

Church of the Immaculate Conception, Maryhill

Catholic Social Teaching: Session Two

15th November 2022

Slide One Preamble

Tonight, we are going to highlight one of the central concepts in CST ~ the option for the poor. I will outline what this actually means in CST and Mary will connect it to our possible responses to the current cost of living crisis. We will continue the same format as last time with input then group work where your groups will come up with actions at the local, national and international level which address what the option for the poor is calling us to do.

Option for the Poor

Slide Two The Beginnings: Scrutinising the Signs of the Times

The option for the poor has been a central principle of CST since the very beginning of Christian thought in the Bible, and through the various phases of the development of Church teaching which we looked at last time. The term, ‘option for the poor’, is relatively recent though. The story of how it came about goes something like this. The Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes* (known in English as the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World) talked about discerning the ‘signs of the times’ in our mission as Church in relation to our world. In the preface to *Gaudium et Spes*, following a statement about Christ coming to serve and not be served, another paragraph illustrates how this can be done: “To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of **scrutinising the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel**”.

Slide Three Among the first to discern the signs of the times after the Council were the Latin American bishops at their meeting in 1968 in Medellín in Colombia to address the role of the Church in transforming Latin America. They saw that the lives of most of the population of this most Catholic of continents was “beset by misery” and by an “injustice which cries to the heavens”. The Church was called, they said, to get rid of the ‘unjust structures’ which perpetuated this poverty and created an underclass which was oppressed. At the subsequent meeting in Puebla in Mexico in 1979, they called this commitment to solidarity with the poorest the ‘preferential option for the poor’ (a term first used in 1968 by the superior general of the Jesuits, Father Pedro Arrupe, in a letter to his order) and it has become part of the magisterium or the teaching authority of the Church ever since.

Slide Four What Poverty and the Option for the Poor Mean

What does poverty actually mean? Poverty, according to Ruth Lister, the former director of the Child Poverty Action Group, is

a material reality [which] disfigures and constrains the lives of millions of women, men and children and its persistence diminishes those among the non-poor who acquiesce in or help sustain it.¹

The first part is easy to understand but note the second part which says of the rest of us that if we are part of the poverty-making population through our votes or our actions, then that diminishes us. This is exactly what the Church is saying.

Lister further defines poverty as having insufficient resources to meet socially recognized needs and to participate in the wider society. The UN has incorporated into its meaning notions such as the violation of basic rights and human dignity that are associated with poverty but not necessarily caused by it. This largely accords with the Christian perspective, except that in theologians such as the late Albert Nolan OP in his *‘Jesus Before Christianity’*,² we see poverty as a mixture of the lack of material means to live a decent life but also the lack of dignity of the human person who, after all, has been created in the divine image.

Slide Five Nolan mentions whole swathes of society who were counted as the ‘poor’ in Jesus’ time. They were the beggars who were often the sick, the lame, those with leprosy and other ailments and those without families and who had to beg to live. Then there were the widows and orphans and the unskilled day labourers who were often out of work. There were the ‘sinners’ who were shunned by society. ‘Sinners’ included those with unclean professions such as tax collectors, robbers, prostitutes and gamblers as well as those who could not read the scriptures – what the Pharisees called the “rabble who know nothing about the law – they are damned” in John’s Gospel (7:49). The oppressed actually included the majority of those who lived in Palestine in Jesus’ day. They did not count. The father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez OP, expresses poverty in the Bible as “a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God”. Pope Francis reminds us of the poorest who are “cast off by society, forced to live off what is discarded and suffer unjustly from the abuse of the environment. They are part of today’s

¹ Ruth Lister, *Poverty*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) 1.

² Albert Nolan OP, *Jesus Before Christianity: The Gospel of Liberation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982).

widespread and quietly growing ‘culture of waste’”, connecting poverty to the climate crisis.³

Slide six It is interesting to compare the description of the poor in accounts such as Nolan’s with contemporary accounts of poverty in Scotland such as ‘Poverty Safari’ by Darren McGarvey who is from Pollok and is a former drug user and alcoholic and I think one of the most articulate voices from our deprived communities to appear for some time. Mary will also highlight him so I’ll just mention a couple of things. The first is the lack of esteem suffered by the poor which spills out into education. McGarvey writes that reading and all forms of academic achievement were regarded by many of his male peers as either feminine (and therefore bad!) or the preserve of posh people and freaks. What constituted their moral compass was ‘not grassing’ when the police came round looking for people who had broken the law rather than being annoyed they had broken the law in the first place. They were often treated by authority figures even in social work departments as lesser beings. The parallels between being part of an underclass in contemporary Scotland and how you’re treated, and the case of the ‘poor’ in the Palestine of Jesus’ time are startling.

Slide seven So poverty is not just about a lack of money or opportunity but is also about distorting the dignity of the human person (the foundational principle of Catholic Social Teaching - that this is prime because we are created in the divine image); it’s about how poverty stunts lives yet we are meant to lead fulfilled lives; it’s about how poverty often means not participating in society at all levels in order to ensure a fullness of life;

slide eight it’s about how poverty often destroys the bonds of solidarity which Pope Francis defines as “the creation of a *new mindset* which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by the few”.⁴

So what is our response?

Christian Response to Poverty as Part of the Preferential Option for the Poor

Slide Nine It is clear that the option for the poor involves not just a personal response to the poor but a response to the structural injustice we see all around

³ Pope Francis, *Meeting with the Members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization, Address of the Holy Father*, 25th September 2015. Retrieved from http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_onu-visita.html.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, par. 188.

us. The 1971 Synod of Bishops issued the document *Justice in the World* (Justitia in Mundo) which speaks about ‘unjust systems and structures’ that oppress people. Saying an injustice is structural is to say it can be embedded within the frameworks of our cultures and societies. In other words, the way societies are designed and structured may be unjust, inhumane and discriminatory. Pope John Paul II refers to unjust social structures as ‘structures of sin’ which harm the social fabric of societies. Global poverty - including the poverty of our own people who will go to bed hungry tonight in Maryhill - is such a sin.

The Christian call through the Option for the Poor is not to tinker with poverty to make the poor more comfortable in a toxic quagmire of injustice but to rid the world of an oppressive poverty which dehumanises; the option for the poor urges us not to be satisfied that people have enough to eat but that they have also the right and freedom to participate in society at all levels in order to ensure a fullness of life; the option for the poor calls on the rest of us not to pay lip service to the sufferings of others but to engender a radical empathy with the poor and listen deeply to them.

Slide Ten Pope Francis writes in his 2020 encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*: “It is an equally indispensable act of love to strive to organise and structure society so that one’s neighbour will not find him/herself in poverty”.⁵ He continues, “it is an act of charity to assist someone suffering but it is also an act of charity.....to work to change the social conditions that caused his or her suffering”.

Working to change conditions which produce poverty is a vital part of our mission as Catholics in transforming an unjust world to one of justice. Pope Francis also said that the Church was to be a poor church committed to the poor so when you come to your group work it would be good if you evaluate how we’re doing.

Slide eleven

Pope Francis: *‘The measure of the greatness of a society is found in the way it treats those most in need, those who have nothing apart from their poverty!’*

⁵ Fratelli Tutti, par. 186.