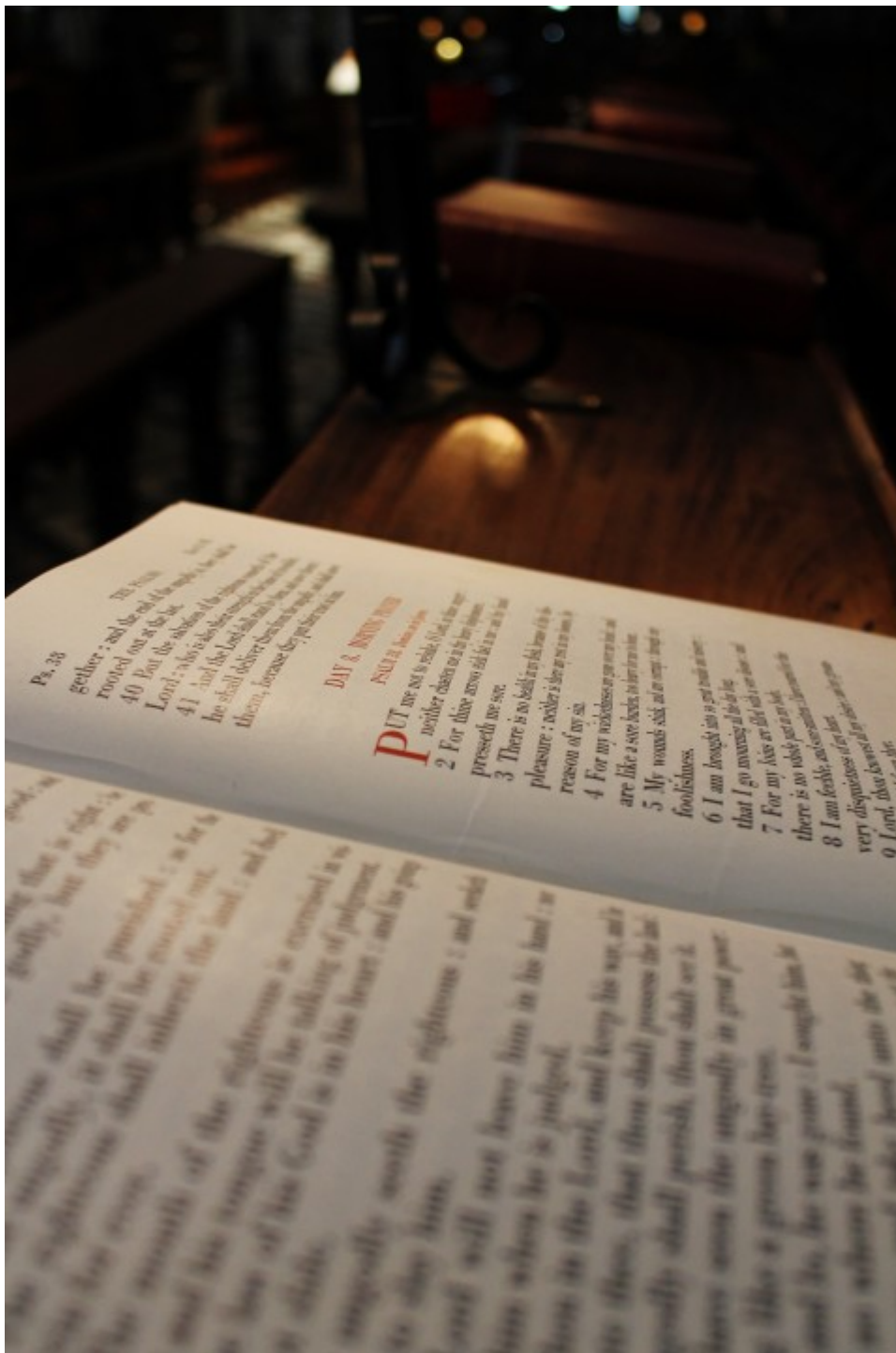


Prayer that makes hard hearts softer

When we pray for "the poor," do we think of actual people?

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [August 1, 2018](#) issue



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Composing “prayers of the people” for Sunday worship is a tough assignment. Deciding what to include is the first big challenge. Then there is the tendency to gear such prayers more to worshipers’ ears than to the heart of God. We all know prayers that use fancy language to soft-pedal life’s cruelest realities or that dance around the plight of people in dire straits.

I have to admit that I've contributed a number of anemic prayer petitions of my own over the years. Knowing how daunting it can be to address God on behalf of an entire community, I now ask questions of myself like these: Are enemies receiving more than vague mention in these communal prayers? Is physical sickness really the most exciting thing that happens to us, or are we simply allotting generous prayer space to our bodily concerns because we consider illness to be some kind of injustice? Do our references to "the poor" substitute an abstract economic category for actual people whose individual lives hang by a thread?

It's this last concern that has my attention today. When Speaker of the House Paul Ryan briefly dismissed Patrick Conroy this spring from his position as chaplain of the House of Representatives, it was Conroy's praying that did him in. He prayed that there wouldn't be winners and losers under the new tax laws but rather "benefits balanced and shared by all Americans." That was too much for Ryan, who admonished Conroy to "stay out of politics." In the end, liberals and conservatives together rescued Conroy's chaplaincy.

I don't know Father Conroy's general prayer habits. But it's not unrealistic to think he was trying to converse with God about a legislative strategy that essentially delivers a large tax cut to corporations and wealthier Americans, which in turn causes the federal deficit to spike, which then creates the argument that there's no choice but to institute savage cuts to social programs. In a way, such a strategy scapegoats the have-nots for our country's deficit woes.

Here's my word regarding our most vulnerable brothers and sisters: it shouldn't be a crime to be poor and need public assistance. Yet the current effort to sharply stiffen work requirements for those seeking food stamps does just that. It penalizes poverty. Most working-age adults on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) already work, but at low-wage jobs with unreliable hours, no benefits, and little or no access to living-wage jobs. Threatening to cut off critical food assistance to people who face multiple logistical and educational barriers to gainful employment is mean and brutish. It only leaves people in deeper poverty.

The Bible is littered with reminders of the privilege of meeting needs for those who struggle. *Sklerokardia* is the term used frequently by biblical writers to describe the inelastic condition of the human heart that hardens toward God and others. If the very pronunciation or appearance of that word brings to mind the medical term *arteriosclerosis*, it's probably doing its job. Hard-hearted indifference is a chilling

idea. So is waging war on the poor.

The next time I'm assigned to write prayers, I'm going to pray for enough honesty to locate words that aim to soften calcified hearts (including my own) and that encourage them to beat in tune with the pulse of God's own heart.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Prayers that soften hearts."