

# Stiffing the poor: With us always

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Alice O'Connor, a historian at the University of California, Santa Barbara, says that her students laugh when she talks about how Lyndon B. Johnson declared a “war on poverty” in the 1960s. Apparently the idea strikes them as quaint. But as O'Connor points out, the disparity between the rich and poor today is greater than it was in the Depression or in the post-World War II years of affluence.

We've moved from a political climate in which war can be declared on poverty to one in which war can be declared on the poor themselves—in the form of policies that favor the privileged. In the Bush administration's first tax cut in 2001, for instance, 40 percent of the benefits went to the richest 1 percent of taxpayers, while the bottom 20 percent of taxpayers received less than 1 percent of the benefits, according to Ichiro Kawachi and Bruce P. Kennedy in *The Health of Nations* (New Press). The more recent tax cut will only exacerbate the disparity between the very rich and very poor.

One of the latest attacks on the poor comes in the form of adjustments to the Earned Income Tax Credit program. The EITC, originally a Republican idea with bipartisan support, is a refundable tax credit for poor working families and individuals. The Internal Revenue Service, at the direction of Congress, plans to introduce a complex “pre-certification” procedure, presumably to weed out those who don't qualify. Critics of the plan say it is so complex that it will scare off some applicants, and that some legitimate applicants won't be able to produce the information requested. The question is: Why are poor people's benefits being examined in ways not applied to benefits for the wealthy? Typically, the IRS scrutinizes taxpayers after the fact, not before.

When Jesus famously said, “The poor you have with you always,” he was not prescribing how things ought to be, nor was he turning away from the needs of the poor. He was realistically describing the way things are. Further, Jesus was quoting from Deuteronomy 15: 1-11, which included not just an assessment of the human community (there will always be someone in need), but also a goal (there should be

no one in need) and a mandate (when there is someone in need, don't be tight-fisted). Indeed, Torah didn't just require benevolence toward the poor, but through the year of Jubilee and other measures, sought to address the systemic roots of poverty.

The apostle Paul had his debates with the other apostles over how the gospel should be applied to gentile believers, but he said they had one thing in common—a commitment to remembering the poor (Gal. 2:10, 6:9-10). This commitment doesn't end all debates about how best to show solidarity with the poor—how to balance “bearing one another's burdens” with expecting people to “carry their own loads.” Still, the presence of poverty in our own land and abroad should bind people of faith together in benevolence and in advocacy for the poor.