



Siding with Victims

By T. Michael McNulty, SJ

Taking the side of those who have been harmed by the adverse economic and social impact of the global pressures of first-world powers is a moral imperative for First-World Christians. It is also difficult to do, for it has been a presupposition of western liberal society at least since the 18th century that all voices have an equal claim on our attention. But this position excludes the voices of the poor and marginalized, the victims of global economic forces that inflict terrible suffering on them without the possibility of redress. Gustavo Gutierrez says that while the interlocutor of modern western philosophical and theological speculation has traditionally been the Enlightenment, the interlocutor of the Third World has been Death. First-World moral reflection has been and continues to be an extension of First-World presuppositions, which are formed by experience that is essentially middle-class.

NO VOICE FOR THE VICTIM

In Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*, the character Dr. Tarrou says: "All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences....That's why I decided to take, in every predicament, the victims' side, so as to reduce the damage done."¹ The tolerance that characterizes First-World political, economic and moral discourse seems to ensure inclusiveness. In fact, by giving all voices equal weight it effectively neutralizes Tarrou's commitment: it marginalizes people in poverty, who are incapable of entering into the conversation.

People who are poor and marginalized are the victims of historical forces over which they have no control. They are in this sense "absent from history." The social, political and economic forces that form the present context of human interaction, especially on the international level, are partially the result of the adoption of a certain world view, especially about economic activity and international trade. A kind of "economic fundamentalism" (called "neoliberalism" in much of the world) infects First-World attitudes toward markets and free trade, which are widely viewed as capable of *automatically* solving the economic problems of the Third World. These arguments are commonplace in the justification of free trade agreements like NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement], CAFTA [Central American Free Trade Agreement, about to be presented to Congress for ratification], and the FTAA [Free Trade Area of the Americas, currently being negotiated]. For example, although NAFTA apologists claim that the treaty has improved the volume of trade with Mexico, such macroeconomic improvements are small comfort for the thousands of small Mexican farmers who have been driven to bankruptcy as a result. As a further example (adapted from political philosopher Henry Shue's book *Basic Rights*²), the redirection of land once used for cultivation of beans to the production of flowers for export can have dire consequences for impoverished local populations. The cultivation of flowers is profitable for some because of the demand for cut flowers in the industrialized North, but it may well result in an increase in the price of beans in the local market (because of a lowered supply) that prices them out of the range of local

consumers, resulting in malnutrition (especially of children) and its accompanying woes. The ideology of free trade and globalization has no room for the cry of the victim.

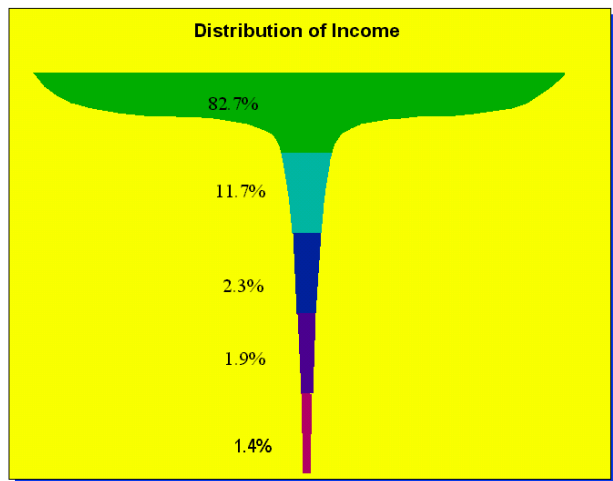
THINGS ARE GETTING WORSE

So what? Be patient, we are told. Eventually life will be better even for those on the bottom of the economic pile. Only an unfettered market and global free trade stand any chance of defeating poverty. Unfortunately, the evidence so far is not encouraging. Indications are that things are getting worse: The [UNDP Human Development Report for 2005](#) states:

In 2003, 18 countries with a combined population of 460 million people registered lower scores on the human development index (HDI) than in 1990—an unprecedented reversal. In the midst of an increasingly prosperous global economy, 10.7 million children every year do not live to see their fifth birthday, and more than 1 billion people survive in abject poverty on less than \$1 a day. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has inflicted the single greatest reversal in human development. In 2003 the pandemic claimed 3 million lives and left another 5 million people infected. Millions of children have been orphaned.

Global integration is forging deeper interconnections between countries. In economic terms the space between people and countries is shrinking rapidly, as trade, technology and investment link all countries in a web of interdependence. In human development terms the space between countries is marked by deep and, in some cases, widening inequalities in income and life chances. One-fifth of humanity live in countries where many people think nothing of spending \$2 a day on a cappuccino. Another fifth of humanity survive on less than \$1 a day and live in countries where children die for want of a simple anti-mosquito bednet.

The UNDP describes the distribution of goods in terms of the now-famous champagne glass mage: the top 20% of the world's population control more wealth than the bottom 80% (UNDP 1992). The fact is that hard work and perseverance, even by very talented people, will not bring success in the absence of favorable social, economic, and historical circumstances. A young peasant in Chalatenango, El Salvador, has no hope of bettering his or her circumstances, unless he or she can somehow find a way to "El Norte" [the U.S.], legally or (more likely) illegally.



Income of richest 20% of world population
1960 - 70 x poorest 20%
1989 - 140 x poorest 20%

Ignacio Ellacuría, SJ, the martyred rector of the Central American University in El Salvador, argued that the lifestyle of the first world was positively immoral because its benefits cannot be nonarbitrarily distributed among all human beings. The earth simply does not possess the resources necessary to allow everyone (or even most people) to enjoy a first-world standard of living. One need only imagine the specter of 1.3 billion Chinese driving SUV's to have the truth of this claim come home to one. Inhabitants of the First World have *no idea* how easy they have it. They do not recognize the immense investment in infrastructure (electricity, telephone, water, heat, roads, gasoline, etc.) upon which they rely but which is invisible to them.

What are the consequences of this situation? Philosopher Richard Rorty outlines the problem with brutal clarity. According to him, the crucial question is, whom are we willing to include under the pronoun “we,” who belongs to our moral community. Such inclusion depends “not only on our willingness to help those people but on belief that one is able to help them.” If the developed world cannot achieve such inclusion, it must treat people in poverty as “surplus to their moral requirements, unable to play a part in their moral life. The rich and lucky people will quickly become unable to think of the poor and unlucky ones as their fellow humans, as part of the same ‘we.’”³

COMPASSION AND SOLIDARITY

But perhaps Rorty has the problem reversed. Maybe we can only help those with whom we share moral community. The issue is not our moral obligation to help so much as the recognition of the other as a fellow-human. It is not in abstract principle but in human interaction that we find the connections of compassion and solidarity that make for practical community. Theologian Henri Nouwen defines compassion as follows: “Compassion manifests itself in solidarity, the deep consciousness of being part of humanity, the existential awareness of the oneness of the human race, the intimate knowledge that all people, however separated by time and space, are bound together by the same human condition.”⁴ Compassion is the recognition that everyone else is just like me.

It is therefore the cry of the victim that creates the bond of community, for as the French writer Simone Weil says, “at the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him.”⁵

The reality of the world is the normative standard, and that reality is one of poverty, disease, economic exploitation, hunger and political oppression for the majority. The temptation will always be to silence or ignore the victims of history, to say there will always be winners and losers. Our relationship to them can be externalized, so that it involves only economic contribution, so that it does not commit one’s person and life prospect. But in fact the externalization of the relationship with the victims, those who are poor and marginalized, is at the same time their dehumanization. Taking the victims’ side, modeling the world from the perspective of the reality that daily oppresses them, transforms both the victims and ourselves. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, Superior General of the Jesuits, said in a speech in Venezuela in 1998 that the option for the poor results in their humanization and personalization: “The result is not an external goal, but rather the terminus toward which the dynamic of the option tends. For the option for the poor is above all a relationship, an alliance, a casting of one’s lot with them.”⁶

THE STRUGGLE TO CHANGE OUR HEARTS

We should not delude ourselves that this change in perspective will be easy. There is a kind of staging that people go through: 1) horror - “My God, I didn’t know it was so bad”; 2) determination - “Let’s fix it”; 3) despair - “We can’t fix it. Let’s forget it”; 4) solidarity - “They” is replaced by “We,” “those people” by “my people.” Getting past stage three is the real challenge for those in affluent societies. It involves in the first place that we ourselves strive for solidarity, and each must find his or her own path. Ellacuría paid for his commitment with his life, as did Archbishop Romero. But the task is indispensable nonetheless. For us to take the victims’ side is to give them a voice in the conversation, to be, in Romero’s powerful words, “the voice of those who have no voice.” Without solidarity, however, such a move lacks authenticity. We cannot simply grant liberation to people

who are poor and marginalized—they must take it for themselves. And we must accept their struggle as our own.

To recall Tarrow's words: "That's why I decided to take, in every predicament, the victims' side, so as to reduce the damage done." Taking the victims' side in our consumer-drenched culture demands at least as much attention as in Tarrow's plague-afflicted city. The success or failure of the effort will determine our contribution to the building of a human community that includes *all* of humankind.

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1 Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 235-37.

2 Henry Shue, *Basic Rights*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

3 Richard Rorty, "Moral Universalism and Economic Triage." UNESCO (1996), available at <http://www.unesco.org/phiweb/uk/2rpu/rort/rort.html>.

4 Henry Nouwen, "Compassion: The Core of Spiritual Leadership," *Worship* 51(1977), 13.

5 Simone Weil, "Human Personality," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, edited by Sian Miles (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 49-78.

6 Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, "The Option for the Poor in the Face of the Challenge of Overcoming Poverty," printed in Peter J. Henriot, SJ, *Opting for the Poor: The Challenge for the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, DC: Center of Concern, 2004).