

# Caring

## A Catholic-Christian Response to Poverty *Biblical Foundations of Concern For Those Who Are Poor*

**A**ny Catholic-Christian response to the problem of poverty must begin in the beginning—that is, with Genesis 1—as it is the foundation upon which Christian anthropology and social ethics is built: *God created man and woman in his image; in the divine image God created them; male and female God created them.* [Gen. 1:27].

**W**hen remembered well and taken to heart, such a belief has resulted in extraordinary works and institutions of charity including hospitals, orphanages, schools, shelters and soup kitchens. When it has been qualified, dismissed or forgotten, prejudice, warfare, slavery, genocide, racism, sexism, and homophobia have been the results.

**I**t is in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament in which we hear the most vociferous defense of those who are poor. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Micah hurl burning indictments against Israel and Judah for their exploitation and lack of concern for those who are poor and vulnerable. To the prophetic eye, this was clear evidence of the breakdown of the covenant, the covenant that binds Israel together to God. ***How, they asked, could a people that claimed to hold a special relationship with God ignore the most fundamental needs of those who are poor for food, clothing and shelter, and take advantage of their vulnerability?*** This heartless conduct and lack of care could only characterize a sinful nation, a “people laden with wickedness” (Is. 1:4). ***Political leaders particularly shared in this blame:*** “*Woe to those who enact unjust statutes and who write oppressive decrees. Depriving the needy of judgment and robbing my people’s poor of their rights, Making widows their plunder and orphans their prey!*” (Is. 10:1-2).

**I**t is from Judaism that Christianity derives its concern for the poor, which for Christians is particularly manifest in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In his concern for the poor, Jesus not only acted with what had long been proscribed by Jewish law, but also challenged those religious laws and institutions that separated, oppressed and alienated people.

**L**uke’s Gospel is particularly concerned with the plight of the marginalized: those who were socially, economically, and politically powerless. This is first conveyed near the beginning of the Gospel, in Mary’s Magnificat, inspired by Hannah’s song from 1 Samuel 2: “*He has thrown down the rulers from their throne but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty.*” (Lk. 1:52-53).

**A**t the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, he proclaims the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy: “*The Spirit of God is upon me, because the Spirit has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor...*” (Lk. 4:18a).

**L**uke’s emphasis is also seen in the warnings against the dangers of wealth (Lk. 6:24; 12:21, 19-31), as well as in the Beatitudes: “*Blessed are you who are poor, for the reign of God is yours*” (6:20). In a society that looked upon wealth as a blessing from God, such a teaching that regarded the poor as God’s favored ones must have been quite shocking.

### Faith and Poverty in the Modern World

**I**n 1965, the Second Vatican Council issued the Pastoral Constitution *On the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*). The Council helped to recover the scriptural sense that the progress of the human person and the progress of society hinge upon one another. It urged that vigorous efforts be made to alleviate economic inequalities, because fundamentally economic productivity is to benefit the whole of the human person – not only materially, but also intellectually, morally, spiritually, and religiously: There must be made available to all men and women everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one’s own conscience, to protection of privacy and to rightful freedom in religious matters.

