



# Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and Poverty

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## Scripture and Poverty

Consideration of poverty in Catholic social teaching begins with the foundation that each person is both sacred and social, created in God's image, and destined to share in the goods of the earth as part of a community of justice and mercy. From the time of the Deuteronomic laws, the covenant, and the prophets, there was special mention of the poor and their privileged place in the community. The Hebrew word for the poor is the **anawim**, the little ones, originally those "overwhelmed by want."<sup>1</sup> In the Old Testament, this group was primarily widows, orphans, and strangers (refugees, migrants, immigrants). They are poor and powerless. Their poverty was often the result of unjust oppression. As such, they comprised "Yahweh's poor."

The Lord frequently warned the Israelites about their duty to the poor: *You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan* (Exod 22:20-22). Their special status reflected a combination of powerlessness, poverty, and systemic exclusion from the community.

Care for the **anawim** became the test of Israel's faithfulness. The word used to reflect the community's duty to the poor is "justice." Instead of being recipients of optional charity or pious generosity, the poor became the measure of Israel's fidelity to the Lord. Their right treatment lay at the heart of biblical justice and righteousness. Not caring for the poor was infidelity to God, because people who forgot the poor no longer really believed in Yahweh revealed as God of the people, the community, dwelling among them and

passionately concerned for their welfare, especially for the poor.

Jesus fulfills this tradition in his teaching and actions. His three "great parables"—according to Pope Benedict—are about justice and the poor: the Good Samaritan in *Luke 10*, the rich man and Lazarus in *Luke 16*, and the dramatic judgment scene in *Matthew 25*.<sup>2</sup> In this judgment drama, Jesus emphatically identifies himself with the poor and measures individuals and nations by our deeds of justice and mercy.

## Preferential Love for Poor and Oppressed

Today, church commentators use **anawim** in a developed sense that explicitly includes four groups: widows, orphans, strangers, and the poor. All four suffer the interconnection of poverty, powerlessness, and exclusion and are alike in the oppression they often suffer. Believers are charged to see to it that the **anawim** are not without the means to meet their basic needs, nor are they to be excluded from the community or its decision-making by their lack of means. If the poor around us now are uncared for, we too cannot know the one who says, *"I will be your God, and you will be my people."* This God-of-the-community gave creation to us as goodness to be shared as stewards—not owners. If we forget the poor, we have forgotten God and our own radical interconnectedness: to God as life-giver and to one another as sisters and brothers, the two great commandments of Jesus. Thus the Catechism now proclaims "a preferential love on the part of the Church" for those oppressed by poverty.<sup>3</sup>

## Responses to Poverty

The implications drawn out over the centuries are rich. As the U.S. bishops put it, *The first line of attack against poverty must be to build and sustain a healthy economy that provides employment opportunities at just wages for all adults who are able to work.*<sup>4</sup> In this, they highlight the tradition's emphasis on a "family wage." The Catechism explains, *Everyone should be able to draw from work the means of providing for his life and that of his family, and of serving the human community.*<sup>5</sup> Related emphases in Catholic teaching stress the importance of: (1) unions as a means to assure a fair wage, protect workers, and allow them to exercise their rights to participate in society and in the workplace; (2) employee benefits such as retirement benefits, unemployment compensation, workers compensation, and so forth; (3) rights to emigrate to find work; (4) the evils of workplace discrimination; (5) care for those who are unemployed or unable to work due to age, disability, and care of children; and (6) the right to health care.

Just as CST has understood poverty to be connected to powerlessness and non-participation in society, so our teaching on poverty has grown from simple assistance with a meal or shelter to encompass an array of necessary responses: advocacy for social and economic change; empowerment of individuals and groups; political participation and economic development so people can be "artisans of their own destiny"; micro-enterprise loans; and the importance of "property" for the poor in multiple senses of land, capital, education, and technological know-how.

1 John S. Kselman, S.S., and Michael L. Barre, S.S., "Psalms," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, pp. 523-52, at 532.

2 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 2005, No. 15.

3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, No. 2448.

4 U.S. Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, 1986, No. 196.

5 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, No. 2428.