

CHAPTER 1

Justice for All

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From childhood on, Americans recite the Pledge of Allegiance, which ends with the words, “liberty and justice for all.” These words resonate as an ideal and a fervent dream of how life should be for everyone. People in the United States of America believe that justice is their birthright. United States citizens have a deep, abiding belief in justice. They are concerned with justice, most often envisioned as a basic sense of fairness that is expected in the workplace and at home, in the organizations they have joined, as well as in society at large. They also expect conformity to law and a reasonable interpretation of law with attention to honesty and impartiality. Justice is not just a fervent expectation, but also a deep-seated hope, even when circumstances short-circuit people’s lives. Despite obstacles to achieving it, hope for justice is the basis for people’s outlook on life and shapes their view for the future.

An understanding of justice of many, if not most, United States citizens includes a sense of social justice, the conviction that in a land of plenty all should have their basic human needs met: food, shelter, safety, health care, and education. Beyond that, they hope that all are provided with opportunities to develop their talents and pursue their life dreams. The reality, however, is that social justice in the United States is often shattered by the realities of poverty.

POVERTY: A JUSTICE ISSUE

In recent times the media has carried stories of celebrities and politicians who have focused attention on poverty. On February 3, 2005, former South African President Nelson Mandela, at the invitation of The Campaign to Make Poverty History, came out of retirement and traveled to Britain to speak to over 20,000 people gathered in London’s Trafalgar Square. His speech compared poverty to slavery, because poverty is a prison that has entrapped millions of people. Poverty, Mandela stated, “is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.” Overcoming poverty is more than an act of charity. Rather, it is “an act of justice,” for it protects “a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life.” Mandela directed his message to all people, especially world leaders who would

meet that summer for the G-8 summit, an economic conference of the industrialized nations that included Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States; he spoke as well to the United Nations delegates who would meet in September to continue work on the Millennium Goals that were first proposed in 2000. In effect, Mandela addressed not only his immediate audience but also everyone of good will so they would be motivated to work to overcome poverty. In his words, "Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom."¹

Bono, lead singer of the Irish rock group U2, had direct experience of how famine affects children. In 1986 he and his wife, Alison Stewart, traveled to Wello, Ethiopia, where they worked in an orphanage for six weeks. It was the height of a severe famine that ravaged the country and claimed the lives of young and old alike. Bono's involvement as a spokesman extended to his founding a Washington-based humanitarian organization, DATA, dedicated to addressing Debt, AIDS, Trade, and Africa. His vision is to alleviate the suffering and provide help and relief for the millions of people in Africa with programs similar to the Marshall Plan that addressed the problems of post-World War II Europe. DATA advocates for a combination of foreign aid, debt cancellation, and trade incentives.

When Bono addressed the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., on February 2, 2006, he spoke about his involvement in Jubilee 2000, a movement that lobbied leaders of wealthy nations to forgive the debt of over fifty of the world's poorest nations. The idea was simple, as proposed in Leviticus 25:35-38, that those who had loaned money would forgive, or cancel, debts so poor nations once freed of debts owed to foreign nations would have funds to dedicate to health care and education. He went on to speak of Jesus' first public proclamation from the book of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk 4:18-19). Bono is convinced that God is with the vulnerable and poor. In his words, "God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house...God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war...God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives,

and God is with us if we are with them." Bono pointed out that God is calling us to do what God is doing: to be with the poor. He urged the United States of America to increase foreign aid by an extra one percent in an effort "to change the world, to transform millions of lives." He made the connection with the Millennium Development Goals: "clean water for all; school for every child; medicine for the afflicted, an end to extreme and senseless poverty," goals that he called "the Beatitudes for a Globalized World."²

While world poverty attracts the attention of and raises the compassion of many people, poverty in the United States is a far less popular topic. One notable exception is former North Carolina Senator John Edwards's address to the Democratic National Convention in July 2004. He spoke of poverty as a threat to the lives of many Americans. In his words, there are "two different Americas: one for those people who have lived the American Dream and don't have to worry, and another for most Americans, everyone else, who struggle to make ends meet every single day."³ His sense of the basic unfairness of poverty led to his serving as the first director of the newly formed Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity at the University of North Carolina. He has traveled throughout the United States, meeting with people living on the margins and listening to their stories. In addition, he has talked with young people at colleges and universities to raise their awareness of poverty. In December 2006, Edwards announced his candidacy for the presidency of the United States in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, an area known for the poverty of its residents that captured national and world attention after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in September 2005. As one of his major campaign issues, John Edwards was committed to speaking about poverty. In an interview with Bob Herbert of *The New York Times*, Edwards explained why Americans need to be concerned about the issue of poverty: First, poverty confronts us as a moral issue that we cannot ignore, and we must devote time and energy to working to solve the many problems that are related to poverty if we are to be true to our national ideals; second, poverty is a threat to the middle class, many of whom are struggling and on the brink of falling into poverty, all of which weakens the American economy; third, poverty is a complex problem that

demands a multi-pronged approach, including efforts to address low wages, to expand the earned income tax credit (EITC), to provide the opportunity for workers to organize, and to address the lack of access to good education, affordable housing, and health care.⁴ In a book he co-edited, *Ending Poverty in America* (2007), Edwards's concern for the millions of people living in poverty is evident when he wrote that, "The real story is not the number but the people behind the number. The men, women, and children—one in eight of us—do not have enough money for the food, shelter, and clothing they need. One in eight. That is not a problem. That is a challenge. That is a plague. And it is our national shame."⁵

Poverty: A Threat to Society. Poverty is a topic that most people in the United States avoid discussing. Poverty, like a cloud blocking the sun, can effectively prevent the realization of the American Dream. Rather than become depressed or disheartened, most people choose not to think about or discuss poverty. But poverty is a reality not just for those who are at or below the official poverty threshold. It is a specter that haunts many persons who optimistically self-identify as middle class. As hard as some people work and as much as they want to prosper, many people are on the verge of slipping into poverty. Most Americans avoid discussing poverty, for to be poor carries a stigma and many consider being in poverty a disgrace.

According to Elizabeth Warren,⁶ in the 1970s most families were able to live on one salary; in recent years families have to rely on two salaries. The standard of living in the United States has improved as is evident from the increase in home ownership, as well as access to a greater number of appliances, electronic gadgets, and other conveniences. But families now need two salaries to pay the higher mortgage rates, the cost of child care and transportation, which is a necessary consequence of both parents working. They also have to purchase medical insurance, pay for higher education, and pay higher taxes on their combined earnings. The advantages that American workers had come to expect—health care benefits and a company pension—are disappearing at a rapid rate as businesses and corporations are dedicated to providing ever higher profits

for their owners and stockholders. The middle class is at risk and often faces economic crises: mortgages whose high interest rates are such a burden that some lose their home when they are unable to make timely payments; escalating credit card debt; and the high price of health care.

Credit card debt is insidious, for when one is late in making or misses a payment, there is the added burden of late penalties and higher finance charges. Soon this information is shared with other companies that in turn increase the interest rates on other credit cards. Even college students can get caught in the web of credit card debt when credit card companies send out credit card offers that appear irresistibly attractive. Yet many card holders do not realize that the credit card contracts often contain provisions that may drag them deeper into debt. Adults suffer the ill effects of credit card debt when they charge extraordinary expenses, such as when a family member requires expensive medical treatments, or when they need to cover ordinary living expenses when income is limited by job loss. When an adult is sick and unable to work, the family misses the wage earner's income, and extraordinary expenses not covered by insurance are often charged on a credit card. Families in the past often had savings to bridge the gap, but today many Americans are living from paycheck to paycheck. One extraordinary expense—such as when a parent cannot work, when a child becomes seriously ill, or when the family loses its home due to debt, storm damage, or fire—can plunge the family into poverty.

Of particular concern for college students is the crisis in student debts. In recent years as college tuition has risen steadily, the limited funds available from federal loans and the difficulty of completing the required loan forms have caused students to turn to private loans. Unlike federal loans whose interest rates are capped by law, private loans have variable rates that can reach twenty percent, similar to what credit cards charge. Students are often unaware that interest rates are compounding even while they are still in college. In effect, this is a problem affecting millions of students, one that will follow them through life. College students who use private loans are like indentured servants who will have to work for years to pay back the principal and all the interest. Declaring bankruptcy is no relief, because the bankruptcy law passed in 2005

holds students liable for repayment of federal and private college loans.⁷ Entering adult life burdened by huge debt narrows the options a college graduate has regarding employment, a desire to volunteer in the United States or overseas, and the choice of a way of life; it may even delay a person's decision to marry and start a family.

Poverty is like a wolf lurking at the door, threatening to devour those within. Politicians speak of safety nets, but these are almost non-existent. In former times one parent was available to help if a relative got sick or injured; today a parent has to take unpaid leave or be unemployed for the time he or she is needed, and may even lose his or her job as a result of attending to family duties. Since families need two incomes to pay their monthly bills, having only one income is truly a hardship. Those who are single parents with the responsibility of raising children face this challenge all the time. A single parent, most often the mother, is severely handicapped by having only one income, lacking other financial resources, and earning a lower salary than her male counterparts. The choice is between working or caring for a feeble parent, a sick or disabled child, or recovering from one's own illness. As bills accumulate, the economic crisis is compounded by the physical, social, and emotional toll brought on by uncertainty and insufficient income. Families are also often separated from extended family support systems. Siblings, aunts, uncles, and other relatives are facing the same economic challenges, so offering help is not possible in many situations.

Making Poverty Count. Poverty in the United States is a pervasive problem. Statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau reveal that 37 million Americans, about 12.6 percent of the population, were living at or below the official poverty threshold in 2005. For a family of four, composed of two adults and two children under the age of 18, the poverty threshold was \$19,806. It is obvious that families with such limited income could not afford to pay for housing, food, clothing, transportation, and utilities. Studies have shown that families need at least twice the dollar value of the official poverty threshold to cover family expenses. On a practical level, there are many more people living in poverty who are not counted in the official government statistics

because the measure of poverty is set at such a low level. Despite these limitations, it is worth noting that the number of people living at the poverty threshold increased by 5.3 million from 2000 to 2004. In addition, poverty rates are higher in the inner city and in the rural areas of the United States. Most of those who are poor are working, but as is well known, those who work full time at a minimum wage job as their sole means of support are living in poverty.

Poverty is a greater burden for certain groups of people. Single women with children as well as children living with only one parent or guardian have a higher incidence of poverty. Racial minorities, namely, blacks and Hispanics, and recent arrivals—immigrants who left their home country to find work to support their families—are also more likely to be living in poverty.⁸

Poverty threatens millions of lives. Individuals and families need help beyond minimum wage jobs and government assistance. It might appear hopeless, but there are groups that are working to reduce poverty. One such group is Catholic Charities USA, which has dedicated itself to halving poverty by the year 2020. As an organization that responds daily to the many needs of the poor, Catholic Charities also works to counter the many misconceptions about poverty. First and foremost, they state the fact that poverty affects many Americans over their lifetime. “Almost half of all Americans will have experienced poverty for a year or more at some point in their lives by the time they reach age 60.” Of those who have experienced poverty, about half will have lived in poverty for a total of four or more years. The second point stressed by Catholic Charities is that most poor people are workers. The majority of poor families, about two out of three families, have one or more workers. Since the federal minimum wage is low and not adjusted for inflation, a person can work full time for the entire year and not be able to earn enough money to support himself or herself, let alone children and other dependents. Third, to correct misperceptions, Catholic Charities points out that most poor Americans are white. Almost half of all Americans, about 47 percent, who are living in poverty are white.⁹

It is important to note that the United States is one of the richest and most powerful nations in the world. For our country to have such a

high number of people living in poverty is a disgrace. While it is easy to blame the persons who are poor for their misfortune, it is more truthful to say that people are poor due to a combination of personal, social, and economic causes. Individuals can only work so many hours, and juggle so many debts. Society plays a major role in terms of its institutions and the policies that have allowed corporations and businesses to have so much power and influence that they often ride roughshod over the rights of workers. When profits go to highly paid CEOs and stockholders and not to those working to ensure the success of the company, especially at a time when worker productivity has soared, there is reason to question priorities. Workers are not the only ones who suffer; so too do their families. While some individuals profit, this comes at the expense of women and children who will suffer the ill effects of poverty. Those living in poverty cannot flourish—their health, education, and family life will be seriously affected. Poor mental and physical health, lower educational achievements, and a fast track for more years of living in poverty are the result of not paying workers a just wage for their labor.

The Ecology of Poverty. One can come to understand the difficult situation of American workers by reading David K. Shipler's accounts of the working poor. The working poor are entangled in a complex social network created by conditions of material poverty and it is difficult for them to free themselves from this social and economic whirlpool. In other words, they are part of "an ecological system of relationships among individuals, families and the environment of schools, neighborhoods, jobs and government services" that separates them from the broader society. The dynamics of this ecological system often work against the poor and thwart the efforts they make to escape from poverty. While charity and government programs have been somewhat effective, Shipler is convinced that "the full force of the nation's power can be mobilized only by the federal government. Only then can we alter the ecology of poverty."¹⁰

JUSTICE FOR THE POOR: A PLACE AT THE TABLE

A guiding metaphor for achieving justice for the poor is that of a place at the table. Is it possible in this land of plenty to make a place at the table for the poor, especially impoverished women and children? The table from a Christian perspective is first and foremost the sacred table, the table of God's love. Moreover, the image of the sacred table is captured splendidly in Andrei Rublev's icon, "The Holy Trinity." Based on the story in Genesis 18 when Abraham offered hospitality to three visitors, this icon is seen in the Orthodox tradition as a manifestation of the Trinity. The icon depicts three divine persons seated around a table. The figures are "equally sized," a sign of their equality and the fact that "no one dominates." Each figure is depicted "in full face," since "face to face eye contact" engages the viewer and encourages him or her to interact and, by means of the encounter, enter into communion.¹¹ "The Holy Trinity" invites the viewer to enter the peaceful, loving, active presence of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Comforter. This is a holy place with room for the viewer to listen and share in intimate conversation. This sacred table makes all people feel welcome. Once God's love is experienced, people realize the equality of all persons before God. Persons are then more likely to work in solidarity so that justice for the poor can truly be realized.

The table is also a place for decision making. This image of the table is presented in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops pastoral letter, *A Place at the Table: A Catholic Recommitment to Overcome Poverty and to Respect the Dignity of All God's Children* (2002). The bishops claim that respect for persons who are created in the image and likeness of God requires us to make a place at the table of social decision making for all members of our community, especially women and children, since they have frequently been absent from the table of social decision making. Justice for the poor requires that all people learn to share power and responsibilities.

Letty M. Russell, theologian and educator, provides a clear understanding of how a place at the table empowers people. In her writings,

Russell refers to the table as an image of partnership, a central theme throughout her writings. God is the model for partnership. The communication of love among the persons of the Trinity allows humanity to marvel at the "Trinitarian image of reciprocity, joint sharing in the work of salvation and the mission of the world." God's activity of "being partner in God's self and being partner with us" is the model for partnership among women and men. Russell defines partnership as "a new focus of relationship in which there is continuing commitment and common struggle in interaction with a wider community context."¹² The paradigm of partnership is envisioned as a *circle of interdependence*. Diversity is valued and participation welcomed. "Authority is exercised in community and not *over* community."¹³

Letty Russell employs three images in her effort to work toward a global table. The first is a *round table* as "a sign of the coming unity of humanity." The round table allows each person to be seen and to have equal access to speak and be heard even as it becomes a welcoming center for people's lives and for resolution of their concerns. The round table is a metaphor for achieving the "*already* of welcome, sharing, talk, and partnership" as opposed to the "*not yet* of our divided and dominated world." The second image is the *kitchen table*. People carry out the myriad tasks of daily living around the kitchen table. Around this table people share their lives with family and friends. Like the early followers of Jesus, Christians share the bread of their lives. The kitchen table is the scene for solidarity as people reach out to include the oppressed and recognize them as neighbor and friend. The third image is a *welcome table*, a place where the community welcomes those who are often made to feel that they are not welcome. The welcome table, part of the black church tradition, "symbolizes the communion table and every other gathering at table. At God's welcome table those who have been denied access to the table of the rich white masters are welcomed and may welcome others as a foretaste of the final partnership with God."¹⁴ The welcome table makes clear that women and men of all races, nationalities, and socio-economic status experience God's acceptance and love. In turn, all are called to appreciate the giftedness of each individual and to work together in partnership with God.

The table reminds us of our calling by God to seek justice for the poor. It can recall meals where good food and drink, and lively conversation among family and friends, nourished the mind and heart. It can challenge us to be more inclusive, to make a place for the poor at our table among family and friends. It can relate to the table of fellowship where a community of believers shares the word of God and the Body of Christ and then reaches out to others, especially those living on the underside of life. In its very simplicity it can bring home how all are welcome and how individuals are called to shoulder responsibility for one another and for the world. The table can be a symbol of love between God and humans, as well as a symbol of partnership with God. As God calls each to life and love, so too rich and poor are called to be with and for one another. Gifts of self and wealth shine more brightly in the brilliance of God's love for each of us.

HOW POVERTY BECAME A CONCERN

An interest in justice for the poor is the result of this writer's family background, religious congregation, and ministry commitments. As a white, middle-class, multi-national American woman born and raised as a Roman Catholic in the Bronx, New York, I learned from infancy the importance of family. When our father died at an early age, a maternal aunt volunteered to live with our family and became a second mother to all three children. Our mother worked outside the home at a time when most mothers could stay home and raise their children. A monthly Social Security check for each child was used to provide clothing, shelter, and food. Government assistance helped sustain the family in its time of need.

Years later when I entered the convent, the Dominican Sisters of Sparkill had a home for boys who were separated from their parents by death, divorce, or various social ills. Experience as an assistant group mother and later as a teacher introduced me to the limited options of the poor. An institution with dedicated sisters was no substitute for a child's own parents. In the course of time, the congregation assigned me to various teaching positions. Higher education and opportunities to travel

to Spain, Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador provided the training to teach Spanish. Learning to speak Spanish was a way to think in another language and to experience other cultures. This opened the door to other people's minds and hearts, and to many more situations in which I saw firsthand the realities of poverty in the world.

Over the years I worked as campus minister, assistant principal, and then principal in three Catholic high schools in the Bronx. As Director of Campus Ministry, I coordinated a Christian Service program. An elective course for seniors, Christian Service was a religion course that offered young men the opportunity to volunteer in hospitals, nursing homes, or educational facilities, such as day-care programs and elementary schools. Direct service was combined with opportunities for reflection. The students were also required to do a study of a specific injustice, using a social analysis process. As an administrator, I interacted with parents as well as their children. Requests for financial aid increased as more parents found it difficult to pay tuition and meet their other expenses. One avenue for obtaining tuition assistance was the Inner-City Scholarship Fund. As part of the process I conducted interviews with parents and guardians. These revealed the strains on family life: illness, death of a parent, disability, dependencies, and limited income. Poverty was in the eyes of the single parent or grandparent, the newly arrived immigrant, the student living virtually alone. Questions arose, the most basic of which was: How do these women and children survive on such limited income in this urban setting?

Since their founding in 1876 the Dominican Sisters of Sparkill have worked with women and children in need. Like other religious congregations, the sisters responded to the Second Vatican Council's call for renewal. We met for many months to discuss governance and lifestyle. We elected delegates who met during a series of chapters, the result of which was the revision of our constitutions. On May 6, 1985, over one hundred years since its founding, the Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of the Rosary celebrated the official approval of their revised constitutions. First approved by the sister delegates at the Chapter of 1976, the goal that was subsequently approved by a majority of all the sisters, was a recommitment to the "proclamation of the kingdom of God through a

ministry for justice wherein we focus on enablement of the poor, of the powerless, of the oppressed, and of the spiritually deprived people of our times."¹⁵ In embracing the revised constitutions I recognized that I had already experienced firsthand the primacy of justice for the poor in my ministries with people. I am firmly convinced that only when justice takes root, especially among the poor, will we as a people experience the reign of God in this world.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The primary purpose of this study is to demonstrate that concern for the poor is an issue of social justice, and that concern about justice for the poor needs to be incorporated more fully into contemporary Christian religious education if we are to bridge the gap between Christian ideals of social justice and Christian efforts to link faith and everyday life in meaningful and responsible ways. To achieve this primary purpose the study draws upon economic data and contemporary sociological studies to deepen an awareness of the realities of poverty in the United States of America. It also provides a Christian perspective for understanding the realities of poverty by exploring biblical senses of justice for the poor, reviewing Catholic social teaching to uncover insights regarding poverty and justice, and working with the perspectives of liberation theology to demonstrate how we can move beyond the oppression of poverty to a renewed and enriched sense of justice in society today.

Christians can become more intentional advocates for the poor through education, prayerful discernment, and disciplined action. For instance, education about Catholic social teaching can focus attention on preferential love for the poor and seeking justice for them as constitutive elements of Christian faith. It can demonstrate how Christians can examine the U.S. welfare system and proposed legislation in the light of Catholic social teaching as they strive to discern how they might seek greater social justice for the poor. It can also review how the Catholic Church has had a powerful, yet limited, effect in embodying the message of justice and love for the poor, and how the church's role as an advocate for the poor can be developed more fully through the greater

involvement of all Catholics responding willingly and creatively to their neighbor in need. In light of the guiding metaphor, *a place at the table*, the study demonstrates how Christians can intentionally include the poor by inviting them to the table to explore ways of sharing stories, experience, and power.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS STUDY

This study helps to bridge the gap between the senses of justice found among Christians and United States citizens and their failure to seek social justice for the poor in their midst.

Concern for justice, especially justice for the poor, has always been central to Jewish and Christian faith traditions. The Bible provides a rich interpretive context for helping one to develop a sense of what it means to seek justice for the poor. In the Hebrew Scriptures God enters history as a protagonist for the poor. In the Christian Scriptures Jesus of Nazareth brings a message of hope, reveals a loving, forgiving God, and stands firmly with outcasts and the oppressed. Catholic social teaching enlarges and informs our understanding of how justice should be understood and how it affects people. It draws deeply from the well of Sacred Scripture and relates it to the lives of all people. Once again, the poor appear center stage and are special both to God and people of good will. Moreover, one sees how Catholics strive to embrace the senses of justice found in Christian Scripture and often do acts of charity. For instance, students especially are encouraged to donate food, volunteer locally and in distant places like the Gulf Coast and Mexico, and contribute to charitable causes. What is needed, in addition to charitable acts, is to develop the skills to analyze injustice in society and seek ways to work together as a community to address it and change it to justice.

Christian concern for justice has a special significance and importance in the United States because of our deep, abiding belief in justice. We feel the sting of injustice when immediate needs for food, clothing, and shelter are not met, and when a willing, able person is unable to find meaningful employment at a living wage. We have a sense that some-

thing is terribly wrong in our society when people do not have opportunities to escape the grasp of poverty.

Unfortunately, as Christians and citizens of the United States we have tended to overlook the growing numbers of poor people, especially women and children, in our midst. While we have a basic sense of social justice, we have too often failed to reflect on how our actions contribute to poverty. Moreover, we have often neglected to devote creative energy to addressing and overcoming the realities of poverty. Thus, despite our Christian and national senses of justice, poverty grows.

As a society, we fail to act justly toward the poor when we do not ensure that they have the resources and opportunities needed to survive. Just as we have ignored the growing numbers of poor people in our midst, we have neglected to raise questions about social justice for the poor. As poverty grows in the United States, justice seems to wither.

It is my intention to broaden our understanding of poverty as an issue of social justice by connecting the empirical analysis of social science and our Christian belief that we are to value and respect each person as our neighbor. This study provides a resource that can enable students and religious educators, namely, parents, teachers, the church community, ordained and lay leadership, to integrate more fully the best from the public plaza with the wisdom of our Christian traditions. Principles of social justice based on a genuine love for one's neighbor are presented as a guide for informing, reforming, and enlarging the American Dream of justice for all. Overall, this book is an attempt to provide a framework for creating a table of Christian fellowship, a table of social decision making, and a table of partnership where we are all welcome guests, equal before God and enriched by each person's presence.

METHODOLOGY

"Research begins in wonder and curiosity but ends in teaching."¹⁶ Curiosity leads to questions, a natural way to begin research. Gathering information and examining theories can whet our appetite to know more, so that eventually we weave a web. People and events, ideas and

theories are woven together in delicate but resilient relationships. Since a web is transparent, it may also lead us to look beyond present concerns to an even broader, expansive landscape. This allows us to see how we are related in a world of intricate beauty and complex problems.

The overarching methodology for this study is a “circle of praxis,” defined as a circular process of social analysis.¹⁷ Joe Holland and Peter Henriot credit Paulo Freire with developing the concept of praxis, namely, action informed by reflection.¹⁸ The elements of this circle of praxis are insertion, social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral/educational planning. The primary data of social analysis are the experiences of persons and their communities, what is happening in their lives, their feelings and how they respond; these are the moment of insertion. Social analysis makes sense of experiences, examining both cause and effect, how events are linked, and identifying who the major actors are. This process sets these elements against a broader background and makes connections among events and people. Theological reflection searches and applies Scripture, tradition, and church social teaching to the experiences; it effectively allows the Word of God to raise questions, suggest new insights and new responses. Pastoral/educational planning emerges from the analysis and reflection upon experiences in the light of faith to arrive at appropriate responses on the part of individuals and communities. The response considers both short-term and long-term effectiveness. The action response evokes new situations that call for evaluation and a return to the process of insertion, analysis, reflection, and planning. The circle of praxis is more properly identified as a “spiral”¹⁹ because there is an expectation that the process will continue and result in change. It is, in effect, an open, ongoing process that continues to analyze experiences and events to ensure that justice is available to all, especially those who are of little concern to the world, but of great concern to a loving God and community.

First, analyzing and comparing empirical and historical data provide an understanding of poverty in the United States. This analysis is the means for exploring the various aspects of the ecology of poverty in the lives of women and children. A review of responses to poverty in the United States reveals how individuals, organizations, and the govern-

ment have reacted to those who are poor by showing what they are willing and able to do to assist the poor.

The exploration and analysis of the empirical and historical data generate meaningful understanding.²⁰ As noted, the poor, including the working poor, are increasingly separated from the broader society, which is socially shielded from understanding what it means to be entangled in the complex network created by the conditions of poverty. Consequently, this study uses empirical and historical analysis to help us understand more fully the multifaceted realities of poverty, including the suffering and hardship it inflicts, especially on women and children.

As Stephen Schmidt has written, there is always a need to approach history with “a hermeneutic of suspicion as well as a homiletic of hope” if we are to discover the “human values worth preserving.”²¹ Criticism and objectivity provide clarity, while openness to the future reveals hope. In this study there is a reliance on data to provide objective clarity, a critical analysis of policies and their impact on poor women and children to break open the meaning of the data, and a suggestion of hope for the future based on a discussion of the benefits of being more socially inclusive of those who are rendered powerless because of poverty.

Second, the heart of this study is theological reflection. Theological reflection is a disciplined attempt to gain some understanding of God’s activity and presence in our lives and in the world, and to discern what God has enabled and required, and is enabling and requiring of people of faith. The theological analysis in this study focuses on Scripture and tradition, Catholic social teaching, and contemporary liberation and feminist theologies. Scripture reveals how God and people have interacted, and how a believing community welcomes all people, providing a table of fellowship as well as food, shelter, and comfort in times of distress. Catholic social teaching provides principles based on natural law and Scripture, as well as interpretations of issues of justice and poverty. Contemporary liberation and feminist theological critiques clear the way to welcome all to the table and to insure partnership in service based upon fundamental Christian beliefs about God.

In this study, theological reflection is coupled with and unfolds into social analysis. For instance, a review of Scripture and Christian traditions

enlarges our understanding of justice for the poor. Scripture and tradition reveal a God who sides with the poor. Jesus' words of hope and compassionate actions for the poor challenged the early Christians as they formed a worshipping community whose members came from disparate economic situations. Faith communities today continue to address the realities of people from vastly different socio-economic conditions, and their confrontations with poverty can be understood in the light of Scripture and church tradition. Similarly, after reviewing Catholic social teaching in the light of social analysis it is evident that the church has directed attention to people's inherent worth and dignity, and that there is a compelling need for the church to continue to be an advocate for the poor today.

Third, as the study proceeds, a concern for what Christians can and should do will emerge. Stated differently, the study strives to inspire Christians to recognize what they can and should do to make a place or a better place at the table of life for the poor. In this part of the study I rely heavily on the work of Letty M. Russell, Thomas H. Groome, and Gabriel Moran. Letty Russell's discussion of educating for justice is based on God's mission to reconcile the world through Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:18–20). It is a call to partnership with God and people in community as reflected in service, journeying with God to actualize the reign of God's justice and peace in our time, and welcoming others and working in solidarity with them to transform society and effect justice. Thomas H. Groome's writings enlarge the discussion with his emphasis on the responsibility of all educators—teachers and parents—to educate for justice, a justice that flows from spirituality, is modeled in relationships, and is truly a passion. Groome also provides suggestions regarding curriculum and pedagogies of social consciousness. Gabriel Moran's educational approach is explored as a way of engaging people in a method that builds on affirmation, acknowledges limitations, moves to prophetic resistance, and reorders life at a deeper level. Moran also argues that issues of justice are "at the center of the process" of religious education, and that this process requires taking "immediate steps to reduce the world's sufferings in a small but tangible way."²²

The last chapter brings the study full circle. In the beginning the reader entered into the reality of poverty in the United States. At the end the

researcher invites all Christians to be educated for justice so that they can deal “critically and creatively” with the realities of poverty and begin to discover how they can participate in efforts to seek greater social justice.²³ Ultimately, the researcher strives to reveal opportunities for welcoming to the table all those who had been excluded by poverty.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS STUDY

Chapter 1: Justice for All. The introduction examines the challenge of “justice for all” in the United States where poverty affects millions of people. Prominent people from politics and the arts are presented as persons intent on bringing justice to an unjust world. This chapter provides the background, purpose, and significance of the study, and its methodology is described. The guiding metaphor, *a place at the table*, is introduced as an image that can be used to encourage people to work for a future where all share in decisions and power.

Chapter 2: Poverty in the United States of America. This chapter explores the reality of poverty in the United States, beginning with portraits of the working poor: a family at risk of losing their home, women who moved from welfare to work, and the experience of a “random family” in the South Bronx. The U.S. Census Report is examined because it provides data to determine the extent of poverty. In addition, the reality of poverty for the working poor and the effects of poverty on women and children are explored. Finally, the chapter reviews the response to poverty in the United States from a historical perspective, as well as providing models for responding to poverty. The image of a tilted table is presented to reveal the injustice of the current government approach to poverty.

Chapter 3: Poverty: A Concern of Christian Faith and Social Justice. This chapter provides an analysis of poverty in the United States from a Christian faith perspective. It presents the biblical basis for justice, laying a foundation for this study in terms of how Scripture reveals a God of justice who invites all to respond with compassion for

the poor. It also explores the early Christian community's response to disparities of wealth and poverty in their midst as a model that offers insights applicable in addressing the realities of poverty today. There is a focus on women and poverty in the early church, and an active overview of concern for the poor from the early Christian era through modern times. In documenting the suffering of the poor and revealing principles for addressing poverty and justice, Catholic social teaching serves as a foundational resource to understand poverty more fully and make us better advocates for making a place for the poor at our social table. Of special interest is the role of the Catholic Church in welfare reform, how the institutional church influenced American perspectives on justice for the poor, and an analysis of the church's effectiveness in working for justice for the poor. Finally, the U.S. bishops' document, *A Place at the Table* (2002), provides a model for addressing the needs of the poor and working together to provide a place for all at the table of decision making.

Chapter 4: Liberation Theology and Justice for the Poor.

This chapter turns to the work of a number of carefully selected liberation theologians to enlarge the discussion of justice for the poor. It explores the road to liberation theology, using the documents of the Latin American Bishops Conferences at Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979). Key principles for understanding justice and poverty from a liberation theology perspective are drawn from Gustavo Gutiérrez. Insights from Roger Haight, S.J., situates liberation theology in a North American context. Contemporary theologian Letty M. Russell is the primary guide for exploring a liberationist and feminist analysis of poverty and justice. Their writings enlarge the conversation and provide guidance for discussing how both rich and poor can better understand and respond actively and compassionately to the poor in social, economic, and pastoral situations.

Chapter 5: Educating for Justice. I propose fundamental principles for educating for justice from a Christian faith perspective in the United States today against the backdrop of understanding poverty and the problems it presents. Christian Scripture, history, and tradition pro-

vide depth and scope for examining poverty and seeking ways to relate with the poor, allowing rich and poor to interact as children of a loving God. The Rev. Letty M. Russell, Thomas H. Groome, and Gabriel Moran serve as guides for educating for justice. Letty M. Russell's writings, based on her experience as a Christian educator, provide a panorama for educating for justice by emphasizing the themes of God's mission, partnership, and hospitality. Thomas H. Groome's writings offer educators an understanding of justice as a mandate of faith, as a way of living, a justice curriculum, and pedagogies for fostering social consciousness. Gabriel Moran's four-step approach to educating for justice—as discussed in his book, *Interplay: A Theory of Religious Education* (1981)—provides a broad canvas for pastoral and educational planning. This chapter draws from these authors proposals for how Christians can be partners with a loving God in God's work for justice. These proposals present ways in which Christians, as coworkers with God, can learn to welcome the poor as those whom God prefers and as persons who deserve a place at the table. Methods for transforming an unjust society are explored in order to achieve a reign of justice. The theory of social justice as a continuum considers the value of each person's involvement and dedication to justice. Finally, case studies provide living examples of people who have made and are making a place at the table where all are welcome and where justice becomes a reality for all people.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your understanding of the words, "liberty and justice for all"?
2. Do you agree that most Americans have a sense of social justice? Explain why you agree or why not.
3. How and when did you become aware of poverty as an issue of justice?
4. How is poverty a threat to society?

5. Describe what is meant by the “ecology of poverty.”
6. Discuss the meanings of “a place at the table” in terms of Andrei Rublev’s icon and the U.S. Catholic bishops’ pastoral letter. How do these compare with the thoughts of Letty M. Russell?
7. Based on your experience, explain how charity for the poor expanded your views about them and the challenges they face.
8. Discuss the steps involved in a “circle of praxis.” What is needed for each step of the process? How could this process broaden your understanding of poverty and social justice?

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NOTES

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⁴ Bob Herbert, "More Than Just Talk," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2007. <http://select.nytimes.com/2007/05/08/opinion/08herbert.html>

⁵ Senator John Edwards, Marion Crain, and Arne L. Kalleberg (eds.), *Ending Poverty in America: How to Restore the American Dream* (New York: New Press, 2007), 256.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Elizabeth Warren, "The Vanishing Middle Class," 38-54.

⁷ Diana Jean Schemo, "Private Loans Deepen a Crisis in Student Debt," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2007. www.nytimes.com/2007/06/10/us/10loans.

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⁹ *Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good* (Alexandria, VA: Catholic Charities USA, 2006), 12.

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¹⁸ Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970).

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²⁰ Jack L. Seymour, "Power and History: History as 'Critical' Analysis," *Religious Education* 82, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 350.

²¹ Stephen A. Schmidt, "The Uses of History and Religious Education," *Religious Education* 80, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 349.

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²³ Gabriel Moran, "Of a Kind and to a Degree," Marlene Mayr (ed.), *Does the Church Really Want Religious Education?: An Ecumenical Inquiry* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988), 21.