COMMENTARY By DR. DHANPAUL NARINE

Rich Pope, Poor Pope:
The Perils of Inequality

The architecture of the poor is crumbling. On the tables of the rich are delicacies from everywhere. The scraps are thrown to the poor. In the ocean of plenty the majority are rudderless.

Pope Francis says that inequality is a social evil. The United Nations calls it the paradox of our times. Its Millennium Development Goals stipulate that the eradication of poverty will be high on the agenda and with good reason so be it. For inequality, the gap between the rich and the poor makes depressing reading. In the two decades between 1990 and 2010 income inequality increased by over 11 per cent and the trend is for more increases in the near future.

Economists have suggested that one of the main ways of narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor is to empower the latter with greater spending. But with 75 per cent of the population living in societies where income are unevenly distributed it is difficult to see how the imbalance could be fixed.

The disparity in purchasing power and the prevalence of fragile social institutions mean that the majority is excluded from participation in formal economic structures. This can have devastating implications for the economy and development. For example, when one in every five persons are earning less than $1.25 per day what can be set aside for the rainy day? Where would the funding for education and health and other basic needs be provided? But there are other problems as well.

According to the United Nations, ‘one in every four children under age five has inadequate height for his or her age.’ Stunted growth is as result of malnutrition and the UN figures show that 162 million young children are currently suffering from under-nutrition. As if there are not enough to disrupt the pattern of living and worry social and economic planners there are wars and conflicts that cause displacement. The UN tells us that every day in 2013, 32,000 people had to abandon their homes to seek protection of real estate on the planet. Millions of Catholics face poverty as well but the response of the Vatican for action has not been given sufficient attention in the literature.

The Popes have long been aware of the realities of the world. However, a revolution in the papacy occurred under Pope John Paul the Second. This pontiff decided to address the issue of inequality and to actually do something about it. He realized that the United weak, the vulnerable and the voiceless.

In July 2005 Pope John Paul spoke in Scotland around the same time that the G8 Summit was held at Gleneagles. The Pope spoke to the ‘Make Poverty History’ rally and urged the world leaders to cancel the debts of poor countries. The leaders agreed to forgive the debts of a number of countries in the sum of more than $40 billion. This was a small start but it showed that the Papacy can be in a position to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor.

Paul Ryan (R-Wis), for instance, says that he upholds Catholic traditions and he puts people first. In England there is talk of a mansion tax to get the rich to pay up. But Pope Francis has his critics.

The billionaire investor Kenneth Langone has stated that he and his wealthy friends might stop their donations to the Catholic Church if the Pope continues his attack on capitalism. It will be recalled that Mr. Langone was mentioned in the overpayment of Richard Grasso, the former president of the New York Stock Exchange. Mr. de Grasse received $190 million in deferred compensation under the watch of Mr. Langone. It is suggested that since Mr. Langone is a free spender and lobbies the Pope to his views and money can undermine the work of the Vatican.

Pope Francis has also been described as a Marxist by some of his critics. He has responded by saying that people expected the cup to overflow and benefit the poor but as he says it ‘magically got bigger and left out the poor. In any event the poor has been mentioned many times in the gospel and even Marxists are good people.’ It is clear that poverty will be on the agenda of Pope Francis in the years ahead. This is to be encouraged as the Child should go to bed hungry.

What is needed is for all religions to meet at the United Nations, to declare ‘war’ on poverty and to have the leaders of the world accountable to ordinary people. This would be a good first step.