

## **Material and Spiritual Poverty**

(Joe Colletti, PhD)

We need to abandon any idea of a dichotomy between material and spiritual poverty if we want to truly integrate experiences of material and spiritual poverty into our lives. Material poverty is often defined in very basic terms such as the lack of food, clothing, and shelter. Spiritual poverty is often defined within the context of a broken relationship with God. What we need to realize and remember is that when these experiences are a reality for others they are a reality for us and when they are a reality for us they are a reality for others. What we also need to realize and remember is that integration is a daily act and life-long process that involves integrating our own actions and responses towards others and vice versa.

### **Material Poverty**

In essence, we are all materially impoverished. The scriptures make it clear that "the earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it (Psalm 24.1)." Thus, before God each one of us is poor. However, some of us share in economic conditions that do not make us materially poor whereas others are not able to share in the same circumstances. Some of us are able to obtain the necessities of daily living such as food, clothing, and shelter while others struggle to do so.

Some of us also share in social circumstances that do not make us materially poor whereas others are not able to share in the same conditions. Social aspects of poverty often evolve around issues such as the lack of education, employment, health care, and political power. Some of us have more readily access to these resources while others do not. Lack of access often results in unequal social status, inequitable social relationships, social exclusion and/or expulsion, and a diminished capacity to participate in processes that may change social and economic conditions.

### **Spiritual Poverty**

Spiritual poverty is a result of a broken relationship with God. It is furthered when we only focus on the broken relationships with God of others and not on our own broken relationship with God. We need to realize that we are all broken and poor before God and before one another.

We become even poorer when we do not realize that if all is not well with others than all is not well with us and if all is not well with us that all is not well with others. This is the inescapable network of economic and social

mutuality that should not be ignored and eliminated. All of us share the material and spiritual fabric that make up our everyday lives.

During a speech delivered at The National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., on March 31, 1968 Martin Luther King Jr. stated

"In a real sense all life is inter-related. All persons are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality."

Within this framework, solidarity provides deep-rooted feelings of community and union. A strong sense of community is stressed through the idea that everyone is "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality" and a strong sense of union is emphasized through the belief that all persons are "tied in a single garment of destiny." Adding the Christian concept of incarnation within this context means that God is also part of the inescapable network of mutuality and intertwined within our single garment of destiny.

### **Integration of Material and Spiritual Poverty**

The way out of material and spiritual poverty for us and others needs to include prayer. Our prayers should stem from how God sees us which is poor and rich at the same time. We are poor in that the earth and all that it contains is God's and not ours. The earth does contain resources that are God's and that we should help ensure that these resources are shared by all.

Prayer alone is not enough. Ministry is needed. Our ministry should help ensure that our resources, and the resources of others, are shared among one another. Thus, adequate food, clothing, and shelter should be a goal for all. However, the lack of such resources can further our brokenness. Such brokenness can include alienation, loneliness, and oppression as a result of discrimination, prejudice, and lack of judgment. Thus, we need to go beyond providing the basic needs of daily living and help provide the resources that are needed to heal from such brokenness that may include case management, spiritual direction, and political capital. Otherwise, we may perpetuate a cycle of dependence that keeps others and ourselves from fully healing from the condition of brokenness.

Prayer and ministry provide opportunities to integrate material and spiritual poverty into our lives. If we see others experiencing material poverty and do nothing about it our relationship with God is broken and we are in a condition of spiritual poverty. If others have a broken relationship with God our material resources may help heal that broken relationship. Not sharing our material resources leads to our own material poverty because it is not shared. Thus, integration happens when we realize that we are all broken and poor before God and before one another and when we do something about it by sharing what we have and remembering that what we have—whether material or spiritual—is God’s for us to share.