

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

Session Focus

This session on Catholic Social Teaching explores the option for the poor and vulnerable. As the Catholic Bishops of the United States explain “Scripture teaches that God has a special concern for the poor and vulnerable. The prophets denounced injustice toward the poor as a lack of fidelity to the God of Israel. Jesus, who identified himself with ‘the least of these,’ came to preach ‘good news to the poor, liberty to captives...and to set the downtrodden free.’ The Church calls on all of us to embrace this preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, to embody it in our lives, and to work to have it shape public policies and priorities. A fundamental measure of our society is how we care for and stand with the poor and vulnerable.” (*Faithful Citizenship*, USCCB, 15)

Learning Objectives

The session on Option for the Poor and Vulnerable guides learners of all ages to . . .

- comprehend the reality of poverty as experienced by people in the United States, Canada, and around the world, and the conditions that contribute to keeping people poor
- value and appreciate the significance of Catholic teaching on the option for the poor and vulnerable, and the responsibilities of Catholics to care for and stand with the poor and vulnerable
- live their responsibilities for creating a more just world where poverty is eliminated by engaging in action, locally and globally

Session Overview

Part 1. (15 minutes) Gathering & Opening Prayer Service

Part 2. (15 minutes) All Ages Learning Experience: Who Are the Poor

Part 3. (90 minutes) In Depth Learning Experience: The Poor and Vulnerable

- Option 1. Whole Group Format: All participants remain in the same room.
- Option 2. Age Groups Format : Participants go to separate rooms for parallel learning: families with children, adolescents, adults.

Part 4. (20 minutes) Sharing Learning Experiences

Part 5. (10 minutes) Closing Prayer Service

Design Options for In-Depth Learning

Option 1. Whole Group Format

This format guides the entire assembly through each of the learning experiences. You might choose this format if you have:

- a large physical space with good acoustics/sound system and furniture to comfortably accommodate the learners
- a competent large group facilitator/master of ceremonies able to provide clear directions and to manage the dynamics and energy of a large group
- a group of leaders who feel comfortable moving through the assembly offering assistance, or a large enough team of table leaders to have one leader work with each table group
- a learning topic that lends itself to everyone learning the same thing at the same time, but in different ways, in the same space

Facilitation Tips for this Format:

Guide small groups through each of the activities at the same time.

- Organize people into table groups based on age groupings: families with children (grades 1-5), middle school adolescents, high school adolescents, young adults, and adults.
- The lead facilitator guides the entire group through each of the learning experiences. All presentations and activity instructions are given to the whole group.
- The age-appropriate learning activities within each learning experience are conducted in table groups.
- Where needed, small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Option 2. Age Group Format

This format provides for three separate parallel learning programs. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic. You might choose this format if you have:

- an adequate number of meeting spaces for the various groups to gather
- an adequate number of competent facilitators to work with each group
- a topic that is best explored through age-specific learning

Facilitation Tips for This Format

- Organize participants into three or more parallel learning groups: families with children (grades 1-5), adolescents (grades 6-12), and adults.
- If there are a large number of adolescents, divide them into two groups: middle school and high school.

Organize separate groups for young adults, adults, and older adults. Or you can give the adults their own choice for forming small groups.

- Direct the adolescents and adults into small groups. Give them all the handouts and learning materials needed for the learning experiences
- Guide the families with children into table groups of two or more families. Give each table all the handouts and learning materials necessary for the learning experiences.

- A facilitator must guide all the of the families through each learning experience, while small group leaders move from table to table assisting.

Materials Needed

Gathering

- Name tags
- Community building activities
- Opening Prayer Service
- Bible

All Ages Opening Learning Experience

- Equipment for visual presentation: multimedia projector and screen
- Bible

In-Depth Learning Experience

- Handouts
- Play money for each family unit and small group
- Creative art materials: newsprint, paper, markers, pens, and pencils
- Glue
- Variety of photo-heavy magazines
- Bible

Closing

- Closing Prayer Service
- Bible

Session Plan

Part 1. Gathering and Opening Prayer (15 minutes)

Registration and Hospitality

- Welcome people and ask them to sign in for the program.
- Provide name tags or invite people to make their own.
- Distribute the handouts participants will need for the session. (You can also distribute handouts for the In Depth Learning program at the beginning of each Learning Experience.)
- Invite people to share a meal. (Depending on time of day, the program may end with a meal.)

Welcome the participants to the program and introduce the theme of the session, in your own words, using the following text:

This session on Catholic Social Teaching explores the option for the poor and vulnerable. As the Catholic Bishops of the United States explain, “Scripture teaches that God has a special concern for the poor and vulnerable. The prophets denounced injustice toward the poor as a lack of fidelity to the God of Israel.

Jesus, who identified himself with ‘the least of these,’ came to preach ‘good news to the poor, liberty to captives...and to set the downtrodden free.’ The Church calls on all of us to embrace this preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, to embody it in our lives, and to work to have it shape public policies and priorities. A fundamental measure of our society is how we care for and stand with the poor and vulnerable.” (*Faithful Citizenship*, USCCB, 15)

In the words of Pope Francis, “I believe that, yes, the times talk to us of so much poverty in the world and this is a scandal. Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education, so many poor persons. Poverty today is a cry. We all have to think if we can become a little poorer, all of us have to do this. How can I become a little poorer in order to be more like Jesus, who was the poor Teacher?” (6/7/13 Jesuit Schools—Q & A)

In this program we are going to discover the poor in North America and identify what is keeping them poor. We are going to look at what our Catholic faith teaches us about God’s special concern for the poor and vulnerable. And we are going to find ways to take responsibility as individuals, families, and parish communities for creating a country where poverty is eliminated.

1. Group Formation

Organize people into small groups. For the All Ages Experience participants need to be organized into intergenerational groups of eight people (children and parents, teens, adults, older adults). If a participating family has all three generations present (children, parents, and grandparents), they become one intergenerational group. Each group needs to have at least three generations present: children, teens, and adults.

For the In Depth Learning Experience organize participants into three types of table groups: family clusters of two or more families, groups of adolescents, and groups of adults. See the session plans for adolescents and adults for more instructions on organizing groups.

2. Opening Prayer Service

Preparation

Create an environment with a large wooden table with chairs at the table.

During the opening song, ask several families, teens, and adults to bring to the table the following items: tablecloth, plates, silverware, napkins, glasses, Bible, several candles, and other items that you want to use to decorate the table.

Create a prayer space in the middle of the table with the Bible and candles.

Gather

Choose a song about helping those who are poor. During the song, have people set the table with place settings, Bible, candles, and other items.

Pray:

Gracious God, we gather today around this table to give you thanks and praise and to remember all the people in our country and world who do not have a place at the table. So many of your people do not have the food they need to survive. They don't have a table or a place at anyone else's table. Tables are where we come together to share a meal. But they also are where people gather to make important decisions about their families, their neighborhoods and nations, and their world. Too many people have no place at these tables, so their voices and needs are never heard.

Open our hearts and minds to the reality of poverty in our land. Help us to hear the voice of Jesus Christ in the cry for help that rises from this world of poverty. Inspire us to build a world free of poverty and injustice. Amen.

Listen

Select one of the following Scripture readings and proclaim it to the assembly:

- Isaiah 58:6-11 (Share your bread with the hungry)
- Luke 4:16 – 19 (Mission of Jesus)
- Luke 7:20 – 22 (Report to John the Baptist)

Respond

Let us pray for those in need . . .

Defender of the oppressed and the orphan, we pray for all people in our nation and world who suffer from poverty, injustice, and fear.

Response: In your tender mercy, protect them, O Lord.

We pray for all those without enough food to eat today and for those without a home.

Response: In your tender mercy, protect them, O Lord.

We pray for those who work long hours but cannot earn enough money to support their families.

Response: In your tender mercy, protect them, O Lord.

We pray for babies born at risk, for children who are sick, and for all those who lack proper health care.

Response: In your tender mercy, protect them, O Lord.

We pray for families facing loss of jobs or the anxiety of an uncertain future.

Response: In your tender mercy, protect them, O Lord.

Go Forth

O God, you are the defender of the poor
and the stronghold of the orphaned and the widowed.
When your people were robbed of their homes
and put in chains,
you did not abandon them
but made of them a special people.
From the remnants of their lives
you fashioned them into a garment of joy.
In the fullness of time, you sent Christ
who announced the good news of salvation to the poor,
the day of liberty for those in need.
In these days, the nightmare of poverty
haunts our world and enters our homes.
Standing in lines, deprived of human dignity,
the poor of our world beg for love
and ask for food and work.
Shine your spirit of courage and compassion upon us.
Warm the cold of our hearts and wills.
Help us to help your beloved poor.
Help us to see that in loving and tending their needs
we are tending the presence of Christ among us.
We ask this through Christ and the Holy Spirit,
with you, One God, forever and ever.
Amen.

(Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly: Prayers for Peace and Justice, Edward Gabriel)

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience (15 minutes)

Involvement Phase of the Pastoral Circle Process

The All Ages Learning Experience is designed to help participants feel and understand how a particular social issue affects the lives of other people and their own lives. The first step in the Pastoral Circle process—and the basis for any action—is Involvement. Through learning activities, we connect the participants with the social issue to be explored, helping them “feel” the issue being analyzed and exposing them to what is happening in their local community or world. This helps the participants “hear” and “think” from a broader perspective. Once people are connected with an issue or situation, they are ready to move to analysis, to ask the “why” questions from a first-hand perspective.

In this session there are two involvement activities. The first is conducted with everyone; the second is in the In Depth Learning age-group activities

1. Who Are the Poor?

Pastoral Circle Process: Involvement

Preparation

Prepare a photo-slide show using PowerPoint or another program to illustrate the reflection, “Who Are the Poor?” (see below). Select photos that match each line in the reflection. Play instrumental music in the background. Make sure the photos reflect the diversity of poor people. The photos should look like everyone else in society. The only difference is that they are economically poor and socially disadvantaged.

A copy of the script can also be found on Handout #2. Select readers of various ages to present the reflection—children, teens, young adults, parents, older adults.

Materials Needed

- Copies of Handout #2 for the readers

Introduction

Read the script slowly so that people can reflect on what they are seeing and hearing. Pause after each line.

Most people in North America have what they need to live in comfort.

Most people have enough food to eat, enough clothes to wear, and enough shelter to be safe.

People are said to be “living in poverty” when they do not have enough of what it takes to fulfill basic human needs.

A person can be poor when he or she lacks the essentials of daily life, such as sufficient food to keep them from being hungry.

A person can be poor if he or she works hard at a job but doesn’t make enough money to buy the things needed to be healthy and secure, such as proper clothing to keep them warm in cold weather, or health care to help them recover from illness.

So, who are the poor in North America? This is how those living in poverty would answer if they were here today:

We are mostly White,
but also African American,
Latino,
Native American,
and Asian too.
We are children.

We are the elderly.

We are disabled.

We live in cities,
suburbs,
and in the country.

We go to work
and to school
and to church.

We want a good and safe life for our families and ourselves; we are concerned about raising our children well.

We help others who are in even worse shape than ourselves.

Some of us are single mothers with children, whose husbands left us after years of marriage,
and we are now working minimum wage jobs.

Some of us are teenagers who already have a child.

Most of us can't make ends meet even though we work full time.

Most of us don't have health insurance, even if we are working full time.

Some of us have no jobs because the companies in our area moved our jobs to other countries.

We are people who frequently depend on handouts at food pantries and soup kitchens.

Most of us did not receive a good education from our parents and our schools.

Some of us messed up our lives with alcohol and drugs.

If we were a state or province, our population would be greater than that of all the other states. We would, in effect, be the largest state in the U.S.

We are nearly one in six of all Americans.

And we aren't all the same.

Have participants remain silent for a minute or two, getting in touch with their thoughts and feelings.

Invite them to reflect on the following questions and then share their thoughts with their small group.

- How did you feel as you watched the people in the presentation and listened to their words?
- Is it hard for you to imagine that there are people living in poverty in the United States, the richest country in the world?
- How did this presentation affect the way you think about people who are poor?

Part 3. In Depth Learning Experience (90 minutes)

Families with Children Learning Experiences

Activity 1. What Is It Like Living at the Poverty Line?

Pastoral Circle Process: Involvement

Participants will experience the struggle of living at or near the national poverty line income by developing a monthly budget for their household expenses.

Preparation

Statistics on poverty change from year to year. To get current statistics on the monthly income for each of the four situations in the activity, check out one of the following websites and insert the income into the blanks below and on Handout #3.

Poverty USA: Information and Action Ideas on Poverty

<http://www.povertyusa.org/index.php/learn>

Health & Human Services, U.S. Government: Census Statistics (updated annually)

<https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty.html>

HealthCare.gov: Federal Poverty Level

<https://www.healthcare.gov/glossary/federal-poverty-level-fpl/>

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: Poverty Statistics

<https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals#no-poverty>

Use regionally-specific budget figures for this activity if possible. Research average regional figures for the expense items, especially rent and utilities, by checking the newspapers for typical prices of apartments, asking several individuals or families about monthly prices for utilities and food expenses, and so on.

Prepare envelopes of play money to distribute to each family unit or group. Mark each envelope with the type of life situation. Be sure to prepare plenty of envelopes for each life situation, since you will not know the groups' selections in advance. You can assume that families will pick one of the two family options. Prepare envelopes in the following amounts:

Family of four: \$ ____

Single parent and two children: \$ ____

Single person: \$ ____

Senior citizen: \$ ____

Materials Needed

- Handout #3, one per table group
- Handout #4 for each participant
- Play money

- Pens or pencils
- Envelopes
- Access to the internet (encourage participants to bring their smartphones)

Distribute pens or pencils and copies of Handout #4: Living Month to Month to each person. (Young children will not need the handout).

Activity

Introduce the activity by saying:

In this activity we will experience, in a small way, the challenges and frustrations of developing a monthly budget for our household expenses with an income that has been set at or near the national poverty level. We will be asking you to take the role of a real- life situation and work with your family or small group to develop your monthly budget. There are four life situations.

Life Situation 1: Monthly Income for a family of four at the poverty level: \$_____ (approximately).

Life Situation 2: Monthly income for a single-parent mother and two children with one child in day care and one in school: \$_____ (approximately).

Life Situation 3: Monthly Income for a single person working 40 hours at the minimum wage: \$_____ (approximately).

Life Situation 4: Monthly Income for an individual senior citizen on a fixed income of Social Security after the Medicare deduction: \$_____ (approximately).

Distribute an envelope of play money to each family or small group that corresponds to their selection. Give each group a copy of Handout #3: Budget Items so they can put their monthly expense allocation in the appropriate square. Direct each group to use Handout #4 to develop a monthly budget with their fixed income. They need to determine how much things cost and how much they can spend on each expense category with the amount of money they have. Encourage them to use their smartphones to research expenses. They should proceed from the first item through the last item in order. As they assign budget figures for each item, they should place that amount of play money in the appropriate square on Handout #3. This gives them a visual way of seeing how the money is being spent and how much is left.

Monitor your time and keep the groups moving.

Invite groups to finish their budgets and discuss the following questions:

- What was it like making these choices: difficult, easy, stressful, painful?
- How did you feel about your choices?
- What items were you forced to leave out or not allocate enough money for in your monthly budget? What are the consequences of those choices?

Invite groups to share observations about their experience with everyone. Encourage them to share their feelings as they struggled to survive at the poverty level or minimum wage salary.

Share with group one example of how far a poverty level income would go in the United States today. Using average national expenses found on one of the recommended websites above, create a PowerPoint presentation or large sheets of newsprint to explain the information.

Using \$_____ for a family of four, here are average national expenses for one year:

- Annual rent for a two-bedroom apartment in a metropolitan area: \$_____.
- Annual utility expense (electricity, gas, oil) to keep a family of four warm (or cool) and secure: \$_____.
- Annual cost for two people to ride the bus daily to and from work in a major metropolitan area: \$_____. (Trips to the doctor's office, grocery store, and so on, would be additional.)
- Annual at-home food expense for a family of four: \$_____. It is estimated that families at the poverty line will spend about \$_____ annually on food away from home.
- Annual family contribution to medical insurance (assuming that the employer is making a substantial contribution to medical insurance): \$_____.

Here is the budget calculation for one year:

Salary: \$_____

Expenses: \$_____ for the following "non-negotiables:"

\$_____ (rent)

\$_____ (utilities)

\$_____ (public transportation to work)

\$_____ (food)

\$_____ (medical insurance contribution)

What is left out? How about phone, school supplies, shoes and clothes, toiletries, home furnishings, gifts (Christmas and birthdays), recreation and entertainment to name a few items?

Activity 2. Why Are People Poor?

Pastoral Circle Process: Exploration-Analysis

Exploration or analysis, the second phase of the Pastoral Circle Process helps the participants ask *why* in the face of human suffering and injustice. Why do these conditions exist? What role do politics or economics or cultural values play in perpetuating the problem? Exploration broadens the participants' thinking by helping them look for the causes of the injustice; to examine the relationships among politics, economics, and cultural values in our world that perpetuate the injustice; and to analyze the social or structural realities that keep the situation from changing. Exploration helps the participants to understand the social issue more thoroughly so they can envision ways to be involved in working for justice.

Preparation

Prepare newsprint sheets or PowerPoint slides that list the order of the activities to guide people through the process.

Print and cut out the poverty cards from Handout #6 and place them in an envelope. One set of cards for each family.

Materials Needed

- One large sheet of paper, glue, and one marking pen per family
- Handouts #5 and #8
- Handout #6 (cut into cards) and envelopes

Introduce this learning experience by using the text below to explain the urgency for determining the reasons why people are poor and what we can do about it. Tailor the message to your audience.

Pope Francis is a champion of the poor. He has challenged all people of faith to look at why poverty exists and then do something to change the reality. In 2014 he said:

We have at our disposal so much information and so many statistics on poverty and human tribulations. There is a risk of being highly informed bystanders and disembodied from these realities, or to have nice discussions that end up in verbal solutions and disengagement from the real problems. Too many words, too many words, too many words and nothing is done! This is a risk. (6/14/14)

The U.S. Bishops have written about the causes of poverty:

“The realities of poverty today are shaped by powerful economic, moral, and cultural forces. Among these is the rapid pace of globalization—the increasing global connections among our economic, cultural, social, and political lives. While we are becoming more connected as one human community, we often live and work in very different economies.

- Some people are *pulling ahead*, harnessing their education and positions to seize the opportunities of economic life and the global marketplace.
- Many people are *left behind*. They lack the education, skills, access, and opportunity to compete. They include the hungry and homeless, subsistence farmers, victims of discrimination, those suffering with AIDS, those caught in violent conflict, and immigrants and refugees without the right papers or language skills. Discrimination, low wages, sweatshop conditions, and unjust trade and other policies leave many on the fringes of economic life.
- Many people are *struggling*. They have jobs or farms but may lack the income, health care, and other benefits to raise a family in dignity. They are working hard but not getting ahead. Their financial security is subject to investment decisions, market trends, world commodity prices, and other economic forces that are beyond their control. They worry about keeping their jobs or their farms, feeding and educating their children, paying for health care, and saving for their old age.”

(*A Place at the Table*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Pope Francis shares,

“In all places and circumstances, Christians, with the help of their pastors, are called to hear the cry of the poor. This has been eloquently stated by the bishops of Brazil: ‘We wish to

take up daily the joys and hopes, the difficulties and sorrows of the Brazilian people, especially of those living in the barrios and the countryside – landless, homeless, lacking food and health care – to the detriment of their rights. Seeing their poverty, hearing their cries and knowing their sufferings, we are scandalized because we know that there is enough food for everyone and that hunger is the result of a poor distribution of goods and income.” (11/24/13)

Give parents Handout #8: Poverty in the United States. This will help them deepen their understanding of the scope and causes of poverty in the United States.

Give each family Handout #5 and review it with them.

Have each family read all of the cards.

Explain that their task is to arrange the cards in a circle on the sheet of paper. The card headed “poverty” should be at the top of the circle. All the others should follow it in a clockwise order. The arrangement should show how each condition is created or caused by the one that precedes it.

When the family has agreed on an arrangement for the cards, instruct them to glue the cards onto the paper and draw arrows from the first card around until the circle is completed.

Invite families to form groups of two or three families. Have each family share their poverty chart, explaining why they placed the cards in the order they did.

Instruct groups to develop specific ideas for breaking the cycle of poverty. Have them imagine they have the power to change the situation of people, especially children, who live in poverty. Make sure the children take the lead in coming up with ideas and have parents supplement the ideas shared by the children. If necessary, share a few examples of responses for attacking poverty in the U.S.

- creating a program that provides a basic level of food for all children living in poverty
- creating free health care services for the poor
- providing more funding for education in low-income areas
- setting up job training programs for parents
- keeping youth in school until they attain a diploma/degree
- providing free education beyond high school for those who have been laid off or downsized
- ensuring the prompt payment of child support
- encouraging poor and low-income people to organize so that they get fair and just treatment and a chance to participate in decisions affecting them
- establishing a higher minimum wage
- providing health care for everyone who works and their families
- subsidizing day care for all low-income workers
- ensuring that no low-income person pays more than one-third of his/her monthly income on housing

Have parents write down the ideas.

Ask each family unit to select several ideas that will address one of the issues on their poverty chart. Each family should add their ideas to the poverty chart, writing the idea next to the step on the poverty cycle to which it corresponds.

Invite groups (or individual families) to discuss their thoughts and feelings about what they experienced using the following questions:

- How are you feeling about the situation of others who live in poverty today? Is it hard for you to believe that so many people are living in poverty in the richest country in the world? What surprised you about the situation?
- Why does poverty continue?
- What would it be like if several of your family's ideas were actually implemented? What impact would your ideas have on people's lives?
- What did you learn today that you didn't know before?

Activity 3. What do the Scriptures and Church Teachings Say about Human Rights?

Pastoral Circle Process: Reflection

Reflection, the third phase of the Pastoral Circle process, engages the participants in exploring a social issue from the perspective of faith—the Bible, Catholic Social Teaching, and the living response of the Catholic Church to the issue—locally, nationally, and globally. This step involves the participants in examining what the Catholic faith says about a particular social issue. They explore what the Catholic community is doing about social issues and what motivates its response. Reflection calls forth not just an intellectual assent to faith, but a commitment to incorporate a faith response within one's own life. The Word of God brought to bear upon the situation challenges old ways of thinking and responding by raising new questions, suggesting new insights, and opening people up to new action possibilities.

Preparation

Leaders and table facilitators should read Handout #9 for background on the Gospel story of the rich man and Lazarus.

Materials Needed

- Handout #9 for leaders
- Handouts #10, #11, #12, #13
- Paper, colored markers, magazines with pictures, glue, scissors
- Newsprint and markers

1. Why Should Catholics Be Concerned about Poverty?

Use the following text from *A Place at the Table* to introduce the importance for all Catholics to be concerned about poverty and to seek solutions for alleviating poverty.

- Our faith calls us to it. The Gospel and Catholic social teaching place our service of the poor and vulnerable and our work for justice at the center of Christian witness.
- Our nation needs it. Too many Americans, especially children, are growing up poor in the richest nation on earth. The blessings and burdens of American life are not being shared fairly.

- Our world requires it. Each day, 25,000 people, including more than 10,000 children, die from hunger and related causes. Disease and debt, corruption and conflict are threatening the lives and dignity of millions in our increasingly globalized world.
- Our salvation demands it. In Jesus' description of the Last Judgment, the critical question is 'What did you do for the least of these?' Jesus identified himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, and the stranger, insisting that when we serve them we serve him.
- Our actions can make a difference.
(*A Place at the Table*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 3)

2. What Scripture Says . . .

Catholic teaching on the option for the poor and vulnerable begins in the Bible. Our focusing Scripture reading for this session is the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 16:19 – 31).

Proclaim the passage from Luke 16:19 – 31 to the group. Use multiple readers, assigning each reader a different part: narrator, Lazarus, Rich Man, Abraham. Invite the participants to follow along on Handout #10.

Invite family groups to discuss the parable using the following reflection questions:

- What is Jesus' message to us in this parable?
- What is Jesus asking us to do in this parable?
- Was the story addressed just to individuals, or is there a message in the story for families, groups, and institutions (the Church, business, government) as well?

Use the following overview from *A Place at the Table* to summarize briefly the Biblical vision of the option for the poor. You may want to develop several key points from the text below or use a combination of key points and short Scripture quotes to present the Biblical vision.

"Our faith calls us to look at economic life in terms of its moral and human dimensions. Concern for the poor echoes through the Scriptures—in the passion of the prophets, the words and witness of Jesus, and the example of the early Church. The Church has lived out this concern in every age and every land. Our commitment to those who are in greatest need is rooted in the biblical vision of the sacredness of all human life. In the Old Testament, the Book of Genesis teaches us that every person is made in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27) and endowed with inalienable dignity, regardless of who we are, where we are born, or what we accomplish. As believers, we are called to treat all people—especially those who are suffering—with respect, compassion, and justice.

"Genesis also teaches us that all of creation was made by God and ultimately belongs to God. (Genesis 1:26-30, 15:18) The goods of creation must be used to advance the reign of God and the well-being of all. Private ownership is important to ensure freedom and dignity and to help people to meet basic needs, but the goods of creation are not to be controlled by some at the cost of injustice to others. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #2402-2407)

"Throughout the Old Testament, God calls his people to care for those on the margins of society. (Leviticus 19:9-15) The God of Israel is a God of justice who protects and defends the poor. (Psalm

113:7, 140:13) The prophets clearly reminded the people of Israel that a test of their faithfulness was the way they treated their poor and vulnerable—the widows, the orphans, and the aliens. (Isaiah 10:1-5, Jeremiah 22:3, Ezekiel 22:29-31)

”In the New Testament, we learn how Jesus shared his love in a special way with those who were poor or vulnerable. In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and in the Parable of the Rich Young Man, Jesus urged us not to ignore those who are suffering in our midst and warned that attachment to riches can be a barrier to discipleship. (Luke 16:19-31)

”Although Jesus reminded us that in a world marred by sin, the poor would always be with us, he also challenged us to see him in those who are hungry or thirsty, in strangers, in the naked and imprisoned. In Christ’s description of the Last Judgment, we learn that when we ignore the poor, we ignore Christ himself. (Matthew 26:11) As John Paul II has declared, “This Gospel text is not a simple invitation to charity. . . . By these words, no less than by the orthodoxy of her doctrine, the Church measures her fidelity.” (Matthew 25:44-45) (From: *A Place at the Table*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002, 11-12)

Choose one of the following activities to go deeper into the Scriptures.

Option A. Re-work a Gospel Passage for Today

Distribute Handout #11 to each family. Invite participants to imagine: *If Jesus were here today, how would he “re-work” a Gospel passage to speak to people today?*

Give each child in the family one Gospel passage from Handout #11 to re-write or to illustrate. Younger children can illustrate the story with drawings and pictures from magazines. Have them choose how they want to do this activity. The options include:

- Children can rewrite the Gospel story as an eyewitness account of something Jesus did or as an interview of a person who met Jesus (e.g., a person Jesus healed).
- Children can rewrite the Gospel passage from a particular point of view (e.g., the different characters in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus).
- Children can rewrite the Gospel passage using a creative method such as storyboards for a TV show or a movie, a TV newscast, a commercial, and/or a newspaper or magazine story.

The Scripture passages on Handout #11 include:

Luke 16:19 – 31 (Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus)

Mark 12:28 – 31 (Greatest Commandment)

Matthew 25:34 – 40 (Parable of the Final Judgment)

Mark 10:17 – 22 (Rich Young Man)

Luke 4:16 – 19 (Mission of Jesus)

Luke 7:20 – 22 (Report to John the Baptist)

Luke 6:20 – 21, 24 – 25 (Luke’s Beatitudes)

Luke 6:30 - 33, 36 (Give to everyone who asks.)

Luke 12:33 – 34 (Sell your belongings and give alms.)

Mark 98:1 – 9 (Feeding the crowd)

Luke 14:12 – 14 (Invite the poor to the banquet.)

Allow time for families to complete the activity. Then invite them to share their writings or drawings with other families near them.

Option B. Putting Yourself in the Gospel Story

Pass out Handout #11. Invite each family to rewrite a Gospel story by putting themselves in it. Younger children can illustrate the story with drawings and pictures from magazines.

Invite each family to read one Gospel passage aloud. Allow them to choose one of the following Gospel passages from Handout #11.

Luke 16:19 – 31 (Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus)

Matthew 25:34 – 40 (Parable of the Final Judgment)

Mark 10:17 – 22 (Rich Young Man)

Mark 9:1 – 9 (Feeding the crowd)

Ask the children to rewrite the story from a first-person point of view, describing the events as though they were in the story participating. Ask them to arrange the situation so that at the end of the story they are alone with Jesus. Ask them to conclude their story with a dialogue between Jesus and themselves, discussing what happened. Their conversation will lead into thoughts and feelings about their own life.

Invite families to share their writings or drawings with other families near them.

Option C. Write a Letter to Jesus

Pass out Handout #11. Invite each family—or children with the assistance of their parents—to rewrite a Gospel story using a letter format.

Tell the children to think of the Gospel reading as Jesus' letter to them. Parents should read the passage aloud, and then ask the children to respond by writing their thoughts in the form of a letter to Jesus, a prayer. Use any of these passages from Handout #11:

Luke 16:19 – 31 (Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus)

Mark 12:28 – 31 (Greatest Commandment)

Matthew 25:34 – 40 (Parable of the Final Judgment)

Mark 10:17 – 22 (Rich Young Man)

Luke 4:16 – 19 (Mission of Jesus)

Luke 7:20 – 22 (Report to John the Baptist)

Luke 6:20 – 21, 24 – 25 (Luke's Beatitudes)

Luke 6:30 - 33, 36 (Give to everyone who asks.)

Luke 12:33 – 34 (Sell your belongings and give alms.)

Mark 9:1 – 9 (Feeding the crowd)

Luke 14:12 – 14 (Invite the poor to the banquet.)

Direct families to use a letter format (Dear Jesus . . .) and include what they learned from reading the Gospel passage, how they will try to live what Jesus has said, and what they need from Jesus in order to live what God has asked them to do.

If you have all the children write a letter, have each child in the family select a different passage. Parents can write the letter for younger children.

Invite families to share their writings or drawings with other families near them.

3. What the Church Teaches . . .

Distribute Handout #12 to the parents as background information.

Prepare a brief presentation on the Church's teaching on the option for the poor and vulnerable using Handout #12 and the following text from *A Place at the Table*. Summarize briefly the Church's vision of the option for the poor and how it is grounded in the Biblical vision, especially the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ. To present the Church's vision use the key points below, as well as key points from the reading, then add selected quotes from *A Place at the Table*.

Key Points

- The Church, from its earliest days, made caring for the poor a priority in its teachings and actions. (See Acts 4:32-34 and quote from St. Ambrose.)
- The Gospels remind us that there is a special presence of Christ in the poor (when we serve the poor, we serve Christ). The poor and vulnerable are a special priority for Christians.
- We are one human family. We see every other person as our neighbor.
- All people have basic human rights: the right to life and the right to acquire what is necessary to live a life with dignity.
- Concern for the poor is advanced by our efforts, as individuals and as a community, to serve their needs and to create a more just world where poverty is eliminated.
- The Church is at the forefront of service to the needs of the poor and vulnerable and of working for justice to eliminate the causes of poverty.
- We serve the poor and act for justice because of our faith in God and our respect for the dignity of the human person.

"Applying the Scriptures to human history has been the task of saints, church leaders, and ordinary believers through the centuries. The social doctrine of the Church provides principles for reflection, criteria for judgment, and guidelines for the choices we make every day. (Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, #49) In the early years of the Church, Christian communities cared for their weakest members by sharing what they had. (Acts 4:32-34) According to St. Ambrose, 'You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich.'

"Catholic teaching about human dignity and economic justice has been a special focus of many papal encyclicals and statements of our bishops' conference, offering key themes and principles and applying them to the issues of the day. (See "A Catholic Framework for Economic Life.")

"Pope John Paul II insists that the unequivocal words of the Gospel remind us that there is a special presence of Christ in the poor. This presence requires the Church to make a preferential option for those who are poor and vulnerable. (Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, #49) The principle of solidarity reminds us that as members of one human family, we see every "other" as our neighbor,

who must share in the “banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.” (Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #39) Solidarity calls us to care for our neighbors in need who are nearby and for those who are far away and to see all those who suffer as sisters and brothers. (Pope John XXIII, *Mater and Magister*, #157)

”Catholic teaching affirms that all persons, even those on the margins of society, have basic human rights: the right to life and to those things that are necessary to the proper development of life, including faith and family, work and education, housing and health care. Work is the key to the social question (cf. Pope John Paul II, *On Human Work*). Work should not leave people poor but should provide wages sufficient to achieve a standard of living that is in keeping with human dignity. (Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, #20) Workers have both an obligation and a right to work, (Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, #43) as well as a right to participation, association, and economic initiative. This includes the right to choose to join a union and to bargain collectively.

”In the Catholic tradition, concern for the poor is advanced by individual and common action, works of charity, efforts to achieve a more just social order, the practice of virtue, and the pursuit of justice in our own lives. It requires action to confront structures of injustice that leave people poor. Individual believers are called to be generous in sharing what we have with those in need and to promote justice through the choices we make in our families, schools, and workplaces, and through our participation in social and economic life. (Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, #35-36)

”Our social doctrine is expressed and enriched by the Church’s broad experience. Across the globe, our Church puts faith into action by feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, educating the young, caring for the sick, welcoming the stranger, providing access for persons with disabilities, and working for greater justice and peace. The Catholic Church is the largest non-governmental provider of education, health care, and human services in our nation. We are helping families and communities to combat hunger and homelessness, overcome poverty and dependency, build housing, resist crime, and seek greater justice. Catholic schools are among the best anti-poverty programs, offering first-rate education, moral truth, and discipline in communities across our nation. We welcome and resettle many refugees fleeing conflict and repression. We offer relief and development in more than eighty countries.

”Our Church’s commitment to find a place at the table for all God’s children is expressed in every part of our country and in the poorest places on earth. All across the globe, the Church carries this forward because of who we are and what we believe about God and the human person. Our faith gives us the strength, identity, and principles we need to sustain this work.”
(*A Place at the Table*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002, 11-12)

The option for the poor raises many questions: How can we challenge ourselves to see Christ in the poor and in the vulnerable? What can we do to affirm the dignity of the poor and to give them a hand up? What can we do to protect the vulnerable and empower those who are poor and powerless?

Invite groups to discuss what they have learned from the Gospel passages and the Church’s teachings on the option for the poor and vulnerable.

Distribute newsprint and markers to each group. Direct them to write at the top of the newsprint sheet, “Ways to Live Our Option for the Poor.”

Have them divide the paper into three equal columns with these labels: 1) family, 2) parish, 3) society.

Say to the groups:

If we took the option for the poor and vulnerable to heart, as we have seen in the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, the message of Jesus, and the Church's teachings, what actions would we need to take as individuals or families, as a parish community, and as a society?

Challenge each group to identify four or five actions in each column.

Invite groups to share their list with a group nearby.

Call all the groups together and ask for a few ideas in each of the three columns, so that everyone can hear the ideas from other groups.

Post the newsprint sheets for all to see.

Activity 4. How Can We Eliminate Poverty?

Pastoral Circle Process: Action

Preparation

As a team, decide ahead of time if you'd like to have the whole faith community work on a project aimed at helping a particular group of people who are challenged by poverty. If you decide to go this route, use the chosen project to guide participants through this activity and help families and individuals decide what they can do to take action.

Prepare a take-home booklet for participants which lists opportunities for service and justice in the local community and beyond. Begin by researching local organizations involved in direct service to those in need and organizations working to alleviate the causes of injustice (advocacy groups, community organizing groups, etc.). Check with your diocesan Catholic Charities and social justice offices for recommendations. Be sure to include projects that your faith community already supports.

Materials Needed

- Handouts #13A and #13B, Handout #14
- Booklets with service and justice ideas created by your team
- Newsprint and markers or PowerPoint

1. Accepting Our Responsibilities and Moving to Action

Introduce the final activity by explaining to the group, in your own words, the following:

In this final activity we are going to explore ways we can all get involved, regardless of how young or old we are, and accept our responsibility to the poor and vulnerable in our country and world. As Pope John Paul II expressed countless times,

“Service to those in need must take the form of direct action to relieve their anxieties and to remove their burdens, at the same time lead them to the dignity of self-reliance...Service to the

poor also involves speaking up for them and trying to reform structures which cause or perpetuate their oppression. In the final analysis, however, we must realize that social injustice and unjust social structures exist only because individuals and groups of individuals deliberately maintain or tolerate them. It is these personal choices, operating through structures, that breed and propagate situations of poverty, oppression, and misery.” (John Paul II, “Address to Catholic Charities,” San Antonio, TX, September 13, 1987, nos. 5 and 6, *Origins* 17:17 [October 8, 1987]: 287)

Pass out Handouts #13A and #13B to participants. Then continue:

Action involves helping people survive their present crisis or need *and* addressing the root causes of the problems. We call this the “two feet of social action:” direct service to those in need and action for justice to address the causes that perpetuate the problem (see handout).

Collecting food for the food bank, working at a soup kitchen, visiting the elderly or sick, and tutoring children are common examples of direct service. Direct service needs to be coupled with actions aimed at removing the causes of the problems that direct service is addressing. Legislative advocacy, community organizing, and working with organizations that are changing the structures that promote injustice are examples of action for justice.

To explore this more deeply, let’s take the issue of homelessness as an example. To walk with both feet of social action, an individual or family who prepares and serves a meal at the homeless shelter could also be involved with a local organization which is working to create housing, employment, and just policies for those without adequate housing or make a contribution to Habitat for Humanity to address the worldwide problem of inadequate housing.

By walking on both feet we experience the benefits of working directly with the homeless *and* learning to change the system which keeps people homeless. Real change will come about only when we work together to alleviate the present suffering caused by an injustice and organize our energies to eradicate the causes of the injustice.

Brainstorm with the community issues of injustice which cause people to live in poverty. Discuss how participants would like to be involved as individuals and as families. If your faith community has chosen one or more featured projects to adopt, provide a more detailed explanation of how people can be involved in these projects. Have families and individuals write ideas which energize them on Handout #13B in the appropriate footprint.

Create a PowerPoint presentation or display large sheets of newsprint with the two feet and action ideas inside each foot. Have families and individuals decide on the actions they are willing to commit their time to. Invite them to write their initials on Handout #13B next to whatever action they commit to doing.

2. Time, Talent, and Treasure

Ask adolescents to join their families for this activity. Pass out Handout #14.

Introduce the activity with the following Scripture quote: “Your heart will always be where your treasure is” (Luke 12:34). Then share:

We use our time for what is really important in life. This activity will analyze our individual and family use of time and how we can be more generous with our time, talent, and treasure in service to those in need.

Think about how you or your family currently spends time on a typical day. Identify the number of hours your family spends on daily activities. Use your “Family Time Chart” to draw a picture of how your family uses time.

Give people an example of a completed chart by using the “Sample Daily Family Time Chart.” Use a typical day in your family as an example. Then give families time to complete their charts.

Invite individuals and families to discuss the following questions. Suggest that to be more generous with the family’s time, talents, and treasure in service to others, the family may need to make changes in their use of time.

- Are there important activities we must make more time for? How can we make more time for these important activities?
- How can we become more generous with our time, talents, and treasure to serve people in need—locally and around the world?
- What changes do we want to make in our chart?

Conclude by asking participants to find projects that match with their family’s time, talents, and treasure. Invite them to make changes to their commitments on Handout #13B if something new occurred to them.

3. Guest Presenter (if time permits)

Invite several representatives from local service organizations or social justice leaders in your faith community to share their thoughts about the importance of serving and acting for justice.

Direct guest presenters to share with the group the following information:

1. The kind of work they are doing and how it responds to the needs of people locally (or nationally or internationally)
2. The reasons they are personally involved in this work/ministry
3. The characteristics of the people they are serving
4. The role they think the Church should be playing in this and other situations of injustice
5. The ways that people can get involved in their work. Following the brief presentation(s)

Provide opportunity for participants to ask questions.

Adolescent and Adult Learning Experiences

Activity 1. What Is It Like Living at the Poverty Line?

See Activity 1 under Families with Children for details.

Activity 2. Why Are People Poor? People Are Poor Because...

Pastoral Circle Process: Exploration-Analysis

Exploration or analysis, the second phase of the Pastoral Circle Process helps the participants ask *why* in the face of human suffering and injustice. Why do these conditions exist? What role do politics or economics or cultural values play in perpetuating the problem? Exploration broadens the participants' thinking by helping them look for the causes of the injustice; to examine the relationships among politics, economics, and cultural values in our world that perpetuate the injustice; and to analyze the social or structural realities that keep the situation from changing. Exploration helps the participants to understand the social issue more thoroughly so they can envision ways to be involved in working for justice.

Preparation

Prepare newsprint sheets or PowerPoint slides that list the order of the activities to guide people through the process.

Prepare a PowerPoint or newsprint with the answers to the 5-point quiz on Handout #8. The answers include:

1. According to the 2020 Census report, 37.2 million people live in poverty in the United States.
True.
2. The number of people living in poverty decreased in 2020.
False. It went up from 10.5% in 2019 to 11.4% in 2020.
3. The United States government says that a family of four is poor if its income is less than \$35,000 a year.
False. The federal poverty level is \$26,496 for a family of four. Many experts believe a more realistic poverty threshold for a family of four would be much higher.
4. Over six million people were considered the "working poor" in 2019.
True. 6.3 million were classified that way.
5. More children than seniors live in poverty.
True. 14.4 percent of children live in poverty compared to 8.9 percent of those aged 65 and older.

Materials Needed

- Handouts #7, #8
- Newsprint and markers

Activity

Introduce this learning experience by using the text below to explain the urgency for determining the reasons why people are poor and what we can do about it. Tailor the message to your audience.

Pope Francis is a champion of the poor. He has challenged all people of faith to look at why poverty exists and then do something to change the reality. In 2014 he said:

We have at our disposal so much information and so many statistics on poverty and human tribulations. There is a risk of being highly informed bystanders and disembodied from these realities, or to have nice discussions that end up in verbal solutions and disengagement from the real problems. Too many words, too many words, too many words and nothing is done! This is a risk. (6/14/14)

The U.S. Bishops have written about the causes of poverty:

“The realities of poverty today are shaped by powerful economic, moral, and cultural forces. Among these is the rapid pace of globalization—the increasing global connections among our economic, cultural, social, and political lives. While we are becoming more connected as one human community, we often live and work in very different economies.

- Some people are *pulling ahead*, harnessing their education and positions to seize the opportunities of economic life and the global marketplace.
- Many people are *left behind*. They lack the education, skills, access, and opportunity to compete. They include the hungry and homeless, subsistence farmers, victims of discrimination, those suffering with AIDS, those caught in violent conflict, and immigrants and refugees without the right papers or language skills. Discrimination, low wages, sweatshop conditions, and unjust trade and other policies leave many on the fringes of economic life.
- Many people are *struggling*. They have jobs or farms but may lack the income, health care, and other benefits to raise a family in dignity. They are working hard but not getting ahead. Their financial security is subject to investment decisions, market trends, world commodity prices, and other economic forces that are beyond their control. They worry about keeping their jobs or their farms, feeding and educating their children, paying for health care, and saving for their old age.”

(*A Place at the Table*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Pope Francis shares,

“In all places and circumstances, Christians, with the help of their pastors, are called to hear the cry of the poor. This has been eloquently stated by the bishops of Brazil: ‘We wish to take up daily the joys and hopes, the difficulties and sorrows of the Brazilian people, especially of those living in the barrios and the countryside – landless, homeless, lacking food and health care – to the detriment of their rights. Seeing their poverty, hearing their cries and knowing their sufferings, we are scandalized because we know that there is enough food for everyone and that hunger is the result of a poor distribution of goods and income.’” (11/24/13)

Explain that you are now moving to a discussion of the causes of poverty. Distribute Handout #7 and ask participants to fill it out individually.

Invite participants to form small groups and share their choices for the three primary causes of poverty, and why they chose those particular items. Before any discussion, each participant should share his or her three causes. Group members should place check marks next to the items other group members mention. In this way everyone keeps track of the causes that are receiving the most “votes.”

Instruct the group to identify the causes that were selected the most. Have them discuss where they agreed as group members and where they disagreed (or items that only a few people selected) about the causes of poverty.

Direct each group to write the major causes of poverty on a sheet of newsprint and post it for all other groups to see.

Distribute Handout #8 “Poverty in the United States.” Ask participants to take the five-question quiz. Share the answers on newsprint or on a PowerPoint slide.

1. According to the 2020 Census report, 37.2 million people live in poverty in the United States.
True.
2. The number of people living in poverty decreased in 2020.
False. It went up from 10.5% in 2019 to 11.4% in 2020.
3. The United States government says that a family of four is poor if its income is less than \$35,000 a year.
False. The federal poverty level is \$26,496 for a family of four. Many experts believe a more realistic poverty threshold for a family of four would be much higher.
4. Over six million people were considered the “working poor” in 2019.
True. 6.3 million were classified that way.
5. More children than seniors live in poverty.
True. 14.4 percent of children live in poverty compared to 8.9 percent of those aged 65 and older.

Direct participants to review the Poverty Profile on Handout #8, taking special note of the major statistics. Invite them to discuss what surprised them about the statistics and the extent of poverty in the United States. Use these questions:

- What reasons for poverty stand out when you look at the reality of poverty in the United States?
- If your group had to select a top five list, what causes would you identify?

Using your newsprint list from the first activity, place a check mark in front of items you already identified and add new causes based on your discussion.

Have people compare their answers to the final section on the handout: “Several Key Causes of Poverty.” Ask them:

- What affirms your understanding of the causes of poverty?
- What is new?

Direct each group to develop specific ideas for alleviating the causes of poverty they have identified. Invite them to imagine they have the power to change the situation of people who live in poverty. Participants should develop ideas for specific causes and write their ideas on newsprint—matching ideas with causes.

If necessary, share a few examples of responses for attacking poverty in the U.S.

- creating a program that provides a basic level of food for all children living in poverty
- creating free health care services for the poor
- providing more funding for education in low-income areas
- setting up job training programs for parents
- keeping youth in school until they attain a diploma/degree
- providing free education beyond high school for those who have been laid off or downsized
- ensuring the prompt payment of child support
- encouraging poor and low-income people to organize so that they get fair and just treatment and a chance to participate in decisions affecting them
- establishing a higher minimum wage
- providing health care for everyone who works and their families
- subsidizing day care for all low-income workers
- ensuring that no low-income person pays more than one-third of his/her monthly income on housing

Post the newsprint sheets from each group on the wall next to their list of the causes of poverty. Invite participants to discuss their thoughts and feelings about what they have just experienced, using the following questions:

- How do you feel about the situation of those who live in poverty today? Is it hard for you to believe that so many people are living in poverty in the richest country in the world? What surprised you about the situation?
- Why does poverty continue?
- What would it be like if several of your group's ideas were actually implemented? What impact would your ideas have on people's lives?
- What did you learn today that you didn't know before?

Activity 3. What Do the Scriptures and Church Teachings Say about the Option for the Poor and Vulnerable?

Pastoral Circle Process: Reflection

Reflection, the third phase of the Pastoral Circle process, engages the participants in exploring a social issue from the perspective of faith—the Bible, Catholic Social Teaching, and the living response of the Catholic Church to the issue—locally, nationally, and globally. This step involves the participants in examining what the Catholic faith says about a particular social issue. They explore what the Catholic community is doing about social issues and what motivates its response. Reflection calls forth not just an intellectual assent to faith, but a commitment to incorporate a faith response within one’s own life. The Word of God brought to bear upon the situation challenges old ways of thinking and responding by raising new questions, suggesting new insights, and opening people up to new action possibilities.

Preparation

Leaders and table facilitators should read Handout #9 for background on the Gospel story of the rich man and Lazarus.

Materials Needed

- Handout #9 for leaders/facilitators
- Handouts #10, #11, #12
- Newsprint and markers

1. Why Should Catholics Be Concerned about Poverty?

Use the following text from *A Place at the Table* to introduce the importance for all Catholics to be concerned about poverty and to seek solutions for alleviating poverty.

- Our faith calls us to it. The Gospel and Catholic social teaching place our service of the poor and vulnerable and our work for justice at the center of Christian witness.
- Our nation needs it. Too many Americans, especially children, are growing up poor in the richest nation on earth. The blessings and burdens of American life are not being shared fairly.
- Our world requires it. Each day, 25,000 people, including more than 10,000 children, die from hunger and related causes. Disease and debt, corruption and conflict are threatening the lives and dignity of millions in our increasingly globalized world.
- Our salvation demands it. In Jesus’ description of the Last Judgment, the critical question is ‘What did you do for the least of these?’ Jesus identified himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, and the stranger, insisting that when we serve them we serve him.
- Our actions can make a difference.

(A Place at the Table, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 3)

2. What Scripture Says . . .

Catholic teaching on the option for the poor and vulnerable begins in the Bible. Our focusing Scripture reading for this session is the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 16:19 – 31).

Proclaim the passage from Luke 16:19 – 31 to the group. Use multiple readers, assigning each reader a different part: narrator, Lazarus, Rich Man, Abraham. Invite the participants to follow along on Handout #10.

Invite table groups to discuss the parable using the following reflection questions:

- What is Jesus' message to us in this parable?
- What is Jesus asking us to do in this parable?
- Was the story addressed just to individuals, or is there a message in the story for families, groups, and institutions (the Church, business, government) as well?

Use the following overview from *A Place at the Table* to summarize briefly the Biblical vision of the option for the poor. You may want to develop several key points from the text below or use a combination of key points and short Scripture quotes to present the Biblical vision.

“Our faith calls us to look at economic life in terms of its moral and human dimensions. Concern for the poor echoes through the Scriptures—in the passion of the prophets, the words and witness of Jesus, and the example of the early Church. The Church has lived out this concern in every age and every land. Our commitment to those who are in greatest need is rooted in the biblical vision of the sacredness of all human life. In the Old Testament, the Book of Genesis teaches us that every person is made in God’s image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27) and endowed with inalienable dignity, regardless of who we are, where we are born, or what we accomplish. As believers, we are called to treat all people—especially those who are suffering—with respect, compassion, and justice.

“Genesis also teaches us that all of creation was made by God and ultimately belongs to God. (Genesis 1:26-30, 15:18) The goods of creation must be used to advance the reign of God and the well-being of all. Private ownership is important to ensure freedom and dignity and to help people to meet basic needs, but the goods of creation are not to be controlled by some at the cost of injustice to others. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #2402-2407)

“Throughout the Old Testament, God calls his people to care for those on the margins of society. (Leviticus 19:9-15) The God of Israel is a God of justice who protects and defends the poor. (Psalm 113:7, 140:13) The prophets clearly reminded the people of Israel that a test of their faithfulness was the way they treated their poor and vulnerable—the widows, the orphans, and the aliens. (Isaiah 10:1-5, Jeremiah 22:3, Ezekiel 22:29-31)

“In the New Testament, we learn how Jesus shared his love in a special way with those who were poor or vulnerable. In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and in the Parable of the Rich Young Man, Jesus urged us not to ignore those who are suffering in our midst and warned that attachment to riches can be a barrier to discipleship. (Luke 16:19-31)

“Although Jesus reminded us that in a world marred by sin, the poor would always be with us, he also challenged us to see him in those who are hungry or thirsty, in strangers, in the naked and imprisoned. In Christ’s description of the Last Judgment, we learn that when we ignore the poor, we ignore Christ himself. (Matthew 26:11) As John Paul II has declared, “This Gospel text is not a simple invitation to charity. . . . By these words, no less than by the orthodoxy of her doctrine, the Church measures her fidelity.” (Matthew 25:44-45) (From: *A Place at the Table*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002, 11-12)

Tell participants they are now going to look at what Jesus specifically said and did about the poor and vulnerable. Pass out Handouts #10 and #11. Assign each person in the group one or more of the Gospel passages (you can combine shorter passages so that all 10 passages are presented).

Luke 16:19 – 31 (Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus)

Mark 12:28 – 31 (Greatest Commandment)

Matthew 25:34 – 40 (Parable of the Final Judgment)

Mark 10:17 – 22 (Rich Young Man)

Luke 4:16 – 19 (Mission of Jesus)

Luke 7:20 – 22 (Report to John the Baptist)

Luke 6:20 – 21, 24 – 25 (Luke's Beatitudes)

Luke 6:30 - 33, 36 (Give to everyone who asks.)

Luke 12:33 – 34 (Sell your belongings and give alms.)

Mark 9:1 – 9 (Feeding the crowd)

Luke 14:12 – 14 (Invite the poor to the banquet.)

Give the participants several minutes to read the passage and to prepare to summarize in their own words what they think Jesus is saying to us today through this passage. It is important that they not only summarize Jesus' teaching but relate it to their lives and to the world today.

Have participants read their Gospel passage(s) aloud to the others in their group, and then share what they think Jesus is saying to us today through this passage.

After everyone has presented, invite the participants to discuss in their groups Jesus' message about the option for the poor and vulnerable using the following questions:

- How would you characterize Jesus' teaching and practice toward the poor based on his actions and stories?
- What challenges and threats to the option for the poor and vulnerable exist in today's society?
- How does Jesus' approach to the poor and vulnerable compare with our country's approach? What values of American culture oppose the option for the poor and vulnerable?
- How does Jesus' approach challenge the "conventional wisdom" about our responsibility to the poor and vulnerable?
- What if we as individuals, as a Church, and as a society adopted Jesus' approach to the poor and vulnerable? What would change?

Distribute Handout #12 to participants.

Prepare a brief presentation on the Church's teaching on the option for the poor and vulnerable using Handout #12 and the following text from *A Place at the Table*. Summarize briefly the Church's vision of the option for the poor and how it is grounded in the Biblical vision, especially the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ. To present the Church's vision use the key points below, as well as key points from the reading, then add selected quotes from *A Place at the Table*.

Key Points

- The Church, from its earliest days, made caring for the poor a priority in its teachings and actions. (See Acts 4:32-34 and quote from St. Ambrose.)

- The Gospels remind us that there is a special presence of Christ in the poor (when we serve the poor, we serve Christ). The poor and vulnerable are a special priority for Christians.
- We are one human family. We see every other person as our neighbor.
- All people have basic human rights: the right to life and the right to acquire what is necessary to live a life with dignity.
- Concern for the poor is advanced by our efforts, as individuals and as a community, to serve their needs and to create a more just world where poverty is eliminated.
- The Church is at the forefront of service to the needs of the poor and vulnerable and of working for justice to eliminate the causes of poverty.
- We serve the poor and act for justice because of our faith in God and our respect for the dignity of the human person.

“Applying the Scriptures to human history has been the task of saints, church leaders, and ordinary believers through the centuries. The social doctrine of the Church provides principles for reflection, criteria for judgment, and guidelines for the choices we make every day. (Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, #49) In the early years of the Church, Christian communities cared for their weakest members by sharing what they had. (Acts 4:32-34) According to St. Ambrose, ‘You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich.’

“Catholic teaching about human dignity and economic justice has been a special focus of many papal encyclicals and statements of our bishops’ conference, offering key themes and principles and applying them to the issues of the day. (See “A Catholic Framework for Economic Life.”)

“Pope John Paul II insists that the unequivocal words of the Gospel remind us that there is a special presence of Christ in the poor. This presence requires the Church to make a preferential option for those who are poor and vulnerable. (Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, #49) The principle of solidarity reminds us that as members of one human family, we see every “other” as our neighbor, who must share in the “banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.” (Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #39) Solidarity calls us to care for our neighbors in need who are nearby and for those who are far away and to see all those who suffer as sisters and brothers. (Pope John XXIII, *Mater and Magister*, #157)

“Catholic teaching affirms that all persons, even those on the margins of society, have basic human rights: the right to life and to those things that are necessary to the proper development of life, including faith and family, work and education, housing and health care. Work is the key to the social question (cf. Pope John Paul II, *On Human Work*). Work should not leave people poor but should provide wages sufficient to achieve a standard of living that is in keeping with human dignity. (Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, #20) Workers have both an obligation and a right to work, (Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, #43) as well as a right to participation, association, and economic initiative. This includes the right to choose to join a union and to bargain collectively.

“In the Catholic tradition, concern for the poor is advanced by individual and common action, works of charity, efforts to achieve a more just social order, the practice of virtue, and the pursuit of justice in our own lives. It requires action to confront structures of injustice that leave people poor. Individual believers are called to be generous in sharing what we have with those in need and to

promote justice through the choices we make in our families, schools, and workplaces, and through our participation in social and economic life. (Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, #35-36)

"Our social doctrine is expressed and enriched by the Church's broad experience. Across the globe, our Church puts faith into action by feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, educating the young, caring for the sick, welcoming the stranger, providing access for persons with disabilities, and working for greater justice and peace. The Catholic Church is the largest non-governmental provider of education, health care, and human services in our nation. We are helping families and communities to combat hunger and homelessness, overcome poverty and dependency, build housing, resist crime, and seek greater justice. Catholic schools are among the best anti-poverty programs, offering first-rate education, moral truth, and discipline in communities across our nation. We welcome and resettle many refugees fleeing conflict and repression. We offer relief and development in more than eighty countries.

"Our Church's commitment to find a place at the table for all God's children is expressed in every part of our country and in the poorest places on earth. All across the globe, the Church carries this forward because of who we are and what we believe about God and the human person. Our faith gives us the strength, identity, and principles we need to sustain this work."
(*A Place at the Table*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002, 11-12)

The option for the poor raises many questions: How can we challenge ourselves to see Christ in the poor and in the vulnerable? What can we do to affirm the dignity of the poor and to give them a hand up? What can we do to protect the vulnerable and empower those who are poor and powerless?

Invite groups to discuss what they have learned from the Gospel passages and the Church's teachings on the option for the poor and vulnerable.

Distribute newsprint and markers to each group. Direct them to write at the top of the newsprint sheet, "Ways to Live Our Option for the Poor."

Have them divide the paper into three equal columns, labeling them 1) individual, 2) parish, 3) society. Note that the society category includes businesses, government, community organizations, etc.

Say to the groups:

If we took the option for the poor and vulnerable to heart, as we have seen in the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, the message of Jesus, and the Church's teachings, what actions would we need to take as individuals or families, as a parish community, and as a society?

Challenge each group to identify four or five actions in each of their three columns.

After sufficient time, invite groups to share their list with a group nearby.

Call all the groups together and ask for a few ideas in each of the three columns, so that everyone can hear the ideas from other groups.

Post the newsprint sheets for all to see.

Activity 4. How Can We Eliminate Poverty?

Pastoral Circle Process: Action

See Activity 4 in the Families with Children section for details.

Part 4. Sharing Learning Reflections (20 minutes)

The whole group sharing experience provides an opportunity for each age group to share something they learned with the entire group.

Ask representatives from the family, adolescent, and adult groups to share the actions they developed for serving the poor and vulnerable in the In Depth Learning Experience (individual or family actions, parish community actions, social actions).

Then invite families and adult participants to share commitments they are making to the poor and vulnerable from Activity 4 in the In Depth Learning Experience.

Present the following information using the words below or your own words:

“Think of everything we have done in this session to learn about the situation of poverty in the United States, the message of Jesus and the Church on the option for the poor and vulnerable, and the ways we can alleviate poverty by standing with and standing for the poor. What is the most important lesson you have learned tonight? Why do you think alleviating poverty is so important for us as Catholics?”

Allow several minutes for small group sharing, and if time allows, ask for responses from the group.

Part 5. Closing Prayer Service (5-10 minutes)

At the beginning of the closing prayer service, involve several families, teens, and adults in bringing food to the table. This food can then be donated to a local food bank or shelter.

Gather

Lord God, we ask you to enlighten our minds and open our hearts to those in need of food and shelter. Forgive us for the times when we avoided our responsibility because of our fears and prejudices. Help us to have a passion for justice and to care for the weak and oppressed as you did.

Help us to develop a caring society where all people are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. And help us today to witness actively to the Gospel as it challenges us to hear and respond to the cry of the poor.

Listen

James 2:14-17

Respond

God of justice and friend of the poor, we offer our prayers for our country and all who suffer injustice.

For the millions of our fellow citizens who are living in poverty, that despite our society's rejection and inaction, they might feel loved and valuable in your sight.

Response: O God, hear our prayer.

For our nation, that we are moved from tolerance of poverty to passionate work for justice.

Response: O God, hear our prayer.

For the parents who struggle each day to provide food, pay the rent, keep their families together, and just survive, that they might find community supports that enable them to nurture, enjoy, and spend time with their children.

Response: O God, hear our prayer.

For the children whose needs are unmet, whose cries go unheard, and whose lives hold little joy, that we might fill their needs, respond to their pain, and seek to enrich their lives.

Response: O God, hear our prayer.

For all those who are sick and without medical insurance, that they find care and healing.

Response: O God, hear our prayer.

For our nation's leaders, that they might make alleviating poverty the nation's highest priority.

Response: O God, hear our prayer.

For ourselves, that we might continue, with renewed determination, to serve and advocate on behalf of the poor in our nation and world, so that every person and family have the basic necessities of life.

Response: O God, hear our prayer.

Go Forth

Lord Jesus,

Open our eyes that they may see the needs of the poor;

move our hands that they may feed the hungry;

touch our hearts that they may bring warmth to the despairing;

teach us the generosity that welcomes strangers;

let us share our possessions to clothe the naked;

give us the care that strengthens the sick;

make us share in the quest to set the prisoner free.

In serving the needs of the poor may we grow closer to you.

Amen.