

A MORAL COMPASS

Blessed are



BY CHARLES STROBEL

I always say that the beginnings of Room in the Inn at Holy Name Church in Nashville started out for me with a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich that led to a soup kitchen that led to people sleeping in my parking lot, ending in my inviting them in to spend the night. And they stayed the winter. Over time, this simple act has become the work of a lifetime. In fact, I remember thinking to myself when I invited them in that first night, “If I do this, I may end up doing this for the rest of my life.” But like Scarlett O’Hara, I said, “I’ll think about it in the morning,” and brought them in.

This is an edited version of a presentation given during the Catholic Health Association’s staff retreat on Sept. 17, 2010, in St. Louis. Charles Strobel is founding director of Room in the Inn’s Campus for Human Development, a religious not-for-profit organization providing services for the homeless in Nashville, Tenn.

the poor

But that moment was really not the start of it all. Looking back over the years, I've come to realize how so much of the various phases of my life have been connected — so much so that for over 60 years, the issues and concerns of the poor and marginalized have always been right before my eyes, even when I didn't think I was seeing their problems.

A short background of those years may explain why I consider the issues of the poor the most important ones facing our communities and our world today. Why I have come to understand that the ramifications of poverty touch all aspects of our lives together. Why we cannot afford to ignore or gloss over these ramifications. Why, instead, we must raise them and face them honestly.

I was born in north Nashville. My father died when I was 4, leaving my mother to raise four children under the age of 8. This meant that Mama had to work outside the home. She made \$185 a month as a clerk for the fire department. She also had to take care of her two elderly aunts, Aunt Mollie and Aunt Kate, who lived with us and took care of us during the day.

North Nashville was known at that time as Cab Holler. Although some folks rode buses to the western part of town to do domestic work, most folks worked in the area — and everyone was poor. In the economy of the time, the poor worked for the poor. And they found dignity in

sion went. They were the washerwomen in the neighborhood since they were the only ones with washing machines.

Mama hired a woman named Sadie to help with the ironing. Sadie was in her 70s. There was no such thing as “being on a fixed income.” Sadie's only income was what she could make cleaning and ironing. She was African-American.

There was another family who lived behind

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the house next door to us in a horse barn that had been converted into a two-room, tar-paper shack. I remember seeing the father get up at dawn every morning to work his day job delivering coal, come home around 6 p.m. and, after supper, he left again and worked as a janitor until midnight. He did this six days a week, but was never able to make enough money to get his family out of that horse barn and buy a real house.

So as I grew up and heard people say that poor people were lazy and didn't want to work, that was not my experience, my frame of reference, at all. I don't know how much these memories contributed to my formation, but by the time I got to high school, I realized I wanted to go to the seminary. I did, and spent five formative years from 1965 to 1970 at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Those years were revolutionary in our country, involving the struggle for civil rights and racial equality, the war on poverty and the anti-war movement.

These movements on the streets crystallized my thinking. At the same time, I was being undergirded with a theological framework in the classroom, where I came to understand that the poor

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the work. People grew vegetables and sold them off the backs of horse-drawn wagons. Other men sold blocks of ice for the iceboxes, not refrigerators. Others hauled coal to burn. Men with wagons picked up people's food garbage and fed it to their pigs; other people “took in laundry,” as the expres-

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of the world should be at the top of the list of our concerns. Starting with the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, I heard over and over words like the prophet's call to "defend the widow, the orphan and the stranger," or the Psalmist pray that "the Lord hears the cries of the poor," or, "lavishly God gives to the poor," or "God lifts up the lowly to high places," or "go sell your possessions and give to the poor," or "blessed are the poor." And dozens and dozens of other passages.

But nothing struck me with such force as when my Scripture professor unfolded the meaning of a word that I would like to give you as a gift. It is a beautiful word in Hebrew, little known and rarely used. You may forget the word, but I hope you remember its concept. The word is *anawim*. *Anawim* is the Hebrew word for "poor."

More than an economic condition, the word refers to all of us as we are seen by God. Job reminds us that each of us is born naked, "Naked I came into the world, naked I return again. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Jesus proclaims the first Beatitude: "Blessed are the poor." The actual biblical language is "Blessed are the *anawim*."

Anawim defines all of us — every man, woman and child — as a blessing. What is our blessing? Our blessing is that we know we are incapable of being happy all by ourselves. This is our poverty, and all the riches in the world cannot rid us of it.

If we need to, we can prove it to ourselves. For as soon as we become honest and aware of what it means to live and breathe and embrace the gift of a new day dawning that comes as a total gift, not as our entitlement, don't we have to come to grips with the question of poverty — not as something to avoid, but as something essential to living a life of love? Spiritual writings over the centuries say that there is no possible conversion unless one experiences poverty of self. This is at the heart of the meaning of *anawim*.

The *anawim* are not simply the ones without change in their pockets. The *anawim* are all of us, according to God. Yet most of us resist thinking of ourselves as poor, much less blessed in our pov-

erty. We lose sight of the fact that this is how we are created. Long before we achieve power, prestige, possessions, privilege or even pigmentation, we are naked, vulnerable and poor, dependent on a woman for our survival.

When we forget this basic truth about ourselves — whether we are people of faith or not — we end up fighting for our own survival rather than helping each other survive.

As we gather possessions, power, prestige and privilege, we begin to separate, creating all kinds of differences of class and status. Although almost everyone believes in the necessity of possessions, the differences they create inspire extreme competition, rivalry and war. From the cultural existence of nations, states, tribes, clans, castes and social classes to the more informal groupings in congregations, clubs, associations, businesses and teams, our separation can diminish our realization of this divine truth proclaimed from the beginning: We share a common humanity. And we share a common poverty.

But understanding ourselves as *anawim* establishes an equality among us that can lead to the greatest blessing imaginable — human kindness. Rather than allowing our riches to divide us, we can discipline ourselves to recognize how each of

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us is the same. We can be united in a poverty that yields a generosity of spirit.

We understand this notion of *anawim* whenever we prefer service to others over personal advantage. When we do so, then and only then will the economic poor have hope, born of our understanding, and economic deliverance from their grinding, degrading conditions, because of our generosity.

This biblical framework forced me to ask how this concept translates in the modern world. For I believe this concept of *anawim* is more in need of translation and interpretation today than it ever has been.

What I found in the 2,000 years of Christian history was an evolution of social doctrines that did not diminish this notion of *anawim* but increasingly clarified it, summarizing it in the phrase, "God's preferential option for the poor." Later I

found that this principle was consistent with similar teachings from all the major religions of the world, and that it could be expressed in the following six principles that have become priorities in Catholic social justice teachings. They don't require you to be a person of faith.

- The needs of the poor take priority over the wants of the rich
- The freedom of the dominated takes priority over the liberty of the powerful
- The participation of marginalized groups takes priority over the preservation of systems that exclude them
- The rights of workers take priority over the maximization of profits
- The preservation of the environment takes priority over uncontrolled industrial expansion
- The production to meet social needs takes priority over the production for military purposes

This last principle reminds us that we cannot talk about poverty without talking about war and their interconnectedness, for poverty produces war and war produces poverty.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu says simply, "We will never win a war against terror as long as the conditions for poverty and injustice remain. Poverty breeds terrorism. So we should stop spending billions of dollars on weapons of destruction

and instead feed the hungry people of the world. Then, we'll stop terrorism. If we want to live in peace, we have to realize we are all members of the same family."

For decades our culture and our government has been blind and deaf to such principles and hasn't encouraged initiatives to end economic poverty. Instead, the marketing message from

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our centers of power has been that we can escape poverty and the needs of the poor by accumulating lots of stuff: big entertainment systems, bigger cars, massive homes and excessive amounts of clothes and toys for everyone, children and adults. We have wasted our surplus wealth on things when it could have been spent better on social transformation and strengthening community.

Today, we are paying a heavy price for shunting aside the principle of *anawim*. Because we have glorified war and deregulated greed, we now have an economy in tatters and a social fabric that is



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threatening to completely unravel along with it.

But, to paraphrase Charles Dickens, the worst of times often are inextricably linked with the best of times. Those of us who care about social justice have an opportunity — as our society acknowledges that major mistakes have been made and hungers for fundamental change — to resurrect *anawim* and make it a guiding force in our world. We have an opportunity to install *anawim* as a guiding principle of economic theory.

This is our challenge and we must take it up with energy and urgency.

Reversing course will not happen unless our deepest insights and biggest hearts come together to embrace fundamental moral priorities that begin to infuse our culture. These priorities are not personal whims. They transcend political parties, require sacrifice of individual needs for the greater good and have lasting consequences that are just.

The six tenets of social justice teaching are moral perspectives to guide and form our policies. They cannot be mandated as laws, but as principles that represent a higher law. My Christian theological training would explain them as representing the dilemma of “curing the blind man on the Sabbath.” A higher law, known as a moral law, supersedes a lesser law. This higher moral goal that goes beyond the rules of the moment is what moral theologians call a moral imperative.

This is not so foreign to most of us. Haven’t you overlooked some of your employees’ shortcom-

ings, even if it costs you some production? And every mother and father knows what it means to give their children another chance. All of us have fallen back upon such special acts of goodness, if not at our jobs, then in our homes, with our spouse, our children, our relatives or our neighbors.

There’s a moral imperative at work in moments like these. Not a whim, not simply personal feelings, not just a moral majority or general consensus, but a glimpse — an insight — into what is truly moral and good.

Each of us is given this moral compass, although we may have blunted or denied such inner direction at times. The best leaders among us are those that can make difficult moral decisions with confidence and ultimately without regard to public opinion. They describe these decisions as coming from the heart.

Such decisions derived from the heart are the very heart of the matter. For the heart is what we’re talking about. The vessel that pumps life through our bodies is the symbol of the best expression of human relationship — human love. Not the head, not the body, but the heart.

When I talk about the poor, I am talking about including them in our hearts. I am talking about them not as pawns to be used like instruments or machines, not as cogs in industrial wheels, nor as laborers to slave for us, but as human beings who are our brothers and sisters — sharing a common humanity with us and in need of the very things we need.

I am talking about a new economics, the economics of *anawim*. It is not based on exorbitant profits, but on a new kind of profit-sharing inspired by a moral imperative — an imperative that will strengthen family relationships and community relationships because it respects our common humanity.

The fundamental principle of the economics of *anawim* starts with a living, family, saving wage.

In *Creating a World Without Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism*, economist Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank, writes of a broader economic vision. He proposes the creation of social businesses that return no profit to investors — any profits are plowed back into the business. Yunus and the Grameen Bank received the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize “for their efforts to create economic and social development from below.”

One of the great spiritual writers of the last century, Thomas Merton, writes, “Certainly the legitimate desire to live a decent and civilized life in the world is no sin. God wills for us an ordered and happy life on earth. But the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, the Gospels and letters of Christian scripture constantly remind us that in practice the comfort and pleasure of some is generally paid for by the misery and oppression of others, and every rosy picture of our affluent society has a dark side experience shows.”

So rather than mandating this new economics of *anawim*, I would suggest we all visit our past, as I did at the beginning of this talk, and find the stories that touch the inner core of our values. I suggest we find our hearts and learn anew the lessons we may have forgotten: Those times when someone gave us a break when we didn’t deserve it. Those times someone forgave our stupidity or screw-up. Those times we became aware that people never really pull themselves up by their own bootstraps — it remains a myth that denies the inevitable contributions of so many people who have helped us along the way.

Find those stories that shaped our vision and turn them to a new vision for the poorest among us.

Is this kind of generosity something that calls to you from deep within? If so, you will not need to rack your brain for ways to deprive yourselves and be generous. Simply by loving others with the miracle of God’s love, you will soon become poor. You will no longer have anything much of your own. Oh, you may have some possessions,

but your time, your attention, your investment of energy will belong to the demands of those you love. And those you love will become an increasingly wider circle of people and places. Drawn ever more deeply into such generous love, you will understand better all those haunting words in the Scriptures like, “Don’t worry about what you are to eat or what you are to wear,” “Take neither walking stick nor traveling bag,” “Do not return evil for evil” and “Proclaim good news to the poor.”

Remember, you will not be alone if you do this. Millions of people of all races and cultures and creeds have already lived this way, for they have come to know that only God could want such love; that only God could love this way; and that only God’s love could make people do things that no human could.

So my words to you today: Do not lose sight of your place in the church. If I could offer you any future direction, it would be this:

If enough of us, in our everyday actions and discussions with others, operate within an eco-

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nomie framework that is rooted in and guided by an understanding of *anawim*, our shared common humanity, we will slowly but surely see that the needs of poor and homeless people become the priorities of us all. We will help initiate a groundswell rooted in God’s spirit, God’s imagination, which will replace other economic models driven by greed and selfishness for one that is guided by a moral principle of investing in human capital.

Today, I hope that our minds come to know the suffering of the poor even more. Today I hope that we can imagine how to express our hearts for the poor, and then to allow those moral imperatives to guide us confidently into a future that finally embodies what it means to belong to the one human family.

Today, then, we pray for the courage to love, the courage to be poor, the courage to see the hand of God in our lives and the courage to change our city and our world.

For blessed are the poor. Blessed are the *anawim*. Blessed are all of us. Amen.

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