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Introduction to the Issue

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

Meghan J. Clark and Anna Rowlands, co-editors

Growing and persistent homelessness is a prime example of the *throwaway culture* in which “human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded” (Francis, 2013, 53). In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis challenges us to ask ourselves, “How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is exclusion” (2013, 53).

Homelessness is simultaneously a global and local problem. “Lack of housing is a grave problem in many parts of the world, both in rural areas and in large cities . . . Having a home has much to do with a sense of personal dignity and the growth of families” (Francis, 2015, 152). Shelter is unequivocally identified as necessary for integral human development and a just social order by both the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights and Catholic social teaching (UN General Assembly, 1948, 25; John 23 1963, 11; Paul VI, 1967, 53; John Paul II, 1987, 17, 31; Francis 2015, 152).

The connection between “home” and dignity is also found in the Scriptures – more than just material shelter, the home is a deeply spiritual place. It is also, as the Irish Bishops Conference (2018) points out in their recent document on housing and homelessness, one of the first deprivations that faced the Holy Family. Visiting a homeless shelter in Washington, DC, Pope Francis noted that, “The Son of God came into this world as a homeless person. The son of God knew what it was to start life without a roof over his head” (Francis, 2015a, September 24). Nevertheless,

street homelessness is an area that has not received extensive, specific and sustained reflection within Catholic social teaching.

In the last twelve months two significant documents have emerged from two national Catholic Bishops’ Conferences on housing and homelessness, the Irish and Australian bishops. In *A Room at the Inn?*, the Irish bishops (2018) note:

...the right to adequate housing, which embraces the badly housed as well as the unhoused, is intimately connected to the enjoyment of other rights, including the right to privacy, to freedom of movement, to respect for the home, to family life, to freedom from discrimination, to security of the person, to health, to education, to equality before the law, to work and to a decent and safe environment. (17)

“...readers will find robust theological reflection, engagement with persons experiencing homelessness, and critical insights on policies by both government and church agencies.”

Recognizing a need for renewed theological and social reflection on these complex intersecting questions, fifty scholars and practitioners from 20 different countries of origin gathered in Rome on November 30- December 2, 2017 for a Symposium on Street Homelessness and Catholic Social Teaching in cooperation with the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development. Building upon the challenge of Pope Francis and ongoing Vincentian Family (Famvin Homeless Alliance) on homelessness, Depaul International, the Institute for Global Homelessness at Depaul University, the Center for Catholic Studies at the University of Durham, and St. John’s University co-sponsored the gathering. Through dialogue, the symposium sought to highlight the scourge of street homelessness and develop theological

reflection as an important and practical contribution to the work of the Church.

This issue of JoVSA is a continuation of the conversations begun in Rome.¹ In this issue are theological and practical reflections from Argentina, the Philippines, France/Rome, Ireland, England, and the United States. Throughout the articles, readers will find robust theological reflection, engagement with persons experiencing homelessness, and critical insights on policies by both government and church agencies. These essays invite all of us to consider more deeply the Catholic social teaching tradition and lived realities of people experiencing homelessness.

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NOTES

1. Additionally, the conversation does not end with this JoVSA issue but continues in a forthcoming volume of essays on street homelessness and catholic theological ethics edited by James Keenan and Mark McGreevey from Orbis Press.

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