

THE PROGRESS REPORT

Must We Have the Poor With Us?

By Fred E. Foldvary

"Poverty will always exist." So said Sister Nirmala, who became the superior general of the Missionaries of Charity founded by Mother Teresa. In dedicating her life to providing hospice for the dying poor of Calcutta, Mother Teresa knew she was just treating results of poverty, not the cause. Sister Nirmala said that Mother Teresa's order would continue helping the poor "without wanting to know the causes of poverty."

Sister Nirmala echoed the saying in the Bible, "For ye have the poor always with you" (Matthew 26:11). Does that mean that poverty is just a fact of life, that we can only treat the effects, and never eliminate it? If one is going to go by the Bible, one needs to take it in its entire context. For we have also Deuteronomy 15:4, "there shall be no poor among ye; for the Lord shall greatly bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it." Furthermore, "the Lord shall make thee plenteous in goods" (Deuteronomy 28:11).

The Bible is telling us that there need not be any poor among us, for we have been given an inheritance, our natural endowment in land, which can plentifully provide all our needs. But the land can provide for all only if we follow natural economic principles, "if thou shalt harken diligently ... to observe and to do" what is right (28:1). The blessings of nature are conditional. We have not followed the conditions, the principles, and so we have the poor, the homeless, the hungry, amongst us.

The principle that will end poverty is simply to share what nature has amply provided for us, and to stop stealing from one another. As Henry George wrote in his book, *Social Problems*, "There is in nature no reason for poverty." If we have the poor with us, the cause is from human policy, not from any natural lack of resources.

We can share nature's bounty by having all those who own a piece of nature pay rent to society for their use of it. The benefit of land is its rent, which can serve humanity by funding our common services or by being distributed equally. With the benefits of the earth shared, our labor can provide for our individual needs if we are able to keep those wages.

But policy today is just the opposite. **Government taxes the wages of labor and lets those who mine the earth, siphon the waters, and hold the land surface, collect most of the rents.**

When we put up barriers to employment, of course we have the poor. And it is noble to help them, but if that's all we do, then with the other hand we are also helping to keep them down in the muck of poverty.

Henry George wrote a pamphlet called "*The crime of poverty*." Since poverty is not necessary, said George, "it is a crime for which society is responsible and for which society must suffer." Poverty is a result of the deliberate government policy of erecting barriers to employment with

taxes and excessive regulations on labor and enterprise instead of sharing our natural inheritance, the benefits of land.

The US government has waged a "war on poverty" with welfare that feeds and houses the poor, but does not cure poverty. A pamphlet "Government vs. The Poor" by Jarret Wollstein reports that between 1968 and 1985, the number of Americans below the official poverty level increased from 24 million to 35 million. **Government welfare is compensation for having denied the poor the opportunity to work in the first place. And much of that welfare spending is soaked up by the bureaucracy - and by landlords.**

In one of his speeches, Winston Churchill observed that where charity and welfare aid helped the poor, rents rose. Rent control is no answer - it causes buildings to decay and cuts the supply of new housing. No, to end poverty, we need to go to the cause. The way to end poverty is to take down barriers to employment, stop taxing wages, and share the land rent. If the poor continue to be with us in Calcutta and in America, it will only be because of our ignorance and apathy.