

BEWARE THE “FRIENDS OF THE POOR”

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This is the season of giving and give we should: to the surviving family members of the horror of 9-11; to the needy; to the disabled; to all those unable to provide for themselves. But let's do it without the smugness that too often accompanies the giving.

I say this because it's been my experience that the people who scream the loudest about helping the poor typically do the least. Worse than that, they are among the most self-righteous people God ever put on this earth. Take the late Mitch Snyder.

In the 1980s, Snyder made himself an icon among rich people who claimed to care about the poor. He appeared on countless TV shows—always disheveled and in fatigues—imploring Americans to give to the homeless. A bum himself, he refused to support his own family. This remained true even when he came into big money (he got a handsome check from Hollywood after his life was portrayed on the screen). But Mitch “cared” about the poor. He “cared” so much that he even lied to a congressional committee about the real number of homeless persons in the U.S., hyping the number so it would make him look good.

Snyder always reminded me of Karl Marx. Marx made a living off his writings that detailed how badly the working class were treated. Yet he never once stepped foot in a factory and never talked to the working class. But he said he knew all about them. The closest he got to knowing the poor was his own maid, “Lenchen,” whom he royally exploited. He never paid the woman a dime, giving her only room and board. But he did get to know her well enough to get her pregnant. Consistent all the way, he never supported his kid and never claimed paternity. We

know this because the guy who publicly claimed to be the kid's father—Marx's comrade, Friedrich Engels—spilled the beans on his deathbed.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau did the same thing. The intellectual father of the French Revolution wrote endlessly about oppression. Ironically, he made his own contribution to oppression by fathering five illegitimate children, all of whom he abandoned. To top it off, he even had the audacity to write a book about childrearing, *Emile*. But to this day those who call themselves progressive could care less what Rousseau did. What matters is that he "cared."

It's so easy to love the poor in the abstract. Who can't love the masses? Who can't love the homeless? Who can't love the working class? The problem begins when individuals appear. Interacting with real live people can lead to all kinds of trouble, especially for those who spend most of their time writing and speaking about the oppressed.

In the 1970s, when I was pursuing my Ph.D. at NYU at night, I was working during the day in a Catholic elementary school in Spanish Harlem, St. Lucy's. The students in my sociology class were uniformly concerned about the poor. The poor were oppressed, victimized, etc. Yet when I asked them to help tutor my students on a weekend, they fell silent. Not because they were busy—few of them worked. But they "cared."

Similarly, when I was a professor I frequently socialized with the men and women who worked in maintenance, housekeeping and in the cafeteria. What I found striking was that the Marxist professors on campus, who loved to pledge their solidarity with the working class, never even knew their names.

Nothing's changed. For example, if I asked college professors which state "cares" more about the poor, Massachusetts or Mississippi, the answer would be obvious. Yet government data show that Massachusetts ranks dead last among all the states

in average itemized charitable giving, yet it's the fourth wealthiest state in the union. By contrast, Mississippi is the most generous state in the nation yet only one state is poorer.

Or consider this. Those of us who are religious are constantly being lambasted in the media as hypocrites who really don't care about the poor. Non-believers, on the other hand, are portrayed as being quite generous. But the truth is just the opposite. University of North Carolina sociologists, Mark D. Regnerus and David Sikkink, drew on data gathered by the Religious Identity and Influence Survey, and found that the more religious a person is the more likely he is to give to the poor. Non-religious persons are the stingiest in the country.

So do what you can this Christmas season to help the needy. But beware the "friends of the poor." At the end of the day, they're a lousy role model. That's why Mother Teresa was so great: she comforted the sick and provided for the needy without ever bragging about her work. She not only "cared" about the poor, she actually fed them, bathed them and tended to their every need. And she did it remarkably without a trace of smugness.