

# Who Is My Neighbor?

The Face of Poverty in Washington State



## A Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops of the State of Washington

*"I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. ... We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them."*

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 198

### The Face of Poverty

Poverty has a face. It is more than an issue to be discussed or a problem to be solved. Poverty has a human face. It is the face of Linda, who, while out of work and raising her family, often did not know how she would provide the next meal for her children. At times she put food coloring in the children's eggs, just to make mealtime less monotonous. Linda has stage 4 cancer, and her limited access to adequate health care adds a disquieting uncertainty to her bleak prognosis. But Linda is a fighter who has overcome drug addiction and homelessness, and now she's helping raise her grandchildren.

When we stop and look into the face of poverty, we recognize that "the poor" are not strangers. They are our sisters and brothers, members of our human family. Those in our cities and towns who lack the most basic necessities of life — food, housing, basic health care and educational opportunities — remind us that when our neighbors are hungry, cold, sick and unprepared to share fully in the life of our community, it is more than an economic challenge. Hunger, homelessness, illness and broken dreams shatter the bonds of community that hold us together, bonds that contribute to civic peace and stability. As people of faith, our relationship with God brings us into relationship with every other person, and the needs of others call us to share the gift of love we have received from our loving and merciful Father.

As the spiritual leaders of the Catholic people in Washington State, we bishops have spent the past year listening to the voices of our neighbors living in poverty. Like Linda in the Diocese of Yakima, they shared their stories of hunger, homelessness and pain with honesty and openness. We heard stories of anguish from mothers like Karla in the Spokane Diocese, who said, "Every day is a struggle." Her 11-year-old daughter was a toddler when Karla left her husband because he was abusive, and now her daughter is a fourth-grader filled with anger. Raising four children on her own has been difficult for Karla, and now she and her children are homeless and often sleep in their car. She used to sell her blood to buy food; and once, when one of the children was sick, she had no money for medicine and stole some Tylenol. As a result, Karla has a police record and worries that no one will hire her and wonders what kind of a future her children will have.

We listened to the stories of immigrant men and women, some with documents and some without, like Sophia, a farmworker. She spoke about relying on home remedies

and over-the-counter drugs to treat a serious illness that sent her to the emergency room. After she was released, she received a \$14,000 medical bill, and with no insurance coverage she wondered how she would pay. Sophia expressed concern for others facing similar circumstances even though she and her family still confront many challenges of their own.

Many whom we met had encountered negative influences while living on the streets. Jonathan in the Archdiocese of Seattle, who grew up in a middle-class home, received an education and had a good job but suffered from depression. He began using drugs and alcohol and lost his job of 11 years. He became sober and found housing but lost it when he began using drugs again. Disowned by his family, without friends or money, he found himself homeless on the streets of Seattle. He told us, "I couldn't understand how someone who came from where I came from could be homeless."

Poverty has a face, and it also has a voice. But that voice often does not penetrate the wall of fear, misconception and prejudice that can separate people who are poor from those of us who have what we need. The voice of poverty can be drowned out or ignored in the halls of government, where other legitimate demands for resources also resound.

In our listening sessions, we heard "the cry of poor" (Psalm 34). We are writing this pastoral letter to all people of good faith and to political leaders because we heard in the voices of people who are poor both a plea for mercy and a desire to participate fully in the life of their communities. Reflecting on what we heard, we recognize the urgent need for action to alleviate the suffering that has become epidemic in every city, town and community in our state.

### Role and Responsibility of the Catholic Community

Pope Francis wants us to be evangelized by people experiencing poverty, and in our listening sessions we learned that those living in poverty in Washington State truly "have much to teach us." In our conversations, we learned the sad truth that many simply accept insecurity and suffering as an inevitable condition of daily life. And with awe, we also discovered that many — if not most — who have experienced severe poverty harbor a strong desire to help others experiencing similar difficulties.

Hearing their stories raised urgent questions within us. If we believe the faith we profess, how are we to respond to so many of our neighbors who do not share the benefits of our state's economic wealth? Because the social and economic factors affecting those living in poverty are so varied and complex, what is the most effective way to relieve their anguish? Answering these and many other questions related to

hunger, homelessness and chronic unemployment requires a well-formed conscience. As Catholics, we have a moral obligation to inform our consciences in light of Scripture and Catholic teaching, and then to take direct action that demonstrates concern for our sisters and brothers. What we must do for “the least” among us is the unmistakable call of the Gospel to disciples of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 14:16; 22:37-40; 25:31-46; John 13:34; 1 John 4:21). Jesus assures the least among us, whom he counts among those who are blessed, that the kingdom of God is theirs (Luke 6:20). And he assures us, as he assured the rich official, that when we share with them, we will have treasure in heaven (Luke 18:22).

Despite the clarity of the Lord’s call, we find that it is not always easy to answer the question: “Who is my neighbor?” But Jesus does not ask us to solve a problem. Rather, he calls us into relationship with our neighbor, a much greater challenge.

The dignity of human life, the common good and solidarity are more than mere words and phrases. They are the foundation stones of our values and actions as faithful Catholic citizens. When we acknowledge the inherent dignity of the human person,<sup>i</sup> we definitively answer the question “Who is my neighbor?” with one word: Everyone. When we speak of the common good,<sup>ii</sup> we acknowledge that we are called to love our neighbor — everyone — as ourselves (Mark 12:31). Our actions must ensure everyone’s right to life, to work, to basic health services and to basic education. Acting in this way, we are in solidarity<sup>iii</sup> — in relationship — with everyone, including those of different nations, races, cultures and ethnicities. Solidarity with our neighbor begins with listening and leads to action. Acting as sisters and brothers to those who are poor and marginalized, we journey with them as they seek solutions to their problems, address their challenges and take their rightful place in our communities.

Scripture and Catholic social teaching form a moral compass to guide our decisions to work for the common good. Catholic teaching and tradition draw our attention to the words Jesus spoke when the Apostles asked him to dismiss the crowd so they could find food and lodging. He said to them, “Give them some food yourselves” (Luke 9:12-13).

### **Role and Responsibility of Government**

Scripture and Catholic social teaching also form the basis for our understanding of the role and responsibility of government. They guide our advocacy on behalf of those who lack the basic rights of food and shelter, access to health care, a living wage and education. Jesus explicitly acknowledged legitimate public authority and the established community leaders of his day (Matthew 17:25-27; 23:3; 22:21),

and he was blunt in assigning responsibility to those in leadership for serving the common good with mercy (Mark 10:42-45; Matthew 12:6-7). The authority and responsibility of public officials in pursuit of the common good also is affirmed by Catholic social teaching. Some things are best addressed by individuals, families, churches and charities; but when problems such as homelessness, hunger, drug addiction and mental illness are common to every community, it is a just and reasonable expectation that society will act cooperatively to address these problems.

The Catholic understanding of justice asserts a special concern for people who are poor and the moral imperative to pursue economic justice. Ensuring that everyone has access to basic health services is an example that came up repeatedly in our listening sessions, along with the need for decent wages and educational opportunity. Access to these social goods requires initiative by public entities, even if the services themselves are provided by private agencies and organizations. We gratefully acknowledge the programs and services in the State of Washington designed to reduce poverty, alleviate suffering and ensure basic human rights for those living in poverty. It is unfortunately true, however, that when revenue collections fall short, these essential lifelines are among the first to be reduced or eliminated. It is not our intention to prescribe specific policy options but to propose a moral basis for determining whether public policies serve justice (i.e., whether public policies serve *people*).

Our listening sessions convinced us that the plight of those living in poverty in our state is reaching crisis proportions. At the same time, we grew in awareness that providing just a little help can make a big difference. We spoke to many people whose primary obstacle to lifting themselves out of poverty was the lack of secure housing. We listened to Thomas, for example, who came from a good family but “became lost” after his father passed away when he was 20. After a conviction and a period of incarceration, he was homeless. However, he said that once he found housing, “That’s where things began to turn around.” He went back to school, began a training program, graduated and now is working as a social worker in a shelter. Stories such as this convinced us that our pursuit of public initiatives to reduce poverty must begin by ensuring adequate funding for essential social services like housing, so that people like Thomas can thrive.

### **Pray and Act**

The title of this pastoral letter is the question the scholar of the law asked Jesus: “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). In response, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan and asked, “Which of these ... in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers’ victim?” Jesus does not refer

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<sup>i</sup> Human life is sacred. The dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Direct attacks on innocent persons are never morally acceptable, at any stage or in any condition (Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, no. 44).

<sup>ii</sup> The common good indicates “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26). The common good, in fact, can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 164).

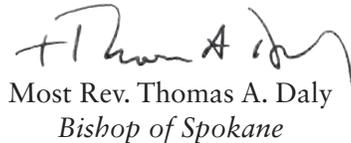
<sup>iii</sup> Solidarity highlights in a particular way the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples toward an ever more committed unity. Solidarity must be seen above all in its value as a moral virtue that determines the order of institutions. On the basis of this principle the “structures of sin” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, nos. 36, 37) that dominate relationships between individuals and peoples must be overcome (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, nos. 192-193).

to the victim in his question, but directs the scholar's attention — and ours — to those who encountered a "neighbor" in need. When the scholar answers, "The one who treated him with mercy," Jesus gives us a decisive commandment: "Go and do likewise."

As we listened, prayed and reflected on what we heard, we bishops considered anew our own response to the questions raised by so many living in poverty in an affluent state. Seeing the faces and hearing the voices of our brothers and sisters living in poverty, we were called to solidarity with them. We were challenged to examine our assumptions and rethink our approaches. Scripture and Catholic social teaching provide reliable guidance for asking difficult questions and searching for solutions. Thus we have produced study materials to help our Catholic people and parishes confront the poverty in our state and explore ways we can act as a community of faith to alleviate suffering and advocate for change. In other words, how are we *to be neighbor* to those in need?



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Most Rev. Thomas A. Daly  
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Most Rev. Joseph J. Tyson  
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Most Rev. Eusebio Elizondo, M.Sp.S.  
*Auxiliary Bishop of Seattle*



### PRAYER OF A FAITHFUL COMMUNITY

Loving and merciful Father,  
We thank you for the gifts of life, of family and of faith.  
In Jesus, your Son, you call us to recognize everyone as brothers, sisters and neighbors.  
Open our eyes to see those living in poverty as you see them.  
Teach us to extend the embrace of your care to those seeking housing, health care and food.  
Enliven us to protect the right to life, to work and to education.  
Lead us along new paths of solidarity with immigrants and those living on the margins.  
Embolden us through your Holy Spirit to seek genuine encounters with our neighbors in need.  
Inspire us to act as a community of faith to alleviate poverty and advocate for change that strengthens the human family.  
For all the blessings we have received from your bountiful hands, we thank you.  
For blessings still to come as we work together for the common good, we rely on your ever-faithful presence.  
We make this prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.