



Fighting Poverty to Build Peace

The Gospel reminds us that the measure of our lives is how we treat the “least ones” among us (Mt. 25). The theme of Pope Benedict XVI’s 2009 World Day of Peace message is “Fighting Poverty to Build Peace.” In the message, the Holy Father reminds the faithful that our efforts to address poverty reflect our commitment to the dignity of the human person and to building a more just and peaceful world. Several themes and excerpts from this statement are provided below. The full text of the message can be found at: vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/index_en.htm

Poverty contributes to conflict. “Poverty is often a contributory factor or a compounding element in conflicts, including armed ones. In turn, these conflicts fuel further tragic situations of poverty” (# 1).

Poverty is a threat to human dignity. “Every form of externally imposed poverty has at its root a lack of respect for the transcendent dignity of the human person. . . . The poor, [Pope John Paul II] wrote, ‘ask for the right to share in enjoying material goods and to make good use of their capacity for work, thus creating a world that is more just and prosperous for all’”(# 2, 14).

Wealthy societies suffer from moral and spiritual poverty. “In advanced wealthy societies, there is evidence of marginalization, as well as affective, moral and spiritual poverty, seen in people whose interior lives are disoriented and who experience various forms of malaise despite their economic prosperity” (# 2).

Population is not the problem. “The extermination of millions of unborn children, in the name of the fight against poverty, actually constitutes the destruction of the poorest of all human beings. And yet it remains the case that . . . population is proving to be an asset, not a factor that contributes to poverty” (# 3).

Pandemic diseases deserve moral responses. “First and foremost, educational campaigns are needed, aimed especially at the young, to promote a sexual ethic that fully corresponds to the dignity of the person. . . . Then, too, the necessary medicines and treatment must be made available to poorer peoples as well” (# 4).

Children are the most vulnerable victims. “To take the side of children when considering poverty means giving priority to those objectives which concern them most directly, such as caring for mothers, commitment to education, access to vaccines, medical care and drinking water, safeguarding the environment, and above all, commitment to defense of the family and the stability of relations within it” (# 5).

The Reality of Poverty in the U.S.



- 37.3 million people live in poverty in the U.S. This includes 10 percent of families.
- The Federal government’s poverty threshold for a family of four is \$21,200.
- The child poverty rate in the U.S. is 18%, between two and four times higher than other major industrialized nations. One in six children in the U.S. lives in poverty.
- The poverty rate for America’s population over 65 stands at 9.7 percent, or one in ten seniors.
- At 16 million, the greatest number of poor persons is non-Hispanic White Americans.

The Reality of Global Poverty

- An estimated 1.4 billion people live in extreme poverty, on under \$1.25/day.
- Over 2.6 billion people live on \$2 a day. Countless others live just above the poverty line and remain highly vulnerable to crises.
- 40 million people were pushed into hunger in 2008 due to higher food prices.
- One quarter of all children in developing countries are at risk of experiencing long-term effects of undernourishment.
- Over 1 billion people do not have access to clean water, 2.6 billion lack access to sanitation, and over 30,000 children die of preventable diseases every day.



Photo by Sean Sprague for CRS. This Ethiopian woman gathers food at a food distribution center.





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Disarmament is necessary for development. “An excessive increase in military expenditure risks accelerating the arms race, producing pockets of underdevelopment and desperation, so that it can paradoxically become a cause of instability, tension and conflict” (# 6).

Globalization must benefit all. “Globalization on its own is incapable of building peace, and in many cases, it actually creates divisions and conflicts. . . One of the most important ways of building peace is through a form of globalization directed towards the interests of the whole human family” (# 14, 8).

Poor countries should have equal access to the global market. “Since the Second World War, international trade in goods and services has grown extraordinarily fast. . . yet there are other low-income countries which are still seriously marginalized in terms of trade. . . I should like to renew an appeal for all countries to be given equal opportunities of access to the world market, without exclusion or marginalization” (# 9).

Ethical approaches are needed in the market and in policy. “If the poor are to be given priority, then there has to be enough room for an ethical approach to economics on the part of those active in the international market, an ethical approach to politics on the part of those in public office, and an ethical approach to participation capable of harnessing the contributions of civil society.” (# 12).

The Church has always been committed to the poor. “The Church's social teaching has always been concerned with the poor. . . The Church, which is the ‘sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race’ will continue to offer her contribution” (# 15, 8).

We all have a role to play. “The Christian community [must offer]. . . gestures of creative solidarity, not only by ‘giving from one's surplus’, but above all by ‘a change of life-styles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies’. . . Effective means to redress the marginalization of the world's poor through globalization will only be found if people everywhere feel personally outraged by the injustices in the world and by the concomitant violations of human rights” (# 15, 8).

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5 Ways You Can Help Combat Poverty

1. Take part in the **Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD)'s Poverty Awareness Month** in January. Visit povertyusa.org to learn about life living in poverty in the United States—and then educate others!
2. Visit the web page of the **Catholics Confront Global Poverty** Campaign, a project of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services, for information about combating global poverty: uscgb.org/sdwp/globalpoverty. Visit catholiccharitiesusa.org to learn about the **Campaign to Reduce Poverty in America**.
3. **Call or email** your federal, state, and local representatives to express your concern about poverty in the U.S. and world and its root causes. See the JPHD Take Action page at: uscgb.org/sdwp/takeaction.shtml
4. Make a **donation** to a group funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development or to service programs such as Catholic Charities. Find out more about CCHD-funded groups that are working to address the root causes of poverty in their communities at uscgb.org/cchd.
5. Join with family, friends, or fellow parishioners to **pray** for solutions to poverty!

