

Stretch Forth Your Hand To The Poor

Good day and much love to our sisters and brothers tuning in. Good day and much love to my fellow panellists, with whom I'm beyond honoured to share this space. As we exchange pleasantries, I'll continue by humbly, yet boldly, claiming to speak on behalf of all youth of good will, especially those of us on the fringes of society. At this 2020 World Day of the Poor, we, the youth, find ourselves in an extremely volatile historical context, pregnant with the potential for production or destruction. Humanity is fully aware of this, but of course, we are told that "the problem is the youths these days" 😞.

Though brighter than ever before, our world is dark, as we sprint toward the point of no return in exchange for the fool's gold we're being deceptively offered. With each stride we see less trees, more lifeless bodies, and the cry of our dear Mother Earth is increasingly deafening. Our prophets are silenced in exchange for profits,¹ often via dismissal² or suppression,³ if not worse. Although our living conditions can conceivably be just, it feels like this darkness stems from the context that we youth are in the birth canal of our Mother's history, about to meet one of two hands: one that aborts or one that delivers.

Amidst the chaos of the last few decades of a changing climate,⁴ political strife,⁵ genocide,⁶ and war,⁷ we could have found some tiny semblance of hope in the pattern that extreme poverty, defined as persons living on less than roughly \$2 US dollars a day, had been

¹ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976): 10.

² Devan Cole, "Mnuchin Says Greta Thunberg Can Explain US Economic Policy After She Studies Economics In College", CNN, Last modified 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/23/politics/steven-mnuchin-greta-thunberg-davos-trnd/index.html>.

³ Javier C. Hernández and Albee Zhang, "Chinese Students Denounce Limits On Free Speech, In A Rare Protest", Nytimes.Com, Last modified 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/18/world/asia/china-protests-universities.html>.

⁴ Alejandra Borunda, "Weather Shows Evidence Of Climate Change Every Single Day Since 2012", National Geographic, Last modified 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/01/weather-shows-evidence-of-climate-change-every-single-day-since-2012/>.

⁵ Abby Vesoulis and Abigail Simon, "Here's Who Found That Russia Meddled In The 2016 Election", Time, Last modified 2018, <https://time.com/5340060/donald-trump-vladimir-putin-summit-russia-meddling/>.

⁶ History.com Editors, "Rwandan Genocide", HISTORY, Last modified 2009, <https://www.history.com/topics/africa/rwandan-genocide>.

⁷ "Syrian Civil War | Facts & Timeline", Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed 28 October 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War>.

on the decrease for the last 20 or so years. However, 2020 and the pandemic have seen this course upended and now we find ourselves on the trajectory where extreme poverty is set to rise, gripping nearly 10% of the world's population in its grasp.⁸

Right here in our beloved motherland of Trinidad & Tobago, how many job losses have we witnessed because of Covid alone? How many families continue to be at the mercy of our charity? How many of our youth are unemployed or underemployed and suffer poverty's tragic effects? According to the UN's World Economic Forum in 2014, approximately 2 out of every 3 youth in developing countries have yet to achieve their full economic potential.⁹ While I don't mean to go on and on with the negativity, the fact of the matter remains that it exists. Poverty exists!

It's at this point I would like to define poverty, according to Gustavo Gutierrez, as "being rendered socially insignificant owing to ethnic, cultural, gender, and/or economic factors".¹⁰ Poverty is much more than how much money we make or don't make. Poverty is nothing less than social exclusion, essentially being outcast or cut off from society. As a species that relies on social inclusion for survival, allowing poverty to exist is equivalent to perpetuating genocide. Whether we are comfortable hearing it or not, poverty is our everyday lived experience, and it is the result of this mindless, heartless system that we designed, a system that has absolutely no regard for the human person, no regard for the youth, and no regard for our dignity (Gen 1:27).¹¹

⁸ "Extreme Poverty Set For First Rise Since 1998, World Bank Warns", BBC News, Last modified 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-54448589>.

⁹ "#Youthstats: Hunger And Poverty - Office Of The Secretary-General'S Envoy On Youth", Office Of The Secretary-General'S Envoy On Youth, accessed 28 October 2020, <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/hunger-poverty/>.

¹⁰ Paul Farmer et al., *In The Company Of The Poor* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2013): 152.

¹¹ Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 9

Of course, among the negativity there is lots of positivity, and we youth remember this as we stretch forth our hand “in openness and union with others”¹² so as to sustain our efforts.¹³ We have people such as 17 year old Sophia Scott, an African American teenager and founder of *Quaranteens*, a free online tutoring service for children in the primary and secondary US education system.¹⁴ We have one of our newest official additions to the Communion of Saints, Italian Blessed Carlo Acutis (1991 – 2006), who used his ordinary gifts and talents to bring glory to God in an extraordinary way.¹⁵ Right here at home, in our own Archdiocese of Port of Spain, we are blessed with people like Taresa Best Downes who tirelessly champions the causes of Catholic youth and young adults in her role as the Episcopal Delegate for Youth.¹⁶

In addition to all the good, we understand the virtues of faith, hope and love.¹⁷ These are the basis for answering our vocation. If we are meant to live out our baptismal call to be saints, then we must follow our Christian mandate to be the Incarnation by being the Body of Christ,¹⁸ bringing about the Reign of God,¹⁹ and bringing the good news to the poor.²⁰ The Good News heals, and in the same way that Jesus heals those he encounters,²¹ we too, our Body, needs Christ’s healing as well. Therefore, we “youths these days” are called, and want to answer the call, to be Christ’s healing presence to Christ’s poor,²² ailing body, because as

¹² Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* [S.I.]: (Catholic Truth Society, 2020). §91.

¹³ Pope Francis, "Fourth World Day Of The Poor, 2020: “Stretch Forth Your Hand To The Poor” (Sir 6:7) | Francis", Vatican.Va, Last modified 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/papa-francesco_20200613_messaggio-iv-giornatamondiale-poveri-2020.html. §3.

¹⁴ Cerith Gardiner, "Meet The Inspirational Teen Who’S Created A Global Free Tutoring Service", Aleteia — Catholic Spirituality, Lifestyle, World News, And Culture, Last modified 2020, <https://aleteia.org/2020/10/18/meet-the-inspirational-teen-whos-created-a-global-free-tutoring-service/>.

¹⁵ Angela Mengis Palleck, "Carlo Acutis: Millennial Generation Has A Blessed - Vatican News", Vaticannews.Va, Last modified 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-10/carlo-acutis-blessed-assisi-eucharist-patron-internet.html>.

¹⁶ "Taresa Best Downes: Episcopal Delegate For Youth", The Catholic News, Last modified 2019, <https://catholicnewstt.com/index.php/2019/02/16/taresa-best-downes-episcopal-delegate-youth/>.

¹⁷ 1 Cor 13:13

¹⁸ 1 Cor 12:27

¹⁹ Mark 1:15

²⁰ Luke 4:14-21

²¹ Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 56

²² Matthew 25:40

long as one of us suffers, we all suffer.²³ We know that God commands us to stretch forth our hand,²⁴ and that's exactly what we intend to do.

We already know from Catholic Social Teaching, which holds the dignity of the human person at its core, that just work is an essential contributor to the realisation of said dignity.²⁵ Amid skyrocketing costs of living, along with the many other human caused disasters we currently face, one of the few things we youth have left to dream of is fulfilling work. But when we find ourselves in the middle of a pandemic with higher education costs,²⁶ massive job loss,²⁷ and lack of fair opportunities,²⁸ facing poverty and social exclusion, it is no wonder why our youthful dreams can be mistaken for nightmares.

For thousands of years humanity has wrestled with the reality of poverty. Embedded in our Judeo-Christian roots since our humble beginnings are fundamental and concrete teachings on how we should treat with the poor and eradicate poverty. It's unequivocally clear that poverty is not a part of God's plan for God's people and creation. Yet the problem still persists today.

As with every age, we experience the effects of poverty in relation to our own historical context. Lack of adequate housing, often even lack of housing altogether, rampant malnutrition, pitiable academic advancements, pervasive mental health issues, lack of self-esteem, physical and emotional dysfunction, collective shame, susceptibility to violence and trauma in all forms, psychosocial issues, stress, and the all-encompassing like, affect too many of our youth today.²⁹

²³ 1 Cor 12:26

²⁴ Matthew 12:13

²⁵ "7 Catholic Social Teaching Principles | CAFOD", Cafod.Org.Uk, accessed 28 October 2020, <https://cafod.org.uk/Pray/Catholic-social-teaching>.

²⁶ Kevon Felmine, "GATE Funding Cut By \$35M, Under Review Again", Guardian.Co.Tt, Last modified 2020, <https://guardian.co.tt/news/gate-funding-cut-by-35m-under-review-again-6.2.1238190.b17cbfa13b>.

²⁷ "1.5 Million Caribbean Jobs Lost Because Of COVID-19—ILO", Cnc3.Co.Tt, Last modified 2020, <https://www.cnc3.co.tt/1-5-million-caribbean-jobs-lost-because-of-covid-19-ilo/>.

²⁸ Shane Superville, "Morvant Residents Want Justice After Police Killings - Trinidad And Tobago Newsday", Trinidad And Tobago Newsday, Last modified 2020, <https://newsday.co.tt/2020/06/29/morvant-residents-want-justice-after-police-killings/>.

²⁹ "Effects Of Poverty, Hunger And Homelessness On Children And Youth", <https://www.apa.org>, accessed 28 October 2020, <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/poverty>.

I maintain, as Saint Paul did, when one of us suffers, we all suffer. Until none of us experience poverty, all of humanity is responsible.

No one needs me to stand here today and list all these effects in detail because we all know them already. We constantly hear about poverty and its sordid effects. We don't need more voices crying out in the wilderness.³⁰ What we need is change. We give alms and often think it suffices. I'm here to say though, that we "youths these days", do not deem almsgiving as enough of a response to poverty. We stand against this raging, soulless machine, and we know that we must disarm it of its death dealing devices and rebuild it in order to bring about the justice God wants for us; the justice for which Jesus, our liberator, died.

So as Christians, living in 2020 and beyond, reflecting on this World Day of the Poor, how do we stretch forth our hand? Our pope "appeals to the spark of universal consciousness and mutual concern that may still be present in our hearts."³¹ We, "the youths these days" of good will, this November 2020, join Pope Francis in his appeal, especially because we know that without a concrete commitment to the poor, we can never consider ourselves truly Christian.³² We Catholics love to claim the title of pro-life; it's about time we started living that in the fullest sense.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis reminds us of the path along which we're currently racing . By failing to affirm our fellow sisters and brothers' dignity, because of issues such as where they're from,³³ we create a hierarchical system that prefers those of greater wealth and discards the rest.³⁴ He goes even further to purport that unless we uphold the dignity of the human person, the human race won't survive.³⁵

³⁰ John 1:23

³¹ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §117.

³² Farmer et al., *In The Company Of The Poor*, 147.

³³ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §106.

³⁴ *Ibid.* §99.

³⁵ *Ibid.* §107.

We must remember that we are fundamentally called to a preferential option for the poor. To be pro-life is to bring life to others, especially the poor. Thus, we find ourselves in an impossible dichotomy: our systems deal death to the poor, the most vulnerable in our society, yet authentic Christian experience naturally brings life.³⁶

We are all familiar with The Lost Sheep parable in Luke 15. However, how many of us can claim to be familiar with the lost sheep? How many of us know the lost sheep by name?³⁷ How many of us know where the lost sheep is? If we don't know where it is, have we gone looking? And if we do know where it is, have we entered into the rocks it is fatally stuck in between, helped it break itself free, then proceed to fully embrace it, though it is battered, bruised, and bloody, put it around our necks as we would fine jewellery, and head back toward the fold, fully aware that we become battered, bruised, and bloody like the lost sheep in the process?

Do we make a special place in our homes for it to receive the best treatment possible as we nurse it back to health? Do we clean its wounds and kiss its hooves as we accompany it on its road to recovery? Do we defend it from the other sheep as it recovers, and help reintegrate it into the fold until the 99 once again accept the lost one as they accept themselves? Sisters and brothers, this is the preferential option for the poor. It is not optional to rescue the lost sheep; it is mandatory.³⁸ Our sisters and brothers suffering the effects of poverty are our lost sheep, crying out for our help, crying out for Christ's healing, as they're slaughtered every day by our murderous systems. But we Christian "youths these days" know that death is not the end. Resurrection follows.

So once again, I ask, how do we Christians stretch forth our hand? I believe that prayer is our life line to the God who answers all of our life questions. And as Francis says in his

³⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink From Our Own Wells* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984): 45.

³⁷ "You say you love the poor? Name them." – Gustavo Gutierrez

³⁸ Francis, "Fourth World Day Of The Poor, 2020." §8.

message on this World Day of the Poor, “prayer to God and solidarity with the poor and suffering are inseparable.”³⁹ This is why my humble suggestion, on behalf of “the youths these days” is that we stretch forth both arms as we pray the Our Father, similar to how we do at mass.

When I say pray, I don’t simply mean emptily recite some words. Most of us can say the Our Father half asleep. But are we awakened by the cries of our suffering sisters and brothers living in poverty? When I say we should pray, I mean we should actively enter into the Christian community, our Body of Christ, pray with solidarity, living out each line of the prayer as God intends for us, so that we may bring about Christ’s salvific action in the here and now.

As we boldly dare to call God our father, let us appreciate the way Christ rightly brought us into an intimately personal relationship with God as our Father. We are God’s beloved children,⁴⁰ and the poor are the first in line for God’s never ending love. Through this understanding and appreciation, let us make God’s name holy.⁴¹ Let us bring about the Reign of God in our words and actions as we do God’s will, especially in relation to what we do for the poor. Let us walk with the feet of charity and justice as we follow Christ, sanctifying the earth the way we believe Heaven is sanctified.⁴²

When God blesses us with food and other material resources, may we love one another enough to collectively share what we have so that all may have, especially the poor.⁴³ May we love so that the poor has enough first. Through it all, may the poor forgive us for the wrong we’ve done for so long, embrace us as the father embraces the prodigal son, and allow us to redeem ourselves by actively forming our hearts to work toward a more just society, thereby

³⁹ Francis, “Fourth World Day Of The Poor, 2020.” §2.

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, *Our Father* (New York: Image, 2018.): 20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 44.

⁴² *Ibid.* 46.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 77.

ridding ourselves of our greatest evil: the oppression and death dealing structures we've preserved for far too long.

As I wrap up, I'd like to reaffirm that our Christian community holds within it the secret to our youthful hope. As young people we find it hard to hope. We need to feel welcome in the ecclesial community and our hope will flourish. And when we feel hopeful, with our faith and with our love, we will change the world and the course of our history. The problem is not the youths these days, but the solution involves the youths these days.

To the former young generation, trust us. You raised us. Now trust us. We'll make mistakes, as does everyone, but I'll dare to say that as Christian people the biggest of the many rooms⁴⁴ in God's house is that of mercy, forgiveness, and redemption. Let's all be the pro-life we claim to be, abort the mission of our selfish ways, start working collaboratively toward the systemic change we need, and stretch forth our hands to the poor to embrace them, include them, and deliver them safely into the future in order to bring about the Reign of God here on earth.

Sincerely,

The youths these days.

Thank you.

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⁴⁴ John 14:2

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