

The Poor Among You

Our history as a people is littered with stories of the painful and agonizing conditions of the poor. They lack even the most basic requirements of day-to-day living. They have limited opportunity for rising above their condition. They seem to be trapped in a hopeless cycle of suffering, oppression, deprivation, frustration, exploitation, and even crime.

It is cold comfort to know that we are not the only country facing this persistent problem. For this reason, eleven years ago, the United Nations launched the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as a global campaign to reduce poverty by half by 2015.

But with less than five years remaining, it seems that we are losing the war on poverty. Social Watch Philippines (SWP), in their 2010 Shadow Progress Report, stated that *“The picture of inequality has hardly changed since 2000. The poor live in rural communities far from Manila—in Bicol, Visayas, and Mindanao. They are the landless, homeless, jobless, underemployed, uneducated, sick, malnourished, discriminated Filipinos. Many of them are women, Muslims, Indigenous Peoples and tribal Filipinos.”*

Monitoring the MDGs since 2001, Social Watch observes that the government did not spend enough for the MDGs. It points to the urgent need to look carefully into what they describe as *“the hindrances to the move towards justice and sustainable development”*. Among the hindrances identified are *“high inequality between the rich and the poor, rising population, persistent corruption, unsustainable debt.”*

The war against poverty is full of complexity and defies simplistic solutions. Not even an anti-poverty campaign as expansive as the United Nation’s MDGs is assured of success. Might this be the reason that in the Bible Jesus says “the poor will always be among you?”

However, this is not meant to dismiss the poor and poverty as simply part of our reality. No! Jesus seems to be telling us here about a challenge and a standard in the way we live our lives. Actually, his words reference God’s ancient command to His people, re-emphasized by Moses at the end of 40 years in the desert: “For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land’” (Deuteronomy 15:11 ESV). In many other passages in Scriptures, we are called to give importance to the least, the helpless and those who have less in life. And as the Good Samaritan did, we are expected to provide care, help and guidance to our neighbour.

Let us pray for long-lasting systemic change: Over the remaining five years, President Noynoy must take full advantage of his political capital in leading the government and our people in fulfilling our commitments to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). And may the Lord imbue us with an ever fresh and enduring excitement as we continue to actively participate in the lives of the poor.