

Poverty today
by Joe Maloney

When I was a teenager and in one of those rare meditative moods, I pondered the fact that I was born on the “right” side of the tracks. My parents were financially secure, at least to my knowledge. Poverty was not a family issue. Only when I entered the Order did poverty or simple living become a personal issue. I took a vow to live a life of poverty or simple living. I endured workshops and many group discussions trying to discern what the vow of poverty meant today. My personal reflections follow.

In the ‘80s six of us Capuchins decided to form an intentional community promising each other to live a simple lifestyle, to live in a poor area of the city, to live the “basics.” For various reasons in a few years the community died. The good will and intention was always there. For me, no matter how “poor” we were, the security of the province was always present.

Having reached retirement age, I applied for SSI benefits, Social Security Insurance, for low income citizens. I had to go to the Social Security office for an interview to determine if I qualified. The clerk interviewing me asked a few questions such as – *Are you currently employed? No. Do you have any insurance from your previous employer? No. Do you have a bank account? No. Do you own any property? No. Do you have any source of private income? No.* The clerk finished the interview, consulted his supervisor and then told me I could leave. The benefits were approved. I left the office, climbed into the “company” car. I drove home relieved that I was declared legally poor and the benefits would start coming.

The windows in my room face Mt. Elliott St. One crisp Fall day I looked out my window and saw a black woman walking on the sidewalk. She was dressed in a black garbage bag, a hole on the top for her head and two on the side for her arms. It would be easy to cruelly dismiss her out of a racial bias as one who lost her clothes in some reckless poker game. This image still haunts me. We only know the poor by mingling with them. I have many images in my room of the poor and downtrodden, pictures from magazines and newspapers. They remind me that there is a world out there that is foreign to me. We are all brothers and sisters. I can never complain.

I read our recently promulgated Capuchin *Constitutions* and am inspired. But for me the bottom line is“*What have you that you have not received?*” Everything is a gift. We are all poor. St. Paul would add to that ..“*If everything is a gift, why do you act as if it is not.?*” (cf. 1 Cor. 4:7) Our constitutions advise us in the use of goods (God’s gifts) no matter how we got them to follow the principle – “the minimum necessary, not the maximum allowed”. St. Francis urges us to “*desire nothing else, let us wish for nothing else let nothing else please us and cause us delight except our Creator and Redeemer and Savior, the one true God, who is the Fullness of Good , all good, every good, the true and supreme good, Who alone is good.....Therefore, let nothing hinder us or separate us or nothing come between us.* (cf. chapter 23, First Rule.) I am reminded of the old Quaker hymn. “*Tis a gift to be simple. Tis a gift to be free.*” I recall the truth of this simple statement as I, in my retirement, try to downsize . I am sure Francis would sing this song if he were around.