Blessed Are the Poor
What is the proper moral response to these hard times?
By Thomas Massaro | JANUARY 19, 2009

The best homiletic advice I ever received was to remember always that I am a fellow pilgrim sharing the path of discovery with a congregation. As a new regular voice at this magazine, I will do my best to bring this call to intellectual humility to my columns. Fellow travelers are more likeable than self-appointed gurus, after all.

Keeping my pledge to avoid “know-it-all-dom” will come easily enough in this initial column, because I will share some tentative thoughts on a pressing topic on which nobody can speak with final authority: how to respond to the current economic downturn in a way that is true to the Gospel and Christian ethics.

To employ a medical metaphor, one could say that economists by now generally agree on a basic diagnosis of what went wrong to precipitate this crisis, and they can discern a reasonably clear prescription to foster recovery (bailouts, stimulus packages and new regulatory oversight). They might even come up with a reliable prognosis and timeline for crawling out of this, the sharpest recession in decades.

But a distinct set of challenges arises when we turn our attention to the personal level. How should we think about what is happening “at street level,” to actual people and the budgets of their hard-pressed families? Some of the challenges I have in mind regard how best to describe the effects of the recession, while others pertain to the shape of the proper moral response to these hard times.

Poverty—there is a word we have heard too seldom since the financial dominoes started tumbling last fall. Financial crises and the recessions that follow cause poverty rates to soar. Jobs are lost, incomes decline, investments shrink, savings are tapped out, health care coverage expires, foreclosures strike, and retirement plans are scuttled. No household is completely immune from the threat of insecurity. Correlated with declining income are a host of personal hardships, from marital strain to drug use to declining health, even suicide. These spreading ripples, worthy of deep concern, often originate in the stubborn reality of material deprivation.

Downward mobility—another stark term that demands our attention. For some it means a modest scaling back of expenses and expectations, for others the alarming prospect of an increasingly desperate struggle for survival. As maddeningly imprecise as this term is, it always involves the “bite” of dashed aspirations and the loss of social status. Families confronted with involuntary downward mobility are generally not different from their neighbors; they simply find themselves at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Pope John Paul II challenged the world to grow in the virtue of social solidarity. What does it mean to be in solidarity with those affected most acutely by this recession? The answer to this question turns out to be quite individual, with no one-size-fits-all response. At the very least, it entails avoiding those “Marie Antoinette moments” that reveal ignorance of the less fortunate and insensitivity toward them. While some point to the New York Yankees’ recent spending spree on free agents and new stadium amenities as an unconscionable display of callousness, we all need to reassess our priorities.
Notice that phrase just above: “the less fortunate.” The lessons available from observing the roller coaster of recent business cycles must include an appreciation for the limits of self-reliance amid unstable modern economies. “There but for the grace of God (or the burst of the bubble) go I!”

For those who persist in a blanket policy of blaming the poor for their poverty, John Paul offered this challenge in his encyclical Centesimus Annus (1991): “But it will be necessary above all to abandon a mentality in which the poor—as individuals and as peoples—are considered a burden, irksome intruders trying to consume what others have produced.”

If any good comes of this recession, it may just consist in a more honest and nuanced view of the true causes of poverty and greater fellow-feeling with those suffering its effects. While hard times do not automatically settle disagreements on policy issues, like the proper extent of social safety nets, the recession does present a privileged opportunity to reassess certain moral dimensions of our economy and to discern our own “option for the poor.”

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