

DESTINATARI PARTICOLARI DELL'AZIONE PASTORALE DELLA CHIESA I POVERI E GLI SCLUSI

INTERVIEW with Cardinal Tagle

The Holy Father, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, just like any papal document, operates on different levels. There is such a thing as *evangelical poverty*. The poverty of someone who chooses to be poor because of a spiritual motivation like, I follow Jesus and I choose to be poor with him and like him. And that is a type of poverty that is liberating, fulfilling and even joyful. But, in our world right now, we also see a different type of poverty. A poverty which has always been present in the world. It is the dehumanizing poverty. Poverty that is not chosen by others but imposed on them by persons, other human beings who do not care, or by a system that prevents them from acquiring a decent human life. So this type of dehumanizing poverty, in fact, legitimated systematically by a financial or economic system that is unfair, without cultures, societies, politics, and unfortunately even by religious peoples. This type of system produces exclusion. People who are not only put on the margins but are outcasts. So they don't belong. They don't exist. They don't have a share in the goods of the earth. And economic marginalization brings with it also social marginalization. You have no voice in society (cultural marginalization).

People would say that your values don't matter. The values of the victors, those in the center, are imposed on you, etc. Unfortunately, I think Pope Francis is quite right that people in the existential peripheries (those who are outcasts economically, socially, politically, culturally) also are forgotten when it comes to the pastoral care of the different religious communities. And so, we, in the Christian Church, know what liberating poverty is. Being poor in and with Jesus. We are called to be in communion with those in existential poverty. This reality we see very much in different parts of the world and my mission as president of *Caritas Internationalis* has brought me to different places and has offered me some encounters, personal encounters with people who are in those existential peripheries. They're quite dramatic. Some of them are in refugee camps. Some of them you find already quite settled in places that had welcomed them but still wounded by memories of violence and the loss of their heritage, etc. And it disturbs you. And I ask, where is humanity? How could human beings do this to other human beings? And, how do these people, who are in the margins and even pushed further out, how do they preserve their sense of being human? If you live in the midst of trash, would you start looking at yourself as trash? When you know that you do not matter to society, will you start believing that you really have no worth? And that is why *Evangelii Gaudium* enters. We, who have experienced a poor God in Jesus Christ and we who have promised to follow him, poor and in the spirit of service, are called to be one with them. And this is not some sort of an invention of Pope Francis. The preferential option for the poor has been part of Church language these past 60 years. But this just to clarify that



preferential option for the poor does not mean that we will divide the Church. Divide in the sense that, while we opt for the poor, we are neglecting those who are not materially poor, those who are not economically, socially, culturally poor. Because in the end, all of us are poor and our option for the poor is our option for all humanity. The poor have only one wealth and that is their being human. And to opt for them is to opt for naked/raw humanity. Very often, if you are wealthy, people befriend you, people respect you. Beware! It is not your humanity that they are respecting. Very often, it is your wealth, your property, your name, your honor, your prestige. And when all of these is gone and when you are barely human being, you lose your friends. So, option for the poor is option for all human beings. It teaches us to go to the core. You love people not because of what they possess. You love people because they are children of God. So option for the poor teaches us universal love.

If we focus on *Caritas*, first of all, we have to be reminded that, the so-called service of charity is not some sort of extracurricular activity. Here, the basic insight of Pope Benedict XVI contained in *Deus Caritas Est* is essential. He says that the Church, (the identity, the nature of the Church), rests on three poles like a tripod. First, is the Word of God (*kerygma, mártir*). Second is Sacrament (*prayer, leitourgia*). And third is the service of charity (*diakonia*). Those three must interpenetrate each other. I cannot say I will build the Church only on the Word of God and forget Eucharist, forget sacraments and forget charity. No! The full nature of the Church involves the three in interpenetration. So, the work of *Caritas*, as I said, is not just some sort of an NGO, a service work. It expresses the nature of the Church. Having said that, the work of *Caritas* operates on different levels. The most obvious is humanitarian service especially when there are emergency situations and we know: ecological, environmental, natural disasters and human made disasters. They have been producing millions of people in need. And so, their neediness evokes from us our response of love. But *Caritas* also does advocacy work: saving lives; being the voice of the poor; and trying to influence like global policies through networking with people so that lives would be saved and poverty could be eliminated, hopefully eliminated. And third, is also the formation of communities that would respond in the spirit of communion and solidarity.

And so, the work of *Caritas* addresses emergency needs but also addressing the roots of some of the problems and trying to form the communities that would help one another and influence also policies, international policies.

The first that is important and this is what we, as clergy and even the lay leaders had been founding upon composed like an antiphon or refrain is, **first**, personal encounter and presence. Because the people in the peripheries feel that they are forgotten, they are far placed, they are not present in the consciousness of people. So the personal contact and the assurance that they are remembered, that they exist is already a fundamental thing. The **second** is trying to provide to the best as we could the pastoral care. Very often they say that the Church's pastoral services are available to the middle class and those in the upper echelon of society like even marriage counseling, counseling for the youth... They say that is the middle class thing. How come the poor who need, who need more of this type of guidance should be deprived of that? So, programs to provide them pastoral accompaniment. **Third** is,



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providing for their emergency needs like feeding programs, medical assistance... We have clinics. Every vicariate in the Archdiocese of Manila has a clinic for the poor and now, thanks to benefactors, we have two mobile clinics to attend to the poor. If the poor could not go to the hospital and we bring the hospital, the mobile clinics to them. We also have education and livelihood so that you don't consider the work of charity simply as "welfareism." We have been accused of that. "Oh, you maintain the status quo! You help the poor and they remain poor." You also equipped them through scholarships and livelihood skills, capacitating for the poor. Lately, also, we have also have been intensifying the ministry for the integrity of creation. For we know that, if the ecological crisis is not addressed, the poor are the ones who suffer most. Lately, we have been engaging in parish-based programs for rehabilitating drug users so that through counseling, catecheses, family counseling, education and the formation of communities, we could protect lives, we could protect the young. We have also embarked on the formation of the village, the "barangay," so-called leaders, since they are in direct contact with the poor. So, how do we equipped them with the social teachings of the Church and also the police force? Since they are there to help secure the community, then, we hope that they could have the proper values, human and spiritual values so that they could assist the community. So, these are a few things that we are doing but, doing them only with one motivation: to serve and to bring the love of Christ where it is needed.

That is a very beautiful question and I hope, that area could be explored more and more. But based on my limited experience, first, when we talk earlier about personal encounter with the poor and assuring presence. You know, many, even among the poor, have access to social communications and this is one mode by which we could be present to people. Physical presence, face-to-face presence is irreplaceable, but in the world of Media, one way by which we can be present is through effective use of social communications. So, the first challenge is, for me, how could we make our presence felt using the means of communication right now? And I have to stress that because, very often, when I look at media people, you could see that things are orchestrated, the angling, strategy, etc. while they might be helpful. I think, what people need is *authenticity*. Do you come across as an authentic person bringing an authentic presence? People cannot be fooled. People know whether your presence is being orchestrated or packaged. And for me, people who are well versed with virtual or in virtual reality should know that is also *authentic*. So how to use social media in projecting an authentic presence of individual person and of the Church? The second thing is the Media. When I was much younger and my earlier initiation into the world of Media, I used to think of it simply as set of means to communicate. But with the fast, the swift development and changes, social communications has become a world in itself. It has been a culture in itself. It has its own language. It has its own worldview. It has shaped a new humanity. It has a new set of values, a new way of thinking, a new way of connecting... So, social media right now is not just a set of means to connect with people. It is a world to be evangelized. And we hope that those in the media apostolate would be conscious of that. We are not only evangelizing people through Media, but is the world that we are entering: the world of media. How is it evangelized? How is it becoming more and more the presence of the Good News?

We affirm with the Gospel message and with the tradition of the Church, in the social teachings of the Church and recently, in these past years, vigorously affirmed by Pope Francis that, yes, God has a special love for the poor not because they are more spiritual, because more morally upright, but because they need God and they need all of us.

But let me end this interview by saying, as we go to the peripheries, as we go to the people who are considered marginal and outcast at the moment, let us not go to them from a posture of superiority. As it is a temptation to think that I am in the center going to the periphery. When in fact, maybe they are the center. They should be the center. And maybe we, who think are in the center, we are in another periphery. We have isolated ourselves from the real center. We need to learn from those in the peripheries. We don't go to them simply as bearers of the Good News. We need to hear the Good News from them. They are a special evangelizing group, a community of evangelizers. I have learned valuable lessons about true faith, true love, true hope from them and it puzzles me no end. How could people who have nothing, who should be the most angry people in the world, the most bitter people in the world, how come their joys and smiles are genuine? How come their generosity is not made up? How come they survive? Whereas those who are in the so-called center of society, in the slightest headache, they gave up. The slightest frustration they think of suicide. Who is in the center? Who is in the periphery? Those in the existential peripheries, they might be the true center and we go to them to learn also from them.

For those in the biblical apostolate and that means the whole Christian community, for Christian community is a community that is generated by faith as a response to the living Word of God, I have one request. Vatican II already stated this and it was affirmed by Pope Benedict after the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God in his exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, the Word of God must animate our spiritual life, pastoral life and missionary life. Very often, we plan our pastoral approaches. We engage in so much planning about our missionary approaches and endeavors. And that is good, very good! But the question is, what animates it? Is it the word of God? Is it our immersion in the Word of God that gives us the intuition to respond pastorally and with the sense of mission to the realities that we see. Let us not make the Word of God simply a title to some of our statements. Very often what happens is we have already drawn up our plans and before publishing it we say, oh let us look for a biblical text to introduce it. No! You begin with the Word of God and let the Word of God guide us in our choices, pastoral and missionary choices.