
Beccegato (Caritas): "Poverty is not only an economic problem. It is a multi-dimensional phenomenon"

"On this Day we are urged "not to stand idly by, not to remain indifferent, for it is always possible to do something, something that can bring comfort and hope to the people we meet and who are experiencing situations of suffering and loneliness". This is the meaning and the heart of Pope Francis' [Message for the Sixth World Day of the Poor](#), which he established in 2017, at the end of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. On this Day we reflect on the many forms of modern-day poverty, which extends far beyond the opportunity for prayer and reflection by experts alone. Instead, it is an explicit invitation to overturn egotistical patterns, reconsider our lifestyles and forge new relationships with the socially excluded. SIR discussed the matter with **Paolo Beccegato**, Vice Deputy Director and Head of Caritas Italy's International Department **In his Message for the Sixth World Day of the Poor, Pope Francis described the Day as "a healthy challenge, helping us to reflect on our style of life and on the many forms of poverty all around us." Is this correct?** Most definitely, and it is based on a twofold necessity. The first stems from the Pope's observations in 2016 when, at the end of the Extraordinary Year of Mercy, he remarked that something in the world was wrong in this regard. A more in-depth analysis, looking at the numbers and listening to a few testimonies shows that the poor are many, and their numbers are growing (in Italy, in Europe and in the world). They are knocking at our doors, but they are often turned back. The second necessity is of a theological, ecclesiological, biblical nature. The poor occupy a central place in God's heart and for this reason they deserve a very special attention from everyone, no one excluded. **How many poor people are there in the world today?** The pandemic, followed by the war in Ukraine, gave rise to a dramatic increase in the number of poor people in the world, although this trend has been in progress for many years. The figures are impressive, but they don't tell the whole story. With regard to world hunger, for example, after years of moderate optimism the numbers are reaching alarming levels again. An ever-growing number of men, women and children are suffering from hunger and malnutrition: as many as 820 million, one ninth of the world population. And the numbers are growing steadily. The climate emergency and the grain crisis due to the war in Ukraine played a role in triggering this growth because they affected access to food globally, with a severe impact on some countries in particular. **Which areas have been most affected?** The situation should be seen from a different angle, that of the war. In fact, war is the main cause of poverty in some parts of the world. The axiom "poor country-war country" is realistic. High levels of internal tensions, ongoing or recently-ended conflicts are the root causes of hunger and poverty, both in Africa and in other parts of the world. Sadly, the number of countries at war is also increasing. In the last year alone, the number of armed conflicts in the world rose by 12%, not counting the war in Ukraine, which significantly worsened the existing negative trend. **Are there other kinds of poverty besides food poverty?** Poverty is not only related to economic aspects, it is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. For example, there is a steady emergence of 'social poverty', which affects most poor people in every part of the world. These include economically poor persons living in a constant condition of marginalisation and hardship inside their respective countries, hence in a state of continuous suffering. So-called "educational poverty", caused by a shortage of school facilities and teachers, and by the fact that many families have no way of enrolling their children in school, is also growing. Finally, "health poverty", is experienced by persons with poor access to public and private health care services. Households risk spending a bigger portion of their shrunken income for health, and people tend to postpone necessary medical interventions until their financial situation improves. I would like to mention one last finding concerning the number of persons who, for the above-mentioned reasons or due to extraordinary climate-related or natural disasters, are in need of emergency aid. This figure is somewhat connected to the state of health of the world. It is an alarming figure that has grown by 40% in the last year alone. There are approximately 235 million people whose livelihoods depend on

the support of the international community. To make matters worse, the international community - i.e. all national governments - made known that it will only be able to respond to the needs of 160 million. This means that the remaining 75 million rely on the support of civil society, i.e. non-profit and church associations, NGOs, missionaries, individual citizens and whoever else can contribute and provide assistance to repair these vast cracks in the fabric of humanity. **What can be done to ensure that the fight against poverty does not turn into welfare dependency?** The question is extremely complex, nobody has a magic wand nor does the same answer apply to every situation. The development objectives are numerous, multi-faceted, interconnected. Development is multi-dimensional. Pope Francis calls for the global development of people and nations, but this is at odds with inequality, an age-old problem in developing countries and a growing problem in our Western societies. In fact, economic development not always coincides with the social growth of the population. Indeed, in most cases, the higher the GDP, the greater the inequalities. The bottom line, however, is to help impoverished societies as much as possible while preventing assistance from turning into dependency – and this applies to both “large” and “small” projects - with the aim of empowering local communities. It depends not only on who is receiving the aid, but also on how the aid is provided. **How is the "love for the poor" put into practice today?** The approach must be at least twofold. First and foremost, a grassroots approach involving civil society. One such example is the mass anti-Vietnam war movement sparked in the United States that forced policymakers to back down and put an end to the conflict. An abused, manipulated country, constantly depleted of its resources due to inequitable contracts, is a country living in the throes of poverty that will never be able to recover. The most glaring example is the burden of “debt” that oppresses and crushes poor countries' economies, and with it the lives of its citizens. In short, a bottom-up movement that involves each one of us, and a top-down movement that should involve the governments of rich countries and turn their attention to the development and growth of the poor ones. Only this twofold approach, this pincer movement, will possibly deliver a fatal blow to world poverty.

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