

The Cries of the Poor Are Still With Us



**25 Years
of Working to
Empower the Poor**

**A Statement of the U.S. Bishops'
Campaign for Human Development Committee**

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The Cries of the Poor Are Still With Us

25 Years of Working to Empower the Poor

POVERTY IN AMERICA is a social and moral scandal that continues to wound our nation deeply. A serious deficiency of resources and opportunity assaults the dignity of tens of millions of individuals who are poor, and it diminishes our society as a whole. We live in a time in which poverty is increasing. The gap between poor and rich is growing. In this political and cultural climate, while increased concern for justice and charity is often expressed, all too frequently the real and continuing cries of the poor are not heard. It is important that we in the Church speak out.

We offer this brief statement on poverty and empowerment from the perspective of the Campaign for Human Development, the U.S. Catholic bishops' anti-poverty initiative that is now twenty-five years old. **First**, we want to share some of the lessons that the Campaign has learned in a quarter century of fighting poverty and injustice. **Second**, we invite everyone in this nation, especially members of our own Catholic community, to accept the challenge to a renewed commitment to eradicate poverty from our midst. All of us have both a moral and a civic responsibility to shape a future in which every American is free from the crushing bondage of poverty. There is no more urgent task that we face as a society. For, if we fail in this responsibility, we will fail in the basic test of a just society and the test Jesus offers us in the sacred Scriptures, "when you did it for the least of these, you did it for me."

Signs of the Times

THE SHOCKING FACT which our nation must confront is that more than 35 million people, roughly one in every seven Americans, live in poverty. According to current government statistics, nearly 15 million children under age 18 (22 percent) live in poverty, and the number is increasing steadily. As troubling as these overall numbers are, we must also remember that poverty rates are much higher for some—those who live in the central cities, those who live in rural areas, those who have borne the brunt of racial discrimination, and those who are young.

Equally disturbing is the growing gap between rich and poor in our nation. Recent economic studies indicate that we are the most unequal industrialized country in the world in terms of income and wealth, and

we are growing more unequal at a rate faster than other industrialized nations. The top 20 percent of our population possesses more than 80 percent of the nation's wealth and 55 percent of all after-tax income. The lowest-earning 20 percent of the population earns only 5.7 percent of all after-tax income. Although the causes

of poverty are complex, the perpetuation of these extreme inequalities of income and wealth is unjustified, especially in light of the fact that there are millions of poor, hungry, and homeless people in our midst.

Some might ask why, after twenty-five years, poverty has not been eradicated. Why, despite the heroic work of many local organizations such as those funded by CHD, have national poverty statistics continued to worsen? While it is not our aim here to provide a comprehensive analysis of these questions, we can point to several economic, political, and educational factors that have affected the trends toward greater poverty and inequality.

More than 35 million people, roughly one in every seven Americans, live in poverty.

On the economic front, it is clear that rapid technological change, the shift toward a service economy, declining wages, and the globalization of the marketplace are producing new and deep-seated pressures on the national economy. These forces affect all Americans, but they are having a particularly severe effect on the poor. It is low-income people who are the first to lose jobs when technology and global competition force restructuring in the marketplace. It is poor people who have the least access to the advanced education and training that are essential in an information-based economy.

In the political arena, during the last twenty-five years we have witnessed a significant shift away from our national commitment to fight poverty. Many have become disillusioned by the lack of progress in this effort. Others have gone so far as to blame the poor and try to make them scapegoats for the nation's economic and social ills. We find ourselves today in a culture that is excessively individualistic and materialistic, a culture that places too little value on community, and that fails to promote the kind of personal and public responsibility necessary to sustain the common good. Such personal and cultural values have led to a political climate that often overlooks the needs of the poor and, in some cases, is even hostile to their interests. Middle-income families also are being affected by the realities of poverty: incomes are decreasing, unemployment is impacting family life, and many face an insecure future. Poor and middle-income alike are feeling the increasing effects of government cutbacks and decreasing resources.

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In the area of family life, there is a clear relationship between poverty and the disintegration of family life. And our experience the past quarter century has clearly demonstrated that it is transformative education that empowers people to move out of poverty.

What have we learned? Among the lessons we have learned from CHD's first twenty-five years are these:

1. Participation in CHD-funded projects has empowered poor people with a voice in decision-making that affects their lives, resulting in a greater sense of hope and dignity.
2. At the same time, CHD has built new bridges between the poor and non-poor.
3. CHD has proved that there is hope—that people working together can make changes in the structures that affect them, and gain control of the forces shaping their lives.
4. Low-income people have participated effectively in bringing about these changes through local community-based organizations. These types of local organizations are deeply rooted in American values, tradition, and history, and they also exemplify the social teachings of the Church. United communities, organized around their common interests and shared values, contribute to the strength and vitality of a democratic society.

For the past quarter century, the Campaign for Human Development has been an unusual combination of religious commitment, street-smart politics, commitment to structural change, and the development of the poor.

5. The CHD philosophy emphasizes empowerment and participation of the poor. By helping the poor to participate in the decisions and actions that affect their lives, CHD empowers them to move beyond poverty.
6. CHD responds directly to what the poor need. Since its inception, CHD's philosophy has been to let the needs of the poor empower the direction of funding. Thus, CHD is constantly at the forefront of social and poverty issues in the United States.

In summary, for the past quarter century, the Campaign for Human Development has been an unusual combination of religious commitment, street-smart politics, commitment to structural change, and the development of the poor. CHD's belief that the poor can develop themselves, work together, and change social structures sets it apart from most funders and from most of the public discourse on poverty.

A Campaign of Hope

WHILE CURRENT TRENDS are deeply troubling, we remain hopeful and confident in the ability of our nation to generate a renewed commitment to fight poverty with compassion and creativity. Our experience during the last quarter century with low-income groups funded by the Campaign for Human Development has demonstrated to us that poverty can be overcome. Many of the 3,000 local groups funded by CHD have won impressive victories in this struggle and have left a positive and lasting impact on the nation.

We have seen firsthand the evidence that Americans are a generous people, with immense ingenuity and resources, and with a deep reservoir of concern for those in need. The annual collection for CHD in Catholic parishes of the United States, for instance, has generated \$250 million over the past twenty-five years. This kind of generosity changes lives and builds communities.

Moreover, we have witnessed the commitment and the creativity of the poor to improve their own lives, to become agents of their own future and full participants in the social, economic, and political life of the nation. In their 1986 pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*, the bishops of the United States declared:

Our experience with the Campaign for Human Development confirms our judgment about the validity of self-help and empowerment of the poor. The Campaign . . . provides a model that we think sets a high standard for similar efforts (no. 357).

The story of the Campaign for Human Development is the story of the poor, working individually and collectively, in the struggle for justice

and hope. Founded in 1970, the Campaign is now the largest private funder of self-help projects for the poor in this nation. The mission of this program has been nothing less than to work for the elimination of poverty and injustice in America.

From its inception, CHD's purpose was to provide financial support for specific projects aimed at eliminating the very causes of poverty. In our 1969 *Resolution on the Campaign for Human Development* which led to the creation of the Campaign, the founding bishops emphasized that "the goal of such support is self-sufficiency and the development of people caught within the cycle of

poverty and dependence." In short, CHD's mission has been, and continues to be, that of enabling poor people to have choices in creating their own futures.

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A Campaign of Moral Values

THE CAMPAIGN'S MISSION is deeply rooted in the mandate of sacred Scriptures and the values of Catholic social teaching. Despite the many persons who do care and who are trying to help the poor, CHD's mission often is in tension with some aspects of contemporary culture and society, for example

- ▶ In a society that often prefers to marginalize, overlook, or ignore the problems of poverty, CHD announces God's justice and special concern for those who are poor.
- ▶ In a culture that is focused almost exclusively on private rights and individual responsibilities, CHD announces that human development is not only individual but also social. Fighting poverty demands not only individual change but also social change.
- ▶ Amidst social and political institutions that often treat the poor as victims, clients, or objects of manipulation, CHD announces that the poor are people of dignity, people of hope and power, and people who can and must participate in decisions that affect their lives.
- ▶ Amidst a culture characterized by isolation and alienation, CHD calls for a renewed commitment to the common good and the virtue of social solidarity.

Fighting poverty demands not only individual change but also social change.

We would like to comment briefly on each of these themes, for they reflect important social values that offer valuable lessons for the Church and the entire nation as we face the challenge of poverty in the years ahead.

1. **Justice for the Poor.** From the earliest books of the Hebrew Scriptures and throughout the life of Jesus Christ himself, we hear the message of God's justice and special concern for the poor. We learn that our God is a God who demands justice from all the people (Dt 16:20) and executes justice for the needy (Ps 140:13). We hear the cry of the Old Testament prophets in denouncing injustice and announcing God's justice. We are instructed by the words of the prophet Micah: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mi 6:8). Most of all, we are invited to model our lives and mission on that of Jesus as he began his public life: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor . . . to let the oppressed go free" (Lk 4:18).

At the heart of the biblical view of justice is the assumption that the justice of a community is measured by its treatment of the powerless in society—often described as the "widows, the orphans, and the aliens" of Hebrew times. Each of us must ask ourselves and the wider society: "Who are the 'widows, orphans, and aliens' of our time?" Are they not the women, children, and immigrants who live in poverty in our nation? How does our society measure up to this biblical test of justice?

Our concern about poverty is directly linked to the foundational principle of Catholic social teaching—the sacred dignity of the human person. Every human person is created in the image of God. As Pope John Paul II has said in his recent encyclical letter *The Gospel of Life*, the human person "is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of God's presence, a trace of God's glory" (no. 34). Therefore, the denial of dignity to a person is a form of violence against God, a blot on this image. This kind of violence against human dignity is a concrete and daily reality for millions of Americans who live with poverty, hunger, and homelessness.

In a twenty-fifth anniversary message to CHD, the Holy Father exhorts all who are concerned for justice and peace "to acknowledge their responsibility to be prophetic witnesses to the *Gospel of Life*, defending the right to life of every individual, especially the weakest and most vulnerable."

CHD's commitment to fight poverty, therefore, is a commitment to protect human life and to promote human dignity. It is a commitment to guard against violations of fundamental rights of the person, including the right to basic material necessities, e.g., food, shelter, employment, education, health care. Working to protect these rights is a basic demand of justice and a sacred duty for all.

2. **Social Sin and Injustice.** CHD's methodology is a testimony not only to our belief in God's grace but also to God's belief in us and in our abilities to deal with problems. The existence of widespread poverty in a nation as wealthy as ours is not just an economic and social problem; it is also a moral problem. Social evil results when we do not extend a helping hand to the poor and work to change the structures that keep people locked in dehumanizing situations of poverty.

In addressing the issue of poverty, it is important to understand that sin has both a personal and a social dimension. While all sin is ultimately rooted in the acts of individual persons, these individual acts often create and sustain unjust structures and policies (e.g., racism and tax inequities) which themselves can be called "sinful." When whole classes and communities of people are forced to live in conditions that are less than human, that prevent them from experiencing full social participation and human development, then the social, economic, and political structures that maintain these unjust conditions must be changed. The "social sin" that is embodied in these structures must be named and rooted out.

The existence of widespread poverty in a nation as wealthy as ours is not just an economic and social problem; it is also a moral problem.

The mission of CHD during the last twenty-five years has been focused on precisely this kind of change. The financial resources and the educational efforts of the Campaign have been directed toward the root causes of poverty. These efforts have uniquely complemented the extensive work that our Church has done and continues to do in providing direct services to meet the needs of the poor. While these services are essential, CHD's more long-term work for institutional change is also an essential element of our response to poverty.

3. **Human Development and Empowerment.** No more important lesson has been learned in CHD's twenty-five year history than the lesson taught by poor people themselves—that empowerment and participation must be at the heart of any successful effort to eliminate poverty. In their pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*, the bishops wrote:

The most appropriate and fundamental solutions to poverty will be those that enable people to take control of their own lives. For poverty is not merely the lack of financial resources. It entails a more profound kind of deprivation, a denial of full participation in the economic, social, and political life of society and an inability to influence decisions that affect one's life (no. 188).

The poor who have lived out CHD's philosophy of empowerment and participation have been a source of great inspiration. Over and over again, they have taught us that there is hope—that people working together can and do gain control of their lives and change the social structures that keep them poor. Hundreds of thousands of people who have participated in CHD-funded projects have gained a voice in the decisions that impact their lives. Through the very act of participation, they have gained dignity and hope. They have acquired the tools to take charge of their own lives and to create a better future by building communities of hope.

One of the hallmarks of CHD-funded groups has been the identification and training of leaders from low-income communities.

Through grassroots organizing and leadership development, CHD has made "human development" a reality. That is, the Campaign has helped thousands of community leaders to develop the necessary skills to become effective voices for fundamental changes in their neighborhoods and communities. These leaders have changed the face of low-income communities like these:

- In San Diego, where fear pervaded neighborhoods, police now patrol the streets, drugs have been driven out, harassment has ceased.
- In Philadelphia, where health care was once denied, it is now available to indigent people, pregnant women, the physically handicapped, and seniors on fixed incomes.
- In rural North Carolina, where unemployment loomed as the only prospect, CHD's economic development program has enabled workers to own and manage their businesses.
- In Texas, where the educational system failed, children now learn in a healthy and creative environment.
- In Baltimore, where urban blight once prevailed, new and renovated housing now stands.
- In Columbus, where low-income residents were politically isolated and without power, they now have an effective voice in city halls and state legislatures through the successful efforts of church-based community organizations.

CHD has brought about change, not only in structures and institutions but also in the lives of individuals. It is here that CHD's impact has been the most dramatic. The human development which has occurred is beyond measure. People have experienced a new sense of dignity and self-respect. People who thought they had little worth now stand up for themselves. People who felt they were alone have bound together for strength. People who felt they were victims of anonymous outside forces now know that decisions affecting their lives are in their own hands. In short, CHD has helped to transform people's lives.

4. **Solidarity/Common Good.** As citizens and Christians, we are called to be responsible for the common good, to be participants in creating together a common quality of life in our communities. We must take seriously the responsibility for helping to create those conditions necessary in society for persons to fulfill their human dignity. Any serious attempt to change the underlying causes of poverty must acknowledge that this kind of change requires a cooperative effort—a solidarity—among diverse groups in society: rich and poor; black and white; urban, suburban, and rural; those who suffer the effects of poverty and those who have the power and influence to bring about meaningful change. The tradition of the common good challenges us to recognize that we have responsibility for all our sisters and brothers.

Building relationships among these diverse groups can be not only a source of individual enrichment but also a foundation for collective empowerment. It can produce the kind of broad democratic power that is necessary if we hope to change the economic, political, and cultural institutions that undergird poverty. It can stimulate the renewed civic participation that is necessary to build strong neighborhoods and healthy communities. In short, forging new relationships that cross existing barriers of race, class, and geography is an urgent and necessary step to create a renewed sense of mutual interdependence and common good that our nation so critically needs.

Reviving a commitment to the common good starts with the realization that we are all members of one human family. We are all part of “one nation under God.” In the words of the Apostle Paul, “We are all members of one body When one member suffers, the whole body suffers” (I Cor 12:26-27).

This is the vision that has inspired CHD’s efforts to fight poverty, and it is the vision that must continue to guide our work in the future. It is a vision grounded in the virtue of solidarity, a virtue that Pope John Paul II describes as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all” (*On Social Concerns*, no. 38).

It is in this spirit that CHD has actively worked to build bridges of solidarity between the poor and non-poor in our nation. Through our TARGET program and our Middle Income Process, we have worked actively to educate members of the Church and the wider community about the reality and the root causes of poverty. Various programs in our parishes and local communities have sought to promote partnerships and greater understanding between diverse income groups, races, and cultures.

The virtue of solidarity is needed today more than ever in our nation. Each of us must be firmly convinced that the fate and future

of all of us, poor and non-poor alike, are inherently connected. When the poor among us suffer, we all suffer. When millions of families are left powerless and without opportunity, we all are diminished as a people. In this intricate social web, when one part is shaken, the whole web trembles.

Forging new relationships that cross existing barriers of race, class, and geography is an urgent and necessary step to create a renewed sense of mutual interdependence and common good that our nation so critically needs.

Conclusion

WE BELIEVE THAT the persistence of widespread poverty in America imposes a profound moral responsibility on every member of our society. It is a responsibility to change, a responsibility to think differently and to act differently.

All of us must learn to think differently about poverty and about how it affects our lives and the communities in which we live. We must come to realize that poverty is a concern that affects not only the poor but all of society. We must come to understand that the growing poverty and inequality in our midst is a serious threat to our future welfare. We must come to know that empowering poor people makes the whole community stronger. We must come to understand that, while the poor alone cannot win the struggle against poverty, neither can the non-poor achieve this goal without the participation of the poor.

While changes in thinking and understanding are important, it is also essential that we act in the face of poverty. Action against poverty means hard work. It means struggling one day at a time, developing local leaders one person at a time, and changing institutions one victory at a time. It means speaking out whether or not it is politically popular and taking risks when the future is uncertain.

The experiences of the Campaign for Human Development over the last twenty-five years provide us with a deep sense of hope that these kinds of changes are possible. Ours is a hope which knows that people can escape poverty and become full participants in society if given realistic chances. We are committed to making that hope a reality.



We must come to know that empowering poor people makes the whole community stronger.

Ours is a hope which knows that people and institutions can be transformed if we keep our focus on respecting human dignity, empowering the poor, and revitalizing the common good. We are committed to helping shape a culture based on those values.

Ours is a hope which knows that the ultimate moral test for our nation is how the "widows, orphans, and aliens" of our time are treated. We are committed to helping our country pass that test.

In closing, we recall the words of the initial resolution that led to CHD's founding 25 years ago:

We believe that this new effort can lead the People of God to a new knowledge of today's problems, a deeper understanding of the intricate forces that lead to group conflict, and a perception of some new and promising approaches that we might take in promoting a greater spirit of solidarity among those who are successful, those who have acquired some share of the nation's goods, and those still trapped in poverty (*Resolution on Crusade Against Poverty*).

In this spirit we invite all people of goodwill to join us in a renewed commitment to the poor, a commitment rooted in faith and lived out in justice.

For more information about the Campaign
for Human Development, call
1-800-946-4CHD.

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