

# Where Are The Poor?

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*Summary: Exhorts us to learn to see the poor in our midst alongside our comfortable and prosperous lives, especially the migrant and racially discriminated against. Calls for a balanced social order based on distributist principles of ownership. Quotes Pope Pius XII on our personal responsibility to aid the poor. Keywords: voluntary poverty, distributism (DDLW #680).*

Where are the poor? This is one of the startling questions that I find being asked on this, as well as other of my trips across this so prosperous country. A Commonweal editorial in a current issue talks of the great prosperity of this country, the warmth, the food, the clothing, the absence of drudgery, and concludes that lest we become complacent at having by our energies and abilities overcome want at home, we must remember the destitution abroad and the Communist menace that promises to alleviate it. In Chicago one of our old friends who used to work among the destitute in one of our houses says that now that we are so prosperous a country it is time for us to devote all our energies to the peoples of the East. Priests in two other cities made the startling statements that the poor are generally undeserving, and that if a man cannot support his family, he should not have one.

Lay folks in general, comfortable in the homes provided by their hard work, and conscious of the suffering which comes to all, rich and poor, are not as “understanding concerning the needy and the poor,” as our Lord would have us. And I can understand how it comes about easy enough. If you are busy about your own vocation, whether it is writing, or teaching, or studying medicine, nursing, or holding down a job dealing with various commodities necessary for life, like food, clothing, shelter and so on, you have your time taken up pretty thoroughly what with job and home and family, including relatives needy and otherwise.

Take the whole problem of the migrant, for example. When I am travelling, I come up against it only if I go out looking for it, if I encounter priests who are dealing with it who can take me to those districts where the poor and the destitute live. Or those of our readers who are up against it themselves. Otherwise the towns and villages of the midwest and southwest and west coast, are just like those of the east, only more so,—more mechanized, more prosperous. And the schools I visit are academies and colleges for the children of the comfortably off.

Even when I am at home visiting Maryfarm, which is located seventy miles up the Hudson, at the beginning of the great fruit country which extends up the Hudson valley and across the state through Rochester and south and west along the shores of the lakes—apple country, peach, pear, grapes, berries, I see little of this problem, though it is there. It suddenly

occurred to me on one visit to Maryfarm—where are the people who harvest these crops, this tremendous amount of fruit which has to be picked and packed by hand to a great extent, and by skilled and careful workers? Where is this great population? Who has seen them? Where do they live, under what conditions, and where do their children go to school, and how do they take their recreation, where do they go to Church? We come across the waifs and strays, the lame and the halt who end up on the wayside and come in to us for a few days or weeks until they recover and go on with their wandering existence. I remember one old Negro whom we picked up by the roadside who came and went for some years. The farm laborers, working in those factories in the fields, chicken farms, dairy farms, also come to us. Without a philosophy of work, a

philosophy of poverty, as Peter Maurin called those two essentials to the Christian life, there is not much chance to save or grow into a good life through these barren and hard occupations. There is no community of work, no chance at responsibility of ownership.

We have not explored this field of the needy and the poor as we should. We only come across it when some strike is called, some attempt at organization is made, such as those in the southern New Jersey region of farms which supply the Campbell soup plants. Hisaye Yamamoto wrote us one article about this situation after visiting friends and relatives in the Vineland, New Jersey, region. I will come across it more on this trip, out through the northwest and along the west coast, and down through the south.

The small farmer and life on the land is being done away with, aside from the sad existence of these migrant workers. Last month in Washington, the President's advisory commission on agricultural matters came to the startling conclusion that to solve the problems of agriculture, approximately two million marginal, low income farm families should be persuaded to leave their farms for employment in the cities. For the last thirty years families have been moved from the land either to the towns or into the ranks of the migrant workers. I wrote articles about it in the *Catholic Worker* back in 1935, and for America, during a bitter winter when hundreds of farm families in Arkansas were being dispossessed forcibly from their homes and living in old school houses and railroad stations and tent colonies.

## And Now Two Million More!

We have all seen the picture, *Grapes of Wrath*, made from Steinbeck's great novel of the same name and the situation depicted there is now worse than in the time of Pres. Roosevelt who did all he could to alleviate the misery of the moment by establishing camps on the west coast, yet did nothing at all about striking at the roots of the trouble, our industrial capitalistic system which is a cancer on the political body, as **Osservatore Romano** phrased it, and which we of the **Catholic Worker** have pledged ourselves to oppose.

Here is an instance of the desperate situation of the migrant population, the needy and the poor. On Christmas day in the St. Louis papers appeared the tragic story of the death by fire of ten children and their mother, and the injury of five others in a flash fire, in a little tenant house on the Cook plantation, ten miles out of Parkin, Arkansas. The blast was apparently touched off by kerosene while the seventeen were gathered around a cook stove making hot tamales for a holiday celebration.

The same day Ossie Bondy, who used to head our Windsor House of Hospitality, and is now living with his family of six in Ontario, sent me a column from a Vancouver, British Columbia paper, telling of the unemployment there, the homeless walking the streets, sleeping in doorways, under bridges, in box cars. In the News letter gotten out by the **St. Benedict Joseph Labre House** in Montreal at 418 LaGauchetierre st., there is the story of an unemployed seaman given a home in a city shelter, and locked out of that from early morning until night. In the **Chicago Sun Times**, as I left that area there were

stories of shack towns on the edge of the prairie where large families are living in dilapidated kennels without plumbing and paying from fifteen to fifty-five dollars a month rent. "A dog kennel with the original runways intact was found converted into three two-room apartments and one family with three small children were paying fifty-five dollars a month for their apartment there."

The city began inspecting these places after a fire swept a garage where a family of fifteen were living with no water, no electricity and only oil stoves for heat. All the homes visited, the coroner says, were fire traps filled with dangerous fumes from oil heaters. One can understand why, at Trumbull Park, some forty families are fighting so desperately to live in a housing project where for the past year a police guard of two hundred or so have to be kept to protect the Negro children as they come from school, and the parents as they come from work. The pastor of the Catholic church which is in the midst of this project has not been exhorting his people, I understand, to a better frame of mind towards their brothers in Christ. Thank God for the Bishops of the country who have spoken out in strong language, who have cried out with a loud voice and tears, to remedy this situation of injustice. One of the reasons for racial tensions of course is the fear of unemployment and the resentment of the white worker toward the Negro who is the low paid worker and coming up in large numbers from the south to swell the labor pool, making large reserves on which the employer can call. What loving kindness and understanding and gentleness and firmness are needed on the part of a pastor to change the hearts of an unruly flock!

What can we do, what is to be done? First of all, we can admit that our so-called American way of life has meant great inequalities, and that there does indeed exist a great mass of poor and unemployed people who are in need of help in this country as well as abroad. We need to study ways to change the social order, or at least admit to others whose work it is, and who have the time and vocation to do it, that we need a balanced social order, where man will be closer to the land, where there is a possibility of ownership and responsibility, and work for young and old, and that security which ownership in industry would bring. We need to study the idea of credit unions and cooperatives, and small groups to work out the idea of family communities, and village communities, and decentralized living. We need to study as far as we are able, the entire distributist program. But together with this intellectual approach, we need to approach the problem directly, and as Christians.

Charles Malik, Ambassador from Lebanon, in a commencement address at Georgetown last year, made the startling statement:

"Supposing you were told—and I believe it to be true—that you must count on parting with at least half of your possessions and you must expect besides plenty of suffering and hardship before you can really master the crisis, would you accept to pay that price? I fear there may

be many who would much rather bury their heads in the sand.

“Whatever may be the material need of other parts of the world, certainly one of the greatest needs of the west is for the virtue of poverty to be once again preached and practiced. . . Again and again the poor have been called blessed, and we may be sure that God can only appear in our midst as one of the poor. It is difficult to compress a total problematic in one nutshell, but I am nearly persuaded that if only the west practiced voluntary poverty, all would be well with the world.”

If we were convinced of the need, if our consciences were aroused, how much could we not do, even those of most modest income, in the way of helping the poor. We must reprint, and read again and again the words of Pope Pius XII, who cried out two years ago in a most noble encyclical, Christmas 1952.

“While our thoughts dwell on these scenes of poverty and utter destitution,” he writes, “Our heart fills with anxiety and is overwhelmed, we can say, by a sadness unto death. We are thinking of the consequences of poverty, still more of the consequences of utter destitution. For some families there is a dying daily, a dying hourly: a dying multiplied, especially for parents, by the number of dear ones they behold suffering and wasting away. Meanwhile sickness becomes more serious, because not properly treated; it strikes little ones in particular, because preventive measures are lacking. Then there is the weakening and consequent physical deterioration of whole generations.

. . . We cannot conclude without mentioning that the very best charitable organization would not suffice of itself alone to assist those in need. Personal action must intervene, full of solicitude, anxious to overcome the distance between helper and helped, drawing near to the poor because he is Christ’s brother and our own.

“The great temptation in an age which calls itself social—when besides the Church, the state, the municipality and other public bodies devote themselves so much to social problems—is that when the poor man knocks on the door, people, even believers will just send him away to an agency or social center, to an organization, thinking that their personal obligation has been sufficiently fulfilled by their contributions in taxes or voluntary gifts to those institutions.

“Undoubtedly the poor man will receive your help that way but often he counts also on yourselves, at least on your words of kindness and comfort. Your charity ought to resemble God’s, Who came in person to bring His help. . .

“These considerations encourage us to call on your personal collaboration. The poor, those whom life has rudely reduced to straightened circumstances, the unfortunate of every kind, await it. In so far as it depends on you, strive that none shall say any more, as once did the man in the Gospel who had been infirm for 38 years: ‘Lord, I have no one.’”