

HELPING THE POOR

William A. Donohue

If there is one thing that Pope Francis and President Obama have in common, it is their professed interest in helping the poor. Both talk a great deal about this issue, and both occupy a very high status. Truth to tell, their commitment to the poor is hardly unique. While there are some who are indifferent, it's hard to find anyone who's anti-poor.

So at a rhetorical level, there's not much difference between the pope, the president, and the public. What matters are not platitudes— we're all in favor of clean air, too—what counts are the kinds of policies we adopt. Good intentions matter, but not much: great damage has been done in the name of helping people. Hitler said his policies would save Western civilization. Stalin and Mao said they would create a utopia. They were all genocidal maniacs.

If we want to help the poor, we should at least know who they are. Census data tell us that nearly all the poor in this country live in houses or apartments that are in good condition and aren't overcrowded. More than 80 percent of the poor own an air conditioner, two-thirds have cable TV, and half own a computer. Fully 96 percent of poor parents say their children were not hungry for even a single day in the past year.

By any historical measure, there are practically no poor people left in America. And when we compare our "poor" to the poor in other nations today, we learn why I chose quotation marks to describe ours.

It would be wrong to conclude that we should therefore do nothing to help those who are not affluent. As Catholics, we have a moral obligation to help those in need. At a minimum, our energy and dollars should be directed at those who can't

help themselves. As for able-bodied persons who are not affluent, the most charitable thing we can do is to enable them to become self-reliant. That is why so-called champions of the poor who oppose school vouchers cannot be taken seriously; it is minority children in the inner city who suffer.

Fraud is rampant. When my oldest daughter was a 12-year-old, I brought her to the office on "Bring Your Daughter to Work Day" (this trendy idea didn't last long). On our way to work, a man was standing next to a table with a huge jug; UHO was inscribed on it (United Homeless Organization). He asked us to give, but I refused. My daughter wanted to know why. When we got to my office, I explained my reasoning.

I downloaded stories on my computer showing what a fraud UHO was. Caryn learned that virtually all the money went to the operators and the street hustlers. Three years ago, New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo (now governor) said, "UHO exploits the good intentions of people who thought their charitable donations were helping to fund services for the homeless. Instead, their donations go directly to UHO's principals and workers, who abused the organization's tax-exempt status to line their own pockets."

Some things never change. Over the summer, it was reported that those who live in New York City's Caribbean neighborhoods are buying groceries with their Electronic Benefit Transfer cards (food stamps for those on welfare) and sending them overseas. There are literally hundreds of 45-to-55-gallon cardboard and plastic barrels that line the walls in virtually every Caribbean supermarket. The food is being shipped to relatives in Jamaica, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. But not all of it: some is being resold by ripoff artists.

Dishonesty is also rampant.

Bread for the World is a prominent liberal organization that

collects donations for the alleged purpose of helping the poor. Not a dime pays for bread: All proceeds go to lobbyists who pressure politicians to spend more money on poverty programs.

Back in the 1980s, celebrities organized a well-publicized campaign to help the poor. "Holding Hands Across America" garnered the support of legions of public figures (even the Reagans were roped into it). It raked in hundreds of millions. Unfortunately for the poor, two out of every three dollars raised was spent to pay for the bash.

More recently, when a donor sent great New York pastrami sandwiches to the "Occupy Wall Street" gang, the pro-poor demonstrators told the homeless who asked for some to get lost. The soup was for the poor.

Helping the poor is a noble cause, but it can also become a fool's errand. We need to ask who the intended beneficiaries are, and what, if anything, can be expected of them in return. We need to know how much of the money goes to administrative costs, and how much is spent on the target group. We need to know if there is a face-to-face relationship between donors and recipients, or just a money transfer. We need to know about fraud and dishonesty.

One of the great things about Mother Teresa is that she never sought the limelight. She simply went about her business helping the poor and comforting the sick and dying. It's our good fortune that she was "discovered" and introduced to the world. She's the proper role model, not those who stand on street corners asking for "spare change," or white-collared professionals who manipulate public sentiment for self-serving reasons.