

The multi-faceted challenges of poverty



THE HUMAN SIDE

FATHER EUGENE HEMRICK
CNS

They came out in droves to hear and award a simple Dominican pastor and theologian who has helped change the way Catholic theology views the poor.

In November 2007, Peruvian Father Gustavo Gutierrez received the prestigious Sophia Award at Washington Theological Union in Washington, which educates seminarians

and lay people for leadership.

Father Gutierrez was born June 8, 1928, in Lima. He is regarded as the founder of liberation theology, which holds that Christian poverty is an act of loving solidarity with the poor as well as a protest against poverty.

Like many before him who have championed the liberation of the poor, Father Gutierrez was criticized and even questioned by Rome about his orthodoxy. Like a true champion, he was exonerated and continues his mission.

"Poverty is very complex," Father Gutierrez told his audience. Usually it is envisioned in economic terms. It is not only about people deprived of material

goods; it is also about people living in cultures other than their own and not being accepted.

It is about being a female living in a culture that degrades females. It is about lacking an education. It is about being on the margins of society, experiencing sadness and death.

Interestingly, Father Gutierrez pointed out that even tax collectors during Christ's time can be considered poor because they were outcasts. He also pointed out that poverty doesn't exist only in poor ghettos or barrios; a rich person afflicted with depression ranks among the poor.

Poverty is universal. It is

found everywhere. It is sadness, the direct antithesis of joy.

Father Gutierrez considered people who see poverty as their fate. He spoke of a woman who felt women were born into suffering. She accepted this as natural and felt it to be the will of God.

To this Father Gutierrez said, "Poverty has causes. We make poverty, and that which we make we can unmake." It is our God-given duty to stand against philosophies and theologies that accept poverty without raising essential and ultimate questions about its causes.

Fighting poverty isn't only about donations; it involves speaking out against its causes.

"Poverty ultimately means death," Gutierrez said. "Too many poor people are dying before their time. Just look at Africa! As Christians it is our duty to always champion life over death."

How do we best fight poverty?

One way is to read the Bible and the life of Christ from the viewpoint of the poor – to cultivate a biblical spirituality of the poor. A great power of the prophets in the Old Testament was their ability to read the times and speak to them in down-to-earth terms through the eyes of God.

Father Gustavo Gutierrez did this the night of his award at Washington Theological Union. ☩

Reasoned conclusion in Iraq still possible



FAITH & PRECEDENT

DOUGLAS W. KMIEC CNS

Just over a year ago, Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., then-president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, raised a key moral question facing our nation: How can the U.S. bring about a responsible transition in Iraq?

To any Catholic like me who initially trusted President George Bush's explanation in support of the war, the bishop's question is especially pressing. The inability to find weapons of mass destruction or a connection to Sept. 11 heightens the anxiety. The claimed humanitarian basis for the U.S. intervention – saving a population from a genocidal Saddam Hussein – also seems

overshadowed by our strategic or energy self-interest.

So if we had little basis for intervening, less basis for dictating a new form of government and even less basis for occupying and arguably precipitating a level of insurgent attacks that have been costly in both American and Iraqi lives, how honorable can our exit ever be?

Perhaps an answer can be found in former Secretary of State Colin Powell's admonition that having intervened, we would have an obligation to fix what we broke.

In theory at least, for a fraction of the hundreds of billions of dollars the president has requested for the continuation of the military occupation, it would be possible to build economic and social infrastructure in the most honorable, humanitarian sense – namely, courts, clinics, schools, businesses and homes in abundance.

It is largely theoretical be-

cause we seem to have great difficulty finding contractors who aren't on the take. But a recent correspondence brings a measure of hope. With little fanfare, parts of our military have already been redeployed to build up rather than tear down.

Take for example Major Mike. Major Mike is a graduate of Pepperdine Law School. A few years ago, he sat dutifully in my class with the usual T-shirt and backpack, putting up with his professor's long-winded Socratic dialogues. Today he is deployed in Fallujah. His responsibility is to steer the Fallujah judiciary toward the rule of law. Here's what he wrote me:

"We met with the chief judge and two of his investigative judges to try and figure out why more criminals are not successfully convicted. The judges advise us to 'think like an Iraqi.'"

Suddenly, like the prophet Micah, he is enjoined to "walk humbly" in another's shoes to achieve justice. Frankly, it's difficult. Thinking like an Iraqi means relying upon what we taught him to see as unreliable and subjective evidence.

Writing in the fairest (but nevertheless distinctly U.S.) terms, Major Mike says the "Iraqi system favors testimonial and demonstrative evidence over real evidence." Translated from the legalese: Americans insist on fingerprints, gunshot residue, photos of the crime scene; in Iraq, the judges want mini-stage plays or re-enactments which not only would not be considered evidence in the United States, but would often be ruled prejudicial.

Nevertheless, crime in Iraq is as frighteningly real – and as tragic – as it is in any American venue. Major Mike recounts the case of insurgents "who kidnapped a 14-year-old boy,

beheaded him, then sent the video of the killing to his father. His father was the former head of one of the local police agencies. Because coalition forces gave the boy some gifts (probably soccer balls), the insurgents thought he was working with us."

Of course he wasn't, and Major Mike senses deeply how, rules of evidence aside, the human heart cries for justice. So it is no surprise when the "judges inform (him) that they want Iraqi legal techniques ... Iraqi laws in Iraq. Not American laws."

In the vernacular of his still-youthful e-mail, Major Mike wrote, "Hmm, what a great idea." He has learned something greater than we could teach him in the classroom. He now knows there is more than one way to reach a reasoned conclusion. His country is gradually learning this too, and that is to be honored. ☩

Teens, parents seek line between trust, neglect



LOOKING AROUND

FATHER WILLIAM J. BYRON,
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Several Saturdays ago I spent a few hours with about 60 high school boys and girls and their parents listening to them talk about better parent-teen communication regarding sex, alcohol and drugs. The question for parents that kept popping into my mind was: "Where does trust end and neglect begin?"

The teenagers want to be trusted. The parents want to trust. But parental unease surfaces as the potential for parental neglect in the face of possibly unwise and risky teenage behavior rises.

Where do you draw the line between trust and neglect? Surely, no parent wants to be guilty of neglect, just as all parents want to trust their offspring.

The question provides a nice framework for great conversations if both parents and teenagers are willing to talk. Doing it in groups with other parents and teens seems to improve the acoustics for the desired exchange.

The conversation, as I heard it, turned on issues of (1) curfew, (2) driving – who's in the car? who's at the wheel? where are you going?, (3) friends – who do you hang out with?, (4) honesty, (5) pregnancy, (6) the Internet and (7) trust.

In families, the participants seemed to agree, there is a need for "consistency" and there has to be agreement on

the "irreversibles" in the ongoing discussions about "boundaries."

Communication is, of course, at the heart of dealing with these issues. The teens have to be permitted to speak up openly about what they perceive to be double standards (e.g., some parents drink and drive). Parents have to explain their "need to verify" (e.g., call the parents of a teen who is hosting the party).

Notably absent from the conversation was any reference to religion, although all four of the schools represented were Catholic. Nor was much said about the need to establish baseline respect for human dignity. That would cover respect for self as well as others as a bedrock principle of right, fair and just behavior.

I also noticed that no one suggested the value of service projects in getting teens "out of

themselves" and into growth-producing character development. Not that the participants were unaware of this; they just didn't bring it up.

And it is worth noting that the school that hosted the gathering and the other three that participated had very little to do with the design, promotion and provision of the program. This was the work of one mother whose children are all grown with families of their own. She decided that it would be useful and just went ahead and put it all together.

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It would be too facile to say that anyone could do it. But it is not wide of the mark to suggest that this intergenerational exchange of experience and information could be happening on a much larger scale if more good people step up and decide to make it happen.

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