

On this date, May 12 in 1968, people arrived in Washington DC by the busloads demanding economic justice. They built a tent city, called “Resurrection City”, across 15 acres near the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument as a multi-day protest against government inaction on poverty. “The Poor People’s Campaign” was the brainchild of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), made up of a diverse coalition of white, Latino, Indigenous and Black Americans from across the country. Sadly, Reverend King never lived to see the event play out. He was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

The leadership pushed on, calling on activists to camp out on the National Mall until the federal government committed to the anti-poverty policies featured in their economic bill of rights. They wanted workers to have meaningful jobs that paid a living wage and the unemployed to have a guaranteed income. They also called for the public to have access to land and capital, and for citizens to play a role in the development and implementation of government programs that affected them.

The Catholic Church has a well-documented tradition on pursuit of the common good and care for “the least of these” (Mt. 25). The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church states: “...the universal destination of goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of particular concern. To this end, the preferential option for the poor should be reaffirmed in all its force”. Additionally, the principle of subsidiarity informs us that the State should not overwhelm local institutions nor should it be completely absent. Larger institutions have essential responsibilities when the local institutions cannot adequately protect human dignity, meet human needs, and advance the common good.

To gauge where we are as a society, in terms of respecting the common good, is to measure how our most vulnerable members are faring. God calls us to be strong advocates for placing the needs of the poor and vulnerable first. We must develop and implement solutions that enable the poor to help themselves. This requires education and training opportunities that are accessible to everyone and lead to employment that pays a living wage and provides a pathway to self-sustainability. A moral and ethical society, built on principles that respect the human dignity of every person, is essential for facilitating the self-reliance of the poor and marginalized.

The vision statement of Catholic Charities of Stockton reflects these very principles. It reads, “In accordance with Catholic Social Teaching, Catholic Charities commits to providing advocacy and social services that maintain and expand the social safety net for families and individuals. Catholic Charities envisions that the dignity of each person is upheld and poverty is reduced as Catholic Charities responds in concert with collaborating partners in the region of the Diocese of Stockton.”

While we serve the Diocese of Stockton region, neither the Diocese nor the diocesan Parishes directly fund us. As a 501(c) 3 non-profit our programs and services are funded through grants, foundations, and the generosity of our communities. Therefore, every dollar donated, all volunteer work, every act of support for Catholic Charities is an action that truly “cares for the least among us”.

Blessings

Deacon Mike