

There are perhaps no truer words in Scripture than these: "The poor you will have always with you." Many founders of religious orders in the 19th century were particularly moved by the plight of the poor. Their congregations dedicated themselves to alleviating poverty and its ruinous effects. One such man was St. Don Bosco who founded the Salesians to minister to the needs of homeless boys and street children.

Although Fr. Francis Jordan, founder of the Salvatorians, and Don Bosco were personally acquainted, their charisms differed greatly. Fr. Francis did not feel so called to address the problem of poverty. Instead, he saw the great need of his time as education ... preaching the Gospel in new and convincing ways to many who were increasingly poor and marginalized. For Fr. Francis, preaching the Gospel always came first, social development was always secondary.

That being said, many of the Salvatorians' earliest apostolic placements were among the poor. Among unemployed youth in urban Vienna, among the various tribes of Northeast India, and in the early years of labor with native peoples in the American Northwest, Salvatorians constantly came up against the dehumanizing effects of poverty to which they could not turn a blind eye. But neither could they completely neglect preaching the Gospel in favor of sponsoring development programs.

In this arena, private acts of charity toward the poor were stressed above working for institutional change. Stories are told, for example, of Fr. Felix Bucher, SDS, who worked among native Americans on the Grand Ronde Reservation in Oregon. One cold winter morning a traveling confrere discovered that Fr. Felix's rectory had no wood stove. In asking why, Fr. Felix simply said that an Indian family had come by needing a stove. And they needed it much more than he did.

Fr. Jordan would have praised such acts of kindness shown to the poor by confreres and sisters, but only if it were coupled firmly to preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Having himself been born and raised in a poor family, Fr. Jordan felt strongly that poverty was never the core problem. Ignorance, especially ignorance of the Gospel and its demands posed the greatest threat to the poor in the rapidly industrializing world; because ignorance of the Gospel jeopardized one's eternal salvation.

More often than not, responding to the signs of his times brought Fr. Jordan and his followers into close contact with the poor. But they never refused to work among the middle class and even the wealthy, since everyone stands in need of the light of the Gospel, and everyone has a role to play in spreading the good news. Today the world-wide Salvatorian Family continues to work directly with the poor to alleviate the stunting effects of generational poverty. Faced with such challenges it is sometimes difficult to remain focused on our primary goal, "that all may know you the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Yet this is why we are sent.