

Pope follows Jesus' footsteps among poor

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Nowhere does Pope John Paul II cut a greater figure than when he is traveling among the world's most destitute and oppressed.

His recently concluded eight-day visit to the poorest of the poor in West Africa is a case in point.

In Guinea-Bissau on the West African coast he marked World Leprosy Day by visiting a leprosy hospital where he denounced the persistence of the disease as a global scandal.

On his way back to the airport he stopped his motorcade at a one-room mud hut, containing four stones and a tin barrel used for cooking — and nothing else. Huddled inside were several children and their father, who looked much older than his years.

"Here, too, freedom is compromised," the pope muttered to no one in particular.

His concern was that with the developed world's attention now riveted upon the pol-

itical upheavals in Eastern Europe and the consequent shift in East-West relations, the plight of the poor in nations of the Southern Hemisphere may be forgotten.

The next day, arriving in Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta), he urged the affluent nations of the world "not to scorn" Africa's hungry millions.

"How would history judge a generation that, having all the means to feed the earth's population, refused to do so with fratricidal indifference?" he asked in a speech before an economic organization of West African nations.

One can argue long into the night whether the positive result of this pope's many trips around the globe justify all the time, energy and money they require. But no one can credibly deny that such trips — especially this latest one to West Africa — have an unmistakably prophetic character about them.

The pope goes in where angels fear to tread. He does not stay among the rich and

powerful. He moves in circles and circumstances that Christ entered before him.

But John Paul II does not visit the poor simply to comfort them, or to offer them the promise of some greater reward in heaven. The powers-that-be would love him to deliver so innocuous a message.

Instead, like Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Micah before him, Pope John Paul II denounces the condition of the poor as an injustice.

Contrary to the political views of his neo-conservative cheering section in the United States, this pope stands firmly with his predecessor Paul VI — and with Catholic social doctrine generally — in asserting clearly and plainly that there is such a thing as an economic right.

Furthermore, such rights are universal in scope. "In the name of justice," he proclaimed, do not "deny them the universal right to human dignity and the security of life."

And neither does this pope chant in



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

unison with his neo-conservative chorus that can sing only of production, never of distribution. Developed countries, he insisted, must share their resources with those in desperate need.

It's important to remember that John Paul II has been making this very same appeal constantly and consistently throughout his entire pontificate.

In Edmonton, Alberta, more than five-and-a-half years ago, he warned that "the poor people and poor nations — poor in different ways, not only lacking food, but also deprived of freedom and other human rights — will judge those people who take these goods away from them, amassing to themselves the imperialistic monopoly of economic and political supremacy at the expense of others."



THE BIBLE CORNER

said, throwing his money down in disgust.

The next person in line was staring at Matthew, too. But there was no condemnation in his eyes for the tax collector. Matthew had seen this man, Jesus, preaching to the crowds along the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

"Anything to declare?" Matthew asked him.

Jesus answered with another question. "Where are you going?"

Matthew was stunned to silence.

"Follow me," Jesus said before he went on.

The people waiting in Matthew's line began to protest vehemently when they saw him leave his tax booth. "Hey, where do you think you are going? You can't just leave like this! We'll report you to the Romans!" they cried.

Scripture Reference: Matthew 9:9.

A simple question alters tax collector's course

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

Matthew looked up from his tax records at the long line of people waiting to pass through his booth. Roman law had decreed that a tax must be paid on all goods entering or leaving King Herod's provinces.

Just for a brief moment, Matthew caught the eye of Nathan, who was a wealthy merchant in the city. There was scorn in his expression for Matthew. Most of the Hebrews living in Capernaum shared Nathan's sentiment. A tax collector was an outcast, no better than a robber or murderer.

For their part, the Romans had left it entirely up to Matthew how much tax should be charged on goods. Whatever he charged above the required tax was his profit. In the process, Matthew came to be distrusted by

the Romans and shunned by the Hebrews, his own people.

Matthew's only friends were other tax collectors. "Our lot in life is no better than lepers," he complained one day as he dined with them.

"A leper does not live in such comfort," one of them replied. "Look around you, Matthew. You have all of the best that money can buy. Money is power. What more do you want?"

"What will become of us?" Matthew asked. None of his friends could answer him.

"That will be \$10," Matthew told the next man in his line.

"It's not a fair price!" the man shouted. "You charged me only \$8 for a similar load of goods last week."

"It is a fair price, Saul," Matthew said

pointedly, "if you remember our little side agreement on another matter. Unless, of course, you would like me to enter it officially here in my records."

Saul made no reply. He counted out the money, his face set angrily. When he reached the required sum, he threw the last coin down with such force that it bounced from the table and rolled out of sight.

This time it was Matthew's voice rising irately. "Get out of here Saul before I charge you what you should really pay!"

Next in line was Benjamin. Matthew watched him dragging his donkey along. The poor animal nearly sank under the weight of his load.

"What do you have to declare, Benjamin?"

"Twenty pounds of grain," he replied. Matthew laughed heartily. "Even if you think me a fool, a fool can see that your beast is nearly dead under that fifty pounds he is carrying on his back!"

"You call me a thief? How much do you want to steal from me today?" Benjamin

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