



World Day of the Poor Message 2021

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Around the globe, the Catholic Church will celebrate the World Day of the Poor on 14 November.

Pope Francis' Message for this occasion can be accessed here:

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/20210613-messaggio-v-giornatamondiale-poveri-2021.html> It takes as its starting point the words "the poor you will always have with you" (Mk 14:7). This Discussion Guide offers some starting points for personal or group reflection and discussion.

Two Interpretations

How should we understand Jesus' words "the poor you will always have with you" (Mark 14:7)?

The Gospel of Mark recalls the story of Jesus visiting the home of Simon in Bethany. There a woman poured precious ointment over Jesus' head. Pope Francis notes that this act was interpreted in two quite different ways (n 1, 2). Some people were indignant that so much money was spent on the ointment when it could have been given to the poor. But Jesus sees it differently. He says, "she has done a beautiful thing to me" (Mark 14:6).

Pope Francis' interprets Jesus' response as a reminder that "he is the first of the poor, the poorest of the poor, because he represents all of them" (n 1). This identification with the poor would lead to his death, for which the nameless woman had anointed him. We remember her for this act of empathy and understanding of Jesus' mission.

- How do you interpret this story? What does it mean to say that the poor are always with us?
- How might we do a beautiful thing for disadvantaged, marginalized or vulnerable people today?

"... wherever the Gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mk 14:9)

The Poor Evangelize Us

Pope Francis says: "the poor, always and everywhere, evangelize us, because they enable us to discover in new ways the true face of the Father. They have much to teach us. Besides participating in the *sensus fidei*, they know the suffering of Christ through their own sufferings" (n 2).

We often think that we are called to help people and communities who are disadvantaged, but Pope Francis reminds us that "we are called to discover Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to understand them and to welcome the mysterious wisdom that God wants to communicate to us through them" (n 2).

People who are disadvantaged, marginalized or vulnerable are our evangelists.

- Have you ever been evangelized by someone who is disadvantaged, marginalized or vulnerable? What happened, and how did you respond?
- In what ways might the Church become more open to being evangelized by the poor?

"The poor, always and everywhere, evangelize us ..."

Mutuality and Closeness

Jesus sides with the poor and "shares their lot" (n 3). He is not only close to them, he is one of them.

Pope Francis reminds us that poor people are not outsiders but part of our communities - 'they' are our sisters and brothers. While charity presupposes a giver and a receiver, mutual sharing generates fraternity and solidarity - it makes us sisters and brothers. It lays the foundation for justice. (n 3).

If we want to "see Jesus in person" we know where to turn. Pope Francis says, "the poor are a sacrament of Christ; they represent his person and point to him" (n 3). In them Christ is always with us.

- How might embracing closeness and fraternity, shape our response to disadvantaged people and communities? What would our action look like?
- Which saints show us how to be close to the poor?

"The poor are not people 'outside' our communities, but brothers and sisters whose sufferings we should share ..."

Freedom and Riches

Embracing the Gospel calls us to choose a lifestyle of sharing and detachment from "passing riches, worldly power and vanity" (n 4). The way we live should be consistent with the faith that we profess. Rather than seeking security in material things and in power, we must "open ourselves decisively to the grace of Christ, which can make us witnesses of his boundless charity and restore credibility to our presence in the world" (n 4). We are called to "give our lives in love" (n 4).

- Has adopting a simpler, more sustainable lifestyle helped you to give your life in love?
- What holds you back from greater sharing and involvement?

"Unless we choose to become poor in passing riches, worldly power and vanity, we will never be able to give our lives in love ..."

Solidarity Not Blame

Pope Francis notes that poor people are often blamed for their situation and seen as a "burden for an economic system focused on the interests of a few privileged groups" (n 5) however "poverty is not the result of fate; it is the result of selfishness" (n 6).

The pandemic has only increased existing inequality, impacting disproportionately on those who were already disadvantaged or vulnerable.

Pope Francis reminds us that the "Gospel summons us to display special concern for the poor and to recognize the varied and excessive forms of moral and social disorder that are generating ever new forms of poverty" (n 5). Social solidarity and generosity are needed, not blame.

- Who do you hear blaming the poor for their situation? How do you respond?
- What new forms of poverty do you see emerging?

"What path of justice must be followed so that social inequalities can be overcome and human dignity, so often trampled upon, can be restored?"

A New Approach

Pope Francis calls for "development processes in which the abilities of all are valued" (n 6). He points out that "there are many forms of poverty among the 'rich' that might be relieved by the wealth of the 'poor', if only they could meet and get to know each other!" (n 6). Disadvantaged people are not simply recipients - they have something to give, and they know how to be generous. Pope Francis notes that they "often teach us about solidarity and sharing" (n 6). He concludes that a "different approach to poverty is required" (n 7) - one in which we are more conscious of being in a mutual exchange.

Pope Francis contrasts talking about poor people in the abstract, stopping at statistics and thinking that "we can move people's hearts by filming a documentary" with "creative planning, aimed at increasing the freedom needed to live a life of fulfilment according to the abilities of each person" (n 7).

- If our current approach to poverty is not working, what needs to change?
- What are some alternatives?
- What forms of poverty do rich people suffer from, and how might disadvantaged people help to address them?

"None are so poor that they cannot give something of themselves in mutual exchange."

Assistance and Transformation

For Pope Francis, “the poor you will always have with you” (Mk 14:7) is a “summons never to lose sight of every opportunity to do good” (n 8). He encourages us to provide immediate assistance to those in need, not as a matter of “easing our conscience by giving alms but of opposing the culture of indifference and injustice we have created with regard to the poor” (n 8).

Pope Francis observes that willingness to confront poverty has declined compared with the past and he sees this as being connected with “the state of relative affluence to which we have become accustomed” which he believes “makes it more difficult to accept sacrifices and deprivation” (n 9). He says that people are “ready to do anything rather than to be deprived of the fruits of easy gain” and that we can “fall into forms of resentment, spasmodic nervousness and demands that lead to fear, anxiety and, in some cases, violence” (n 9).

As well as meeting immediate needs, we should show foresight in addressing causes and working for transformation by “implementing new signs of Christian love and charity as a response to the new forms of poverty experienced by humanity today” (n 9).

Becoming a Movement

This is the fifth year in which the World Day of the Poor is being celebrated. Pope Francis wants it to “grow in our local churches and inspire a movement of evangelization that meets the poor personally wherever they may be” (n 9).

Rather than waiting for people who are disadvantaged, marginalized or vulnerable to come to us for help, we should go out to meet them. Pope Francis stresses that “it is important to understand how they feel, what they are experiencing and what their hearts desire” (n 9).

- Which organizations do you see working to meet immediate needs and / or working for transformation of causes?
- How can you support them?
- What new signs of Christian love do you see emerging?

“Today, in fact, in the more economically developed areas of the world, people are less willing than in the past to confront poverty.”

- How do you, or might you, meet the poor personally?
- How might these annual messages from the Pope inspire a movement of evangelization?

“The poor are to be embraced, not counted.”