

**The Poor in Latin America:
A Testimony of Suffering and Hope**

What does it mean to be poor and how do the poor survive in Latin America?

To be poor in Latin America is to live in a system of poverty and misery, even to live on the brink of utter misery and death.

To be poor in Latin America is to live in a world of suffering, misery, violence, injustice and death. This is the concrete, visible reality experienced throughout our world, not just in isolated incidents. The so-called first world also experiences undeniable symptoms of deterioration of the quality of life of its people. However, it is clear that the people of the two-thirds world suffer more harshly and intensely the consequences of human ambition, of sinful structures and of today's domineering social, economic and political systems.

We live in a world where social, economic and political systems create injustice, violence, hunger, misery and death.

Poverty in Latin America is, in reality, a question of history, structure and culture, inter-connected ever since the beginning of the conquest with black and indigenous slavery and a perverse economic system. Because of that, in recent decades the rate of the impoverishment of our people has accelerated from one of misery to one of utter misery.

The actual social, political and economic system is oriented towards making money, not on capital investment. At the same time, the power of the state is used to support the policies of a market economy, favoring those people who have

resources to the detriment of those who lack them. This system oppresses the poorest nations and the poorest people in every nation.

This situation of growing poverty, oppression and misery finds expression in the lack of daily bread, in increased malnutrition, illiteracy, alcoholism, drug addiction, disease, promiscuity, and unemployment, in the destruction of the family, in the marginalization of women, in the abandonment and corruption of children, in the increase in violence, robbery and crime. Worst of all, this situation contributes to increased militarism and ^{to} increased control and censorship of national and international communications systems. It foments rampant individualism and increases fear and dismay. In other words, we live today in an extremely destructive process of the dehumanization of society and of the human being.

An integral part of this social economic situation is the astronomical growth of the internal and external debts in Latin America. This forces the acceptance of economic measures imposed by large international financial agencies, through the demonic politics of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and others. The truth is, the more we pay, the more we owe; the more the poor are further impoverished, the more the economies of the industrialized nations grow. That is to say, through their misery and suffering, the poor countries are helping to finance the progress and well-being of the wealthy nations.

Sadly, Latin American governments have submitted themselves to the destructive interests of the so-called liberal democracies and economies, paying the price of continuously growing suffering and impoverishment of our people, who, for the most part, are already poor. In order to respond to the demands of the powerful, international market-oriented financial centers, our governments have implemented regressive anti-inflationary policies, accompanied by the dismantling of incipient national industries and the opening of their countries to transnationals. The salaries of the working class people are shrinking, unemployment is growing, ^{and} health care is deteriorating, accompanied by rampant malnutrition. Democratic freedom is restricted at the same time ^{that} ~~the~~ political policies and police repression are turned against political opposition sectors and grass-roots organizations, including the churches most committed to the poor.

To be poor in Latin America is to be ignored, marginalized, humiliated, and treated as inferior by a dominant, affluent social minority and by the persons who constitute this small sector of society. To be poor not only means living in poverty and misery in a society that produces and maintains poverty. It means to be treated as someone who is inferior, who deserves to be marginalized and humiliated.

In reality, it means to be treated by others as an illness to be avoided or, at least, to be kept at arm's length. It means to be considered a "situation" to be modified or eradicated. It means to live like a necessary animal more than

to be respected and recognized as a person with dignity, a child of God, a brother or sister of the rest of humanity. It means to live as if you lacked feelings, as if suffering were a genetic condition, an inherent, necessary element of human nature. It means to live fatalistically, accepting life passively as if we did not have, could not have and did not need to have any hope whatsoever.

It is terrible to be poor, to feel like a fatal disease, while at the same time discovering that there are forces that struggle to perpetuate the impoverishment of the poor.

These are a few indicators of what it means to be poor and how the poor survive in Latin America. It is possible that these indicators also describe more or less accurately the situation of the poor in other parts of the world, including the poor in affluent countries.

WE DISAGREE

As human beings, as Christians, we disagree; we will never give our assent:

- to the existence and the perpetuation of poverty and of misery.
- to the existence and the perpetuation of the poor as a social class.
- to the way of life or, better said, the way of death of poverty.
- to the manner in which the poor incarnate poverty and internalize the attitudes which are projected upon them by the rich.

- to the industry of the perpetuation of poverty and of the poor as a social class.

SIGNS OF LIFE AND OF HOPE

Within this painful, perverse and destructive reality of poverty in Latin America, are there any signs of life and of hope for the poor? Yes, there are signs of life and of hope.

There are signs of life and of hope in liberation movements that are springing up throughout the world, particularly in black and indigenous communities, and particularly in Africa and ^{Latin America} ~~Asia~~. In the liberation of countries in eastern Europe and in Asia. In the liberation of groups of people--women, children, and carriers of certain diseases, such as AIDS. In the liberation of nature, which is ^{reflected in} testified by the struggle of ecological movements. Certainly there are signs of life and hope in the movements for cultural, political, social, economic and religious liberation.

There are signs of life and of hope in the growing struggle for rights--human rights, civil rights, the right to justice and to defend human dignity.

There are signs of life and of hope in grass-roots conscientization movements of people who struggle for liberty and for rights. This can be seen in the organizing and strengthening of unions, of neighborhood associations, of Christian Base Communities, and in other organizations.

There are signs of life and of hope in the activities of civil and religious organizations, Christian and non-Christian, who are committed to the well-being of humanity, and

principally of the poor. Examples are SERPAJ (the Service of Peace and Justice), the CDH (Human Rights Commissions), ISER (Institute for the Study of Religion), CEDI (Ecumenical Center for ~~Divulging~~ ^{the Dissemination of} Information), and CESE (Ecumenical Service Commission). These and many other groups refuse to accept the idea that the world should continue as it is, where a minority has everything, or nearly everything, and the great majority of people have nothing, or nearly nothing.

There are signs of life and of hope in the growing awareness of and practice of solidarity, that brings together people, especially the poor, and different groups and social sectors, for the practice of true love, love that shares, love that acts, love that fights.

There are signs of life and of hope in the renewal and maturation of sectors of the church, particularly in Methodism in the United States and in Latin America, that is hearing the cry of the people of our continent who live in conditions of submission and misery. Methodism seeks orientation in Christ and the strength to continue to be loyal to its prophetic mission, the struggle against the sins of injustice and oppression that deny people the right to an abundant life in the here and now.

OUR COMMON MISSION WITH THE POOR

These signs are very important to the process of ^{op}opposition and struggle against poverty and misery that dominate all Latin America. As Methodists and Christians, we are called to do more, nurturing the hope of the poor in Latin America, as a

sign of the construction of the reign of God. This is the commitment that we need to assume.

It is important that we assume our place as Christians and as a Christian community in the exercise of our mission. This is our mission and God's mission ~~that I see~~ ⁱⁿ the world, in Jesus Christ who came to bring abundant life. As Christians and as a Christian community, we are heirs to the Good news for all people. We cannot evade our responsibility to share God's wealth with all, especially those who are most in need.

Given the reality of today's world, particularly the Latin American situation, where the powers and principalities of evil are well organized to exploit the weakest and most defenseless that constitute two thirds of the population, ~~the~~ Christians and the Christian community are called to put on courage, faith and a firm commitment in assuming mission responsibilities.

Because of this, it is necessary to go to the public, to go out, to struggle, to combat, to cry out, to protest, to denounce, ^{to proclaim} to help, to serve, to preach, to share, to teach, and to pardon, all in the spirit of Christ, in love, as ~~Christ~~ ^{Jesus} did in his time.

It is necessary to recognize urgently that each Christian is called to cooperate with God in the Proclamation, ^{and} service to the reign of God. Each and every member of the church, without any distinction, is a minister of God and has a mission to fulfill.

Recognizing and assuming the truth that all are ministers of God challenges all members of the church to work together, joining strength, concentrating our energy, ^{and} identifying common goals.

Yes, it is necessary to work together, each one exercising his or her ministry. It is necessary to strategize the use of time, the resources and the life of our members, our activities within and outside the church, so that there is sufficient time, resources, and lives for joy and celebration, continuing and expressing our ministry outside the building, together with the most needy.

It is necessary to leave the isolation of denominationalism and to seek the company and cooperation of other groups that are part of the body of Christ. It is necessary to free ourselves from the selfishness of the presumption that our denomination is better, more Christian, more perfect than the other groups. At the same time we need to give up the idea that all the people in a local congregation think alike, that they believe the same doctrines, read the Bible in the same way, and practice their faith in the same ^{manner} way. ~~As~~ Members of the same congregation, ~~they~~ must learn to ~~take~~ communion together and to work together, respecting each other's similarities and differences. The same thing needs to happen in our relationships to other Christian groups. We are emphasizing here the unity of the church as the body of Christ.

The powers and principalities of evil are united. They continue destroying life wherever it may be found. In each

city and geographical region, Methodism must seek to build strength with other groups of Christians in the struggle against all ~~that~~ attempts to destroy life, and ^{we} must seek to promote the Christian faith.

It is necessary to recognize and affirm the presence, value and function of civil society. Civil society is the privileged space of social reality, where groups of people can gather into organized self-government. Civil society is the populace, organized into community associations, as well as ecological, cultural and political groups. ^{There are} ~~it is~~ the space for consumer and producer cooperatives, for grass-roots community work, for unions and class-based groups, and for different groups that defend social well-being.

Organized civil society represents the power to resist political, economic, military, police, paramilitary and government actions that oppress and exploit the poor, that are always the weakest and most vulnerable.

I believe that civil society is ^{doing} much more for the life of the people than the churches, in the areas of racial discrimination, ^{and} health; ^{and} especially, ^{in response to} the AIDS epidemic, in the social-economic spheres, in the struggle for a salary that respects human dignity, in the area of ecology, in defense of nature, God's creation, in the area of politics, in the battle against drug trafficking and in the corruption of political representatives. This is just a small sampling of the ways in which civil society is organizing to defend people's interests and to create a better way of life.

In other words, organized civil society ~~is~~ working for the people, of whom the great majority are poor, to promote a more humane level of life, an abundant life. Surely these aspects of life are included in Jesus's mission, that is likewise the mission of the church. "I come so that you might have life, and have life in abundance."

All of this clearly implies that it is necessary to go out into the world in daily ministry, to struggle, to combat, to proclaim and to serve, trusting in the continuous presence of the resurrected Christ and the Holy Spirit, knowing that it is necessary for all of us to work together, alongside other churches and groups of Christians, ^{and non-Christians} as members of the body of Christ, ^{in the world} knowing that unity is power and faith will show the way to victory, knowing that it is necessary to work with ^{many} different ~~social organizations~~ ^{groups} that ~~also are in~~ ^{are committed to} the struggle to bring forth life.