

# Embracing the Leper: The Story of Amazon Relief

## Study Guide

### Introduction to the Film

*Embracing the Leper* takes viewers to the depressing world of the poor and 45,000 persons with leprosy in the Amazon region of Brazil where we discover a compassion that is extraordinary. Through the eyes and words of filmmaker Gerry Straub and his host, former Michigan lawyer, Jim Flickinger, who created a multidimensional project called Amazon Relief, we encounter the poor who are Jesus in a distressing disguise. The port city of Manaus is plagued by a poverty so lethal it is choking people to death. Hidden in the dreadful slums are countless malnourished children, who constantly face profound hunger.

Gerry's own statements of his deeply held and courageously lived out religious convictions; equally compelling statements on compassion and action from Jim Flickinger, Dorothy Day, and Sr. Joan Chittister; and Gerry's poignant visuals disturb and challenge viewers at many levels. He makes us see what we would rather not see. His film engages us emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and behaviorally. He invites us to feel and empathize more deeply, to think more critically, to pray more faithfully, and to act more courageously. His personal witness is as inspiring as it is troubling. As an expression of the Gospel, Gerry's life and films are indeed "good news for the poor." But they await the viewers' response to become even "better news for the poor."

### A Note from the Filmmaker, Gerry Straub

"In April of 2002, I traveled to Manaus with an extraordinary man, a Secular Franciscan who is making a world of difference in a city half a world away from his home in Michigan. Jim Flickinger gave up a successful law practice after deciding he was going to do something about the poverty he saw in the Amazon during a trip in 1995. When it comes to relieving the suffering of the poor, Jim's philosophy is simple. He says: 'I can't do everything, but I will do everything I can.' And doing everything he could meant starting a charitable organization called Amazon Relief."

### A Note about the Filmmaker, Gerry Straub

As the result of his life-changing encounter with the spirit of Francis of Assisi in 1995, Gerry Straub left a profitable and successful career as a producer of Hollywood soap operas for a radically different vocation. He spent months living with the poor all over the world, so that he could capture their faces and share their stories to all who would open their eyes, ears, and hearts to see, listen, and be converted. His radical conversion reveals the radical message and witness of Jesus. Gerry challenges us to join him in following this Jesus who is to be found in the lives of God's special people, the poor and marginalized of this world.

## **Outline**

### **(Time and Description of the 8 Segments)**

#### **Part One—Poverty and How Some Are Responding**

1. 5:05 Introduction: The “exotic and tragic” contrasts of Manaus, Brazil
2. 2:00 Short biography of Gerry Straub
3. 7:20 Jim Flickinger and his Amazon Relief project for persons with leprosy
4. 2:20 Typical dwelling of the poor and a call to action  
*Note:* When you discuss this segment, replay the tour of this dwelling for its visual impact
5. 2:00 The images and smells of poverty and Dorothy Day’s call to compassion

#### **Part Two—Compassionate Action in the Face of Leprosy**

6. 4:45 The images and terrible anguish of leprosy, the inner beauty of those afflicted with the disease, and the call to “be in communion with them”
7. 3:05 Reflections on compassion
8. 5:30 “Poverty of spirit” and the call to action on many levels

### **Planning Your Time Together**

This DVD can be used in a variety of settings, including adult faith formation sessions, high school or university classrooms, parish Advent or Lenten retreats, parish social justice committee formation meetings, RCIA sessions, parish staff meetings, pastoral council meetings, and more.

The total running time for the DVD is 32 minutes, divided into eight short segments. The first five segments focus on poverty in the region. Segments 6 and 7 add the reality of leprosy in the region. Segment 8 calls us to action at many levels, including a lengthy reflection on our need for “poverty of spirit.” These segments allow for great diversity in presentation: breaking the film into separate viewings, choosing specific segments or scenes for a particular setting or event, or eliminating segments for a shortened viewing.

#### **One Session (Half-Day or Full-Day Retreat)**

Plan time to view and discuss the entire film, share simple food, pray together, and plan a parish, group, or class response.

#### **Two to Three Sessions (60–120 Minutes per Session)**

Follow steps 1 to 4 for segments 1–5 in the first session.

Follow steps 1 to 4 for segments 6–8 in the second session, plus add steps 5 to 7.

Or, if time and/or the group size necessitates it, carry out steps 5 to 7 in a third session.

# Steps and Directions for the Session(s)

**1. Open with prayer.** Start by asking for the courage to open your eyes, ears, and heart to the often silent cries of the poor and for the grace to respond with compassion and courage.

**2. Share feelings and reflection.** Because the visual images are so overwhelming, participants may need time to reflect on their feelings before discussing their reactions to the film. Begin with these questions:

- What image(s) or scene(s) most disturbed you?
- What were your feelings as you watched?
- Why are many of these images so difficult to see?
- Why do we resist “seeing” the poor and especially persons with leprosy?

*After a moment for silent reflection on the first two questions, you might have participants share their answers in pairs or small groups before a discussion of the last two questions as a whole group.*

**3. Identify challenging statements.** Invite participants to identify any statements or statistics that especially challenged them and the questions that the statement(s) raised in their minds.

**4. Discuss “Quotes and Questions.”** Select quotes and questions from the segment(s) you viewed, then follow the steps below.

- Read the quotation aloud, have someone in the group read it aloud, or replay it from the DVD.
- Ask participants to reflect silently for a moment on the question(s) following each quotation, share their answers in pairs or small groups, and invite them to share their responses with the whole group, depending on time.
- Any action suggestions that are identified in these responses could be posted on newsprint.
- A good final question, if time permits, would be:  
*As you watched the film, what changed about the way you see the life of people in extreme poverty and/or with crippling leprosy?*

**5. Consider action suggestions.**

- Invite questions on any action suggestions that may have been identified and posted on newsprint during your discussion.
- Duplicate and distribute “Suggested Responses” and discuss the action suggestions from each of the three sections according to the time available.
- Also depending on time, invite participants to identify additional action suggestions.

**6. Move to decisions.**

- Invite participants to decide on their next step as an individual or family, sharing their decisions in pairs, if time permits.
- Discuss and decide whether to come up with an action for the whole group, class, or parish and what that action might be. Create an implementation plan for the action.

**7. Conclude with prayer.**

- Use “A Litany on Serving the Poor” (at the end of this guide) or pray the Peace Prayer of St. Francis.

## Quotes and Questions from Specific Segments

[2] “The hardest thing for me to understand and accept was not only [St. Francis’] unconditional love of the poor, but also his puzzling love of poverty itself. To better understand, I followed [him] around the world . . . where I spent months living among the poor in some of the most horrific slums on earth.”

- What would make a wealthy TV producer do such a thing?
- Could you see yourself doing anything like it? Why or why not?

[3] “When we are confronted with the unbelievable severity of the poverty that people face on a daily basis in the Third World, we are truly paralyzed by the scope of the problem and feel absolutely hopeless and think—we can’t do anything about it.”

- Is that how you feel after watching this film? Why or why not?
- What are some sources of hope in the midst of all this poverty?

[3] “The poor live without drinkable water or adequate plumbing and they share their humble homes with snakes, bats, spiders, and a horde of large ugly insects. And the poor never find any relief from the stifling heat and humidity.”

- What would it be like to live like this? (for example, to go without air-conditioning during the summer)

[4] (Showing a “typical house” with 22 people living in two small rooms, a kitchen, and an outside toilet)

“I was drawn to the fortitude of the grandmother. She has seen a lot and endured a lot in her life... I tried to imagine living in this house amid the chaos with the smell and in the unrelenting heat.”

- What would be the hardest aspects for you in living in such a home?
- What do you think the grandmother has seen and endured over her lifetime?
- If this grandmother were to write you a letter, what do you think she would ask of you?

[4] “All I can do is to introduce them to you and hope and pray that together we can figure out how to ease their misery. I am only sure of one thing: Christ is with them. And he wants us to be with them. Christ wants us to visit them, comfort them, and sit with them. Christ wants us to be his arms and embrace the poor . . . his hands extended to help the poor.”

- How is Christ “with them”?
- How can we be “with them”?
- What does it mean to “be his arms and embrace the poor”? How can you do this?

[5] “The slums of Manaus helped remind me that I need to carry some of the burden being endured by the people living there.”

- How does Gerry Straub carry some of this burden? How can we do so too?

[6] “Lepers suffer the greatest pain imaginable, a pain far greater than the physical pain they endure. They suffer the pain of rejection, of knowing nobody wants to come near them or even look at them.”

- Did you have trouble looking at them? Why or why not? What did you see?
- What would it be like to endure such pain?

[6] “This leper has no fingers, no feet, no eyesight. Yet what he wants most is to be loved.”

- How does he experience love?

[6] “Christ asks us to be in communion with lepers, to be with them in their suffering.”

- What does it mean to “be in communion with” someone? How can we do this?

[6] “I met many lepers who are ugly and poor on the surface, yet they were very close to God, and so they radiated an inner beauty and richness.”

- What is this “inner beauty and richness”?
- How are the lepers “very close to God”?

[7] “As I toured the slums and leper colonies of Manaus, I felt great waves of compassion welling up within me. I wanted to embrace the leper, but I was afraid.”

- What are “waves of compassion”? Have you ever experienced such waves?
- What do you think Gerry Straub was afraid of? What would you be afraid of?

[7] (Reflections on compassion)

“Compassion makes no distinction between friends and enemies, neighbors and outsiders, compatriots and foreigners. Compassion is the gate to human community.”

“Compassion is not sympathy. Compassion is mercy. It is a commitment to take responsibility for the suffering of others.”

“To be without compassion is to fail to know the self. When we recognize and accept our own frailties, we have no trouble dealing tenderly with the needs and lapses of others.”

“Compassion is the sacrament of concern. To the person who is compassionate, tragedy is not a news report. It is a call to respond.”

“Compassion is not a feeling. Compassion is action. St. Theresa of Avila told her sisters, ‘The purpose of prayer is always good works, good works, good works.’”

- What concepts here particularly strike you and why?
- What phrase or sentence best reflects your own understanding of compassion?

[8] (On “poverty of spirit”)

“Poverty of spirit frees me from being divided by false idols and uncurbed passions; frees me from the craving that makes me restless, distracting my heart and mind from being present to God alone.”

“It reflects the human reality that I am poor before God and consequently I need to radically depend on God alone for true fulfillment.”

“The humble simplicity that embodies poverty of spirit stands in stark contrast with the unbridled pursuit of comfort, power, pleasure and riches, which permeates a society that prizes possessions as a good in itself.”

“I need to die to self because it is the only way for me to be fully alive to God.”

- What do these passages mean to you?
- If you were to put them into practice, what changes would they require in your life?

## **Suggested Responses**

### **Individual, Group, Class, or Parish**

*"It is so easy to become overwhelmed by the colossal scope of the problem of global poverty and hunger . . . All I can do is realize my own limitations and humbly ask God to help me formulate a response that works for me personally. While no one can do everything, Jim Flickinger reminds us that each of us must do everything we can . . . Just do something and do it well and let God's grace do the rest. We must fight the feeling that one person cannot make a difference . . . If you are awake and aware, every day will present you with an opportunity to do something, even if it is only offering a homeless person a smile." [8]*

#### **Pray**

- Pray to be "awake and aware" and to notice the opportunities to respond to the poor around you.
- Call to mind an image from the film or place a photo of a poor person where you will see it often and use it as a reminder to pray for the poor.
- Focus your prayer each week on one question from the "Quotes and Questions" section as it relates to your life.
- Consider praying for true compassion and "poverty of spirit."
- Pray for political and religious leaders to have the courage to challenge poverty.
- Pause while reading the newspaper or a news magazine or while watching the news to pray for the victims of poverty in the stories.

*"It's so easy for me to give from my excess, from what I really don't need. But Christ desires that we do much more than simply share our leftovers." [8]*

#### **Adjust your lifestyle**

- What are some of the "leftovers" that you have shared in the past?
- Have you ever shared more than that with the poor? If so, what?
- What is this "much more" that Jesus may be asking you to give now?

#### **Other possibilities**

- Reduce your use of water, electricity, and gas around your house.
- Designate one day a week or month as a "Solidarity Day" with the poor and go without air-conditioning, TV, and computers; fast or simplify your food and drink; read about and pray for a specific group of people victimized by poverty and poverty-related diseases.
- Do an inventory of all the possessions and activities in your life; distinguish between "the necessities of life and what is luxurious." Begin to let go of the luxuries.
- Donate any savings from such efforts to Amazon Relief or another anti-poverty agency.

#### **Perform other works of mercy and justice**

- On "Solidarity Days" and other times, write letters to political leaders on behalf of such people and invite others to write their own letters or co-sign yours.
- Contact an anti-poverty agency or a hospitality house in a Catholic Worker community\* in your area; explore their program(s), and decide whether you can assist them in any way.
- Check the Web site of the Children's Defense Fund\* and join and publicize their efforts to reduce child poverty in the U.S.
- Invite your parish and/or other group(s) you are a part of to "pair" with a relief project like Amazon Relief\* or one of Catholic Relief Services'\* many projects.

## A Litany on Serving the Poor

**Reader:** As Mother Teresa has told us, “Do something beautiful for God. Every person, no matter how small, is a person of great dignity. Every person is Jesus in disguise.”

**Response:** Mother Teresa, disciple of Jesus, help us to do something beautiful for God by reaching out to someone in need. Jesus, help us to see you in each person we encounter today and every day, especially those who might especially need a smile, a kind word, or a helping hand.

**Reader:** As Dr. King has told us, “. . . I’d like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others.”

**Response:** Dr. King, disciple of Jesus, help us to give our lives serving others, day by day, starting with today. Jesus, servant of all, help us follow you by serving others.

**Reader:** “I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked . . . that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison.”

**Response:** Help us, Dr. King, to share our clothes and time with those in need and pray for all who are imprisoned.

**Reader:** As Jesus has told us, “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (*Matthew 25:40*)

**Response:** Jesus, help us seek out the least of your people, not avoid or avert our eyes from them. Help us to serve them, for in serving them, we are serving you.

**Reader:** Jesus, in those important last words you gave your disciples before your agony and death, you told us that this was your commandment – “Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (*John 15:12–13*).

**Response:** Jesus, help us to love as you loved. Help us to lay down our lives in some way each day to help someone else who needs our attention, our time, and our love and compassion.

**Reader:** And as Dr. King told us in conclusion, “And that is all I want to say. If I can help somebody as I pass along; if I can cheer somebody with a song; if I can show somebody he’s traveling wrong; then my living will not be in vain.”

**Response:** Jesus, help us follow your example, Dr. King’s example, and Mother Teresa’s example as we pass along our life’s journey, cheering those who need to be cheered, challenging someone who needs to be challenged, helping those you send our way. For we believe that in following you in service to others, our lives will not be in vain.

**Song:** “Whatsoever You Do to the Least of My People” or “Here I Am, Lord”