



Christian Education

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From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
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Title: Blessed Are the Poor – Why?
Comment: A sermon delivered on All Saints Day November 3 2002 dealing with the subject of poverty in the Philippines, the gulf between the rich and the poor and the Christian approach to the attitudinal divide that considers poverty a blessing from God.
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Blessed Are the Poor – Why?

It is not often that I make reference to newspaper articles in my sermons, but I would like to do so today and mention an editorial in last Friday's *Philippine Star*. It was written to Teodoro Benigno with the provocative title, "Why We're Losers." Benigno fearlessly takes on part of the myth of the Filipino as Supernatural Being by critically examining the caricature of national response to adversity: to sing and to pray. The editor adds a third typical response: to ignore. How else, he asks, can one explain the near indifference to the finding by Transparency International that the Philippines is the 11th most corrupt country in the world; or the "stoic forbearance about the squalor, the mounting garbage, and the murderous criminals who [penetrate] the neighborhood[s]."

Benigno continues with a comparison of this country with others here in Asia and wonders why places like China, South Korea, Thailand and even Malaysia were able to pull themselves out of "millennial poverty in just 30 years" but not these blessed isles. The writer also expresses bafflement at some of his educated friends who take Philippine poverty for granted. Some, like Roman Catholic bishop Soc Villegas are quoted as saying that "poverty must be loved."

It is then that Benigno writes something that he must know is a misquote of Scripture as he says, "Blessed are the *poor* for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven." He concludes, "All that spiritual jazz really, truly spins me around like a drunken top."

Indeed, that kind of "spiritual jazz" does it to me, too. Whenever I see my rich neighbors leave either Forbes Park church and then stop to give a couple pesos to a beggar in danger of life and palsied limb at the EDSA traffic lights; whenever I see newspaper photos of prominent politicians at mass before they begin their daily efforts to keep themselves in power; whenever the Cardinal, (or one of his spokesmen) yet again pronounces against effective birth control in a land expected to hit 100 million inhabitants by 2010, then, I too spin like a top inside and I wonder what God must think of this country as the self-proclaimed "only Christian nation in Asia."

Mr. Benigno must be receiving lots of angry letters by now for his courageous editorial, and there may be some angry thoughts here and now for my having quoted them, especially since it is a white voice that is repeating them, and the voice of a guest alien at that. Yet, our Christianity makes us both citizens of the world and

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“incarnated” where we are now. The role of the Church is not to roll over and play dead in the face of hypocrisy and corruption. Indeed, I am happy to see that the Episcopal Church in the US and the Church of England, too, has gone on record as being against precipitous military action against Iraq. So too here, where, if our independence from the majority denomination in these islands can give us anything, it is objectivity and perspective. And unless the Episcopal Church in the Philippines is also knee-deep in corruption and scandal, then it ought to have the courage of its convictions and to both preach and live what Scripture and our Tradition really say to this country here and now.

The verse that Mr. Benigno misquoted (for example,) is from today’s Gospel account of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. It actually says, of course, “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Each of the kind of person our Lord mentions in this famous passage might be incorrectly imagined as part of the great, unwashed throng of the poor and needy who are in immediate need of actual, physical help: the poor, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst. And yet each of these categories is also, (and primarily) a spiritual one since the hunger and thirst we are told about are for righteousness, not food and drink. If we want to find praise for the hungry and those who are in need, we’ll have to look elsewhere, and probably not in the Bible.

Indeed, brothers and sisters, there is nothing *blessed* about the poor. Our image of them, especially for those of us from the wealthy West, is more often taken from Hollywood than from Holy Writ. There is nothing automatically *noble* about the poor, either. They are most often so desperate for the necessities of life that the hope of any remuneration at all is often enough to buy their votes or their participation in criminal acts. The poor, in short, are not morally different from the rich with perhaps the sole exception of not having great amounts of wealth to misuse. That distinction, however, goes by the boards when their children are sold into prostitution and medicines are hawked for drugs. No, I (for one) have no more illusions about poverty or the poor who suffer from it, and since I’ve come to live in the Philippines, I must say that it is the poverty that I see and Philippine inability to address it that maddens me, and I do get angry when religion, especially my Christian religion, is used as an excuse or a mask behind which to hide.

What does all of this have to do with All Saints, the “officially religious” holiday period we’ve been celebrating for the past three days? The answer is that commemorating the saints ought not to be only a time for thinking about a heaven to come in the future, (as traditionally approved as that may be,) nor for feeling nostalgic about our “dear departed”. It is also for looking at the saints as valiant heroes and champions of a life that did not compromise its beliefs even in the face of death. Imagining a rather boring group of pious folk floating on clouds does nothing to honor the sacrifices made by the saints when their life in Christ came into conflict with their life in the world, nor does it accurately address the real mystery of what eternal life in the presence of God must be like. This is meant to inspire us not just to “think holy thoughts” and to pray, but to live courageously and with hope. As a recent book review put it: “The real struggle in the world today may not be between good and evil but between hope and evil.” Terrorists, snipers, and suicide bombers are hopeless people not necessarily evil ones.

God tells us repeatedly in Scripture that, although our personal faith is half of our spiritual life, it is *only* half of it since a faith devoid of physical manifestation is dead. We are told by Christ himself in the Gospels that it is *what we do* that best shows our willingness to follow him. Those asked to give away all that they have weren’t to burn it in sacrifice, but to give it to those who were in need. Feeding the hungry is not a matter of not eating meat on Fridays in Lent, but of doing one’s part to see

Holy Trinity Church, Forbes Park, Makati

that food is available to more people and more of the time. Those whom we can call saints did things like that. They may not have individually remade the world as a better place to live, but they were part of the movement for change that took its lead from Jesus Christ. And whatever their spiritual accomplishments, however close to God they became in their lives of prayer and study, it was the love of the saints for their fellow human beings that was remembered by others and it was that that has given them the title 'saint' and the fact that their lives gave others hope.

What is noble, what is blessed about the poor? Exactly the same that is blessed about the rich. It is the fact Jesus died for them. Each beggar tapping your car window, each cripple crawling through busy traffic, each dirty child with a handful of sampaguitas is a soul and body loved individually by God and worthy of your attention and your resolve to do something about the world that has made them the way they are. This is not done by giving individual pesos, (especially if it is done not out of concern but of guilt,) rather it is done by giving time and support for those projects and programs that have hope to really do something (in addition to making our consciences feel better.)

There are projects, important hopeful projects, underway that are actively supported by our Filipino and foreign chambers of commerce and professional benevolence organizations. And those of you who are citizens of this country and can vote can work politically to make a change that expresses not just religious fatalism but Christian hope. These are calls to be courageous; to see beyond our own needs and those of our immediate families and to realize the bond that holds all Filipinos, and indeed all of humanity together. When this is done because one realizes that all humanity is called to new life in Christ and that God wills a better, fuller, safer, and more compassionate life for us all, then these efforts become the mark not only of responsible citizenship, but also of sainthood in the truest sense of the word.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we are given a list of many heroes of the Old Testament faith who are meant to inspire even Christians who are their new spiritual descendents. "...Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..." On these days when we think not only of those whom we hope to see again, and of those whose especially worthy examples are meant to inspire us, the author of that passage does not tell us to kneel and pray and mourn, but to get on our feet and run the race: not only to think, but to do. And there is so much we must do; thank God we're not alone to do it, that we have that "great cloud" cheering us on and offering the world not "a pie in the sky", but a realistic and a holy hope.

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