

Caring for All the Poor
May 4, 2017

Most of the following remarks will sound much more like social or political analysis, but they will be leading up to specifically spiritual reflections that are relevant to anyone who wishes to live according to Jesus' teaching. An article in a recent issue of *The Tablet* by the founder and director of an organization called Together for the Common Good opens with these words: "So many people didn't see Brexit and Trump coming. Some are still unclear about what happened. Yet the causes have been building for years.... The Remain [campaign in Britain] and [the] Hillary Clinton campaign were both predicated on the same economic model that has been dominant across successive governments...; what these campaigns offered was meaningless for those who had been left behind.... But the roots of their disenchantment with ruling elites go deeper than a feeling of having been economically discarded. For too long, a 'progressive' agenda has held people with traditional views and interests in contempt.... When people from proud, inherited cultures experience humiliation and powerlessness they will eventually react.... They had lost patience as social norms were changed without their consent and many of the things that really mattered to them seemed to have become devalued. They felt exiled in their own country." (Jenny Sinclair, "Rebuilding the Broken Body," *The Tablet*, April 8, 2017, pp. 4-5)

That phrase "exiled in their own country," written by a woman in England, is mirrored almost exactly by the title of a new book by an American sociologist from the University of California Berkeley named Arlie Russell Hochschild, whose book is titled *Strangers in their Own Land*, with the subtitle *Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. Sharing the surprise of so many others at the result of the recent presidential election, she decided to rely not simply on what others had written about it but to go speak to people directly, and she chose one of the most

disaffected parts of the country, rural Louisiana. At first the people with whom she spoke were cautious, but they soon opened up and helped Professor Hochschild understand their sense of having long been ignored or ridiculed. At one point she writes: “Looking back at my previous research, I see that the scene had been set for Trump’s rise.... Three elements had come together. [First,] since 1980, virtually all those I talked with felt a shaky economic ground.... They also felt culturally marginalized: their views about abortion, gay marriage, gender roles, race, guns, and the Confederate flag were all held up to ridicule in the national media as backward. And [thirdly,] they felt part of a demographic decline; [one woman told me,] “There are fewer and fewer white Christians like us.” In sum, she and most of the people in her part of the state felt like a besieged minority.

Hochschild’s entire book, and a somewhat similar one by Nancy Isenberg titled *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, are both quite new (published in 2016 and 2017 respectively), and they go into all this in far greater detail than is necessary here. But lest anyone think that a feeling of disdain toward the white working class is exaggerated or, at best, only of recent appearance, I’d like to mention an older author whom I mentioned in my homily on Good Friday. At that service, I spoke of the way Professor Robert Coles covered the plight of blacks in the American South during the struggles to integrate schools in the 1960s. He won a Pulitzer Prize for his writing about the “children of crisis” and likewise received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 1968 he also served as an adviser to Robert F. Kennedy in his quest for the Democratic presidential nomination.

All such work was very much appreciated and applauded by his colleagues at Harvard. But around that time, Coles’ research took a controversial turn. A former student of his described what happened in these words: “In the early 1970s, he published *The Middle Americans: Proud and Uncertain*, which explained, with

deep empathy, the experiences of white firefighters, factory workers, shopkeepers, and farmers. He was vilified for his new research by many of his friends in academia, who could not understand why Coles would devote his considerable talents to a group of Americans whom many progressives viewed as reactionary, racist, and sexist.”

Things became even more difficult for him when, during the riots in Boston over court-ordered busing in the 1970s, Coles, while condemning the violence, wrote that he understood the resentment of working-class whites when the compulsory busing policies that affected their own families left out wealthier surrounding communities like Wellesley and Cambridge. Coles himself is the son of an English immigrant father who had informed his son years earlier of the constrictive role of class that he had known in England, and when Coles reflected on what he saw happening in Boston he readily saw the analogy with problems his father had once experienced. Looking back on this part of his life and the vilification he received for empathizing with working-class whites in his book and in his remarks on their opposition to school busing, he recently said: “I’ve never heard some of the scorn that can be mobilized against people expressed so vividly as on both of those occasions from people who take great pains—and commendably so—to try to understand people of different *racial* backgrounds. The same people can speak about working-class people of their own race with no great charity and often times no great effort at understanding.” He gave as a current example a particularly harsh article in a far-left blog site that included the line: “Be happy for coal miners [if they end up] losing their health insurance. They’re getting exactly what they voted for.” (Richard D. Kahlenberg, “Harvard’s Class Gap,” *Harvard Magazine*, May/June 2017, 36-38)

To turn now to some explicitly spiritual reflections, at our March 30 symposium Cardinal McCarrick said in his opening remarks that in all the

problems facing our society today, there is one issue that runs through them all, the question of what we do about the poor. He encouraged all of us present to remember, “We can never forget the poor.” But we must surely keep in mind that poverty is of various kinds, even if the term first brings up images of material or economic hardship. The author of that article in *The Tablet* was absolutely correct when she wrote: “Who are the poor? Pope Francis has spoken of ‘the poor’ as those who live with the experience of non-power. This could be economic, but it could also be social, ... relational, educational, or spiritual.... The principle of the common good recognizes all the groups who experience non-power—ethnic, economic and social, excluding none.... [And] Jean Vanier understands that to be fully human, we need to be in a relationship with those whom the dominant culture rejects, no matter how difficult that may be.”

It is clear that St. Benedict wanted to overcome all class distinctions in his monasteries. As he wrote in chapter two, “The abbot should avoid all favoritism in the monastery.... A man born free is not to be given higher rank than a slave who becomes a monk, except for some other good reason” (RB 2:16, 18). While one can understand the rise of the later distinction between choir monks and lay brothers, brought on largely because as the centuries passed many candidates were unable to cope with the Latin of the liturgy, that distinction almost inevitably led to a two-tier system of privilege; I know that this was a hardship for some of the lay brothers who were here when I first entered the community.

On the broader level of American society as a whole, much of the difficulty is that many of the so-called “the cosmopolitan elite”—and that has to include all of us, who live in a world-class cosmopolitan center, are well-educated, and never have to worry about where our next meal is coming from—don’t have a lot of opportunities simply to be with people who feel left out. Reading about them in books like *Hillbilly Elegy* or *White Trash* can help, but nothing can replace face-to-

face personal relationships with those of another social class. That is exactly what Arlie Hochschild found by actually going to rural Louisiana and spending a lot of time talking with those who live there. As she writes near the end of her book, “I was humbled by the complexity and height of the empathy wall. But with their teasing, good-hearted acceptance of a stranger from Berkeley, the people I met in Louisiana showed me that, in human terms, the wall [between us] can easily come down.” She not only made good friends there but also stays in touch with them now that she is back on the West Coast.

There is, of course, no point and no need for any of us to travel down to Louisiana or out to Kansas or up to Michigan, but there are certainly parts of our own increasingly gentrified metropolitan area that have been left out of the affluence reflected in so many of the large construction projects going on all over our city and the suburbs. At the very least, it would be good to let persons of lower social standing know that they would be welcome to spend some days as guests here. I would also not consider it at all unusual if any of us should want to spend a couple weeks some June with the Appalachian service project that has been sponsored by our school for some years now. There are doubtless many, many more opportunities than that. I’ll leave the final word to another important churchman at our symposium, for shortly before he had to leave for another appointment, our apostolic nuncio, Archbishop Christoph Pierre, said that we have to respond to suffering “with reality,” not with ideology. He added, “What we heard this morning is suffering which is deep and very, very real. If politics reduces to imposing one’s ideology over someone else’s reality, we are lost.”