

Responding to Poverty

A Spiritual Path

Sunday 18 November is World Day of the Poor. This is acknowledged each year in the Catholic Church on the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time.

As Christians we cannot but take to heart the needs of those who are poor.

Is not this the fast that I choose:

To loose the bonds of injustice,

To undo the thongs of the yoke,

To let the oppressed go free,

And to break every yoke.

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

And bring the homeless poor into your house;

When you see the naked, to cover them,

And not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn

Isaiah 58: 6-8.

At the heart of our Christian ethical tradition is the call to care for the poor. Well, it's more than just a call. It's an imperative! This goes way back to our Jewish origins when the prophets were the conscience of Israel, and even before that time to the Holiness Code of the Book of Leviticus. The prophets of ancient Israel diagnosed, chastised and provided the remedy for society's ills. Their special concern was to call Israel back, time after time, to faithfulness to the Covenant, that bond of love between God and the people. This faithfulness to God was centered in an ethical code, the observance of which would make them 'God's people'. It required hospitality for the stranger, utter honesty and fairness in dealing with people, taking care of the needy, the poor, the orphans and the widows, those who had no means of supporting themselves. In the ancient Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the mark of a good king was that he was compassionate to the poor, to orphans and widows, and took good care of them. Unlike most of the surrounding cultures of the era the religion of the Israelites was what is called *ethical monotheism* – worship of the deity, sacrifice and ritual were empty and 'displeasing' to God without adherence to this ethical code, as we see in Isaiah's words, above.

It is held that this new social order of relationships of justice was responsible for the survival of Judaism as the religion of a relatively small group of people in the face of attack from surrounding nations. Israel was to be a 'light to the nations' and this social order was known as the *Shalom vision* – a world in which nothing less than God's own righteousness and mercy, compassion and particular concern that the poor be treated well and given their share in the banquet of life, was embodied. Jesus, the Jew, steeped in Jewish understanding and observance, lived and breathed this social and moral consciousness too. The Gospel writers have him speaking of it as the Kingdom of God or the Reign of God. One of the first public appearances of Jesus, as related in the Gospel of Luke, has him reading the Torah portion of the day in the synagogue one Sabbath, and the passage for that day was that of Isaiah the prophet:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free".*

Luke 4: 18.

And Jesus declared that these words were now fulfilled in him. Jesus' whole ministry was focused on bringing this freeing love of God to all people so that we would indeed create a world in which relationships of justice, love, forgiveness, non-violence and peace would prevail. "I have come so that you may have life in abundance", he said (John 10:10). The Catholic Church in its Social Justice Teaching, centres itself firmly in these words of Jesus as it speaks of the 'preferential option for the poor', that all our choices and decisions be made on the basis of the needs of the very poorest of our societies. It is this ancient tradition, the words and example of Jesus, and the teachings of the Church, that lead us along a spiritual path and into the heart of authentic Christian spirituality as we face and respond to poverty in our world.

Poverty exists in many forms, as it always has. But at heart poverty is a deprivation of that access to life in its fullness, life in abundance. It is a deprivation of access to what is needed for not only survival, although that is the case for many people, but also for human flourishing. People living without adequate food or water are living in poverty and so too are people who may have those basic necessities but who are enslaved to long hours of poorly paid work in factories and sweat shops. There

is the poverty in our cities as homeless people sleep in doorways and under bridges and there is also the poverty we find tucked away in seemingly ordinary urban settings where children are neglected and hungry, fending for themselves. And so it goes on. And there are many causes of poverty: our economic structures, our political alliances, our social structures, our incessant drive forward in 'progress', government and other sources of corruption, export oriented cash crops owned by multinationals which leave farmers unable to provide food for their own families, climate change and catastrophe and climate injustice which impacts acutely on people not responsible for these changes, trade deals, trade imbalances and tax evasion. It is a complex issue and most of us, unwittingly at times, are part of the perpetuation of poverty through the choices we make.

We cannot afford to look at poverty in a simplistic way or suggest simplistic solutions in our complex world, but our Christian tradition does invite us to look very deeply at ourselves in the face of poverty and its multiple causes. We are asked to look at ourselves in relationship. At the heart of the reality of poverty in our world, whether it be on the global or local level, lies the fact that we have forgotten to look at others as our brothers and sisters, intimately linked to us as part of the human family. When we see the poverty of others as so much collateral damage in the march of those with the power to do so towards affluence and 'progress', we distance ourselves from them, we objectify them and we lose sight of our intimacy. We forget to look into their eyes. The spiritual path that we are invited to walk as we take on our Tradition's response to poverty will see us transformed as much as it will lead to a more just world where there may be some hope that life in abundance may be accessed by all. There are some beautiful truths we hold which are at the heart of our Christian theology and as we look at ourselves in relationship with those who are poor, we are asked to incarnate those truths in ourselves.

Pope Francis, who has called for a poor church for the poor, says: "When I used to hear confessions in my previous diocese, people would come to me, and I would always ask them, "Do you give alms?" "Yes, Father!" "Very good". And I would ask them two further questions: "Tell me, when you give alms, do you look the person in the eye?" "Oh, I don't know; I haven't really thought about it". The second question: "And when you give alms, do you touch the hand of the person you are giving them to, or do you toss the coin at him or her?" These are very challenging words. They challenge us into relationship. They ask us to see the man, woman or child in need, not as 'the other', not simply as the recipient of my charity, but as someone I am encountering, meeting. In that same talk Pope Francis goes on to speak about "the flesh of Christ", the very real way in which our attitude towards those who are poor must become the attitude we would have in an encounter with Jesus the Christ. Christianity

teaches that we are all made in the image of God, we are all 'children of God', together we are 'the body of Christ'. We have much inspiring religious language in our Tradition and looking into the faces of those who are in need asks of us that we take that language and those beliefs out of the realm of ideas or theology and give them flesh and blood. See the Christ in the face of the hungry child, in the face of the beggar on the street corner, in the face of the mother working late into the night in a sweatshop or holding her dying child, in the eyes of the Indigenous child whose life expectancy is shorter than yours, in the face of the little boy whose concerns are the adult ones of providing food and paying the bills he knows are there. There is a story told by the community of Mother Teresa of Calcutta of a young novice tending her first dying person, who came away from this encounter radiant with joy. When asked the reason for her joy she said: "I have just held the Lord Christ in my arms and watched Him die". She had grasped the profound truth of love of neighbour. Love of God and love of neighbour are inseparable. As Jean Vanier says in his book, *The Broken Body*,

*"To love is to open our hearts to people,
to listen to them,
to appreciate them,
and see in them their own unique value;
to wish deeply that they may live and grow.
To love is to open our lives to one another".*

As we learn to ever more authentically love those who are poor we will indeed walk a path of personal transformation. Christianity proclaims that God is seen in the man Jesus who lived two thousand years ago, and if we do really affirm our belief in this, we cannot remain unaffected and unchanged.

Christianity in itself does not present economic theories or proclaim allegiance to particular political parties, but if we were to allow the poor to lead us into these great truths we hold, would it change the politicians we support, the party we vote for, the economic theories we applaud?

"Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that

we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And the King will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'" (Mathew 25: 34-40).

The poverty of those with whom we are intimately linked and with whom we share life on this beautiful planet, sets before us another challenging invitation - the invitation to look at our 'needs' and our 'wants'. If we are sensitive enough poverty will lead us to ask those tough questions which in essence may be summed up in one: am I taking too much of the world's resources for myself? And that will lead us to consider 'needs' and 'must-haves'. At what point do I say no to a 'want'? Am I controlled by my 'must-haves'? Some words that have stayed with me for many years now were spoken by a man I met in a course I was doing some years ago. He told us about an elderly woman he knew who lived in China and he described the simplicity of her life, a simplicity by choice, and he repeated something she had said to him: "I always try to live in a way so that others can live a little better". What an invitation! There are degrees of doing that of course, and it doesn't mean that we necessarily deprive ourselves of all that brings us pleasure. Things such as the good food we enjoy, the ability to travel, the wonder of music and all forms of the Arts are gifts that enrich our human experience and the flourishing of the human spirit. But it does mean that we look with honesty into our hearts and recognise those wants and must-haves that often get the better of us. It invites us along the path of restraint. Restraint, contrary to what may immediately come to mind, is a truly life-giving virtue because when we practise restraint we pause, we give ourselves the space to re-align ourselves with what we know is of real value and what we really do prioritise but which we may have momentarily lost sight of. In that moment of pausing we may just hear that call to simplicity, to curb those endless wants and must-haves, to be mindful of the needs of others, and to do something about that. What is on the family dinner table each evening is there for every member of that family, to be shared. Is it not time we applied that principle on a world-wide scale and shifted our way of thinking so that we look upon the goods of this world as the bounteous provision of a God of abundant life who provides for all of us. And then align ourselves with that Divine generosity. "Then shall your light shine ..."

Our sensitivity to the pain of those who live in poverty is a sure sign of God's 'voice' breaking into our consciousness. It is a sure sign that we are 'growing up', moving beyond the childhood stage of the expectation of the unlimited meeting of our desires. When we listen to that voice we are truly blessed for we are saying yes to that invitation of Jesus to "Come and follow me". To follow Jesus, whom we understand as "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6), is both an inward and outward movement. We are called to personal or inner transformation, to become Christ-like, *and* we are called to transform

the world. St Paul counsels that we must take on the mind of Christ and he prays that we may be strengthened in our inner being with power through God's Spirit, so that "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith as you are being rooted and grounded in love" (Ephesians 3: 17). This is what integrity is – consistency between our inner and outer lives and all the various parts of our lives. All must flow from the same Source. Christianity is an incarnational religion - the truths, the theology, must 'take flesh' in us and through us. "Religion that is pure and undefiled", says James in his letter in the New Testament, "is this: to go to the help of widows and orphans and to keep oneself uncontaminated by the world" (James 1:27).

So here we are in a world of both great joy and abundant life and a world of great suffering and deprivation. And here we are, invited as always by our God of life itself, to be transformed, to see anew as we walk that path into deepening and authentic spirituality, and to discern the ways in which we might reach out and make a difference.

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