

WHAT ABOUT THE POOR?

She was the fifteenth child of the Holy Roman Emperor, Francis I. Born in Vienna, Austria on November 2, 1755, she was christened Maria Antonia Josefa Johanna—but is known to history by her French name, Marie Antoinette.

In 1769 she married the grandson and heir apparent of the King of France. And when the grandson took the throne and became King Louis XVI, she became Queen.

At the time of the coronation France many were going hungry, and there was a major shortage of bread. When told about it, Marie Antoinette is said to have remarked, “If they have no bread, let them eat cake!”

Whether or not she really said it is debated by historians, but over the centuries she *has* become a symbol of decadence and indifference, and for good reason. While her subjects died of hunger and disease, she engaged in frivolous conversations, held multi-day gambling parties, acquired an enormous wardrobe and numerous pieces of diamond jewelry.

In the end, during the Reign of Terror, she was reduced to rags, imprisoned, found guilty on a number of charges, and beheaded by the angry revolutionaries.

Looking at her life, it comes as no real surprise that people would believe she said “Let them eat cake!” She was clearly callous and indifferent to those around her.

Not at all like Jesus. He was a homeless rabbi, traipsing about the countryside doing good. He lived from day-to-day, subsisting on the foods others were willing to share with him. He routinely preached about the importance of caring for the poor and the disadvantaged. And many of those he healed were from the dregs of society. So it is that this story from John, found in one form or another in the other gospels as well, comes as something of a shock. For his remark about the poor seems more suited to Marie Antoinette than to Jesus of Nazareth.

But we misunderstand if we think Jesus was tossing off a thoughtless remark.

John sets the story on the Saturday before Palm Sunday. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus stops at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They are his good friends, and it is a chance for him to rest before he makes his final stand in the Holy City.

First, his hosts serve a meal. They don't sit in chairs at tables, as you or I might do; rather, they recline on mats, gathered around the food. As they are eating, Mary, moved by her great love for Jesus, takes what may have been her most precious possession, a pound of perfumed ointment, and pours it on Jesus' feet, wiping them dry with her own hair.

Judas is outraged. “Why wasn’t this perfume sold so that the money could be given to the poor?”

On the surface, it sounds like a very compassionate response. But John tells us there was a hidden motive. Judas was the treasurer of Jesus’ band of followers. If the perfume had been sold, the proceeds would have been turned over to him for safekeeping until they could have been put to use. And so, Judas would have had ready access to them, would have been able to dip into them for his own purposes.

Be that as it may, Judas still raises a reasonable point. Many of us would have the same reaction. Why not sell the perfume and give the proceeds to the poor?

And our tendency to agree with Judas at this point is only magnified by Jesus’ response. “Let her be,” he tells Judas. “She bought it to use on the day I’m buried to anoint my body. Besides, you always have the poor with you; you do not always have me.” (John 12:8) “Let them eat cake!” At least that’s what it feels like.

But there is another way to read Jesus’ reaction. One that is far more consistent with his constant and genuine concern for the poor.

“Judas,” he is saying, “you always have the poor—and their needs must always be considered. They deserve your attention everyday, not just on the days when we have something extra like this perfume, but everyday. What did you do for them yesterday, or the day before? What do you plan on doing for them tomorrow?”

“My time is limited, Judas. Mary can only do something kind for me today—for soon I will be dead. But the poor, Judas, they will still be around. What will you do for them then? Let Mary lavish her attention on me now. But when I am gone, remember the story I told you about the Good Samaritan. Remember what I have said to you about giving a cup of cold water to the one who is thirsty. The poor will always be with you. They will always need your loving care and attention.”

Jesus, of course, was quite right. The poor have always been with us. And so the question for you and me is the same as it was for Judas. What did you do for them yesterday, or the day before? What do you plan on doing for them tomorrow?

Jan Doktor leads pilgrimages to developing countries, trips designed to help Americans better understand our neighbors and their needs. She has led groups to places ranging from Bolivia to Kenya, but the country that has had the greatest personal impact on her life is India.

Before her first trip there she, like many Westerners, had some preconceived ideas about what she would discover. “My vision of India,” she writes in a recent article, “was one

splashed with bright colors, extravagant fragrances, eclectic spirituality . . . in addition to . . . poverty, overpopulation and religious and class conflict. I found all that and so much more.” (*India: A Shift in My World*,” *Ministry and Money*, 2-07, 1)

As prepared as she was, Jan was still overwhelmed by the poverty she found in India. She writes of monks subsisting on rice and lentil gravy, leper colonies populated by the real outcasts of society and an orphanage for children left to starve on the streets by their prostitute mothers. Perhaps her most disturbing experience was one that happened in Kolkata.

Jan had made arrangements to attend the early morning Mass at the convent where Mother Theresa had been when she was alive. The day of the Mass, she got up at 5:30 AM only to discover the front door of her hotel was locked. She could not get out. So she went to find someone who could unlock the door. She writes: “Waking a sleeping bell man to let me out, I stepped beyond the entryway to find a sea of bodies lining the sidewalks on both sides of the boulevard. The homeless were still asleep, occupying every available space as far as I could see, most with few clothes and no covering against the cool night air.” (Ibid, 3)

Carefully, Jan started to walk down the street, gingerly stepping over body after body. Finally it was more than she could bear. “I stood in that sea of resting bodies and cried—not knowing if I should go forward or stand still. I pondered the scripture’s Good Samaritan story . . . wondering how in the world to emulate the Samaritan on the streets of Kolkata with thousands of bodies surrounding me.” (Ibid) She finally made it to the convent, and wept through the entire Mass.

David Hilfiker is a physician, who lives and works in Washington D.C.’s inner city. He has had a very similar experience. “I sometimes wonder,” he writes, “what the Good Samaritan would have done if the road to Jericho had been littered with hundreds of men beaten by robbers. One part of me wants to respond to every need I can, but another part is unwilling, perhaps unable.” (*Not All of Us Are Saints: A Doctor’s Journey with the Poor*)

When we see pictures from Darfur or India, when we read about the inner cities of Washington and New York, we are often overwhelmed. When we hear about the millions of children and adults around the world who are starving, when we read about the impact of the war on the poor people of Iraq, we can easily fall victims to despair.

Not surprisingly, Mother Theresa, in her book *No Greater Love*, offers up some very wise advice on the subject. While she had and continues to have an impact on people all around the world, her own work focused most intently on the poor people of her own area. “It is too easy,” she writes, “simply to talk or concern ourselves with the poor who are far away. It is much harder, and perhaps more challenging, to turn our attention toward the poor who live right next door to us.” (94)

So maybe we start on this side of the world, maybe we should start with the fact that 12.6% of all Americans living in the United States live in poverty. The highest poverty rates are among black Americans, 24.9% live below the poverty line. The chances of being poor are also greater for children in general. 17.6% of all children 18 and under in the US are considered among the poor. All told, 37 million Americans live in poverty, which for a family of four, means they live on less than \$19,350 a year. (Source: *Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2005*, The U.S. Census Bureau)

But that's still too big to grasp for most of us. That's still overwhelming. So let's get even closer to home. In New England folks in the top twenty percent of the population, have average incomes of \$185,000, while families in the bottom twenty percent have \$12,437. And that gap has been growing.

But let's get even closer. Let's talk about Connecticut. Did you realize that four out of the twenty metropolitan areas in the United States where there is the greatest disparity between rich families and poor ones, are right here in the Nutmeg State? And three are right here in Fairfield County: Stamford-Norwalk, Bridgeport and Danbury. (CT Post, 3-23-07)

While the minimum wage here in Connecticut is considerably higher than the federal minimum wage, it is still abysmally low. The average two-bedroom apartment in Bridgeport rents for close to one thousand dollars. To afford it, one would have to earn two and a half times the minimum wage. (CT Post, 10-14-06, A-13)

Here's my point: we don't need to go to India or even New York City to see poverty up close. We only need to drive a few miles to Bridgeport, or South Norwalk or Stamford. When it comes down to it, we only have to walk a few blocks and cross over to Jesup Road to the Gillespie Center is located to discover it in our own hometown.

The poor are always with us. But we can always choose to do something about it if we wish.

We can and must, engage in charitable acts. You can give generously to our Easter Offering, which helps local agencies who work with the poor. You can sign up with Vonnie Spies to serve a dinner at the Gillespie Center. You can volunteer at the Christian Community Action program in Norwalk to help sort groceries. You can take home a bag and fill it with food for the local pantries.

But charity alone won't do it. We must also engage in acts of justice. For while charity addresses the symptoms, justice looks at the cause.

We must ask why the gap is so great between rich and poor. We must ask what is it about our common life that leads to such inequity? And we must be willing to change the system itself. You can be careful to invest your monies in organizations that have fair labor practices. You can ask your broker to investigate socially responsible mutual funds; there are over 150 of them. You can help with efforts, like the one going on right now in Bridgeport to create a

new charter school, to bring about real change in inner city education. You can stay abreast of legislation making its way through the RTM, the State Legislature and Congress and voice your opinion, and speak out for the poor, like current efforts to raise the minimum wage. William Sloan Coffin is right: "Given human goodness," he said, "voluntary contributions are possible, but given human sinfulness legislation is indispensable. Charity . . . always, but never as a substitute for justice."

"You will always have the poor among you." How very true. But Jesus didn't mean "Let them eat cake." Rather, he meant, do something about it.

**Amen
John H. Danner**