alongside the European Industrial Revolution came colonialism, with the European powers extracting the wealth, usually in the form of labor and natural resources, from colonized countries, undermining their traditional ways of life, and leaving in their wake death, ravaged economies, and extreme poverty.

There is nothing new about compassion either. But along with this new wealth came new ideas that suffering was wrong and should be addressed, and even prevented if possible. This led to the founding of humanitarian agencies, beginning

primarily in the late 19th century (Myers, 2011: 24–26). It was also during this period that Pope Leo XIII published the first modern document of Catholic social thought, *Rerum Novarum*.

What is new, Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, is “knowledge of its crushing extent, and the ever widening and deepening gap between the rich and the poor in contemporary society” (Gutiérrez and Muller, 2015: 39). A woman begging for her children on Christmas Eve (or any eve) is inhuman. In Haiti, where I also work, in 2010 nearly 300,000 people died in an earthquake that lasted no more than a minute, and one sees people living in boxes, or even on top of smoldering heaps of garbage. What is the cause of this, what can be done about it, and why do the wealthy nations allow the misery to go on while continuing to enrich themselves? For a Christian missionary, how is it possible to proclaim a God of love and life in the face of extreme suffering on a massive scale?

Nearly 1 billion people worldwide suffer from hunger, meaning they do not have enough food to lead a healthy life. Bill Gates, the richest man in the world, reportedly has \$81.1 billion. More than 1 billion people live on less than one dollar a day, and 2.7 billion have less than two dollars each day. This essay will examine whether Christianity can accept the status quo, marked as it is by extreme suffering by large numbers of people, and extreme wealth by a few. If we answer in the negative, then how does Christianity ask us to respond? In answering this question, I will examine and contrast a “development” approach and a “liberation” approach, using Scripture, papal documents from my own Catholic tradition, the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, and the book *Walking with the Poor* by Bryant Myers, which provides an assessment of Christian development practices. I will also draw on my own work of nearly 30 years working to address poverty, and the work of Catholic Relief Services, where I am currently employed.

The business of poverty relief

Jesus’ answer to his disciples in Matthew 26:11 (the poor you will always have with you), and which also appears earlier in Mark 14:7, is based on Deuteronomy 15:11. Referring to the seventh year, a year of debt forgiveness, the full passage reads,

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be . . . Give liberally, and ungrudgingly when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all you undertake. *Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth*, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” [Deut 15: 7–8, 9–11]

Seen in this context, Matthew 26:11 would seem to be a continuation of Matthew 25: 31–46, rather than a contrast. Since there will always be people in need, if you are able you must give. Your gifts will lead to God’s blessings, or in the case of Matthew 25, you will be one of the sheep that inherits the kingdom of God. There will always be

people in need, because misfortune happens to everyone. Illness, death, accidents, and natural disasters will always be part of the human condition.

The early fathers of the church also emphasized compassion and giving. Quoting St. Ambrose, “You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich” (quoted in *Populorum Progressio* [hereafter *PP*] 23).

As noted earlier, organized humanitarian assistance came in the late 19th century, with the founding of organizations such as Caritas and the Red Cross. It was during this period that missionaries began to return with stories of destruction, and some began to understand that the mission project had at least in part enabled the state-sponsored wealth extraction, exploitation, slavery, and in some cases genocide. Some humanitarian agencies, such as the Red Cross, were designed to mitigate the effects; others addressed human rights, such as working to abolish slavery and child labor.

This movement intensified after World War II, when there was a need to rebuild Europe, and because soldiers and correspondents came home with stories of non-Western countries ravaged by poverty. It was understood as a moral duty for the “modern” Western countries to take active steps to move poor countries on the path of progress, which was seen as emulating the development of the West (Myers, 2011: 27). These thinkers did not seem to take into account that the West had not “developed” using the assistance of outside humanitarian agencies. The West “developed” through exploiting its own natural resources, and became wealthy through exploiting the resources and labor of other countries. Nonetheless, the world set up a development distribution system, which included USAID, the United Nations, and many new international aid agencies, including Catholic Relief Services, where I currently work.

On development

During this same period Pope Paul VI wrote *Populorum Progressio*, an appeal to the Catholic Church and to the world to address the scandal of poverty through development aid. “The hungry nations of the world cry out to the peoples blessed with abundance. And the Church, cut to the quick by this cry, asks each and every man to hear his brother’s plea and answer it lovingly” (*PP* 3). The document acknowledges that in many cases the colonizing nations left behind ravaged economies; it is no accident that the nations suffering the most from poverty are those formerly colonized by Europe. The gap between rich and poor is growing and may get even worse, the pope wrote in 1967 (*PP* 8).

While seeking to honor past missionary endeavors, Pope Paul VI acknowledged that the former methods of mission are not enough to address the current problem, which is extreme poverty. He names construction of hospitals, sanitariums, schools and universities, and teaching the native population how to take full advantage of natural resources as laudable missionary activities in the past (*PP* 12). However, in the present the church needs to examine every aspect of the problem of poverty—social, economic, cultural, and spiritual—“in order to support the efforts of those who are seeking a larger share of the benefits of civilization” (*PP* 1; 13).

Populorum Progressio supported these ideas:

- A transition from inhuman conditions for the poor and vulnerable (20);
- The rights of private property and free trade are subordinated to the principle that all have the right to glean what they need from the earth (22);
- Dignity for workers so they are partners in the task of development (28);
- Reform, not revolution—capitalism itself is not to blame for the current ills (29–31);
- Organized programs to spur social development as well as economic growth to benefit those on the margins (33–34);
- The ultimate goal is human fulfillment (42).

Pope Paul VI calls upon the wealthier nations to accomplish these goals by taking the following steps:

- 1) mutual solidarity—the richer nations must give aid to developing nations; 2) social justice—the rectification of trade relations between strong and weak nations; 3) universal charity—the effort to build a more humane world community, where all can give and receive, and where the progress of some is not bought at the expense of others. (*PP* 44)

In this document, Paul VI defines solidarity as development aid, and progress as the Western model of capitalism tempered by social justice in trade relations. The rich must be willing to sacrifice—give to the poor—in order to create a truly “human community” where all can live “human lives” (46). This is true for both individuals and for nations (48), which must organize and fund international aid agencies.

His comments on international trade illustrate some root causes of the current imbalance between rich and poor. Pope Paul writes that free trade is inadequate, because while poor nations export resources, rich nations turn those resources into manufactured goods. The manufactured goods receive a higher price, while the natural resources provide little income, thus increasing the gap between rich and poor nations (57–58). Trade should “conform to the demands of social justice” and competition cannot just “be left to itself” (59–60).

The extremes of the latter part of the 20th century illustrated that simple charitable giving was not going to be enough to alleviate suffering, because poverty was getting worse, not better. *Populorum Progressio* suggested that we need an integral approach, one that leads to the movement from inhuman conditions to conditions that are fully human, and the document moves beyond charity to offer the solution of *development* as a way to offer our gifts more effectively, so that we are not caught in an endless cycle of giving, without actually diminishing poverty.¹

On liberation

Liberation theology arose out of the same phenomena that led to the publication of *Populorum Progressio*: an increasing understanding of the extent of global misery, and

those who are affected seeking release from their situation. Both *Populorum Progressio* and liberation theologians reject poverty and seek concrete and lasting solutions. However, while Pope Paul VI saw the solution in development aid, liberation theology seeks liberation from the need for development aid. Gustavo Gutiérrez calls this “a new historical era . . . characterized by a radical aspiration for integral liberation” (Gutiérrez, 1988: xvii).

Gutiérrez makes this fundamental point: it is not enough to describe the situation of extreme poverty and then try to mitigate what one describes; causes must also be determined, because it is only in understanding the cause that one may construct an effective solution. Unfortunately, it is in determining the causes of poverty that problems begin. Although the privileged are willing to accept the existence of poverty on a massive scale, and to build and fund agencies to mitigate it, they become resistant when faced with the causes (1988: xxiii–xxiv), because looking at causes implies some personal responsibility to address the source.

An entire chapter of Gutiérrez’s seminal book, *A Theology of Liberation*, is devoted to the question of liberation and development. He writes that there have been high expectations regarding the potential for development in poor nations to bring people and communities out of poverty—expectations reflected in *Populorum Progressio*. However, these expectations have not been met. Gutiérrez explains that the practice of economic development has frequently been attached to groups and governments which control the world economy (1988: 17), and that their self-interest is to maintain the status quo of a high standard of living in rich nations. This high standard of living is frequently at the expense of poor nations, who provide low-cost resources and labor that provide the manufactured goods sold for a profit in the rich nations. Those profits are made by companies owned in rich nations, kept by their stockholders, and not distributed equitably to the laborers, or to the source of the natural resources.

Gutiérrez sees the current era as one in which the poor nations are realizing that their own liberation will only come about through a struggle to end this domination by the rich nations (1988). Part of the oppression, Gutiérrez writes, is that the industrialized societies offer themselves as models in contexts quite different from their own. Thus, liberation is not just seeking better living conditions, although that is certainly part of it. Liberation seeks a change in the relationships between rich and poor, so that the voices, hopes, and dreams of the poor are integrated into programs to alleviate poverty, and development is oriented toward the common good of all, rather than benefiting a few more than the rest (1988: 18–22).

As Gutiérrez himself points out (1988: 23), *Populorum Progressio* alludes to this in speaking of a transition from inhuman conditions to human fulfillment, in all its aspects. However, the document suggests that the rich nations must plan and carry out the reforms and provide funding to the development organizations. In contrast, liberation theology seeks a means for the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized to take control of their own destiny, because becoming the artisan of one’s own destiny is basic to human dignity. Gutiérrez’s critique is that development in the hands of rich nations serves to benefit rich nations, and thus maintains the status quo.

On self-serving development

When your belly is in the hands of the foreigner, you lose your respect. And people want to regain their self-respect.

—Josette Perard, Lambi Fund, Haiti

In 2010, former president Bill Clinton made a dramatic confession before Congress. He admitted that legislation he supported and signed into law in 1996 undercut rice production in Haiti, thereby contributing to lost production and greater food insecurity. The 1996 bill shifted farm policy to provide more direct cash subsidies to US farmers, providing them with a safety net and lowering the cost of rice production, enabling them to keep the price of rice low while retaining a decent income for farmers in the United States. At the same time, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank imposed a structural adjustment program on Haiti which lowered its import tariffs on rice from 50% to 3%.

As a result, the price of US rice undercuts the price of Haitian rice, because, due to US subsidies for its own farmers, Haitian farmers cannot grow rice for the same low cost. Without the tariffs, the price of rice is kept so low that small-scale Haitian farmers cannot compete, putting many of them out of business, and making their country—and others—dependent on rice imports from the United States.²

Much of that rice, as well as other subsidized US agricultural products, has been distributed in the form of food aid through the development distribution system described earlier. Even more troubling, food aid has frequently been provided to the development agencies to be sold on the local market, thereby raising funds to support the anti-poverty programs of the development agency. The pattern is this: local agriculture in poor countries is undercut through US farm subsidies and structural adjustment, causing small-scale farmers to lose their livelihoods. In response, the US sends food aid which supports our own farmers but continues to undercut the incomes of local farmers, making them dependent on food aid.

In defense of the development distribution system, many organizations have been complaining about this for years, including my own. Overseas staff witness firsthand the damage these policies have wrought against economies they are trying to help, not hurt. Catholic Relief Services, along with other NGOs, the Obama and Bush Administrations, and many members of Congress, have advocated for a more sensible approach to food aid which allows for flexibility. In many cases, the agency needs cash so that it can purchase food aid on the local markets for local distribution, which would not undermine but rather support local farmers and markets. In some cases, when there is an extreme emergency, direct food aid must be imported and distributed through local agencies, although this should also allow for flexibility, so that food can be transported from the shortest distances and at the lowest cost possible.

Thanks in part to this advocacy effort, the Farm Bill signed in 2014 made some modest changes, including increasing the amount of cash that can be used to purchase food locally. However, US law still requires that all agricultural commodities used for food aid must be sourced from the United States, at least 50% of it must be shipped on US-flagged vessels, and at least 15% of non-emergency food aid must be sold on the

local market to pay for development programs.³ Groups representing the agricultural commodities, a few NGOs that benefit from selling the commodities, and the US shipping industry have lobbied intensely to keep the current policies in place (Schnepf, 2015: 3). All of these policies serve the interests of US agri-business. Of particular concern is the so-called “monetization” of food aid, because selling food on the local market undermines local farmers and merchants, thus worsening the poverty and insecurity that food programs are supposed to alleviate.

As Gutiérrez pointed out, there is no shortage of examples of self-interested poverty relief programs. The fair trade movement is another heartbreaking case.⁴ The fair trade movement evolved at about the same time many international aid agencies got their start, post-World War II. First called alternative trade, the idea was to purchase products from poor communities overseas and sell them in the US market, providing a higher price for the producer than they could get through local sales. Fair trade goods include craft and artisan items, and agricultural products, such as coffee, chocolate, and sugar. Many fair trade organizations (FTOs) began as missionary projects, and in the United States, churches and church-based organizations are among the largest and oldest supporters of fair trade. The idea is to address poverty, not through handouts, but through dignified work and economic opportunity.⁵

There are some very fine and well-intentioned FTOs in the USA and elsewhere working to support producers in poor communities. However, there is a lack of transparency and very little available evidence regarding how well producers are being paid and whether those payments are enough to make a difference for producers and their families. The principles of fair trade commonly adhered to in the United States require environmental stewardship and safe working conditions, but only ask that producers are paid at international, national, or local standards.⁶ In many cases the products are purchased by a third party, a fair trade exporter or broker, and resold to US wholesalers or retailers for premium prices, but we cannot know how much of that premium goes to producers because it is not monitored or disclosed across the industry. There are multiple labels and conflicting standards. A few companies disclose what their producers are paid, but every context is different, and actual impact is hard to discern.

The FTO can claim the ethical high ground and use the fair trade label for marketing purposes, and charge a higher price for their product, all in the name of creating a better life for the producer, when we don't know if those producers are actually getting a better life. Furthermore, some FTOs, rather than pay a higher price to the producer, and recognizing that their intervention has not actually addressed the community's poverty, will use some of their own profits to design charitable aid programs, calling it *development*, in the producer communities where they work,⁷ thereby maintaining the status quo of dependence.

Spiritual poverty

Bryant Myers, professor of transformational development at Fuller Theological Seminary, and a former vice president at World Vision, calls our inclination to provide handouts and charity *playing God in the lives of the poor*:

[I]f poverty is viewed as the absence of things, ideas, access . . . The solution is to provide what is missing. This often leads to the outsider becoming the development “Santa Claus,” bringing all good things from the outside: food, well-drilling, education, a working health system. The poor are reduced to passive recipients, incomplete human beings whom we make whole through our largess. (Myers, 2011: 114)

This demeans and devalues the poor. Rather than seeing their giftedness and dignity as created in God’s image, we see defect and inadequacy. The rich see themselves as having something to contribute, while the poor do not, tempting the rich to “play God in the lives of the poor” and leading to messianic attitudes, according to Myers (2011). The rich come to believe that they are the ones who can save, and the poor are incapable of caring for themselves.

Myers believes that this attitude is common in relationships between churches in the Global North and South, and that has also been my experience.⁸ It mars the identity of both rich and poor. Each of us is created in God’s image, each of us equal in the eyes of God, and each of us brings gifts, as well as needs, to our relationships and to our communities. The temptation of the rich is to lose sight of their own neediness, and the temptation of the poor is to appropriate the identity of neediness bestowed on them by the rich, coming to believe that the only way they will ever get anything is if someone gives it to them.

This is our spiritual poverty: that we have become objects to one another, and even to ourselves, rather than brothers and sisters who are connected through our common humanity. The poor are seen as passively waiting for help, and the rich are the means by which the poor receive help. This is the status quo, and the reason for the prevalence of charity and development aid over liberation is that liberation implies that the rich must give up their privilege and instead seek equality, mutuality, and the common good.

An example from the fair trade economy will illustrate what giving up privilege might look like. The problem with the fair trade economy is that the broker, the exporter, the shipper, the wholesaler, and the retailer still need to make money, and there is a limit to the price the US consumer is willing to pay for an item that they can probably get cheaper at the store down the street. So in the end, the producer still gets sacrificed. For fair trade to bring the producer out of poverty, either the US consumer has to pay more, or everyone else in the supply chain has to be willing to get paid less. Either cost goes up or wages go down for the richer people in the equation, and if this happened on a large scale, then we would see more equality. In other words, *poverty is caused by wealth*, and to decrease poverty we will have to decrease wealth.

I have some personal experience with how this works, through one of my affiliations, Just Haiti.⁹ The organization was founded to accompany small-scale coffee farmers in Haiti to improve the quality and quantity of their product, and provide access to the fair trade market in the United States so that they could receive a higher price. Just Haiti markets and sells the coffee, subtracts our costs, and then sends what remains from the sales, the profits, back to the coffee growers.

We have learned that wealth is generated from the profits, and not from the up-front price the growers receive, which is determined by international fair trade standards.

With the fair trade price, the growers can survive, but their basic situation of dependency remains unchanged. Only with the profits can they work to achieve their own family and community goals, which include food security, health care, and education for their children. In sending the profits to the growers, we are not taking them for ourselves. Thus, the US workers are all volunteers, because the US market will not support a price increase for the coffee, and the profits would also be how we paid ourselves.

A better idea would be to have the producers own the whole business, from processing to packaging, marketing, and sales, so that the producers keep all the value. There are a few small companies doing that, and moving in that direction is Just Haiti's plan.

Crucially, I believe, Just Haiti does not engage in charitable aid programs, except in the case of emergencies. We turn the profits over to the grower associations and they make decisions about how to manage their own money. The growers provide a portion of the profits to their members to increase household income, they provide a safety net for their members, they engage in their own community service and development projects, and they expand their business in order to earn more.

There are a few other FTOs—not many—that engage in profit-sharing with their producers. Profit-sharing seems reasonable to me, meaning those on the wealthy side of the equation make less so that the producers can make more. In fairness, the smaller FTOs have small profit margins themselves, and their owners and staff are already sacrificing by receiving a lower wage than what they might get elsewhere. This does not get them off the hook, but puts it in context. Thus, in addition to profit-sharing, for the fair trade economy to work for the producers, the FTOs will need to raise their prices, and the fair trade consumer, including and especially churches, will need to support higher costs with their purchasing dollars, and educate consumers about the need to be discerning about where we shop, supporting companies that engage in profit-sharing with their producers.

Sacrificing for the sake of the Other is at the heart of Christian theology, and it is our spiritual poverty in the developed world that we have been unable to put that theology into practice in the marketplace.

The need for conversion

The solution is conversion, writes Gutiérrez (2003: 95). Conversion requires an encounter, not just with our own interior lives, but more specifically with the poor in our own communities, countries, and world. Conversion is a turn toward God and toward neighbor, especially the most vulnerable among us, and asking oneself what responsibility I bear for the misery. Concern for the material needs of the poor, and the root causes of their suffering, must become a part of the spirituality of the wealthy.

Such a conversion would have to start with friendship. Quoting the Aparecida document,¹⁰ Gutiérrez writes,

Without friendship there is neither authentic solidarity nor true sharing . . . Only the closeness that makes us friends allows us to profoundly appreciate the values of the poor today, their

legitimate desires, and their own way of living the faith. The option for the poor should lead us to friendship with the poor. (Griffin and Block, 2013: 157)

True friendship leads to the recognition that we are all in this together, that the poverty of one is the poverty of us all, and that humanity rises and falls together.

This approach, that friendship is the solution, assumes that material poverty is fundamentally about broken relationships. In other words, our spiritual poverty, described earlier, is the result of the broken relationship between the non-poor and the poor. The source of this broken relationship with the Other is broken relationship with ourselves, because our own identities are marred through our participation in an unjust system that leaves nearly a billion people wondering where they will get their next meal. Myers also writes that what he calls *transformational development* must begin with restoring relationships: with God, with self, within one's community, with the Other, and with nature (Myers, 2011: 181–83).

If friendship is the starting point, then there is enormous hope and potential for Christian mission to make a difference in the lives of the world's most vulnerable. Most missionaries today are part of short-term immersion programs, church-to-church partnerships, or volunteer programs. Sadly, in many cases these endeavors focus on service projects, charitable aid, or development programs to address the poverty they encounter. If the purpose of mission were reframed as friendship, with the relationships formed and nurtured seen as primary, then these programs could be the starting point for the kind of conversion we seek.

Seeking resilience

However, once the friendship is formed and relationships nurtured, there still remains the question of how to address poverty in the communities missionaries encounter. During an emergency, immediate relief is needed. But relief is not a long-term solution to poverty, and the problem is that vulnerable families and communities, without many assets of their own, cannot easily recover from an emergency, and so relief can become aid dependency.

Emergencies happen to everyone. The primary family income-provider can become ill or die. Medical care for a loved one can exceed one's ability to pay. Accidents, fires, earthquakes, and storms happen. These normal occurrences can become disasters if a family, community, or nation does not have its own resources, or assets, to recover. The key to overcoming the bad things that happen is *resilience*.

For communities to escape chronic poverty, they must increase their resilience to withstand shocks. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) defines resilience as the ability of people, households, communities, countries and systems to mitigate, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth. (DeVoe, 2013: 1)

The factors affecting resilience are complex, can be both internal and external, and vary depending on a given context. For example, in the United States, we have insurance to

help us to overcome accidents and medical emergencies, free public education to increase employability, a social safety net if someone loses their source of income, and social security for retirees. These all increase our resilience, and the need for resilience is the reason it is important to provide universal access, which we do not currently have. These and other factors related to governance and civil society are often not present in vulnerable communities overseas. Ability to access income-generating activities is another key factor, and the income generated must be high enough to support one's family in the present and to save for future needs. Access to income requires education, training, market access, and job availability. In short, resilience requires a holistic, integrated approach to poverty relief.

It would be very difficult for a church, a short-term mission group, a volunteer program, a religious order, or a mission organization to address every factor related to resilience. Agencies working toward resilience is something for churches to consider when thinking about distributing their own charitable giving dollars. There are also things that mission programs can do in the communities where they work to increase resilience, decrease dependency, and do more good than harm. These include:

- Work through and with locally based and managed organizations;
- Invest in local projects, plans and initiatives;
- Make income generation that provides dignity not dependence the goal and the metric for success;
- Work to address the external systemic factors that cause poverty and vulnerability.

The structures of civil society hold government accountable to its own people, and weak civil society leads to corruption and the failure of governments to invest in the structures people need (like roads, electricity, water projects, health care) to thrive. Working with and through indigenous local organizations, such as churches, labor organizations, women's groups, farmers' cooperatives, or small NGOs, and strengthening their capacity, rather than setting up your own project or working with other outside groups, strengthens civil society and contributes to stronger governance.

Investing in local initiatives does not translate into providing charitable aid. It means investing in their own initiatives to improve their livelihoods so that they can fund their own locally run community development programs. The only way that communities will reduce their dependency on outside assistance is if they can pay for their own needs, and that requires strong local organizations and income generation. And the income generated must be enough to provide the minimum a family needs to live in dignity.

Finally, as illustrated earlier, there are external factors that can create or aggravate poverty and vulnerability. These factors include policies in the Global North, which means getting involved in legislative and political advocacy and relationship-building in order to influence the powers and structures that create policies in the United States and elsewhere that affect global poverty. It also includes consumer education, so that people, especially members of our churches, understand the importance of how and

where they spend their money. It is much easier to send a check to a charitable aid organization than it is to research the origins of the products we purchase every day. But we really can help to diminish poverty if we are willing to spend more on products that provide a decent income to vulnerable households.

Laudato Si'

Gutiérrez suggested in *A Theology of Liberation* that *Populorum Progressio* is a transitional document. It denounces the gap between rich and poor, and calls for justice, but “ultimately it addresses itself to the great ones of this world urging them to carry out the necessary changes” (1988: 23). Recent documents published by the current pope, while drawing on the insights of *Populorum Progressio*, have moved this dialogue forward.

In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis criticizes the dominant economic system as too focused on profit without taking into account the negative impact the current economy has on human beings. The market, he writes, quoting Pope Benedict XVI, “cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion” (LS 109).

Pope Francis states the need for “liberation” from the dominant market paradigm, and calls for a more human progress. An example of such progress might be cooperatives of small producers who adopt a means of production that preserves the environment and promotes a less consumerist and profit-based, and more communal, model of life (LS 112).

Pope Francis also highlights the critical importance of income generation as the primary means for people to improve their situation. It is essential, he writes, again quoting Pope Benedict XVI, that “we continue to prioritize the goal of access to steady employment for everyone” without regard to the limited interests of business or economic reasoning that favors pure market solutions (LS 127). He writes that charitable aid “must always be a provisional solution” (LS 129). The Pope continues: “the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth” (LS 193). He calls on the world to set limits on wealth for the few, so that everyone else may have what they need to live. Consumers in wealthier countries should pay more for their products or accept a lower income themselves, so that the poor may have access to a higher income.

Finally, Pope Francis calls on us to heal our broken relationships, with nature, with each other, and with God (LS 119). Elsewhere Francis writes specifically about relationships between the poor and the non-poor: “We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them, and to embrace the mysterious wisdom that God wishes to share with us through them” (EG 198).

Back to Capitol Hill

Prior to trying my experiment with the gift cards, my practice had been to greet homeless people when I crossed paths with them, but never to give money or gifts. My reasoning

was that a greeting is an acknowledgement of human dignity, without enabling whatever issues might underlie the person's present predicament. Most homeless services providers advise against giving money to people begging in the streets, and rather advise giving to homeless services providers. This still makes sense to me, as they are far better equipped than I to deal with the larger issues around homelessness. And I think Bryant Myers's analysis of the non-poor feeling like Santa Claus or a savior when giving to the poor definitely applies to me and my experience in this circumstance.

In other words, the same principles apply for addressing poverty in the United States as overseas. We seek resilience, and we seek to strengthen the factors that will lead to resilience, including working through local groups and initiatives, increasing employability, and strengthening the safety net through advocacy and action. It also includes raising wages for the poor, and decreasing them for the non-poor.

Although not a solution, the gift cards did push me beyond my boundaries, and simply giving cash would have had the same effect. The gift cards were an entry into a deeper encounter, more than just a greeting. I had to do more than just pass by—I had to stop, explain what I was doing, and wait for a response. They were a catalyst for “encounter” as Pope Francis calls it, and the people I encountered affected me. The cards were not a solution, but a provisional response that provided a short-term benefit while enabling a deeper reflection and providing a call to action. Similarly, our short-term offers of assistance, service projects, and other poverty mitigation programs can be helpful only if they become a catalyst for true encounter and relationship, and lead us to reflect and act on the root cause of the misery.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. In this context I would define charity as direct gifts and handouts, and development as programs designed to diminish the effects of poverty on communities, such as water systems and agricultural assistance.
2. For the complete story, see O'Connor, 2013.
3. For a summary of the legislation, its history, and the issues surrounding food aid, see Schnepf, 2015.
4. For full disclosure: I am co-founder and president of a fair trade coffee organization working in Haiti. We belong to the US-based Fair Trade Federation and I participate in their conferences and discussions.
5. The US-based Fair Trade Federation provides a brief history of fair trade here: <http://www.fairtradefederation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/History-of-Fair-Trade-11-2011.pdf>.
6. A complete list of the principles required for membership into the Fair Trade Federation: <https://www.fairtradefederation.org/fair-trade-federation-principles/>.
7. For an interesting example of this phenomenon, see the movie *Connected by Coffee* here: <http://connectedbycoffee.com/>. This often moving film illustrates the benefits of the fair trade system, especially the relationships, and the fact that the producer community still cannot pay for its own water project.

8. I have written about the same phenomenon in a previous article. See Lamberty (2012).
9. <http://www.justhaiti.org>.
10. Documento de Aparecida, published by the Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2007. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, CELAM (2007).

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