

## Editorial: Electric, bold new voices are challenging inequality

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Editorial

The world's marginalized poor are finding new bold voices. And it's quite electric.

Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga [took on the world's economic order](#) [1] in the heart of its political order, in Washington, in early June.

"A system has been built now as a new idolatry and it's only the true God that has to be served and not worshipping idols, even if that idol is called market economy ... or the idol of libertarianism," Rodríguez said.

He told *NCR*, "For many, poverty is only -- I wouldn't say only bishops, but many persons -- numbers. For us, poverty is concrete people, concrete faces of people -- people who suffer, people who are living in slums, people who are in prison, people who are deported, people who are in refugee camps."

Rodríguez's moral challenge is personal and comes out of the sweat and smell of poverty. Two-thirds of Hondurans live without adequate food; 10 percent control nearly 50 percent of the nation's wealth.

Pope Francis also has experience with this hardship. One in four lives in poverty in Argentina. His pleas on behalf of the world's voiceless are equally personal. In a letter delivered last January, in Davos, Switzerland, to the assembled economic elite of the world, he pleaded: "I ask you to ensure that humanity is served by wealth and not ruled by it."

His apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, last November was blunter, calling capitalism "a new tyranny."

Francis is hardly the only voice addressing heartless indifference to human suffering. However, he has the largest world stage -- and is using it.

Global poverty and inequality are getting their first sustained examination since the 1960s.

In January 1961, the United Nations resolved that the decade of the 1960s would be the Decade of Development. That same month, in his inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy said: "To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves."

Before the decade was over, Pope Paul VI wrote *Populorum Progressio*, in which he spoke out against growing global inequality and the prevalence of dire poverty. He linked the basic tenets of Christianity with the moral imperatives created by the unequal distribution of material resources.

Five decades later, the world has witnessed an almost unimaginable explosion of wealth, but it's been concentrated and much of it has come at the expense of the poor. Yes, there are fewer famines and better food chains. However, poverty remains, like a plague that won't go away. The global economic system favors a small few and too often at the expense of the many, like the more than 3 billion people who live on less than \$2.50 a

day or the 22,000 children who die each day as a result of poverty.

It's not news that the rich are growing richer. The real news is the concentration of wealth is more extreme than most imagine. This is sparking a new look at poverty.

Two recent books are indicative of the growing interest in both the wealth gap and the concentration of power that enables it.

French sociologist Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century*, after examining volumes of data collected over centuries, warns that growing wealth inequality will only increase, having an even more corrosive impact on democratic institutions -- unless substantial changes are made.

Piketty's central theme is that because capital tends to grow faster than the overall economy, the rich will continue to accumulate a larger and larger share of the economic pie simply because their existing money grows so quickly. Democracies will be increasingly threatened.

*The Divide: American Injustice in the Age of the Wealth Gap* by Matt Taibbi, a former editor for *Rolling Stone*, offers a scorching indictment of the widening gap between rich and poor in America. It exposes how American justice treats rich and poor differently. The powerful get a free pass as their economic manipulations wipe out 40 percent of the world's wealth, while ordinary people are increasingly subjected to harassment and prosecution by an out-of-control penal system. Taibbi writes that American citizens' "basic rights are now determined by our wealth or poverty."

The system is broken. Global stability and peace become less possible as inequality grows. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis wrote that we now live in a world "where the powerful feed upon the powerless." This imbalance, he writes, "is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation. Consequently, they reject the right of states, charged with vigilance for the common good, to exercise any form of control. A new tyranny is thus born, invisible and often virtual, which unilaterally and relentlessly imposes its own laws and rules. Just as the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say 'Thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality."

The words "income inequality" do not capture the meaning of this moment. They seem too bland, too academic, to capture the dire failings of the last five decades -- decades of unequalled, but highly concentrated, accumulation of wealth.

Our world has changed enormously in 50 years -- and then it hasn't. We've learned astronomical amounts about how to successfully combat poverty, including education, combatting disease, empowering women, engaging in sustainable agriculture. But such steps require determination, political will and just economic policies. It also requires a moral compass that has gone missing for some time.

We can pray we are finding one -- and work like hell to spread the word and transform the world scene.

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