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Fr. Schall, Pope Francis & the Poor

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Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I called attention to an essay by Fr. James Schall, S.J. who recently retired from Georgetown University in which he addressed issues of poverty and the poor. He asked if we, as Christians, secretly want the poor to be poor so that we have someone to care for. Almost everything about this essay is obnoxious.

First, the almost. Schall finishes by pointing out that our concern for the poor should not lead us to forget the transcendent. He notes that when money is spent on making a beautiful church, there is always a hue and cry that the money would be better spent on the poor. Schall recalls the Gospel account of Judas raising the same objection. It is one of the hallmarks of our Christian faith that, as Schall writes, the beautiful things of the Church belong to them as much as to the rich, and the poor have as much need for beauty as the middle classes. Here, Schall makes a valid point.

Schall writes, "Whenever someone, religious or secular, tells us that he wants to identify with the poor, especially someone who has little clue about the causes of wealth and poverty, we can suspect that the poor are being used as a cloak to justify a political or personal agenda that needs careful examination." I will confess that I have found some "do-gooders" a tad insufferable. So worked up about their work, so committed to their cause, there are some who begrudge people who are less worked up or less committed the simple enjoyments of life. Do-gooders can be scolds, too. But, the capacity for being a scold marks the culture warrior too, and at least the do-gooder is actually doing good, not inciting culture war. More importantly, I wonder if Schall has anyone particular in mind when he wrote these words, someone like, say, Pope Francis.

It is by now obvious that in his development as a pastor, Jorge Mario Bergoglio was changed by his time

in the slums. In a wonderful essay in the current issue of *The Tablet*, Paul Valley writes:

Bergoglio's visits to the slums brought him into contact with a huge number of ordinary people. One slum priest estimated that over his 18 years as bishop and archbishop, he must have personally talked to at least half the people in the slum. He would just turn up, wander the alleyways, chat to the locals and drink mate herbal tea with them. Fr. Guillermo Marco, his aide for eight years said: 'He doesn't see the poor as people he can help but rather as people from whom he can learn.'

Then-Cardinal Bergoglio, in short, acquired the smell of the sheep. No one can accuse Fr. Schall of that.

Everything in Schall's essay sees the poor in instrumentalist terms. He distinguishes between those incapable of helping themselves, the 'deserving poor' as some call them, and those who could help themselves if they had the chance. But, instead of asking, as Bergoglio did and Francis does, what impedes the second group from actually helping themselves, what structural sins make it impossible for the poor to help themselves, Schall merely notes the difference and suggests we not confuse the one for the other and the if we do so, we will see the second group as 'permanently in a condition of need. The justification for one's religious life is to the 'care' for the poor rather than discover ways to teach the poor not to be poor.' Fr. Schall evidently is unfamiliar with the work of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which is all about helping the poor to help themselves. And, not once in this longish essay does he acknowledge that we might have something to learn from the poor.

Yesterday, I also wrote about the pope's emphasis on encounter. How we encounter the poor goes to the depths of what it means to be a Christian. No one is obligated to give money to the men who beg for it outside St. Matthew's Cathedral, I always tell our RCIA class, but a Christian has the obligation to acknowledge them as persons, not to breeze by as if we did not hear their pleas. And, if we have the time and if we have the cash, help them.

I have never been a social worker. The good Lord and my confessor know that I am no saint. But, a few years back an opportunity presented itself. A friend of my housemate's had fallen on hard times and the housemate asked if his friend could live with us until he got on his feet. I had met this friend a few times and knew that he had a drug addiction so, when he came to ask about moving in, I set down one condition: No drugs in my house. I explained that I could not risk losing my house because a cop had followed him home and discovered drugs. I also explained that I had seen too many people ruin their lives with drugs. What he did on his own time was his business, but no drugs in my house. Of course, the entire time I was making my little speech, I realized that the only thing this young man was thinking about was getting high. And, I was not really surprised when, one day, I discovered drugs in the bathroom. I had every right to ask him to leave, but encounter is not about rights. But, in between the time he moved in and the day I discovered the drugs, I had learned a great deal. I had learned that my blessings were so many, I could not count them. I learned that this young man was very bright and was nowhere near 'hitting bottom' so trying to help him see that his drug addiction was crippling him was futile. I learned that he still had some pride, and it took me a few days to figure out that if I asked him straight away if he needed me to make him some dinner, he declined: I needed to make too much food and have too many leftovers to encourage him to eat them or devise the idea that every Wednesday night I thought the three of us should eat together. When, after getting an odd job he asked if he could contribute to the utilities, I said, 'Of course.' He moved out after a few months. I can't say I was sorry to see him go: It really was nerve wracking after a long day to run into someone who was as high as a kite. I can say that I learned in those months a lot about patience, and about empathy, and about prayer. I still harbor the prayer that when this young man hits bottom, and addicts always hit bottom, he will know that there is someone in his life who tried very hard to always respect him as a person.

As Catholic Christians, we care for the poor per se, in obedience to the Lord's command and His example. Yes, it is great when we can help the poor acquire the skills that will lift them out of poverty. But, we can never be consequentialists. Our obligation to the poor exists with or without success in alleviating poverty. And, as Francis grasps and Schall does not, there are unique graces to be had in the encounter with the poor and not just for them, but for us. These two Jesuits could not be more different in their approach to the issue of poverty, and I am standing with Francis.

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