

# The Poverty of Our Political Rhetoric

By: Tom Dwyer

National Chair, Voice of the Poor Committee, Society of St. Vincent de Paul

Over the last four weeks, each January issue of Frederic's E-Gazette has contained a reflection authored by a Voice of the Poor regional leader about poverty in the United States in recognition that January was Poverty Awareness Month. But now, in the wake of the first 2016 presidential test this week – the Iowa political caucuses – and in advance of the coming state-by-state primaries starting with New Hampshire next week, it's timely and instructive to introduce another poverty concept – the “The Poverty of Our Political Rhetoric.”

I first heard this phrase last week at the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, D.C. It was uttered by Jonathan Keyes, executive director of the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, as he introduced a speaker at the gathering.

Though he didn't elaborate on his meaning, that phrase resonated with me. It seemed so true, having listened to the tone of the campaigns, debates and statements to date of our presidential aspirants. There have been exceptions, of course, but so often the rhetoric is divisive and angry, if not bitter. Appeals are made too often to our basest instincts, not to our noblest yearnings as persons of good will and faith. Personal attacks, whether on other candidates or segments of our population, substitute for substantive proposals and meaningful discussions on ways to improve the common good of all who live in the United States and, indeed, in the world at large.

To some degree, it has always been this way in politics, but that is not an acceptable excuse; moreover, this year seems to me and many others to be particularly vitriolic and empty – a true “poverty of political rhetoric.”

So just as our Voice of the Poor January series discussed ways Vincentians could think about and combat poverty in the daily lives of the poor, vulnerable and marginalized, is it not also our moral responsibility as Catholics and Vincentians to ponder ways to counter the “Poverty of Our Political Rhetoric?” And is there not a tangible and sad connection between poverty in political rhetoric and poverty in real life?

As Vincentians who witness first-hand real poverty in our home visits, our food pantries, our clothing stores and our many special works of charity, we know that social justice for the poor and marginalized is badly compromised these days in our governmental and institutional structures. We see the weaknesses, the gaps, the prejudices, the exploitation, the lack of opportunity and the absence of supportive structures and systems. From this perspective, we must speak out and demand of our politicians that they address these issues. We must educate them about what we witness and impress on them that there are many individuals like us that care deeply about “the least among us.” Our voices should unabashedly proclaim this message at all levels of government – federal, state and local.

Articles in the Voice of the Poor Poverty Series can be accessed via [Frederic's e-Gazette Archives here](#):

- Poverty Awareness Month in the Pope's Year of Mercy  
*December 30, 2015 issue*
- The Many Dark Shades of Poverty  
*January 7, 2016 issue*
- Behavioral Science and the Stress of Poverty  
*January 14, 2016 issue*
- Do not feed" the Poverty Beast - Changing our Mass Incarceration Approach to Crime  
*January 21, 2016 issue*
- Poverty: An Opportunity for Encounter or Exclusion  
*January 28, 2016 issue*

In an essay entitled, “How Would Jesus Vote? or the Politics of God’s Reign,” Professor of Theology, Terrence W. Tilley advises that the correct question is not, “How Would Jesus Vote?” Rather, he says, the question to be asked is, “What would bring us closer to the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed and embodied?”

To do that, he maintains, we must engage in the “diverse reconciling practices that are characteristic of the reign of God.” In that framework, we test our values by examining whether our political practices and rhetoric foster the Gospel messages of feeding the hungry, exalting the lowly, loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, empowering the poor, pulling down the mighty and haughty and doing to others as we would have done to us.

It is not necessary that our politicians agree with us on every issue. We all see indistinctly, as the Gospel says. But the trajectory of our politicians’ thoughts about the common good and its consistency with our Catholic Social Tradition is vitally important and relevant. People of all kinds must be seen as individuals with inherent human dignity; public budgets must be viewed as moral documents that establish our priorities of concern for our fellow man and care for the world as our common home, as Pope Francis recently taught in *Laudato Si’* (On Care for Our Common Home). Politicians, just as we as Vincentians and Catholics are called to do, must be willing to engage and encounter others in a spirit of good faith and not one filled with rancor and disdain.

The life of Jesus was just such – one of reaching out to others, especially those disadvantaged, poor, vulnerable and marginalized. His was a ministry that stressed the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law, as a number of parables attest; or, in other words, He encountered and He engaged on an individual basis, no matter the outward circumstances or accepted constrictions.

In his apostolic exhortation Joy of the Gospel (*Evangelii Gaudium*), Pope Francis calls for this kind of political conversation based on engagement and encounter, and not one of empty rhetoric. “I ask God” the Pope writes, “to give us more politicians capable of sincere and effective dialogue aimed at healing the deepest roots – and not the simply the appearances – of the evils in our world.” (205)

Francis does not shy away from politics as a powerful and effective means to rectify social justice inequities. In fact, he calls politics a “vocation” and a “lofty one” at that, adding that politics is “one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good.” (205)

Next, in a line that will touch deeply every Vincentian who has ever given aid to the poor and marginalized in any form, the Pope writes in his exhortation:

“We need to be convinced that charity ‘is the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members, or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones)’.” (Quoting Pope Benedict XVI in his Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*)

What is the remedy, then, to the Poverty of Our Political Rhetoric? Again, Pope Francis, the champion of the poor and marginalized, points the way when he says:

“I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, the lives of the poor! It is vital that government leaders and financial leaders take heed and broaden their horizons, working to ensure that all citizens have dignified work, education and healthcare. Why not turn to God and ask Him to inspire their plans? I am firmly convinced that openness to the transcendent

can bring about a new political and economic mindset which would help to break down the wall of separation between the economy and the common good of society.” (205)

Now we need to do our part by finding ways in our own St. Vincent de Paul Society Conferences, Districts, and Councils and in the communities in which we live and work to foster in the public square a political discourse of inclusion, engagement, encounter, hope, and promise for a more humane, peaceful and just society.