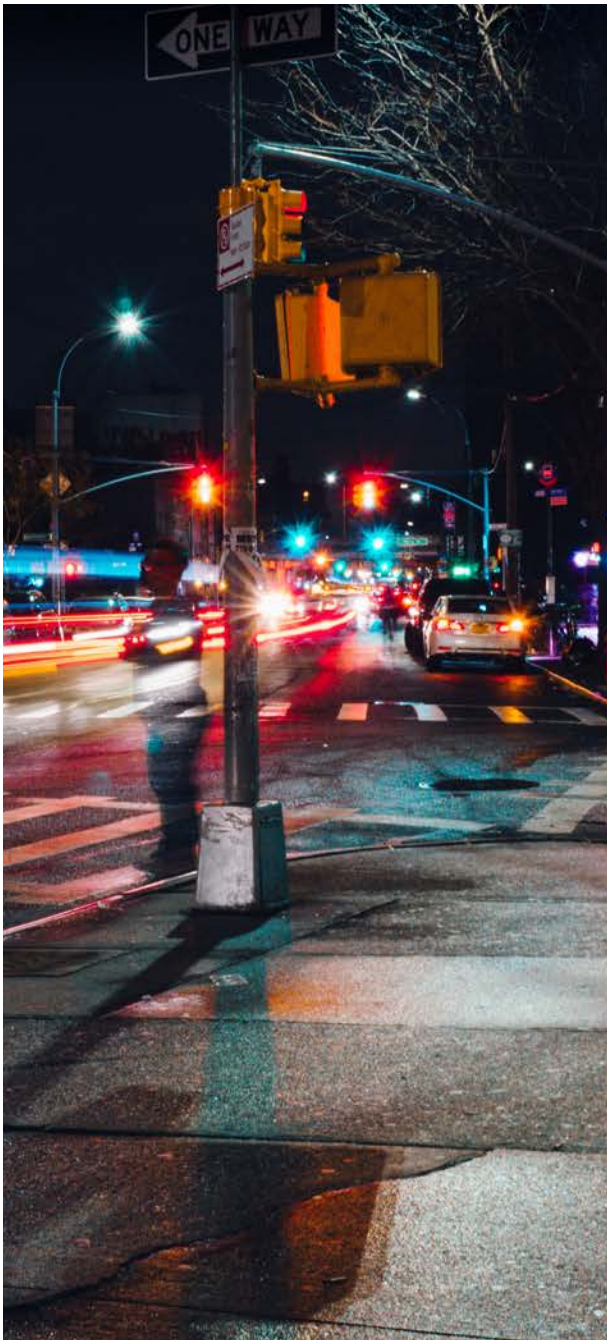


Respect Life Month

*Salvaging a
Throw-Away
Culture*



Office of Life,
Justice & Peace
Archdiocese of Los Angeles



FIRST WORLD PRIVILEGE

We are incredibly privileged to live in the United States. Have you ever questioned why you were born where and when you were? Have you ever imagined what it would be like to live in a different time or place—one without the daily luxuries we take for granted? And, while everyone's situation is unique and every family lives according to their own means, it is still safe to say that we are all participating in a very privileged society.

In the Gospel, when the rich young man approaches Jesus and asks what he must do to gain eternal life, Jesus responds that he must love God and love his neighbor. The rich young man affirms that he does both of these things. Then Jesus tells him all that remains is to go, sell all he has, and give the money to the poor. The rich young man is troubled at these words.

We can certainly understand this troubled response! Is this what is asked of each of us as people of faith? That we ought to sell all we have and give the money to the poor? All that we have? Even our iPhones and laptops and XBOX? What about just our old stuff we don't use anymore?

This teaching is very hard. What does it mean for us?

There are certainly some people who take this literally. Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta is a good example. Now, her vocation is not the vocation of every person, but we can all learn from her and incorporate elements of her love and charity into our lives.

We are called to work for justice through charity. "Charity goes beyond justice, because to love is to give, to offer what is 'mine' to the other; but it never lacks justice, which prompts us to give the other what is 'his,' what is due to him by reason of his being." Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 6.

All people of faith have the responsibility of giving of ourselves for those less fortunate because of our responsibility to respect the dignity of each person made in the image of God.

WHO AND WHAT IS THROWN-AWAY?

Pope Francis has become famous by repeating that we live in a “throw-away culture”. What does he mean by this? Most often, he uses this term to talk about people who are thrown away. Most dramatically, he speaks of the unborn who are thrown away in abortion because they have arrived at the wrong time in a woman’s life. He also speaks of the sick or elderly who are thrown away through assisted suicide by families or society who have neither the money nor the time to take care of them.

But, Pope Francis also talks about generations whose lives are thrown away by an economy that does not offer fulfilling, just-wage-earning jobs for young adults. And, he talks about our culture of waste that is so focused on consumerism that we spend all of our time and money purchasing things for ourselves without sharing with those in need. We don't realize that often our consumption and expansion has disastrous effects on the environment, which end up hurting the poor.

“Men and women are sacrificed to the idols of money and consumption.

That some homeless people freeze to death on the street, that is not news. On the other hand, a drop of 10 points in the stock markets of some cities is a tragedy. That is how people are thrown away.

We, people, are thrown away, as if we were trash.”

(Pope Francis, 05/06/18)



That’s a lot of “throwing away”! Yet, Pope Francis helps us to see that all of this is connected. A culture that encourages people to focus on themselves and personal desires (instant gratification) so much that we forget about those in need around us leads to bad personal choices and bad social policy.

What can begin with a social media habit (let’s be honest about how important it is for other people to like/follow us or to see us in a certain outfit or at a certain event) can grow into a personality focused inward, only thinking of oneself. With a lot of people acting this way, corporations begin to shift business to cater to personal wants rather than community needs. Politicians react to the growing trend, and refocus from global solidarity to individual autonomy. A chain reaction occurs.



“A better world can be built also as a result of your efforts, your desire to change and your generosity. Do not be afraid to listen to the Spirit who proposes bold choices; do not delay when your conscience asks you to take risks in following the Master. The Church also wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities and your faith; even your doubts and your criticism. Make your voice heard, let it resonate in communities and let it be heard by your shepherds of souls. St. Benedict urged the abbots to consult, even the young, before any important decision, because “the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best.” (Rule of St. Benedict, III, 3).

- Pope Francis, January 2017



“LORD, WHEN DID I SEE YOU HUNGRY?”

Christians are called to stop that chain reaction. While not everyone is asked to live as dramatically for the poor as Saint Mother Teresa, Jesus’ words, “what you did to the least of my people you did to me” applies to everyone.

Charity asks us to give of ourselves, without question, out of love for the people we encounter. Love? Yes! Whether we know a person or not, we are asked to love him or her because he or she is a reflection of the face of God.

In addition, as young Catholic leaders in the world, we are asked to participate in action that leads to authentic human development.

No matter what business or career we pursue in life, we have an obligation to help men and women all over the world live better lives. Not just materially better, but to have stronger families with intact marriages, to be allowed to practice whichever faith they choose in freedom, to have quality education for their children, and of course, to have access to nourishing food, clean water, solid housing, and reliable healthcare.



"When we handle the sick and the needy we touch the suffering body of Christ and this touch will make us heroic; it will make us forget the repugnance and the natural tendencies in us. We need the eyes of deep faith to see Christ in the broken body and dirty clothes under which the most beautiful one among the sons of men hides. We shall need the hands of Christ to touch these bodies wounded by pain and suffering."

— Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta

AUTHENTIC HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

All of these together make up authentic human development because humans are not just material—we are beings with both body and soul, and both body and soul must be protected and nurtured for true development.

Doing charity and working for justice are not something we do in addition to our practice of the Catholic faith. In fact, they are integral to it. (See Matthew 25) As Catholics, we approach the issue of helping the poor through the eyes of faith.

There are many people and organizations who work with the poor and do excellent work as humanitarians. That is, they want to help humanity for its own sake. We can work with any of these organizations and people, but our reason for helping the poor is different.

We help the poor because they are the image of Christ in our world. We follow the example of Jesus, who spent his time with the poor and the outcasts of his time. The very first pope and bishops he chose were simple fishermen, not the rich and powerful. This was intentional.



"We may think of the poor simply as the beneficiaries of our occasional volunteer work, or of impromptu acts of generosity that appease our conscience. However good and useful such acts may be for making us sensitive to people's needs and the injustices that are often their cause, they ought to lead to a true encounter with the poor and a sharing that becomes a way of life. Our prayer and our journey of discipleship and conversion find the confirmation of their evangelic authenticity in precisely such charity and sharing. This way of life gives rise to joy and peace of soul, because we touch with our own hands the flesh of Christ. If we truly wish to encounter Christ, we have to touch his body in the suffering bodies of the poor, as a response to the sacramental communion bestowed in the Eucharist. The Body of Christ, broken in the sacred liturgy, can be seen, through charity and sharing, in the faces and persons of the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters. Saint John Chrysostom's admonition remains ever timely: "If you want to honour the body of Christ, do not scorn it when it is naked; do not honour the Eucharistic Christ with silk vestments, and then, leaving the church, neglect the other Christ suffering from cold and nakedness" (Hom. in Matthaeum, 50.3: PG 58).

We are called, then, to draw near to the poor, to encounter them, to meet their gaze, to embrace them and to let them feel the warmth of love that breaks through their solitude. Their outstretched hand is also an invitation to step out of our certainties and comforts, and to acknowledge the value of poverty in itself."

-First World Day of The Poor, Pope Francis, Nov 2017

ENCOUNTER THE HOMELESS

- 1. First and foremost, it is important to treat the individuals struggling with homelessness as people.** Of course, this is already in your heart and your mind, but a good piece of advice is to be aware of your body language when you meet someone. Look each person in the eye and be mindful of not cringing, if they reach out a hand or accidentally graze your sleeve. No matter the struggle a person may go through, they are, before, during, and after their homelessness, just another human being on this planet, worthy of interaction.
- 2. Go ahead and start a normal conversation.** You may ask them about their story, but be prepared if they don't want to share details with a stranger. Ask them where they are from originally or, if they indicate they are a veteran, thank them for their service. You don't have to enter into a long conversation but a small exchange may brighten their day and yours.
- 3. Be respectful of boundaries when there are children involved.** Defer to the adults before offering a child food, toys or even a shake of the hand. Smiles are always welcome.
- 4. It is a personal decision whether you feel comfortable offering money directly to an individual struggling with homelessness.** If you do, don't tell them how to use it. If this is a concern, check to see if there is a shop or restaurant near by; you can ask the family if they would like a meal, and then get it for them. A safe and effective way to help is by making larger donations directly to an established charity that supports homeless families, such as The Dream Center.
- 5. Familiarize yourself with the homelessness resources in your area** so when you are speaking with the family you can direct them to the nearest shelter or soup kitchen. They may be passing through and are unaware that there is a resource only a few blocks away. A simple, "How are you doing? However, if they say they aren't interested, don't push them. Some people who have struggled with homelessness for some time may have had negative experiences in shelters and prefer to be out in the open. No matter what the reply, keep the interaction upbeat and respectful!
- 6. Another easy way to give someone a helping hand is to create some simple "blessing bags"** and have them on hand as an alternative to monetary donations. Blessing bags include small items that make the struggle of homelessness a tiny bit easier for the individual, such as socks, toothpaste, packs of peanut butter crackers, or lip balm.
- 7. One final tip: Always think first about your safety.** Never offer rides in your car to someone you don't know, and never stand with anyone in a poorly lit place. If you feel unsafe, don't worry about being rude. Just leave the situation. Your safety is a top priority always.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is your definition of “poor”?
- Where do you see people you consider poor?
- Why was Jesus, and why is the Church, so committed to helping the poor?
- What does Pope Francis mean by a “throwaway culture”? Who is thrown away?
- How do you describe human development? What are important components?



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