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The Christian Fight Against Poverty and for Peace  
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By Christopher Allen-Doucot

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So if President Bush and Sen. Kerry have found God how come they can't seem to find the poor? Listening to these wealthy, privileged white men profess belief in God, Christ in particular, while at the same time they pander to the non-poor and promise swift military responses to protect our "national security" gives me pause to wonder if they believe in the same Jesus I believe in.

Sure, both men have declared themselves to be Christian, but declarations are meaningless without a concomitant practice. Who would believe either of them if they claimed to be faithful ballet dancers? Have we seen any evidence that they study and practice ballet on a daily basis? A Christian ethic is not determined by polls, nor is it dictated by the Vatican. A Christian ethic demands faithful obedience to a conscience informed by prayer, observation of the world, meditation on Scripture, and respectful consideration of the wisdom of those who have come before us.

Perhaps the simplest measure of a Christian can be found in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus says to his disciples: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me. ...[and] as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me" (Matthew 25:40, 45).

Who are the least among us? The poor? African-Americans? The elderly? The handicapped? The mentally impaired? The imprisoned? The refugees in the Sudan? Iraqis? Children in utero? They are neither wealthy nor powerful. They are most often ignored, shunned or labeled deviant or enemy.

Perhaps Bush and Kerry are like the rich man who declares to Jesus that he keeps all the commandments. Though he doesn't lie, cheat or kill and he loves his neighbor, he nonetheless feels incomplete. Jesus tells the man to sell all that he has, give the proceeds to the poor and then follow Jesus. The story ends with the man sorrowfully leaving Jesus rather than his wealth (Matthew 19:20-22).

Imagine if Bush and Kerry, and all professed Christians, were to give more than lip service to these notions. Center stage of the political discourse would be occupied with plans to eradicate poverty and nonviolently respond to injustice.

Candidates would be competing to see who could more quickly give away their wealth and take up residence in the Nelton Court housing project in Hartford. Jesus was telling the rich man that he had put his cart before his horse. It is not possible to follow Jesus and love our neighbor as ourselves so long as we have so much more than our neighbors.

The perspectives and priorities of those who are impoverished are vastly different than those of Bush and Kerry. The poor and oppressed will never receive meaningful attention from Bush and Kerry so long as they and the rest of America love their wealth more than God.

When the Scribes were trying to trap Jesus, they asked him: What is the greatest commandment? Jesus replied: "You shall love your God with all your heart, mind and soul ... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:34-40). Famously he later added that his followers must also love their enemies. Jesus isn't asking us to like everybody. Rather, he is saying that insofar as we have life, a safe place to live, adequate food and health care, sufficient clothing and access to education so too must our neighbors and enemies.

For "If anyone say, 'I love God,' and hates his/her brother, he is a liar" (1 John 4:20). Hate is not merely a physical assault on another; it is the refusal to love the other fully. And so we are liars when we say that we love God while at the same time we love ourselves more than the least among us.

What is missing from the political scene today is a moral leader who speaks decisively on behalf of the poor and oppressed among whom she/he lives and with whom he/she struggles for justice. Such a leader would never need to utter a prayer, attend a worship service or invoke the name of God for all to know that she/he is close to God.

St. Francis of Assisi was succinct when he said: "Preach the Gospel daily, use words when necessary." President Bush, Sen. Kerry, it is time to shut up and start preaching.

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