

Catholic Allies in Truth

WHAT CAUSES POVERTY?

by David Rippe

Over the centuries, we who live comfortable lives have looked with pity, indifference and sometimes disdain at the poor. "How did they get that way?" we ask. Actually, poverty is the default condition for humankind. We all have something of a common starting point in that we come into the world naked, helpless and completely dependent on others. As we grow, our basic needs become more sophisticated than the infant's simple requests to be fed, held and kept warm. But when the needs aren't met, their absence is just as strongly felt. Some are able to avoid or overcome deprivation during their lives; others, for various reasons, aren't.

Globally, material poverty has diverse roots. Millions live in corners of the world where, due to adverse environmental conditions, a life of comfort simply isn't possible. For centuries, humans have lurched from famine to famine in drought zones and have struggled with meager food supplies. In the short term, unexpected events - hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, tsunamis - happen in various parts of the world every year creating new poverty and making existing systemic poverty worse.

In densely populated tropical zones, contaminated water and insect-spread disease (e.g., malaria) unnecessarily shorten human life spans and diminish what people could otherwise accomplish to help themselves.

Poverty is often fueled by ideology. In the 20th century, totalitarian socialist governments in the Soviet Union and its eastern European satellites, as well as in China, Nazi Germany, southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America presided over the premature and often grisly deaths of 100 million people and rendered millions more wanting for the basic comforts of life after their freedom and property were torn from them.

When civil wars erupt, poverty flourishes. Hundreds of thousands lose their homes and belongings and are sent fleeing to refugee camps. Under the corrupt or unstable governments that often take over, survivors' property is confiscated. Access to future education and technological

advancements are impeded by warlords and power-hungry dictators governing by tight control and arrogating natural resources and even foreign aid to themselves for their own political protection.

Similarly, in a battle against modernity, antiquated cultural and religious traditions in Asia, especially in the Middle East, hold millions in poverty by impeding progress, oppressing women and exporting terrorism to other nations. In Africa, cultural traditions that impose no stigma on promiscuous sexual behavior lead to deadly AIDS epidemics which orphan millions more.

In America, poverty has a unique face and set of causes. The oft-repeated narrative that U.S. poverty is the product of greed, bigotry, racism, and corporate profiteering misses the mark. While all these things have unquestionably contributed to poverty at one time or another, for more than half a century the main driver of poverty in the U.S. has been secular liberalism or progressivism, as it's often called, exemplified in irresponsible self-absorbed personal behavior and the government social policies it spawns.

Drug and alcohol abuse, unwed motherhood, refusal to work, sexual promiscuity, dropping out of school, reckless spending, criminal activity - all are escape behaviors and proven fast-tracks to a life of poverty. But whatever we reward, we get more of. For decades, attitudes and government policies that not only coddle but encourage irresponsible behavior have led the U.S. incrementally on a path to establishment of a massive permanent welfare state - one that functions as a poverty incubator and a black hole for human freedom.

Living standards in the U.S. were already rising steadily by the mid-1960s when President Lyndon Johnson launched his War on Poverty and Great Society programs. Ironically, the overall effect of these programs, combined with the concurrent sexual revolution, was to halt the decline of poverty and maintain it in a range between 11% and 15%, where it remains today. With social programs functioning as work disincentives, unemployed, under-educated, unwed teenage mothers soon became the new heads of households—and being only marginally if at all employable, many made welfare a career. Anyway, what was their incentive to work

full time, marry or get schooling when a benevolent, paternalistic government was there to take care of them, albeit at a subsistence level?

Finding a good paycheck in America's increasingly high-tech economy requires skills that can't be learned from dropping out of school. A substandard education is a sure route to poverty. In many parts of the U.S., public school teachers unions, intent on preserving their education monopoly, have rabidly fought school voucher proposals. Vouchers, which would let parents send students to charter or parochial schools, would offer options of sanctuary and a decent education to poor children stuck in crime-ridden inner-city schools. But due to opposition from unions and the liberal politicians they support, these children have little chance of getting a high quality education which would allow them to find employment and escape poverty.

The problems presented by a marginally employable workforce are compounded by "progressive" attitudes about work itself. God gives each of us unique potential and talents to be employed in the building of His kingdom. For this reason, work not only enables us to provide for ourselves and our families, it is also ennobling. But the American work ethic has been eroded by laziness, self-absorption and the arrogant idea that someone else owes us a living. When employers have difficulty finding prospective hires that can even pass a drug test, it speaks volumes about the value we place on work.

The title of a recent article on a Christian website asked: *What Can We Learn From The Occupy Wall Street Crowd?* The answer should be obvious. If you are unwilling to contribute anything to your community other than to damage public property and make messes for others to clean up, you, yourself, have become a root cause of poverty.

Secular influence has long dominated the media and entertainment industries, glorifying cohabitation, homosexuality and extramarital sex, and encouraging pornographers to push the envelope. These toxins combine to de-emphasize the importance of marriage and family as does the feminist movement which leads women to think of themselves as victims in need of liberation from the oppression of domestic life. The spread of no-fault divorce facilitated break-ups, further contributing to

the idea that marriage is neither a serious nor spiritual contract. That 40% of all U.S. infants are now born to unmarried women (it was only around 5% in 1960) should be a cause for alarm since it bears serious repercussions for American society. The facts are undeniable. Children from fatherless homes don't fare as well in school and are far more likely than children with fathers not only to grow up in poverty but also to spread it through involvement in gang activity and crime.

Yet progressivism's orchestrated assault on America continues. The Obama administration's health care mandate requiring Catholic nonprofits to provide services related to abortion, contraception and sterilization in their employee health plans has forced the Church to draw a line in the sand. Closure of Catholic hospitals and social service agencies would be a devastating blow to the poor, but would be necessary if Church agencies were otherwise forced to operate under secular ideals. Progressives don't care and are willing to risk it to impose their values on society.

This attitude, shared by many (even in the Church) who consider themselves on the vanguard of the social justice movement, is evidence that poverty in America is not merely a socioeconomic condition but a symptom of a much more sinister and serious problem: denial of the truth.

In observing the various secular forms of escape, e.g., the subordination of human life to the whim of convenience; the enslavement of human freedom to the largesse of government and the captivity of drugs; the devaluing of marriage and family; the normalization of sexual promiscuity; and the phobic responses of people to the very truths which would liberate them, we can clearly see the spiritual void in which we have built a corresponding foundation of material poverty.

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