

Poverty Awareness Month in the Pope's Year of Mercy

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This month, Pope Francis declared the Jubilee Year of Mercy commencing on December 8th, and in a few short days, January marks Poverty Awareness Month as sponsored by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).



As Vincentians, focused on ways to minimize and eliminate poverty in its various ugly manifestations that we see regularly in our day-to-day ministry, we might well wonder if there is a connection between the Year of Mercy and Poverty Awareness Month.

Indeed, there is. For if there is one thing we have learned about Pope Francis, clearly the world's leading Voice of the Poor, the plight of those marginalized on the fringes of society is never far from his heart, soul, words, and actions. We do well as Vincentians to listen to his ever-present message of the social justice Gospel.

Mindful of this, over the next four issues of Frederic's e-Gazette, four Regional Voice of the Poor Leaders will offer their personal reflections and observations about Poverty to help us compassionately and prayerfully contemplate how this stain can be so starkly visible and resistant to eradication in our society of abundance and often unbridled consumerism and excess. From Pope Francis, the insight is that we live in a "throw-away" culture and the "culture of exclusion". It is an attitude against which we must rally and rebel.

In [His Bull of Indiction declaring the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy](#), Pope Francis says this:

"15. In this Holy Year, we look forward to the experience of opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society: fringes which modern society itself creates. How many uncertain and painful situations there are in the world today! How many are the wounds borne by the flesh of those who have no voice because their cry is muffled and drowned out by the indifference of the rich! During this Jubilee, the Church will be called even more to heal these wounds, to assuage them with the oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care. Let us not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from discovering what is new! Let us ward off destructive cynicism! Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism!"

Pope Francis goes on to encourage Christian to reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy as a way to re-awaken our conscience which he believes has "too often grown dull in the face of poverty." Though that statement is probably not true for Vincentians who continually look into the face of poverty and regularly respond, perhaps upon closer examination we may find ourselves becoming somewhat immune to what we see and perhaps we despair of making a difference.

The Pope urges us on onward nevertheless, and the Society, especially through its Voice of the Poor Program, seeks to find ways we can break down the "barriers of indifference" cited by the Pope in the excerpt above. As Vincentians, we not only deliver charity, but we look for social justice and we work for systemic change.

So as we almost simultaneously enter the Year of Mercy and the Poverty Awareness Month, the Voice of the Poor Committee urges Vincentians to read and discuss in their conferences, districts and councils the upcoming four messages from Regional VOP Leaders about Poverty in the next four issues of e-Gazette, and to check out the following resources. Each provides food for thought and information worth passing along to your fellow Vincentians, your fellow parishioners, and indeed your community.

- the [USCCB Poverty Website](#), and
- [Poverty USA](#) (which is also part of USCCB)
- [Poverty Awareness Calendar](#) (one page monthly summary)
- [Poverty Awareness Calendar](#) (day-by-day with readings, reflections, challenges, actions to take)

Another vehicle for getting the message out is the attached one page flyer prepared by our National Communications Office on Poverty Awareness Month. It contains basic statistics, stunning in the scope of the problem described, and examples of ways to make a difference by advocating for change through devices like the Society's Capwiz electronic advocacy tool to influence Congress and our Federal leaders. 2016 will be a pivotal year in that regard with elections at all levels of government.

In these ways, we will be living our Vincentian call to help the poor and needy overcome Poverty in both the short and long term, and we will be responding faithfully to the Pope's Call for a Jubilee Year of Mercy.