

WORLD DAY OF THE POOR - 2019

From Pope Francis

1. "The hope of the poor will not perish for ever" (Ps 9:19). These words of the Psalm remain timely. They express a profound truth that faith impresses above all on the hearts of the poor, restoring lost hope in the face of injustice, sufferings and the uncertainties of life.

The Psalmist describes the condition of the poor and the arrogance of those who oppress them (cf. 10, 1-10). He invokes God's judgment to restore justice and overcome evil (cf. 10, 14-15). In his words, we hear an echo of age-old questions. How can God tolerate this disparity? How can he let the poor be humiliated without coming to their aid? Why does he allow oppressors to prosper instead of condemning their conduct, especially in the light of the sufferings of the poor?

The Psalm was composed at a time of great economic development that, as often happens, also led to serious social imbalances. The inequitable distribution of wealth created a significant number of poor people, whose condition appeared all the more dramatic in comparison with the wealth attained by a privileged few. The Psalmist, observing the situation, paints a picture as realistic as it is true.

It was a time when arrogant and ungodly people hounded the poor, seeking to take possession even of what little they had, and to reduce them to bondage. The situation is not much different today. The economic crisis has not prevented large groups of people from accumulating fortunes that often appear all the more incongruous when, in the streets of our cities, we daily encounter great numbers of the poor who lack the bare necessities of life and are at times harassed and exploited. The words of Book of Revelation come to mind: "You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing. You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked" (Rev 3:17). The centuries pass, but the condition of rich and poor remains constant, as if history has taught us nothing. The words of the Psalm, then, are not about the past, but about our present, as it stands before God's judgement.

2. Today too, we must acknowledge many new forms of bondage that enslave millions of men, women, young people and children.

Daily we encounter families forced to leave their homeland to seek a living elsewhere; orphans who have lost their parents or were violently torn from them by brutal means of exploitation; young people seeking professional fulfilment but prevented from employment by shortsighted economic policies; victims of different kinds of violence, ranging from prostitution to the narcotics trade, and profoundly demeaned. How can we overlook, too, the millions of immigrants who fall victim to any number of concealed interests, often exploited for political advantage, and are refused solidarity and equality? And all the homeless and ostracized persons who roam the streets of our cities?

How many times do we see poor people rummaging through garbage bins to retrieve what others have discarded as superfluous, in the hope of finding something to live on or to wear! They themselves become part of a human garbage bin; they are treated as refuse, without the slightest sense of guilt on the part of those who are complicit in this scandal. Frequently judged parasites on society, the poor are not even forgiven their poverty. Judgment is always around the corner. They are not allowed to be timid or discouraged; they are seen as a threat or simply useless, simply because they are poor.

To make matters worse, they can see no end to the tunnel of extreme poverty. We have come to the point of devising a hostile architecture aimed at ridding the streets of their presence, the last places left to them. They roam from one end of the city to the other in the hope of getting a job, a home, a sign of affection... The least offer becomes a ray of light; yet even where justice might be expected to prevail, they meet with violence and abuse. Forced to work endless hours under a burning sun to gather seasonal fruits, they receive ridiculously low pay. They

labour in unsafe and inhuman conditions that prevent them from feeling on a par with others. They lack unemployment compensation, benefits, or even provision for sickness.

The Psalmist describes with brutal realism the attitude of the rich who rob the poor: "They lie in wait that they may seize the poor... and drag them off in their net" (cf. Ps 10:9). As in a hunt, the poor are trapped, captured and enslaved. As a result, many of them become disheartened, hardened and anxious only to drop out of sight. In a word, we see before us a multitude of poor people often maligned and barely tolerated. They become for all effects invisible and their voice is no longer heard or heeded in society. Men and women who are increasingly strangers amid our houses and outcasts in our neighborhoods.

3. The setting of the Psalm is tinged with sadness at the injustice, the suffering and the disappointment endured by the poor. At the same time, it offers a touching definition of the poor: they are those who "put their trust in the Lord" (cf. v. 10), in the certainty that they will never be forsaken. In the Scriptures, the poor are those who trust! The Psalmist also gives the reason for this trust: they "know" the Lord (cf. *ibid.*). In the language of the Bible, such "knowledge" involves a personal relationship of affection and love.

Impressive and completely unexpected as this description is, it simply expresses the grandeur of God, as shown in the way he relates to the poor. His creative power surpasses all human expectations and is shown in his being "mindful" of each individual (cf. v. 13). It is precisely this confidence in the Lord, this certainty of not being forsaken, that inculcates hope. The poor know that God cannot abandon them; hence, they live always in the presence of the God who is mindful of them. God's help extends beyond their present state of suffering in order to point out a path of liberation that profoundly strengthens and transforms the heart.

4. Scripture constantly speaks of God acting on behalf of the poor. He is the one who "hears" their cry" and "comes to their aid"; he "protects" and "defends" them; he "rescues" and "saves" them... Indeed, the poor will never find God indifferent or silent in the face of their plea. God is the one who renders justice and does not forget (cf. Ps 40:18; 70:6); he is their refuge and he never fails to come to their assistance (cf. Ps 10:14).

We can build any number of walls and close our doors in the vain effort to feel secure in our wealth, at the expense of those left outside. It will not be that way for ever. The "day of the Lord", as described by the prophets (cf. Am 5:18; Is 2-5; Jl 1-3), will destroy the barriers created between nations and replace the arrogance of the few with the solidarity of many. The marginalization painfully experienced by millions of persons cannot go on for long. Their cry is growing louder and embraces the entire earth. In the words of Father Primo Mazzolari: "the poor are a constant protest against our injustices; the poor are a powder keg. If it is set on fire, the world will explode".

5. We can never elude the urgent appeal that Scripture makes on behalf of the poor. Wherever we look, the word of God points to the poor, those who lack the necessities of life because they depend on others. They are the oppressed, the lowly and the downcast. Yet, faced with countless throngs of the poor, Jesus was not afraid to identify with each of them: "Whatever you did to one of the least of these my brethren, you did to me" (Mt 25:40). If we refuse to make this identification, we falsify the Gospel and water down God's revelation. The God that Jesus came to reveal is a Father who is generous, merciful, unfailing in his goodness and grace. He gives hope especially to those who are disillusioned and lacking in hope for the future.

How can we fail to note that the Beatitudes with which Jesus began his preaching of the kingdom of God open with the words: "Blessed are you who are poor" (Lk 6:20)? The meaning of this paradoxical message is that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor because they are in a position to receive it. How many poor people do we encounter each day! It seems that the passage of time and the advances of civilization increase their numbers rather than diminishing them. Centuries go by and the Beatitude appears even more paradoxical: the poor are always poorer, and today they are poorer than ever. Yet Jesus who inaugurated his kingdom by placing the poor at the centre, wanted to tell us precisely this: he inaugurated the kingdom, but he has entrusted to us, his disciples, the task of carrying it forward with responsibility for giving hope to the poor. Especially at times like our own, there is a need to revive hope and to restore confidence. This responsibility is not something that the Christian community may underestimate. The credibility of our proclamation and the witness of Christians depends on it.

6. In closeness to the poor, the Church comes to realize that she is one people, spread throughout many nations and called to ensure that no one feels a stranger or outcast, for she includes everyone in a shared journey of salvation. The situation of the poor obliges us not to keep our distance from the body of the Lord, who suffers in them. Instead, we are called to touch his flesh and to be personally committed in offering a service that is an authentic form of evangelization. Commitment to the promotion of the poor, including their social promotion, is not foreign to the proclamation of the Gospel. On the contrary, it manifests the realism of Christian faith and its historical validity. The love that gives life to faith in Jesus makes it impossible for his disciples to remain enclosed in a stifling individualism or withdrawn into small circles of spiritual intimacy, with no influence on social life (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 183).

Recently, we were saddened by the death of a great apostle of the poor, Jean Vanier, whose dedication opened up new ways of showing solidarity with the marginalized and working for their advancement. God gave Jean Vanier the gift of devoting his entire life to our brothers and sisters with grave disabilities, people whom society often tends to exclude. He was one of those saints “next door”; thanks to his enthusiasm, he gathered around himself great numbers of young people, men and women, who worked daily to give love and restore a smile to many vulnerable persons, offering them a true “ark” of salvation from marginalization and solitude. His witness changed the life of countless persons and helped the world to look differently at those less fortunate than ourselves. The cry of the poor was heard and produced an unwavering hope, creating visible and tangible signs of a concrete love that even today we can touch with our hands.

7. “The option for those who are least, those whom society discards” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 195) is a priority that Christ’s followers are called to pursue, so as not to impugn the Church’s credibility but to give real hope to many of our vulnerable brothers and sisters. Christian charity finds concrete expression in them, for by their compassion and their willingness to share the love of Christ with those in need, they are themselves strengthened and confirm the preaching of the Gospel.

The involvement of Christians in this World Day of the Poor and especially in the events of everyday life, goes beyond initiatives of assistance. Praiseworthy and necessary as the latter may be, they should have the goal of encouraging in everyone a greater concern for individuals in any kind of distress. “Loving attentiveness is the beginning of true concern” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 199) for the poor and the promotion of their genuine welfare. It is not easy to be witnesses of Christian hope in the context of a consumerist culture, a culture of waste concerned only for the spread of a shallow and ephemeral wellbeing. A change of mentality is needed, in order to rediscover what is essential and to give substance and verve to the preaching of the kingdom of God.

Hope is also communicated by the sense of fulfilment born of accompanying the poor not for a brief moment of enthusiasm, but through a constant commitment over time. The poor acquire genuine hope, not from seeing us gratified by giving them a few moments of our time, but from recognizing in our sacrifice an act of gratuitous love that seeks no reward.

8. I ask the many volunteers, who merit recognition for being the first to see the importance of such concern for the poor, to persevere in their dedicated service. Dear brothers and sisters, I encourage you to seek, in every poor person whom you encounter, his or her true needs, not to stop at their most obvious material needs, but to discover their inner goodness, paying heed to their background and their way of expressing themselves, and in this way to initiate a true fraternal dialogue. Let us set aside the divisions born of ideological and political positions, and instead fix our gaze on what is essential, on what does not call for a flood of words, but a gaze of love and an outstretched hand. Never forget that “the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 200).

Before all else, the poor need God and his love, made visible by “the saints next door”, people who by the simplicity of their lives express clearly the power of Christian love. God uses any number of ways and countless means to reach people’s hearts. Certainly, the poor come to us also because we give them food, but what they

really need is more than our offer of a warm meal or a sandwich. The poor need our hands, to be lifted up; our hearts, to feel anew the warmth of affection; our presence, to overcome loneliness. In a word, they need love.

9. At times, very little is needed to restore hope. It is enough to stop for a moment, smile and listen. For once, let us set statistics aside: the poor are not statistics to cite when boasting of our works and projects. The poor are persons to be encountered; they are lonely, young and old, to be invited to our homes to share a meal; men women and children who look for a friendly word. The poor save us because they enable us to encounter the face of Jesus Christ.

In the eyes of the world, it seems illogical to think that poverty and need can possess saving power. Yet that is the teaching of the Apostle, who tells us: "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:26-29). Looking at things from a human standpoint, we fail to see this saving power, but with the eyes of faith, we see it at work and experience it personally. In the heart of the pilgrim People of God there beats that saving power which excludes no one and involves everyone in a real journey pilgrimage of conversion, to recognize the poor and to love them.

10. The Lord does not abandon those who seek him and call upon his name: "He does not forget the cry of the poor" (Ps 9:12), for his ears are attentive to their voice. The hope of the poor defies deadly situations, for the poor know that they are especially loved by God, and this is stronger than any suffering or exclusion. Poverty does not deprive them of their God-given dignity; they live in the certainty that it will be fully restored to them by God himself, who is not indifferent to the lot of his lowliest sons and daughters. On the contrary, he sees their struggles and sorrows, he takes them by the hand, and he gives them strength and courage (cf. Ps 10:14). The hope of the poor is confirmed in the certainty that their voice is heard by the Lord, that in him they will find true justice, that their hearts will be strengthened and continue to love (cf. Ps 10:17).

If the disciples of the Lord Jesus wish to be genuine evangelizers, they must sow tangible seeds of hope. I ask all Christian communities, and all those who feel impelled to offer hope and consolation to the poor, to help ensure that this World Day of the Poor will encourage more and more people to cooperate effectively so that no one will feel deprived of closeness and solidarity. May you always treasure the words of the prophet who proclaims a different future: "For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings" (Mal 3:20 [4:2]).

Francis