

# FAITH MATTERS

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## RECLAIMING THE SAFETY NET THE CHALLENGE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE CATHOLICS

BY JASON SCOTT JONES

Where does the idea come from of having a social “safety net” to help the poorest and most vulnerable among us? It seems like an obvious and inevitable fact to most of us today, apart from some radical individualists who believe that the poor should sink or swim. But it hasn’t always existed. The ancient, pagan world made little provision for the weak or unlucky. In Greece, the desperately poor might sell themselves into slavery; in Rome the needy became hangers-on and parasitical “clients” of the wealthy and powerful. Even the “bread and circuses” offered the Roman plebes was not really poor relief but a social lubricant designed to keep the mob politically pliant.

The first record we have in the West of systematic aid for the less fortunate appears in the Hebrew Bible, where the prophets demanded that the better off provide for widows and orphans, and the Law prevented extortionate treatment of the poor—even enjoining the Jubilee, a periodic cancellation of debts and redistribution of income. Inspired by Jesus’ almost incessant talk of the importance of caring for the poor, the early Church quickly developed its own system of charity, distributed by deacons to the needy, Christian and pagan alike.



Smart Investing and Catholic Values



The most famous incident from that period was surely the story of St. Lawrence, arrested by the Romans and ordered to produce the Church's reputed treasures. He called together the widows, orphans and paupers who were supported by Christian charity and presented them to the Romans, saying, "These are the Church's treasures." On one level, Lawrence was simply, almost sarcastically, showing his persecutors where the Church had spent the money they were looking for. More profoundly, he was demonstrating to pagans a profound Christian principle: To us, the human person is the greatest treasure on earth. We see our eternal salvation as conditional on whether or not we recognize, honor, and act on that truth—whether we rescue that treasure when it is endangered, preserve it from harm, and defend its transcendent dignity. When Julian the Apostate tried to restore paganism across the Empire, he found himself frustrated by the massive goodwill won by Christian charity toward the poor, which his pagan allies saw no earthly reason to imitate.

Since then, in one form or another, the Church has always been engaged in doing what we traditionally call the Corporal Works of Mercy. Laymen, clergy, and religious alike saw it as their solemn obligation to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, harbor the homeless, visit the sick, ransom the captive, and bury the dead. Sometimes the local or royal government would play a part in that effort, but much more often it was seen as the Church's duty, to be provided out of the lands possessed by bishops or monks, or the funds raised

by pious laymen and entrusted to their local pastors and abbots for that purpose. One of the worst blows struck against the poor in Western history was the destruction of monasticism in much of Europe. In England especially, Henry VIII's seizure of the monasteries at one stroke deprived the poor of their educators, hospitals, and soup kitchens. It would be centuries before the English state stepped in to fill up some of the vacuum it had created. In the interim, the poor were largely left to fend for themselves, and controlled by strict laws against both begging and vagrancy—and savage punishments for theft, including mutilation and death.

Our modern Western vision of social justice for the poor and the vulnerable is unimaginable without its biblical, Christian background. The concept of a social safety net is a profound and fragile artifact of Christian civilization, and I think it is quite unclear how long this idea will survive the collapse of Christian faith. We saw with the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century how quickly people cut off from faith can forget the moral values that they'd inherited from their believing ancestors, and adhere to brutal and anti-human visions of the Good, which conceive and treat human beings as less than persons. The burden of my recent book, *The Race to Save Our Century*, is the rise of such "Subhumanism" and its roots in the failure of faith.

Dostoevsky warned in *The Devils* that "if God does not exist, all things are permissible." He might also have added that many other things seem pointless, wasteful, or futile. Without belief in a God whose image each one

of us bears, we do begin to wonder, as the Germans did, whether some lives are “unworthy of life.” Today, some ninety percent of preborn babies diagnosed with Down Syndrome in America are routinely aborted by their parents. In the Catholic kingdom of Belgium, euthanasia is legal for sick children, with the permission of their parents. In Switzerland, depressed patients are presented with the “treatment option” of assisted suicide. What will be the fate of the elderly all across aging societies such as Europe and Japan, where grandparents will soon appear as luxuries that society cannot afford? Assaults on the sanctity of life will only increase, as our vision of the human person grows dimmer and more degraded.

As the Christian roots of our post-Christian societies fade with each generation, it will take a prophetic witness of believers to keep alive the idea of human dignity. We must see that our work on behalf of the poor contributes to that dignity, and reflects its roots in the person of Jesus Christ—or else it will utterly fail, becoming merely a means of quelling social unrest and solving social problems—that is, bread and circuses. How can we ensure that our work for the poor remains distinctly Christian, and that our activities build up their human dignity? How do we keep from breathing in the all-pervasive ideology of our age—the “lowest common denominator” of Utilitarian Hedonism, which asserts that the good of human life is to accumulate happy moments, and at all costs avoid suffering? Make no mistake, that theory is the unspoken common ground that unites the most powerful liberals and conservatives alike, though they differ on how to achieve it. Of course as Christians we do not fetishize suffering, and the Church has always worked to alleviate it where

possible. But we hold to a higher and much more challenging vision of human dignity, a more human and dignified notion of what real happiness means. We see happiness as coming from a life well-lived, one grounded in virtue and aimed at a relationship with a loving, eternal God. When we strive to aid people in danger or in need, we can never use means that degrade their intrinsic dignity, undermine their attempts at building up the virtues, or reduce them to abstract “problems” we need to solve. If we do, we ourselves will fail to build up the virtues, and will starve our own relationships with Christ.

For all these reasons, we cannot subcontract our duties toward the “least of Jesus’ brothers” to the programs of an impersonal secular state. You and I are called to perform the works of mercy ourselves—not to buy indulgences through our taxes to hire strangers to do them for us. It is all too easy to forget the full humanity of people we never see, to dispose of them and their needs with grandiose programs or blasé slogans. We fall into patronizing pity, or resentful indifference, toward masses of faceless strangers whose personal failures and sufferings are boiled down into pie charts, bar graphs, and “metrics.” The well-known socialist statesman Josef Stalin recognized this when he quipped, “A single death is a tragedy. A million deaths is a statistic.”

How can you and I avoid lapsing into such toxic cynicism? There is only one way, I think, and it’s one that Pope Pius XI enshrined at the heart of Catholic social teaching. We must use as a litmus test of all our works and plans the fundamental principle he called Subsidiarity. Put simply, in bumper sticker language, what he meant was, “Think globally, act locally.” Whatever we can do as private citizens, families, churches and members of civil society we **MUST** do. Only what

we find, empirically, that we simply cannot accomplish should be entrusted to local government. The residue of problems that elude local government's reach should be bumped up to state government. It is only those intractable issues that really require national legislation that we should hand over to that most distant and unaccountable actor, the nation-state. The Federal government, being the bluntest instrument, should be our absolute last resort. Too often, it seems that those with a heart for the poor have mistaken the Church's preferential option for the poor for a preferential option for the federal government.

We must encounter the poor people who live near us, and act toward them as genuine brothers and sisters, finding ways to offer them opportunities and assistance that respect their full humanity, including their potential to become and remain self-sufficient. None of us would want his or her children to be perpetually dependent. Why should we accept that fate for our neighbors?

Because it is easier, cleaner, and cheaper—at least in the short run. So instead of working at soup kitchens or crisis pregnancy centers, visiting prisoners and helping homeless people to find affordable housing, we drop a dollar into second collection baskets, and vote for politicians who promise to take the poor off our consciences. We see panhandlers and think to ourselves, "I gave at the office—the IRS office." Worst of all, some of us are willing to compromise fundamental issues of human dignity for the sake of advancing state-based solutions to poverty.

The poorest, most vulnerable human beings in America today are preborn children, whom dishonest Supreme Court decisions and complacent elite opinion abandons to destruction, for any reason, all

through nine months of pregnancy. Anyone who supports such laws does not deserve the name of Christian. Such people should not present themselves for Holy Communion in Catholic churches, and if they do, according to canon law pastors should refuse to give it to them. No Catholic may endorse or support any candidate who does not favor full legal protection for the preborn—regardless of his or her stance on lesser prudential questions. If we scoff at the least of Jesus' brothers, who today are unborn babies, he warned us what we would hear from him on judgment day: "Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels." That's a phrase that "pro-choice" or otherwise compromised Catholics should meditate on, every day.

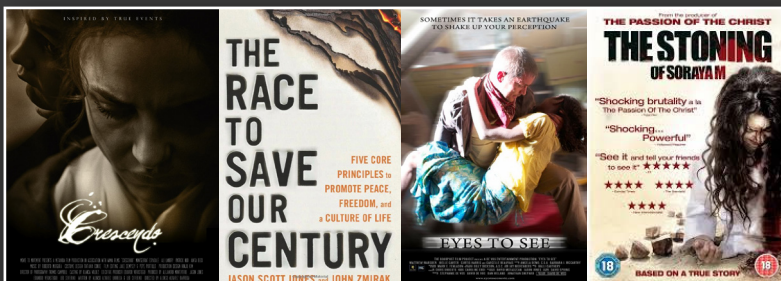
The challenge for social justice Catholics today is to refuse the thirty pieces of silver offered by statesmen in return for compromise about the killing of the innocent. To reject the false compassion that accepts the sin and abandons the sinner. To leave the place of comfort where we can sit alongside philanthropists giving TED talks and NGO leaders who party with Bono, and go out to face rejection, scorn and spitting. That might mean manning the barricades praying outside of abortion clinics. Or teaching the undiluted Gospel of Life in the teeth of sophisticates' sneers. Or defending the goodness and holiness of marriage against its powerful, wealthy enemies. Or refusing Holy Communion to the Vice President of the United States, then facing the consequences.

We are each called to different works, but our call is the same: To the foot of the Cross. If we find ourselves far from it, we know we have gone astray.

# J A S O N   S C O T T   J O N E S



JASON SCOTT JONES is a film producer, author, activist, and human rights worker. Jones was a producer on the 2007 film, *Bella*, which won several film industry awards, most notably the People's Choice Award at the 2006 Toronto International Film Festival. Jason was the associate producer of the 2008 film, *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, which won the NAACP Image Award in 2010 as well as the Los Angeles Film Festival Audience Award in 2009. His short films include *Eyes to See* (2010) and *Crescendo* (2011). He was producer in 2012 of the TV movie *Mother Marianne: Portrait of a Saint*. He works directly to aid the homeless, peoples facing genocide, and women with crisis pregnancies. Jason is co-author of the recently released book, *The Race to Save Our Century: Five Core Principles to Promote Peace, Freedom, and a Culture Of Life*. He lives in Hawaii.



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