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# Why the poor are often 'invisible'

Father Herbert Weber/CNS

Shortly after I finished a degree in social work and began working at Catholic Charities, I visited my mother in the rural community where I had grown up. I shared with her some situations of poverty being experienced by my clientele. She was moved by the descriptions. Then she added, "Thankfully, there is no poverty here where we live."

Indeed, most people in that small town were not poor. Nonetheless, I had to disagree with Mom. I reminded her of the widow for whom she regularly would buy groceries and the family that nearly froze one winter until she and some neighbors arranged for them to receive a load of coal. I also cited a couple of other examples.

Her response was: "Oh, I guess I never thought of that as poverty. That is just people down on their luck."

Poverty, hunger, malnutrition, lack of health care and homelessness all exist even in the most developed of countries. It doesn't catch the eye of people the way the poverty of Haiti or the sub-Saharan does; it may be more subtle and less life-threatening. It is often invisible.

Part of the difficulty comes in defining "poverty." To say that there are fewer persons on welfare rolls than there were a few years ago does not mean there are fewer poor people. An understanding of poverty requires that we examine family income, the ability of the family heads to earn what is needed for a decent standard of living and how basic needs are being met. The level of education and the health of family members almost always enter into the poverty equation.

In giving workshops, I have discovered a couple of stereotypes of the poor. First, people quickly equate poverty with families on welfare for several generations. From that, they too frequently assume these people suffer from laziness or self-imposed poverty. Politicians often talk about the "deserving poor," with the implication that some poor people are undeserving of attention or assistance. The other frequent image of poverty is that of inner-city dwellers, those who live in the blighted downtown sections of many cities.

However, a great deal of poverty is caused by unfortunate events; it can take place in any community and can happen to almost any family. Sickness, the death of a spouse, loss of a job and divorce all can lead



Ken Touchton/CNS

A mother and child walk home in a colonia of southern New Mexico. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, a domestic anti-poverty program, helped residents get running water, electricity and other basic services. "A great deal of poverty is situation-caused," observes Father Hebert Weber. "Sickness, the death of a spouse, loss of a job and divorce all can lead to difficult times."

to difficult times. Women and children are especially affected by such poverty.

When I first met Ellen, she and her two children were receiving monthly welfare checks. Even at that, they would not have made it without the help of Ellen's father, who frequently assisted them.

Her divorce was the event that led to poverty for Ellen's family. Her children were pre-school age. The cost of day care was more than she could afford with the types of jobs available to her, so she chose to stay home with the children.

As the children got older, Ellen re-entered the work world, although her first job was part-time, low-paying and without benefits. Eventually her part-time job became full time with benefits and she was able to re-establish herself.

Other poverty comes from what is termed underemployment. That is when a person works but still cannot provide the basics for self or family.

Maggie, a single mother, has some college education and works as a clerk. She drives an old car on which she still is making payments and lives in a simple apartment. Nonetheless, her monthly bills ex-

## In a Nutshell

Concern for the poor has been a constant tradition from the beginning of Christianity. To fail to see the poor is to fail to see Christ.

Poverty, hunger, malnutrition, lack of health care and homelessness exist, even in developed nations.

Pope John Paul II noted that Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta believed "that in touching the broken bodies of the poor she was touching the body of Christ."

ceed her monthly income. The parish St. Vincent de Paul ministry continues to help her as she tries to cut costs. The need for a better paying job is evident but allusive.

Julie's situation is a bit different. She has various physical limitations due to cerebral palsy. She walks, but with a limp. She is sight-impaired, but not totally blind. She has some hearing loss, but can communicate. And she has limited use of her hands and fingers.

Julie does receive disability

checks and she lives in subsidized housing for which she is very grateful. Yet she is unable to hold a job. Her depression comes from a constant awareness that she always will be counting pennies and wondering if she can pay her bills.

Sadly, those are only a few examples of people who live in poverty in the midst of affluence. Many more have become evident to me through our parish school. Families often ask for tuition assistance, something we are able to provide because of an annual campaign. Families ask because of loss of jobs, sickness or other crises.

Constantly, I discover families who seem to be very much "middle class" who are struggling. When the local steel mill closed down while a new caster was being built, for example, a number of families suddenly found themselves on the verge of losing their cars, houses or more.

Poverty is a reality that often goes unnoticed. For the Christian, the poor cannot remain invisible. To fail to see them is to fail to see Christ.

Father Weber is pastor of St. Peter's Parish in Mansfield, Ohio.