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Responding to Poverty

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Poverty



CHALLENGES FOR 1971-1972:

The Challenge of Pope John and Pope Paul

"There is an immense task incumbent on all men of good will, namely, the task of restoring the relations of the human family in truth, in justice, in love and in freedom; the relations between individual human beings; between citizens and their respective political communities; between political communities themselves; between individuals, families, intermediate associations and political communities on the one hand, and the world community on the other. This is a most exalted task, for it is the task of bringing about true peace in the order established by God."

John XXIII—1963

"If someone who has the riches of this world sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him? It is well known how strong were the words used by the fathers of the Church to describe the proper attitude of persons who possess anything toward persons in need. To quote St. Ambrose: 'You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich.' That is, private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute and unconditioned right. No one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need, when others lack necessities. In a word, according to the traditional doctrine as found in the fathers of the Church and the great theologians, the right of property must never be exercised to the detriment of the common good. If there should arise a conflict 'between acquired private rights and primary community exigencies,' it is the responsibility of public authorities 'to look for a solution, with the active participation of individuals and social groups.'"

Paul VI—1967

Report to U.S. Bishops' Conference, November, 1969¹

"...the Bishops were one step from recognizing that the priority item of Black Americans is to rebuild ourselves out of the legacy of powerlessness and self-negation and self-hatred which has so long been ours. We are not racist. Rather we have tended to undersell ourselves and to overestimate our white countrymen. We control very few institutions, even those which it would be naturally assumed we would control. Our task is to fashion among our number a strong and honorable people who can be constructive in freedom. Our task is to pursue a sharing in power, or, in current language, Black power."

Donald M. Clark, President
Black Catholic Clergy Caucus

¹ From United States Catholic Conference Task Force on Urban Problems.

"The Spanish Speaking...continue to look toward the Church as perhaps the only institution which will help them to realize their human aspirations. Nor can the Church effectively minister to the Hispanic community's spiritual needs and ignore its temporal, material needs and daily sufferings, for the problems of discrimination, segregation, unemployment, unequal educational opportunity, slum housing, poor health, and hunger are all too real to the majority of the Spanish Speaking."

Andrew Gallegos, Representative,
President's Council of Youth Opportunity

"If we are to develop a new agenda for the 1970's:

—We must go beyond the civil rights struggle of the 60's.

—We must stop exploiting the fear of the ethnic, middle Americans.

—We must bring together a new coalition to press for new goals and new priorities for all the poor and the near poor.

—Including the Blacks—the Appalachians—the Indians—the Spanish Speaking—and the white urban ethnic groups.

—Then we can develop a true cultural pluralism in this country and reduce the 'inevitable group. . . conflict.' "

Geno C. Baroni, Director, Program Development,
U.S.C.C. Task Force on Urban Problems

TEACHER:

"What must be done about poverty?" The purpose of this module is to suggest that the answer to this question must be an individual one. Nevertheless, it may be suggested that one answer may be for an individual to begin to become conscious of a responsibility to create a climate of justice in his home, school, and church.

Individual responses to poverty can be no less complex than the causes of poverty. Many responses to poverty, however, have lacked this complexity. For example, many citizens, in the name of church, country, or ideals, have set about "doing something about poverty" by offering leadership, comfort, programs, and aid to the poor. These citizens had rarely investigated the causes of poverty nor had they listened to the poor.

In *Seeds of Destruction* Thomas Merton emphasizes that Americans have been unwilling to listen to one part of the poor population, the Blacks. Merton feels the Black man offers a "message of salvation" to anyone who will listen:

"In simple terms, I would say that the prophetic message of the Negro from God to the society of our time is this: White society has sinned in many ways. It has betrayed Christ by its injustices to races it considered 'inferior' and to countries which it colonized. In particular, it has sinned against Christ in its lamentable injustices and cruelties to the Negro. The time has

come when both white and Negro have been granted, by God, a unique and momentous opportunity to repair this injustice and to re-establish the violated moral and social order on a new plane."²

Merton, then, suggests one response to poverty: listen. In making this suggestion, Merton has carefully considered the causes of poverty.

"It seems to me that we have little genuine interest in human liberty and in the human person. What we are interested in, on the contrary, is the unlimited freedom of the corporation. When we call ourselves the 'Free World' we mean first of all the world in which business is free. And the freedom of the person comes only after that because in our eyes the freedom of the person is dependent on money. That is to say, without money freedom has no meaning. And, therefore, the most basic freedom of all is the freedom to make money.

"If you have nothing to buy or sell, freedom is, in your case, irrelevant. In other words, what we are really interested in is not persons but profits. Our society is organized first and foremost with an eye to business, and whenever we run into a choice between the rights of a human person and the advantage of a profitmaking organization, the rights of the person will have difficulty getting a hearing. Profit first, people afterwards." (pages 22-23)

After having carefully considered this cause of poverty, Merton suggests a second, more concrete response.

"Is it true that even the smallest change of our present social framework is necessarily a disaster so great, that any price, however immoral, can legitimately be paid to keep it from coming about? Is it not possible the white and Negroes might join together in a creative political experiment, such as the world has never yet seen, and in which the first condition would be that the whites consented to let the Negroes run their own revolution nonviolently, giving them the necessary support and cooperation, and not being alarmed at some of the sacrifices and difficulties that would necessarily be involved?" (page 40)

President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania makes a suggestion which is slightly different from Merton's.

"[We] seek to ameliorate intolerable conditions through acts of love and kindness, where the beneficiary of this love and kindness remains an object. But when the victims of poverty and oppression begin to behave like men and to try to change those conditions, the representatives of the Church stand aside.

"My purpose today is to suggest to you that we should accept

² From Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964, pp. 66-67. Copyright 1964 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux; reprinted with permission of the publisher.

that development of peoples means rebellion. I am suggesting that unless we participate actively in the rebellion against those social structures and economic organizations which condemn men to poverty, humility, and degradation, that the Church will become irrelevant to Man, and the Christian religion will degenerate into a set of superstitions accepted only by the fearful."³

The question "What does poverty mean to me?" still remains unanswered. At this point in the study of the question, however, the term "poverty" itself should have some meaning. The word should suggest:

1. the complexities of the syndrome of poverty;
2. the effects which poverty has on health care, housing, schooling, and the general quality of life;
3. and the need to reform those social and economic structures which cause poverty.

There is a difference, however, between knowing what poverty is and deciding to make an individual response. Response means awareness of the poor and of ourselves. Awareness may mean the need to change ourselves rather than the poor.

It is most difficult to be aware of and to change those assumptions which are so much a part of our attitude that they go unquestioned. The following questions may create some awareness of these attitudes.

1. Why is a man valuable? Because he can produce? Because he can do something for us? In what his financial statement amounts to? Because of his socio-economic level?
2. What is our attitude toward our personal property? Are we dependent on the things we own? Can we do without any of them? Which ones don't we really need? Are we willing to have less than others (the poor) may have more? Do our possessions possess us? How?
3. What was Christ's teaching on storing up treasures in this temporal life? What does he say about the standard of this world and the standard of his kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount? (Matthew's gospel is suggested for reference.)
4. What is our attitude toward our rights? Do we feel we have an absolute right to possessions which exceed our needs because we "earned" them? Does the fact that others who have worked as long and as hard as we cannot "earn" equal possessions change this attitude?
5. What are the rights of all men?

An investigation of basic assumptions may not indicate a

³ From Julius K. Nyerere, "Who Controls Men's Destiny?" [reprint of an address], *Maryknoll*, June 1971. Copyright 1971 by Catholic Foreign Mission Society; reprinted by permission of the publisher. In the original speech, President Nyerere was addressing official representatives of the Church (Maryknoll missionaries) and therefore specifically addressed "the Church."

course of action. It will, however, indicate on what basis action should be taken.

Where does action begin? Merton has made one suggestion: listen to the poor. Also listen to your community. What are its basic assumptions? Which of these should be supported and expressed in your life? Which should be questioned and changed? At the community level, then, one response to poverty is to support the value of justice in your household, school, neighborhood, club, etc.

Action outside the level of your immediate community is more complex. Here it is useful to remember that a complex response to poverty is required by the fact that poverty is complex. It follows, then, that the more valuable response to poverty will be based on knowledge of some aspect of poverty. Thus the most useful action on a level wider than your immediate community will probably be in those areas in which you and the poor share a common ground. Is there some citywide decision which should be made by talking and listening to the poor?

This method of action from an examination of self, to an examination of the immediate community, to an examination of a larger social organization, will have several results.

1. It will "set the stage" for broad social and economic change in so far as it keeps justice in focus.
2. Interaction with the poor on common problems will result in listening to and learning from the poor.
3. It will create an awareness of change in yourself, a change in which the poor have played a part.
4. It will create that cooperation with and respect for the poor which eliminates the need for "doing something for them."

STUDENT ACTIVITIES:

The following questions may assist in making unconscious assumptions into conscious assumptions.

Self: Is my attitude toward others based on bias or prejudice? How do I recognize the value of a person?

Family: On what basis does your family make decisions concerning social relationships?

School: How does your school determine the value of its students, faculty, and staff? On what basis are relationships within the school established?

ACTION:

If you discover that a change "can't be done" in your community, ask the questions, "Why can't it be done? Who will be hurt by change? How or why will they be hurt?" Don't stop questioning until you reach the root of the problem. Don't accept generalities or slogans as answers.

Appendices:

READINGS ON THE CHRISTIAN VIRTUES OF POVERTY

(Suggested for liturgical use)

1. "A man with grace is a man who has been emptied, who stands impoverished before God, who has nothing of which he can boast: 'For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil. 2, 13). He works out his salvation in the poverty of 'fear and trembling' (Phil. 2, 12). Grace does not erase our poverty; it transforms it totally, allowing it to share in the poverty of Jesus' own immolated heart (cf. Rom. 8, 17).

"This poverty, then, is not just another virtue — one among many. It is a necessary ingredient in any authentic Christian attitude toward life. Without it there can be no Christianity and no imitation of Christ. It is no accident that 'poverty of spirit' is the first of the beatitudes. What is the sorrow of those who mourn, the suffering of the persecuted, the self-forgetfulness of the merciful, or the humility of the peacemakers — what are these if not variations of spiritual poverty? This spirit is also the mother of the threefold mystery of faith, hope and charity. It is the doorway through which men must pass to become authentic human beings.

"Only through poverty of spirit do men draw near to God; only through it does God draw near to man. Poverty of spirit is the meeting point of heaven and earth, the mysterious place where God and man encounter each other, the point where infinite mystery meets concrete existence." (*Poverty of Spirit*, Johannes B. Metz, pp. 25-26)

2. "God not only created and redeemed all men. Into each man he breathes his own Spirit and recognizes in each man a new-begotten son. All men are brothers of Christ, a brotherhood more basic than any human division based upon family, race, culture, language, or wealth. But these human divisions, these groupings exist and in all justice must be respected. Each group bears in itself some image of God to be loved and developed until God becomes all in all. It would be evil and unjust, a sin that cries to heaven for vengeance to aim at the destruction or even to restrain the activity and growth of such natural groups. Public authorities have a duty not to impose uniformity in the name of economic progress but to advance the conditions of minority groups both economically and humanly. Because they are members of Christ's Mystical Body Catholics must realize a special obligation to their brothers in a minority that much more so if they are poor or unfortunate. 'God has proved His love to us by laying down His life for our sakes; we too must be ready to lay down our lives for the sake of our brothers. And now, suppose that a man has the worldly goods he needs, and sees his

brother go in want; if he steels his heart against his brother, how can we say that the love of God dwells in him?" But minorities also have duties. Even in reaction to past sufferings they must not exaggerate their own group's good to the neglect of the good common to all men. Each minority must develop a true social relationship with other minorities and with the majority in order that there be a true exchange and sharing of the good of each for the good of all. All citizens have the right to a just share in the human enrichment of their nation." (Adapted from the encyclicals *Christianity and Social Progress* and *Peace on Earth* by Pope John XXIII)

3. "Be careful not to make a show of your religion before men; if you do, no reward awaits you in your Father's house in heaven.

"Thus, when you do some act of charity, do not announce it with a flourish of trumpets, as the hypocrites do in synagogue and in the streets to win admiration from men. I tell you this: they have their reward already. No; when you do some act of charity, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing; your good deed must be secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

"Again, when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; they love to say their prayers standing up in synagogue and at the street-corners, for everyone to see them. I tell you this: they have their reward already. But when you pray, go into a room by yourself, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is there in the secret place; and your Father who sees what is secret will reward you." (Matthew, chapter 6, verses 1-6)

"Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where it grows rusty and moth-eaten, and thieves break in to steal it. Store up treasure in heaven, where there is no moth and no rust to spoil it, no thieves to break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

"The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eyes are sound, you will have light for your whole body; if the eyes are bad, your whole body will be in darkness. If then the only light you have is darkness, the darkness is doubly dark.

"No servant can be the slave of two masters; for either he will hate the first and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and think nothing of the second. You cannot serve God and Money.

"Therefore I bid you put away anxious thoughts about food and drink to keep you alive, and clothes to cover your body. Surely life is more than food, the body more than clothes. Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow and reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. You are worth more

than the birds! Is there a man of you who by anxious thought can add a foot to his height? And why be anxious about clothes? Consider how the lilies grow in the fields; they do not work, they do not spin; and yet, I tell you, even Solomon in all his splendour was not attired like one of these. But if that is how God clothes the grass in the fields, which is there today; and tomorrow is thrown on the stove, will he not all the more clothe you? How little faith you have! No, do not ask anxiously, 'What are we to wear? What are we to drink? What shall we wear?' All these are things for the heathen to run after, not for you, because your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. Set your mind on God's kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well. So do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself. Each day has troubles enough of its own." (Matthew, chapter 6, verses 19-34⁴)

4. "All too easily, man lives alienated from the truth of his Being. The threatening 'nothingness' of his poor infinity and infinite poverty drives him hither and thither among the distractions of everyday cares. He runs away from the 'night,' with its fear and trembling before the truth of his Being, into the bright lights of easily understood platitudes. St. Paul termed this as seeking the security of the 'Law,' a security that distorts the elusive mystery and open authenticity of his Being. The Bible calls 'Pharisees' those who try to evade the depth of their innate poverty through clinging to the 'Law.' They are 'rich in spirit' and the most dangerous opponents of poverty, and hence of Jesus, because they vaunt their own brand of piety and seek to set up God as an opponent of poverty.

"Left alone to himself, man still remains the prisoner of his own Being. He cannot successfully hide for long his mysterious Being. If he attempts this, the truth of his Being haunts him with its nameless emissary: anxiety. This becomes the prophet of the repressed mystery of his Being; with its alienation, anxiety takes the place of the scorned poverty. In the final analysis man has one of two choices: to obediently accept his innate poverty or to become the slave of anxiety." (*Poverty of Spirit*, Johannes B. Metz, pp. 30-31)

5. "Peace is not the mere absence of conflict nor the result of a balance of power. It is something positive but precarious. It must be built up day after day in pursuit of the happiness intended by God, an orderly process of growth built upon a more perfect form of justice for all men. Excessive inequalities, whether economic or social or cultural, arouse tensions and conflicts that

⁴ Readings 3, 6, and 9 are in the translation of *The Jerusalem Bible*. Copyright 1966 by Darton, Longman & Todd, Ltd. and Doubleday & Co., Inc.

endanger and can destroy peace. To wage war on misery and to struggle against injustice is not only to improve conditions of living but also to promote the human and spiritual progress of all men, the common good of humanity. The poor and disadvantaged themselves have the primary responsibility to work for their own development. But they cannot build peace by themselves, alone. Cooperation among the poor within the framework of support and understanding and assistance and opportunity given freely by their fellowmen: this is a true program for the development of peace. Of course, this also requires institutions to prepare, to coordinate, to direct, the cooperation of all in the community. But the most necessary foundation is personal integrity, a commitment to personal effort and sacrifice, to suffering accepted for the love of one's brothers in need. For Christians this means union with Christ in his sacrifice for all men. For all men are united in this progress toward God: the development of peace on earth." (Adapted from the encyclical *On the Development of Peoples* by Pope Paul VI)

6. "They even brought babies for him to touch. When the disciples saw them they rebuked them, but Jesus called for the children and said, 'Let the little ones come to me; do not try to stop them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you that whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.'

"A man of the ruling class put this question to him: 'Good Master, what must I do to win eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not give false evidence; honour your father and mother.' The man answered, 'I have kept all these since I was a boy.' On hearing this Jesus said, 'There is still one thing lacking: sell everything you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; and come follow me.' At these words his heart sank; for he was a very rich man. When Jesus saw it he said, 'How hard it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' Those who heard asked, 'Then who can be saved?' He answered, 'What is impossible for men is possible for God.'

"Peter said, 'We have left our belongings to become your followers.' Jesus said, 'I tell you this: there is no one who has given up home, or wife, brother, parents, or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not be repaid many times over in this age, and in the age to come have eternal life.'" (Luke, chapter 18, verses 15-30)

7. "Poverty has many other visages in our life. Every stirring of genuine *love* makes us poor. It dominates the whole human person, makes absolute claims upon him (cf. Mt. 22, 37), and thus subverts all extra-human assurances of security. The true lover must be unprotected and give of himself without reservation or question; and he must display life-long fidelity.

"Every *genuine human encounter* must be inspired by poverty of spirit. We must forget ourselves in order to let the other person approach us. We must be able to open up to him, to let his distinctive personality unfold — even though it often frightens or repels us. We often keep the other person down, and only see what we want to see; thus we never really encounter the mysterious secret of his being, only ourselves. Failing to risk the poverty of encounter, we indulge in a new form of self-assertion and pay a price for it: loneliness. Because we did not risk the poverty of openness (cf. Mt. 10, 39), our lives are not graced with the warm fullness of human existence. We are left with only a shadow of our real self.

"Finally, there is the inescapable *poverty of death*. It is the lodestone for all the various forms of poverty of spirit: the cutting loneliness of our own Being, the lonely resolve of loyalty, the apparent futility of our love, along with the other manifestations of poverty. All these others are merely the prelude and the testing ground for the critical moment of death. It is here that the truth of our being is judged irrevocably. In death we experience the great poverty of our human nature; in death we carry out our obedience of our human destiny, with all its uncertainty and critical decisiveness." (*Poverty of Spirit*, Johannes B. Metz, pp. 45-46)

8. "No man is an island. Each man is a member of society. He is a part of the whole of mankind. His vocation to self-fulfillment is shared by all men in every age in every place. Nations pass into history. Even civilizations are born, develop, and die. But mankind lives on to share the goal of progress. Human solidarity benefits all. It also imposes a duty on each man.

"Progress must not be limited on economic growth. Possession of goods is not the final good of nations or of persons. Prosperity can harden hearts and close minds. Self-interest can masquerade as service. Avarice will destroy solidarity. Disunity ends progress. Selfishness is the face of moral poverty for the poor as for the rich, for nations, for families, for individuals.

"Progress is genuinely human when it is balanced, complete, integral, when it promotes the good of every man and of the whole man. True humanism opens our hearts and minds to our fellowman and to God." (Adapted from the encyclical *The Development of Peoples* by Pope Paul VI)

9. " 'Sir, we should like to see Jesus.' So Philip went and told Andrew, and the two of them went to tell Jesus. Then Jesus replied: 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. In truth, in very truth I tell you, a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest. The man who loves himself is lost, but he who hates himself in this world will be kept safe for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; where I am, my servant will be. Whoever serves me will be honoured by my Father.

" 'Now my soul is in turmoil, and what am I to say? Father, save me from this hour. No, it was for this that I came to this hour. Father, glorify thy name.' A voice sounded from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing by said it was thunder, while others said 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus replied, 'This voice spoke for your sake, not mine. Now is the hour of judgement for this world; now shall the Prince of this world be driven out. And I shall draw all men to myself, when I am lifted up from the earth.' This he said to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

"The people answered, 'Our Law teaches us that the Messiah continues forever. What do you mean by saying that the Son of Man must be lifted up? What Son of Man is this?' Jesus answered them: 'The light is among you still, but not for long. Go on your way while you have the light, so that darkness may not overtake you. He who journeys in the dark does not know where he is going. While you have the light, trust to the light, so that you may become men of light.' After these words Jesus went away from them into hiding." (John, chapter 12, verses 22-36)

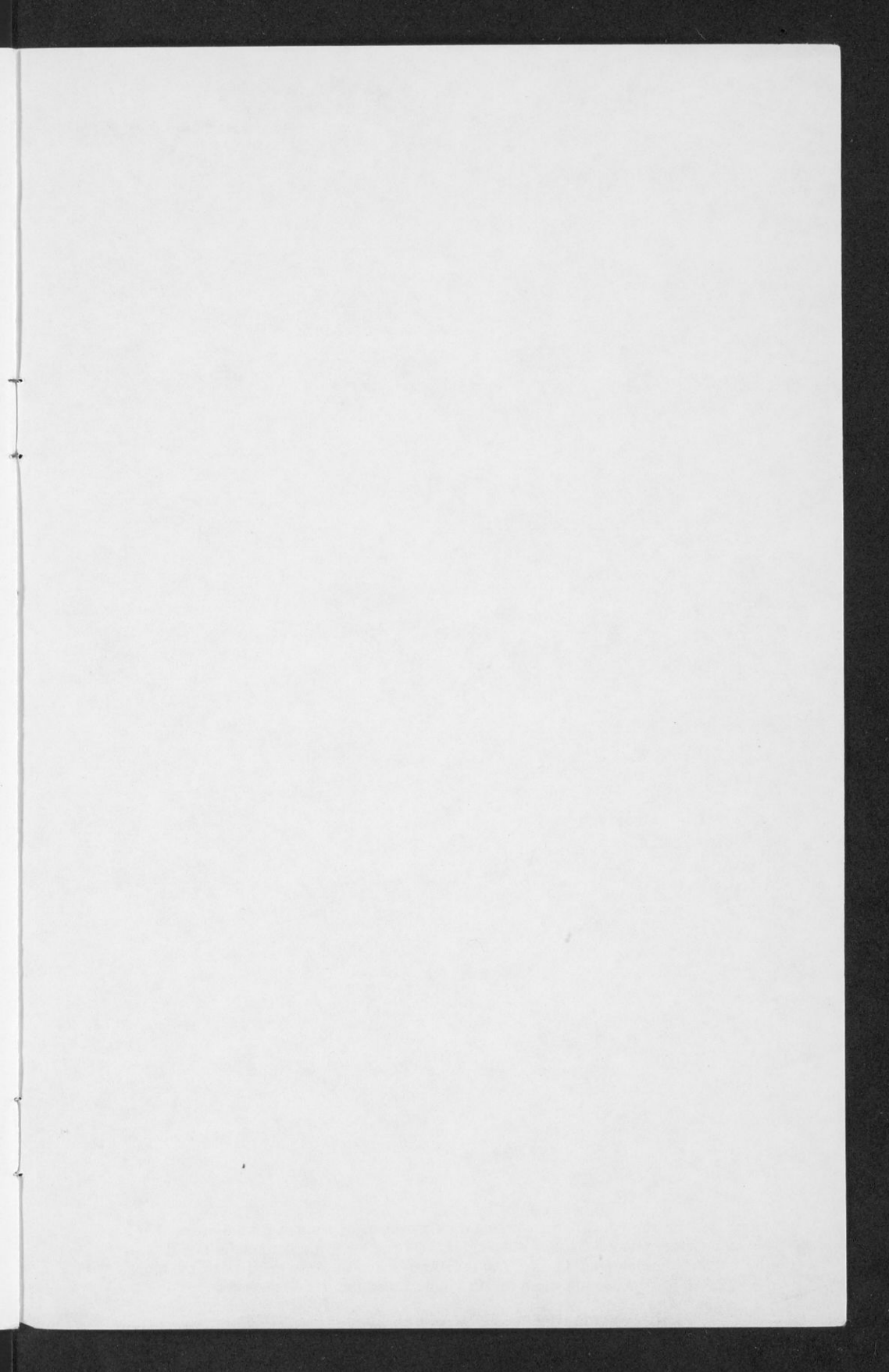
Notes

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