



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY



'The poor you will always have with you' Matthew 26:11

Phew, not much of a consolation is it?

Destitution

In Matthew 26:11, the evangelist says that, "The poor you will always have with you." I will not dare go down the theological debate and interpretation of this verse, don't worry. However, somehow this 'Man', 2,000 or so years ago had already understood human nature well-enough to claim that we are not really out-and-out in eradicating poverty and social exclusion.

Needless to say politicians and policy makers will always tell us that they are doing their best to resolve this conundrum. Not that effort isn't being made, I think that would be feisty to say so. Some are surely giving it a shot.

But how can we talk about obliteration of poverty if I hear of stories of women and men begging for money and sleeping in cars, and they seem to be multiplying?

How can we talk about extinction of poverty if there are still (quasi) slums the like of 'Okella Agius', the ground zero of material poverty and social exclusion?

How can we talk about suppression of poverty when we still want more if we already have more?

How can we talk about elimination of poverty when we still have retired people hardly making it through the end of the month and families depending on food banks?

The truth is that we have a society founded on biting wit.

We claim, and the facts confirm, that our economy is doing well – brilliant.

At the same time, the strangest of things happen, and we seem to live with this. Poverty increases and the gap between the rich and the wealthy and the poor and the needy seem to be growing – strange and very bizarre, I am sure you agree. I am pretty cer-

tain that economists will have a sexy explanation to all of this but I am far more interested in solutions that could avoid such a situation.

Consumers

Now there is another dimension to this singularity.

We want to buy because we are drawn into what Slavoj Zizek would call 'Cultural Consumerism'. We buy and consume till our hands turn blue (or black, if it's a Friday!).

We are made to believe that buying from one place and not from another is OK because the 'company' might tell you it is environmental aware, supporting fair trade, drifting away from slave trade or maybe contributing to some tribe in the middle of Guatemala - if 'you' purchase their goods. Shouldn't we feel good now? These companies almost convince you that you are paying ethically and so it's fine. But all that unruly consumption does create a breach that is very difficult to overcome.

Aid

This Country is now on its way to becoming fully-fledged neoliberal. This is making charity and consumption patterns become part of this redeeming process. If we are not careful, 'charity' will become a compensatory action. We buy, we consume, we dispose, we buy even more but we give to charity. We throw some pennies to I-Istrina or to Dar tal-Providenza, and we are good with our conscious. Wrong. These pennies might feel like you are satisfying ethical obligations but again that is off beam. That is not good enough and that is why that 'Man' said that the 'poor will be around', because 'Charity' can become an occurrence in its own

right. Doing good makes you feel warm and comfortable with yourself and it helps you justify the actions that directly or indirectly burden others. If we are not careful, Oscar Wilde's claims in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, will come to haunt us:

"Now and then, in the course of the century, a great man of science, like Darwin; a great poet, like Keats; a fine critical spirit, like M. Renan; a supreme artist, like Flaubert, has been able to isolate himself, to keep himself out of reach of the clamorous claims of others, to stand 'under the shelter of the wall,' as Plato puts it, and so to realise the perfection of what was in him, to his own incomparable gain, and to the incomparable and lasting gain of the whole world. These, however, are exceptions. The majority of people spoil their lives by an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism – are forced, indeed, so to spoil them. They find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation. It is inevitable that they should be strongly moved by all this. The emotions of man are stirred more quickly than man's intelligence; and, as I pointed out some time ago in an article on the function of criticism, it is much more easy to have sympathy with suffering than it is to have sympathy with thought. Accordingly, with admirable, though misdirected intentions, they very seriously and very sentimentally set themselves to the task of remedying the evils that they see. But their remedies do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it. Indeed, their remedies are part of the disease." (<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/>). This is exactly what is happening.

We are 'simply' keeping the poor alive, rather than nipping the matter in the bud.

How can we talk of eliminating poverty if this Country of ours seems to be devouring up all its resources?

How can we deal with poverty with the electoral programme motivated decisions we take, for example, of providing free health care services to all, free education and stipends that are given to all (even if mummy and daddy drink Cheval Blanc and Chateau Lafite)?

How can we be addressing poverty if taxes are fading away in thin air (*ghax issa taf inti sirna l-Principat ta' Monaco*)?

How can we be dealing with poverty if professionals' charges are colossal, as if it is a God-given right to suck the life out of 'our' patients'/clients' finances?

What a load of frustrations!

We are not really interested in putting an end to it.

We will not sort out poverty by throwing scraps at people, but what do I know, I'm not an economist!

Because free health care for all has become a right, like free education, free welfare services, free this that and the other. In other words, public wealth has turned into a public commodity.

I am not against Charity. In the absence of food, and shelter, it is better than nothing.

But if Charity sits on its own, without long-term solutions (for example by spending conscientiously), if it is only about an event every now and then rather than a concerted effort to transform matters, then Charity degrades and demoralises and makes you feel helpless and weak and not strong enough to deal with your ambitions.

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