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The Visible Poor and Food Poverty

By Stephen J. McKinney

Abstract

The expression the ‘visible poor’ is often used to refer to homeless people living and sleeping rough in the United Kingdom. This article will argue that there are other signs of the visible poor that are related to food poverty, or food insecurity. These can be discerned in the sharp rise in the uptake at foodbanks and in the eligibility for free school meals. There was a rise in the visible poor in the pre-Covid-19 United Kingdom and the short term and predicted long term effects of the pandemic will produce a further rise of the visible poor. This article examines this food poverty from a Catholic theological perspective drawing from the gospels, José Comblin, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Catholic Social Teaching.

Introduction

The series of lockdowns and restrictions caused by the Covid -19 pandemic has led to serious disruption in civic and economic life. As we begin to assess the effects of this disruption, there are serious anxieties about the fragility of the economy and the rise in unemployment in the different parts of the United Kingdom. This rise in unemployment will lead to greater numbers of families experiencing poverty including the children. Around 22% of the population of the United Kingdom lives in poverty and around one third of the children live in poverty. Poverty means that there is not enough income to meet the needs of the family. Children are dependent members of families, and, as such, they are vulnerable to the effects of the decrease in the income levels and the resources of the family. This is equally the case where a family struggles with the challenges of persistent low income caused by working poverty or the ‘low pay-no pay’ cycle. Poverty is an issue that confronts and confounds the aspirations and hopes for social equality and human progression in the twenty first century society.

This article will discuss the rise in poverty in the United Kingdom with specific focus on the rise in food poverty, or food insecurity, as demonstrated by the rise in the uptake in foodbanks and free school meals. The article begins with a concise examination of the contemporary preferential option for the poor, the theological response to the irruption of the poor (the visibility of the poor) in Latin America and the Caribbean. The article then examines some gospel passages on the contrast between the rich and the poor and the sharing of food. The article will progress by addressing some of the visible signs of poverty in the United Kingdom: homelessness, increased uptake at foodbanks and the rise in eligibility in free school meals. The final section proposes that the increase in the visible signs of poverty in the United Kingdom calls for a renewed commitment to the preferential option for the poor.

The preferential option for the poor

The inspiration and impetus for a contemporary Catholic theological response to poverty can be traced through the twentieth century from Pius XI, Pius XII to John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. The theological response in Latin America and the Caribbean, was to be hugely influential on subsequent theology and thinking in Catholic Social Teaching. This response in Latin America and the Caribbean was a response to the poverty and oppression experienced by many of the people. José Comblin states that the poor in Latin America had traditionally been excluded from society.¹ They had been outcasts who were hidden and

forgotten. They were the invisible. They started to protest and make claims for justice in the 1960s. The invisible became visible. This visibility is described as the irruption of the poor and the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean recognised this irruption. The poor could no longer be ignored or disregarded, and this was understood as a deep theological and ecclesial issue and not simply the manifestation of a shift in sociological awareness. The response to this poverty contributed to the development of Liberation Theology and the biblically rooted preferential option for the poor.

Gustavo Gutiérrez argues that poverty is at the heart of the challenge of contemporary Christian faith and life.²

Poverty as it is known to us today hurls a radical and all-encompassing question at the human conscience and at the way we perceive Christian faith. It constitutes a hermeneutical field that leads us to a rereading of the biblical message and of the path we should take as disciples of Jesus.

Gutiérrez distinguishes between three types of poverty: spiritual poverty, voluntary poverty and material poverty, or real poverty.³ Spiritual poverty refers to surrendering oneself to the will of God. Voluntary poverty is to adopt a way of life relinquishing the goods of the world. Material poverty is the physical poverty experienced by many people throughout the world. Material poverty is inhumane, an affront to the God-given dignity of the person created in the image and likeness of God and highlights the deep and unjust divisions in the world. The rereading of the scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, undertaken by Gutierrez and other Liberation Theologians is focussed on the poor, the plight of the poor and God's care for the poor and outcast.⁴ This rereading of scripture is possibly one of the major contributions of Liberation Theology and leads to an understanding that the preferential option for the poor is an essential part of being a disciple of Jesus in the contemporary world.

The division between the rich and poor and distribution of food

One of the major themes in Luke's gospel is that Jesus has come for the poor, the marginalised and the excluded. Luke warns of the dangers of being preoccupied with accumulating riches and he often draws attention to the contrast between the rich and the poor: the Magnificat (1:53), the instructions of John the Baptist (3:11,14), the sermon in the Nazareth synagogue at the start of the public ministry (4:18), in the beatitudes and woes (6:20, 24), the invitation to the poor to dinner (14:13) and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31).⁵ Gutiérrez uses the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to illustrate the deep divisions between the rich and the poor in the contemporary world.⁶ In the parable, the rich man feasted magnificently in fine clothing while Lazarus 'longed to fill himself with the scraps that fell from the rich man's table' (16: 21). The rich man had not shared with Lazarus and when both men died there is a reversal of fortunes in the afterlife.⁷ Gutiérrez argues that the lines, 'there was a rich man' and 'at his gate lay a poor man', sums up the situation between rich nations and poor nations. He adds that it also sums up the situation within individual nations and that the gap between the extremes of wealth and poverty is becoming worse. He draws another interesting contrast between the Lukan parable and the contemporary world. In the parable the rich person has no name, but the poor person is called Lazarus (the only time any person is named in a parable in Luke's gospel).⁸ He argues that in the contemporary world it is the poor person who has no name, who is anonymous. It is the poor nameless person who is excluded and marginalised.

In another striking example, Gutiérrez draws on the Last Judgement in Matthew 25:31-46 (as he often does in his writings) and the claims against the goats in verse 42 are particularly appropriate in this context: 'For I was hungry and you never gave me food, I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink'. The response from the goats is to question when they neglected to provide food and water to the Son of Man. The answer is that: 'I tell you solemnly, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me'.

In contrast, Gutiérrez explores the feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:1-10).⁹ Gutiérrez is aware of the dangers of a one-dimensional interpretation of the miracle and he takes care to acknowledge the layers of meaning in the miracle story and the Eucharistic significance of the miracle. He points out that the large crowd that has been nourished by the words of Jesus are physically hungry and that the limited amount of food that is shared is enough for everyone. However, he deepens the understanding of this sharing of the food as an example of solidarity and inclusion for the contemporary world: sharing with those who are excluded and marginalised. Catholic Social Teaching affirms that every person is sacred and has a right to the necessary spiritual and physical resources to live.¹⁰ Physical resources includes adequate shelter, clothing, health care and enough food to sustain a healthy lifestyle. This last point about a 'healthy lifestyle' is important as there are further anxieties that many people do not have enough food that is sufficiently nutritious in the contemporary world.

The poor and food poverty in the United Kingdom

The term the 'visible poor' in the United Kingdom is usually used differently from the way it is used in Latin America. In the United Kingdom it is more likely to refer to the homeless who live and sleep 'rough' in the open air on the streets and other public spaces in towns and cities.¹¹ These homeless people are a highly visible sign of desperate poverty and this disrupts and challenges the perceived norms of life in public space. Many of us who work in the major cities of the United Kingdom observe a worrying number of homeless people living rough on the streets on a daily basis. The lack of adequate shelter is a concrete example of people not having the necessary physical resources to live. The people who live on the streets, however, are a small percentage of the overall number of homeless people in England and Scotland, many of whom are less visible because they do not live on the streets but live in some form of temporary accommodation.¹²

There are other contemporary signs of the visible poor. The level of food poverty, or insecurity, in the United Kingdom has been increasing at an alarming rate before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the most obvious signs is the rise of the uptake in foodbanks. The Trussell Trust is a well-known and large foodbank organisation that supports over 1,300 foodbanks throughout the United Kingdom. The latest mid-year figures for April to September 2020 make for sobering reading.¹³ These figures reflect the effects of lockdowns and restrictions. The Trussell Trust distributed 1,239,399 emergency food parcels across the United Kingdom in the reporting period. This represented an increase of 47% food parcels when compared to the same period of time in 2019 when 843, 655 parcels were distributed. There has been a rise of 52% of the number of food parcels given to children, accounting for an average of 2,573 parcels for children every day in the reporting period. The Independent Food Aid Network was founded in 2016 and includes over 400 independent food banks.¹⁴ Their latest statistics indicate that 134 independent food banks distributed 426,958 food parcels between February and October 2020, compared to 226,605 in the same period in 2019. This is a rise of 88%. There are many smaller independent food banks throughout the UK that are responding to the needs of local communities, including many Catholic parishes and charities.

The rise in the uptake at foodbanks has attracted considerable attention and the figures for children reflect the extent of child poverty in the United Kingdom. There has also been a rise in the number of children who have become eligible for free school meals in England, a means tested benefit, during the last nine months. The latest figures for free school meals in England indicate a rise from 15.4% in 2019 to 17.3% in 2020. It has to be noted that this follows from a similar rise from 2018 to 2019 of 13.6% to 15.4%.¹⁵ The widely publicised campaign led by the footballer Marcus Rashford forced the United Kingdom Government to provide free meals over the school holidays in England for children who are eligible. In Scotland the figure for registration (not eligibility) for free school meals is 38.1% for 2020 (38.0% in 2019). These figures are extremely high because every child is entitled to a free school meal from primary one to primary three in Scotland (up to primary four in Glasgow City). After these stages, free school meals are provided on a means tested basis. If the figures from primary one to three are removed the figures are just below the 20% level and are closer to the English figures for eligibility. Another issue is that the figures for 2020 were collated in February 2020 and subsequently the Scottish Government recorded a sizeable increase of children receiving free school meals as a result of the effects of the pandemic. There are emergency measures in place to support families over holiday periods.

The preferential option for the poor in the United Kingdom

The passages from Luke and Matthew that were discussed above highlight the gaps between the rich and the poor and one of the consequences for many people living in poverty, they do not have enough to eat. This can be observed in the contemporary UK as more people access foodbanks and more children are eligible and registered for free school meals. These are further concrete examples of people not having enough of the physical resources required to sustain a healthy lifestyle. Poverty becomes more visible in the proliferation of foodbanks and the campaign for free school meals over holiday periods. The passage from Mark demonstrates a different approach, an approach that is about sharing food and Gutiérrez understands this as a deep sign of Christian love and unity. Gutiérrez helped to develop the concept and practice of the contemporary preferential option for the poor in Latin America and the Caribbean in the context of ‘developing’ countries, many of which struggle with the effects of colonial and post-colonial history and oppression. Caution may need to be exercised when comparing ‘developed’ countries to the ‘developing’ countries. There are also questions about the type of poverty experienced by children in the United Kingdom, when compared to that experienced in developing countries. Nevertheless, the boundaries between developed and developing countries have arguably become more blurred in terms of poverty. The poverty of such a large number of people, including children, in the United Kingdom has become increasingly visible as more people require help to acquire sufficient food. This calls for a renewed commitment to the scripture-based preferential option for the poor. This also calls for a commitment to one of the other aspects of the preferential for the poor: to fight the causes of poverty.

Stephen J. McKinney is Professor of Education in the School of Education, University of Glasgow and visiting Professor of Catholic Education at Newman University.

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