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The Gospel on the Solemnity of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, proclaims a kingdom that is not of this world, where the poor in spirit are welcomed.

World Day of the Poor: Giving Voice to the Plight of the Poor

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The World Day of the Poor, instituted by Pope Francis as a yearly celebration on the Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, gives parishes a concrete way to prepare for the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. Each year on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, the faithful hear of a type of kingdom vastly different from that experienced on earth.

This year, in the Year B Gospel reading (John 18:33b–37), Jesus reveals a kingdom that “does not belong to this world.” In the Gospel in the Year C reading (Luke 23:35–43), with arms outstretched upon the throne of his cross, our Lord reserves a special place in his kingdom for “the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3) as he tells the criminal hanged beside him, “Today you will be

with me in Paradise.” Jesus instructs in the Year A Gospel reading (Matthew 25:31–46) that those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and care for the sick will “inherit the kingdom.” The World Day of the Poor, celebrated one week before the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, reinforces Christ’s love for the poor and the Christian journey to the kingdom of heaven. Special liturgies and works of mercy, with the poor at the heart of the worshipping community, can focus the parish family on its daily role in bringing about the kingdom of God.

A POOR CHURCH FOR THE POOR

When Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected pope, he chose the name *Francis* to symbolically connect the vision of the Church

to St. Francis of Assisi.¹ The Holy Father dreamed of a Church that is poor and for the poor.² Pope Francis has acted as a prophet for the poor in the tradition of St. Francis of Assisi, with Eucharistic worship central to this mission. Many of his homilies and symbolic gestures show the prominence of the poor in the heart of Jesus Christ and his Gospel. Of these actions, the establishment of the World Day of the Poor is perhaps the most profound pastoral action.

In the apostolic letter for the Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia et misera*, which announced the World Day of the Poor, Pope Francis notes the day as a “tangible sign” of God’s love for the poor. He envisions the World Day of the Poor as

the worthiest way to prepare for the Solemnity of our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, who identified with the little ones It would be a day to help communities and each of the baptized to reflect on how poverty is at the very heart of the Gospel and that, as long as Lazarus lies at the door of our homes (cf. Luke 16:19–21), there can be no justice or social peace. (21)

The pope describes how the liturgy teaches the Church to be poor and for the poor. In his message released for the first World Day of the Poor, Pope Francis challenges:

If we truly wish to encounter Christ, we have to touch his body in the suffering bodies of the poor, as a response to the sacramental communion bestowed in the Eucharist. The Body of Christ, broken in the sacred liturgy, can be seen, through charity and sharing, in the faces and persons of the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters.³

In this message, Pope Francis links the liturgy to social justice, a connection sometimes missed in our time. The Church encounters spiritual poverty, in communion with the poor, in the Eucharistic liturgy. United to Jesus Christ, in his paschal mystery, Christians are transformed and are freed to minister to Christ in the poor.

Pope Francis’ message for the third World Day of the Poor compels Christians to go beyond the fulfillment of material needs. He exhorts the faithful to “discover their inner goodness” and to engage in a “true fraternal dialogue.”⁴ Recalling his instruction in *Evangelii gaudium* (200), the pope reminds Christians to attend to the spiritual needs of the poor as they “need our hands, to be lifted up; our hearts, to feel anew the warmth of affection; our presence, to overcome loneliness. In a word, they need love.”⁵ Prophetically, Pope Francis is telling us that Christians are called to be sacraments of God’s embrace.

The Vatican has had four Eucharistic celebrations of the World Day of the Poor, with Francis as the main celebrant. After the first Eucharistic gathering in 2017, Francis dined with 1,500 of Rome’s needy, at a luncheon in their honor, at the Vatican’s



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By establishing the World Day of the Poor, Pope Francis has invited parishes to find tangible ways to respond to the needs of the community.

Pope Paul VI Hall.⁶ At the second World Day of the Poor, over six thousand poor attended the Mass, and three thousand were fed at a luncheon.⁷ The pope followed the same practices in November 2019. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, alternative ways to attend to the poor were determined for the 2020 celebration. Clinics were set up throughout Rome to provide free coronavirus testing so the homeless could stay in shelters. Instead of the usual luncheon, five thousand boxed meals, which included a prayer card from Pope Francis, were sent to parishes in Rome to be distributed to the poor.⁸

PARISH SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR

Who are the poor lying at the doors of your parish home? How can your faith community use the World Day of the Poor as a wellspring to embrace those in want of spiritual comfort and basic needs? Pope Francis challenges us to respond to poverty in all its forms: vulnerable young people, abandoned elders, the unborn, the lonely, refugees, “entire peoples, deprived even of the great natural resources at their disposal.”⁹ Pastoral and liturgical ministers have an opportunity to use this special day to reflect on the vulnerable in their midst and plan a day, a weekend, and a permanent initiative of prayer and action.

Liturgical Celebrations

Preparation for a special Mass dedicated to the World Day of the Poor can unite the parish community in spiritual solidarity with the needy of the parish. Depending on the parish socio-economic dynamic, vulnerable individuals or groups can be identified and invited to participate in the liturgy. Many worship resources are available through the websites of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and local diocesan offices. In the



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On the Sunday before the Solemnity of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, the baptized are given an opportunity to reflect on how poverty is at the heart of the Gospel.

Masses and Prayer for Various Needs and Occasions in *The Roman Missal* are Masses 26 “For the Sanctification of Human Labor,” 32 “For Refugees and Exiles,” and 33 “In Time of Famine or for Those Suffering Hunger.”

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, are parishioners still struggling to catch up with their debts after months or a year without work? Do parishioners face risky work conditions? Echoes of *Rerum novarum* are heard in the Collect for Mass 26 “For the Sanctification of Human Labor”:

O God, who through human labor
 never cease to perfect and govern the vast work
 of creation,
 listen to the supplications of your people
 and grant that all men and woman
 may find work that befits their dignity,
 joins them more closely to one another
 and enables them to serve their neighbor.

Similar to Pope Francis’ efforts today, in *Rerum novarum* Pope Leo XIII sought to improve labor conditions of the working-class poor and called Christians to unite in solidarity with those who became victims of ambitious employers. Who in your congregation faces these challenges? This prayer could be used to bless their labor and call the parish to unite in efforts to assist these workers.

Are there refugees in need of support in the parish community? Matthew 25:42–46 is evoked in the collect for the Mass 32 “For Refugees and Exiles” as Christians are called upon to respond to the “stranger” in need:

O Lord, to whom no one is a stranger
 and from whose help no one is ever distant,
 look with compassion on refugees and exiles,
 on segregated persons and on lost children;

restore them, we pray, to a homeland,
 and give us a kind heart for the needy and
 for strangers.

Who in the parish faces hunger? Even with a restarted economy, many continue to face hunger and, because of chronic conditions, some are still wary of shopping. *The Roman Missal* addresses the plight of hunger through the Mass 33 “In Time of Famine or for Those Suffering Hunger.” The Prayer after Communion presents a challenge for Christian action. It states:

O God, almighty Father,
 we humbly ask you that the living Bread
 which has come down from heaven,
 may give us strength
 to relieve our brothers and sisters in their need.
 Through Christ our Lord.

This prayer makes it powerfully clear that Christians, fed on the Body of Christ, are nourished so that they may feed their brothers and sisters that are part of the mystical body of Christ.

The Roman Missal notes that the fourth form of the Eucharistic Prayer for Use in Masses with Various Needs, “Jesus Who Went About Doing Good,” is “appropriately used in celebrations For Refugees and Exiles and In Time of Famine or for Those Suffering Hunger. This Eucharistic Prayer portrays Jesus’ response to those in need. In this prayer, we pray:

For you have given us Jesus Christ, your Son,
 as our Lord and Redeemer.

He always showed compassion
 for children and for the poor,
 for the sick and for sinners,
 and he became a neighbor
 to the oppressed and the afflicted.

By word and deed he announced to the world
 that you are our Father
 and that you care for all your sons and daughters.

As the prayer continues, it makes a plea to the Father to teach charity to the faithful:

Open our eyes
 to the needs of our brothers and sisters;
 inspire in us words and actions
 to comfort those who labor and are burdened.
 Make us serve them truly,
 after the example of Christ and at his command.
 And may your Church stand as a living witness
 to truth and freedom, to truth and freedom,
 to peace and justice,
 that all people may be raised to a new hope.

Living Witness

Being a Church that is poor and for the poor means that Christians must roll up their literal and proverbial sleeves to embrace “human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 24). After the parish liturgy for the World Day of the Poor, how can your community advance the kingdom of heaven by responding to tangible needs in the community? Plan something meaningful to the vulnerable invited to the special Mass. In addition, your parish can initiate a long-term program to minister to a particular cause. Many parishes, like Pope Francis, have hosted luncheons. However, going a step further, the Parish of St. Joseph in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, holds a family fun day for poor families and migrants. Food, games, needed material gifts, and entertainment bring the community together in joyful and hopeful celebration.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Francis calls the Christian community to stand as a living witness. The Eucharistic liturgy places the poor into the loving embrace of the mystical body of Christ and transforms believers so they may serve Christ on the altar of the poor. The prayers of the liturgy give voice to the plight of the poor and issue a call to all to minister to the most vulnerable in the Lord’s kingdom on earth. Let us bring about his heavenly kingdom by lovingly embracing the poor through the World Day of the Poor. ♦

Notes

1. Francis, Audience to the Representative of the Communications Media (March 16, 2013), April 11, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130327_udienza-generale.html.

2. *Evangelii gaudium*, 198.

3. Francis, Message on the First World Day of the Poor (November 19, 2017): 3, accessed on April 11, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/papa-francesco_20170613_messaggio-i-giornatamondiale-poveri-2017.html.

4. Francis, Message for Third World Day of Prayer (November 17, 2019), 8, accessed on April 11, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/papafrancesco_20190613_messaggio-iii-giornatamondiale-poveri-2019.html.

5. Francis, Message for Third World Day of Prayer, 8.

6. Elise Harris, Catholic News Agency, November 17, 2017, accessed April 11, 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-are-you-afraid-of-god-if-so-you-dont-really-know-who-he-is-94332>.

7. Agence France-Presse, “Pope denounces ‘din of rich few’ on World Day of the Poor,” South China Morning Post, November 18, 2018, accessed April 11, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/2173811/pope-denounces-din-rich-few-world-day-poor>.

8. Castelfranco, Sabrina, “Pope Francis Marks the World Day of the Poor Amid Pandemic,” RFI, November 17, 2020, accessed March 6, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/europe/20201117-pope-francis-marks-world-day-of-the-poor-amid-pandemic>.



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The World Day of the Poor calls for the faithful to go from the Eucharistic table to serving people in need.

9. Francis, Homily for the World Day of Prayer (November 18, 2018), accessed on April 11, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20181118_omelia-gionatamondiale-poveri.html.

10. The Parish of St. Joseph 3rd World Day of the Poor Parish Fun Day (November 17, 2019) accessed on March 15, 2021, <http://www.stjosephsentul.org/3rd-world-day-of-the-poor-cum-parish-family-day/>.

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At www.PastoralLiturgy.org

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