

“Hoping for mild at least...”

Poverty: a short formation resource for Catholic parishes



caritas

social action network



“This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him’ (Ps 34:6). The words of the Psalmist become our own whenever we are called to encounter the different conditions of suffering and marginalization experienced by so many of our brothers and sisters whom we are accustomed to label generically as ‘the poor’. The Psalmist is not alien to suffering; quite the contrary. He has a direct experience of poverty and yet transforms it into a song of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. Psalm 34 allows us today, surrounded as we are by many different forms of poverty, to know those who are truly poor. It enables us to open our eyes to them, to hear their cry and to recognize their needs.”

Pope Francis, Second World Day of the Poor, 2018

Foreword

In all three Synoptic Gospels, we hear the story of Jesus sleeping at the back end of a boat, while his disciples cling on to the oars, almost in desperation, to keep afloat in a sudden storm. Why, they thought, is our leader not helping us in this situation? Does he not care?

Yet he is with them, not just physically but inside their minds' struggle, especially at this moment of 'perfect storm'. Their reason tells them they have the skills to sail the boat, and he is trusting them to do that. In the storm, they encounter their basic poverty, their total dependence on a God 'who saves them from all their distress' (Psalm 34). This is the same God who calls the whole Church, symbolised by the boat, at times to 'put out into the deep', at times to 'get out of the boat', and even - in Peter's case - to walk on water.

As Christians we each need to be 'constant in prayer' (Romans 12:12) for the gifts of deeper faith, hope and love. Each of us also has a responsibility, our calling in baptism, to equip each other with the skills to live in the same boat together, to face well the real poverty within ourselves, and then to be prepared



to free people from the poverty all around us.

This pamphlet invites us to equip ourselves, individually and in parish groups, for that moment of seeing another storm break in front of us. It's a storm that remains constant in human history: of forced isolation, of denial of basic goods, of violence, of fear, of destitution and the refusal to help. But it will look different in many of our communities today, still navigating the experience of new waves of political, virus-related and economic turmoil.

May the Lord who is present in all our trials bless your reading and response to this resource.

+Terence Patrick Drainey,
Bishop of Middlesbrough
Chair of Caritas Social Action Network

Revelation teaches us that every person is created in love by God and finds fulfilment not only by having what it takes to sustain life, but by being involved in relationships of love, relationships of justice and solidarity with others. Human fulfilment finds expression in self-giving, in community, in the joyful expression of our gifts, in meaningful work, in art and festivity; above all in responding in faith to the loving God who made us.

A foundational principle of Catholic Social Teaching is the “exceptional dignity which belongs to the human person”⁽²⁾, made in the image and likeness of God, whom God declared to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31), along with the rest of creation. The

promotion of the human person is at the heart of the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching. Pope St Paul VI defined human development as “the transition from less humane conditions to those which are more humane”⁽³⁾. The laity of the Church in particular is called upon to work towards a more just society.

Poverty is not part of God’s will, but a distortion of the divine plan for human flourishing and an affront to dignity. Poverty is not just material deprivation, but includes other circumstances in which human life is limited, whether that is by oppression, chronic discrimination, homelessness, abuse, exploitation, physical or psychological illness, exclusion, loneliness, imprisonment,

“I’m sitting here in a t-shirt, hoody and two dressing gowns writing this. The alarm on my phone just went off to remind me it was time to switch off the heating from its second half-hour run of the day. In the past I used to dread the alarm going off for work, now my heart drops as I realise I’ve got about 15 mins of warmth left before I start to feel the chill again. It’s not like I’m extravagant with my heating. I set it at 16C or 18C when it’s really cold out, and I’m happy, but even that’s not affordable. I find myself following the weather forecast hoping for mild at least.”⁽¹⁾

Colin Ridgway,
Joseph Rowntree Foundation expert by lived experience

1. www.jrf.org.uk/blog/rising-prices-mean-people-poverty-are-struggling-stay-afloat-winter, accessed 3 January 2022

2. *Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes*, 26

3. Pope St Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 21

or inability to take part in work or the cultural life of the community. Human misery, or poverty, has its deepest roots in original sin, our inherited condition of frailty.

Original sin is our turning away from God, hiding from him, seeking to control our own destiny, turning in on ourselves to look for our own satisfaction, our own profit and power over others, not the good of others. It is a rupture in the circuit of right relationships which lead to human flourishing: the relation of communion between God, human beings and nature. Pope Francis puts it this way: “Our sin lies in failing to recognise value, in wanting to possess and exploit that which we do not value as gift. Sin always has this same root of possessiveness, of enrichment at the expense of other people and creation itself”⁽⁴⁾.

Poverty – the various circumstances in which people live a life that is not flourishing - is not natural, and it is not a choice. It is the result of unjust systems and behaviour. It is maintained by policy, as well as by personal and communal habits. As such, it can be challenged and changed. A better social order is



possible, one that is “up to the standard of God’s love”⁽⁵⁾.

The fruitful earth, which God gave to human beings in stewardship, is God’s gift for the sustenance of human life. The goods of the earth are meant to be “shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity”⁽⁶⁾. This is known as the *universal destination of goods*. This does not mean that everyone should own everything, but it does mean that “regulated interventions”⁽⁷⁾ may be necessary to ensure that everyone has access to

4. Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*

5. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 19

6. *Gaudium et Spes*, 69

7. *Compendium*, 173

the level of well-being necessary for integral human development.

The principle of the universal destination of goods requires that those who are poor, or living in marginalised or exploited circumstances, those whose “living conditions interfere with their proper growth”⁽⁸⁾ – think of Colin having to time short bursts of heating in his home - should be the focus of particular concern. In the teaching of the Church this is known as the *preferential option for the poor*. Much of the organised social action of local churches, religious orders and thousands of charities bear witness to this. It affects each Christian since it invites us to consider our manner of living and the consequences of our lifestyles for others.

Christ showed compassion for the poor, identifying himself with the “least” among the afflicted and vulnerable (Matthew 25: 40). In his hometown of Nazareth, he declared that his mission was to bring good news to the poor, “to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4: 18-19). Jesus is speaking in the

prophetic tradition of Israel where *the right of the poor* (Deuteronomy 15: 7-8) is enshrined in the law. The liberation proclaimed by Jesus is not just salvation from sin: “Jesus came to bring integral salvation, one which embraces the whole person and all mankind”⁽⁹⁾.

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Jesus confounds the expectations of his audience in Nazareth by not promising the vengeance of the Lord on their Gentile neighbours. His proclamation – his manifesto, if you like – is good news for those who know their need for God (the poor in spirit). At the heart of this proclamation is compassion (recovery of sight for the blind), the love of God for fragile humanity, but also justice, a year of the Lord’s favour in which those who suffer from political or economic oppression will be released. The Church, faithful to the mission of its founder, works for the “liberation from everything that oppresses man”⁽¹⁰⁾.

8. *Compendium*, 182

9. Pope St John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 11

10. Pope St Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 9

The Christian's solidarity with those who are trapped in various forms of poverty is expressed in corporal and spiritual acts of mercy. This is a compassionate response, the desire to relieve suffering. But we are called to go further. Pope Francis says that solidarity "means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter"⁽¹¹⁾. Catholic Christians are called upon, each according to his or her gifts, to build up the kingdom of God, "a new social, economic and political order, founded on the dignity and freedom of every human person, to be brought about in peace, justice and solidarity"⁽¹²⁾.

As individuals and in groups, we can draw from Catholic Social Teaching and our experience to critique the ways things are in our moment in history, our own social and political circumstances. The teaching of the Church invites us to use the **See-Judge-Act** method for reading the 'signs of the times' and to discern the course of action which aligns our society most closely with the Gospel. This method was confirmed

in magisterial teaching by St Pope John XXIII:

"There are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what in the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: look, judge, act"⁽¹³⁾.

The names of each stage of the method have undergone changes over the years. *Let Us Dream*, for example, the book length interview with Pope Francis by Austen Ivereigh, is structured as *A Time to See, A Time to Choose, A Time to Act*. The approach, however, remains the same. Each Catholic community is invited to use this method to really understand its communities and the conditions needed for people to have the

11. Pope Francis, *Evangellii Gaudium*, 188

12. *Compendium*, 19

13. Pope St John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 236

opportunity for full lives. What do you 'see' around you? Where are people living in circumstances of poverty? Why are people living in poverty? Whose stories, like those of Colin, might help us to understand the lived experience of poverty? What is the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching telling us about what we see? Where do we feel the 'tug of the Spirit' in our reflections? What are we called to do, with the resources we have?

In this deliberation we should remember that people who are poor (a better expression than "the poor") are not the objects of our pity, waiting for us to come and 'rescue' them from degradation. People in poverty have the same dignity as anyone else, and their voice, their agency, must be respected. We can join in local efforts to amplify their voice and experience, to create structures of solidarity, and to bring about systems which do not reduce people to cold misery in their own homes.

In all of this, one thing which must not be neglected is the necessary inner work, or *formation*, of those involved. "The inner transformation of the human person, in his being progressively conformed to Christ, is the necessary prerequisite for a real transformation of his relationships

with others"⁽¹⁴⁾. This conversion of the heart is the priority and does not detract from social action. Quite the reverse. One of the fruits of this inner work is an obligation to ensure that institutions and living conditions conform to the norms of justice.

'What do you 'see' around you? Where are people living in circumstances of poverty? Why are people living in poverty? ... What are we called to do, with the resources we have?'

The pandemic we have been living through since March 2020 has exposed the inequalities and injustices in our society, and the vulnerability of much of the social safety net. It has also revealed hope, when we look back on the fraternity we witnessed in the first lockdown, with neighbours reaching out to vulnerable neighbours, many thousands of people volunteering to help the NHS, and the weekly 'social liturgy' of gratitude for keyworkers.

We know that before the pandemic, 14.5 million people in the UK were deemed to be in relative income poverty after housing costs are taken into account, which is more than

one in five people⁽¹⁵⁾. Child poverty and in-work poverty had been on the rise for several years. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, *UK Poverty 2022*, certain groups were more likely to be pulled into poverty and these groups have borne the brunt of the economic and health impacts of COVID-19:

- Part-time workers, low-paid workers, sectors with high in-work poverty
- Black, Asian and minority ethnic households
- Lone parents – mostly women, many of whom work in hard-hit sectors, more reliant on local jobs
- Private and social renters who have higher housing costs and tend to have lower incomes
- Areas of the UK where there were already higher levels of unemployment, poverty and deprivation.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the government took extraordinary measures to protect many people from the economic damage of the pandemic and lockdown. As some of these measures come to an end, especially the furlough scheme and

the £20 uplift in Universal Credit, together with rapidly rising living costs and tax increases, it seems likely that many more people will be caught up in poverty. Seemingly small policy changes can make a very big difference for a household working through tough choices each week between whether to have food, lighting or heating. In 2022, we are facing a new wave of deep poverty, redundancies and evictions, domestic abuse and addictions, with the continuing impact on mental health which we have seen from the beginning of the pandemic. These fresh concerns should be understood in the context of longer-term widening of the gaps between incomes, basic living costs, and reduced social security for those reaching a point of crisis. Government, businesses, communities and households all have roles in tackling these gaps. The Church is called to be in the thick of this, encountering and accompanying those who are poor, working for their “relief, defence and liberation”⁽¹⁶⁾, tackling the root causes of injustice, promoting the common good.

Our vision for society, as we look to build a future beyond the pandemic, is of a civilization of

15. *UK Poverty 2022*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

16. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2448

love, solidarity and justice, where the dignity of every human being is respected and upheld; where every person can flourish and live in peace and freedom as part of one human family; where there is no exclusion, discrimination, or

dehumanising poverty; where the voices of the women, men and children in the most vulnerable situations are listened to, discerned, and inform action; where everyone is encouraged to contribute to the common good.

Suggestions for reflection

The choice to live more simply is sometimes known as *evangelical poverty*. It is a conscious choice to be transformed – as my circumstances allow, and without intentionally becoming a burden on others – in seeking that everyone has what is adequate, starting in my home and looking ever wider in society.

Poor Church for the poor

Many parishes already participate in organised work to relieve poverty in their local communities, and to address its root causes. In your parish, how does the community life express Pope Francis's hope for a 'poor church for the poor'?¹⁷

See-Judge-Act

This is the method endorsed by the magisterium to understand the need, discern the Gospel response and decide the best course of action. It is related in the tradition of the Church to *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. We encourage you to (re-)familiarise yourself with this method. There are many resources and worksheets on the Web, to practise individually and in groups. One example is Love in Action, which can be found at www.stepforwardinlove.org.

17. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 198

Further Reading

CSAN brings together resources that can be particularly appropriate for formation and social engagement of Catholic parishes and groups. These are available on our website at www.csan.org.uk.

Support Caritas Social Action

A donation will help us to make our nations places where every person can flourish in their families and communities, living with peace and human dignity, and where the voices of the poor and wounded are heard and acted upon. With your support we can address the causes of poverty and witness to the experience of those living in poverty. For more information please see www.csan.org.uk.

Share your feedback

If you have used this resource as part of discerning and organising activities, we would like to hear about parish and group activities that have been established or renewed, and how useful you found the guidance.

Please note we do not offer advice related to this resource.

You can write to us at:

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Or send an email to admin@csan.org.uk.

Credits

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Caritas Social Action Network is an agency of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales dedicated to tackling the causes of poverty, promoting justice and restoring dignity. It is a member charity, with 54 members, including the Caritas agencies of the dioceses of England and Wales.

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