

Statements on poverty

It is not from your own possessions that you are bestowing alms on the poor, you are but restoring to them what is theirs by right. For what was given to everyone for the use of all, you have taken for your exclusive use. The earth belongs not to the rich, but to everyone. Thus, far from giving lavishly, you are but paying part of your debt.

St Ambrose

It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life, which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards 'having' rather than 'being'.

Centesimus Annus, # 36

Its [the Church's] desire is that the poor should rise above poverty and wretchedness, and should better their condition in life; and for this it strives.

Rerum Novarum, # 23

When there is a question of protecting the rights of individuals, the poor and helpless have a claim to special consideration. The rich population has many ways of protecting themselves, and stands less in need of help.

Rerum Novarum # 29

While an immense mass of people still lack the absolute necessities of life, some, even in less advanced countries, live sumptuously or squander wealth. Luxury and misery rub shoulders. While the few more enjoy very great freedom of choice, the many are deprived of almost all possibility of acting on their own initiative and responsibility, and often subsist in living and working conditions unworthy of human beings.

Gaudium et Spes # 63

The principle of participation leads us to the conviction that the most appropriate and fundamental solutions to poverty will be those that enable people to take control of their own lives.

Economic Justice for All, # 188

"If someone who has the riches of this world sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17)
It is well known how strong were the words used by the Fathers of the Church to describe the proper attitude of persons who possess anything towards persons in need. To quote Saint Ambrose: "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich."
Populorum Progressio # 23

The Church continually combats all forms of poverty, because as Mother she is concerned that each and every person be able to live fully in dignity as a child of God.
Pope John Paul II, Lenten message, 1998

"The Church's love for the poor ... is a part of her constant tradition." This love is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, of the poverty of Jesus, and of his concern for the poor.
Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2444

I exhort every Christian, in this Lenten season, to evidence his personal conversion through a concrete sign of love toward those in need, recognising in this person the face of Christ and repeating, as if almost face to face: "I was poor, I was marginalised ... and you welcomed me."
Pope John Paul II, Lenten message, 1998

We begin with the scandal of poverty. Half the world's population, some three billion people, live on two dollars or less a day. Of these 1.2 billion people, 20 per cent of the world's population, live in extreme poverty on less than one dollar a day. This poverty occurs in a world of plenty, in a global economy capable of satisfying all the demands of its richest consumers but seemingly and scandalously unable to meet the needs of vast numbers of the poorest, whose needs ought to be at the heart of public policy. That is why poverty is the proper starting point for all discussions about aid, debt cancellation and trade.
Catholic Bishops of England, Scotland and Wales, 2003

Love for the poor is incompatible with immoderate love of riches or their selfish use.
Catechism of the Catholic Church: 2445

People who are poor and vulnerable have a special place in Catholic teaching: this is what is meant by the "preferential option for the poor". Scripture tells us we will be judged by our response to the "least of these", in which we see the suffering face of Christ himself. Humanity is one family despite differences of nationality or race. The poor are not a burden; they are our brothers and sisters. Christ taught us that our neighbourhood is universal: so loving our neighbour has global dimensions. It demands fair international trading policies, decent treatment of refugees, support for the UN and control of the arms trade. Solidarity with our neighbour is also about the promotion of equality of rights and equality of opportunities; hence we must oppose all forms of discrimination and racism.

*Bishops of England and Wales,
The Common Good, 1996*

Faced with the tragic situation of persistent poverty which afflicts so many people in our world, how can we fail to see that the quest for profit at any cost and the lack of effective responsible concern for the common good have concentrated immense resources in the hands of a few while the rest of humanity suffers in poverty and neglect? Our goal should not be the benefit of a privileged few, but rather the improvement of the living conditions of all.

*Pope John Paul II,
Lenten message 2003*

The solidarity which binds humanity together as members of a common family makes it impossible for wealthy nations to look with indifference upon the hunger, misery and poverty of other nations whose citizens are unable to enjoy even elementary human rights. The nations of the world are becoming more and more dependent on one another and it will not be possible to preserve a lasting peace so long as glaring economic and social imbalances persist.

Pope John XXIII, Mater et Magistra, 157

Countless millions are starving, countless families are destitute, countless men are steeped in ignorance; countless people need schools, hospitals, and homes worthy of the name. In such circumstances, we cannot tolerate public and private expenditures of a wasteful nature; we cannot but condemn lavish displays of wealth by nations or individuals; we cannot approve a debilitating arms race. It is our solemn duty to speak out against them.

Populorum Progressio # 53

It is the person who is motivated by genuine love, more than anyone else, who pits his intelligence against the problems of poverty, trying to uncover the causes and looking for effective ways of combating and overcoming them.
Populorum Progressio # 75

As followers of Christ, we are challenged to make a fundamental 'option for the poor' – to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenceless, to impact on the poor.....As Christians, we are called to respond to the needs of all our brothers and sisters, but those with the greatest needs require the greatest response.

Economic Justice for All # 16

As individuals and as a nation, therefore, we are called to make a fundamental 'option for the poor'. The obligation to evaluate social and economic activity from the viewpoint of the poor and the powerless arises from the radical command to love one's neighbour as one's self. Those who are marginalized and whose rights are denied have privileged claims if society is to provide justice for all. This obligation is deeply rooted in Christian belief.

Economic Justice for All, # 87

The obligation to provide justice for all means that the poor have the single most urgent economic claim on the conscience of the nation.

Economic Justice for All # 86

The primer purpose of this special commitment to the poor is to enable them to become active participants in the life of society. It is to enable all persons to share in and contribute to the common good. The 'option for the poor', therefore, is not an adversarial slogan that pits one group or class against another. Rather it states that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community. The extent of their suffering is a measure of how far we are from being a true community of persons. These wounds will be healed only by greater solidarity with the poor and among the poor themselves.

Economic Justice for All # 88