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CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND HOMELESSNESS: *THE WORLD TRIBE OF THE DISPOSSESSED*

Ethna Regan, CHF Ph.D.

This hymn
is for the must-be-blessed
the victims of the world
who know salt best
the world tribe of the dispossessed
outside the halls of plenty
looking in
this is a benediction
this is a hymn. (Goodison, 1988, p.20)

Homelessness is a complex, global and growing phenomenon, and street homelessness is its most visible aspect. These children, men and women who live on the streets are, in the words of the Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison, “the world tribe of the dispossessed/outside the halls of plenty/looking in”. This article explores both the specific treatment of homelessness in Catholic social teaching and the ethical principles in Catholic social teaching that can be brought to bear on analysis, advocacy, and action in the area of homelessness.

In the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, June 29), there is just one Index reference to homelessness, pointing to a section about particular concern and preference for the poor (§182). There is also only one index reference to the “phenomenon of street children”, pointing to a section treating the dignity and rights of children (§245). While there are some brief references to homelessness in various documents of Catholic Social Teaching, the most extensive treatment of homelessness in the tradition is found in a document of the Pontifical Commission “Justitia et Pax” written to mark the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless in 1987, *What Have You Done to Your Homeless Brother? The Church and*

The Housing Problem. The Pontifical Commission described homelessness as a “harsh reality” which should awaken the moral conscience of people, a blight on human dignity and violation of human rights, and “a very serious obstacle to economic and social development” worldwide” (1987, Introduction section 1). Over a quarter of a century later, homelessness remains as a global human rights crisis.

FACES AND FIGURES OF HOMELESSNESS

For those whose homes
are the great outdoors
the streets their one big room ...
Mansions of the Dispossessed
Magnificence of Desperate Rooms
Kings and Queens of Homelessness ...
(Goodison, 1988, p.19)

The research methodology used by the Pontifical Commission in drawing up the 1987 document involved a process of worldwide consultation of episcopal conferences and oriental churches, a reading of the global signs of the times through the eyes of local churches. The document begins by outlining the “alarming dimensions” of the situation, using two criteria of homelessness, the street homeless and those who lack what might be considered adequate shelter. The approach is both quantitative and qualitative, outlining the millions of people who are homeless – including “large numbers of people who are born, live and die in the open air” – and the realities behind these statistics” (Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*, 1987, I.2). There is no internationally agreed definition of homelessness. The United Nations distinguishes between primary homelessness (or rooflessness) of persons living on the streets and

secondary homelessness, which includes persons with no place of usual residence, those resident in long-term or transitional shelters for homeless people, etc. Some countries include those without adequate housing under the category of tertiary homelessness.

- (i) The first group named in the 1987 document are “homeless individuals, often the victims of personal problems (alcoholism, unemployment, family crises or simply social marginalization), for whom the solution does not simply lie in being given shelter or a place to live” (Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*, 1987, I.3). A 2017 document would, no doubt, include drug addiction among the causes of homelessness. There is a problem with the conflation of a number of very different issues in this first category, and it is unfortunate that unemployment and social marginalization, for example, are referred to simply as “personal problems”. Social marginalization is not a personal problem, but one rooted in a complex web of causes. Today, even in wealthy cities, homeless statistics would be much higher if the hidden homeless who sofa-surf in the homes of family and friends were included.
- (ii) The second group identified are young people who want to get married and build a family, but cannot find the finances for a home.
- (iii) There are marginalized rural and urban people whose settlements have given us words in a variety of languages, for example, *favelas*, *bidonvilles*, *shanty towns*. The 1987 document notes that the reports received from the churches worldwide mention homeless people “dying because of exposure to the elements, heat and cold” (Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*, 1987, III.2), and states that “the problem of those who, in the strict sense ‘don’t have a roof’ is certainly the most critical and the most serious” (1987, I.3). However,

it argues that the qualitative aspect of homelessness must be set within the broader quantitative aspect of “the housing shortage which, in many places, affects entire social strata, all of which are not below the poverty line” (1987, I.3).

- (iv) Today, we can add a fourth group, those driven from – or internally displaced within – their homelands, and those who suffer further from a deadly combination of homelessness and statelessness, a double dispossession due to war and, increasingly, the effects of climate change.

The rights of travellers and nomads are acknowledged, rights to “places adapted to their way of life” with access to basic services for human development. The imperative of forging “bonds of friendship and solidarity” with people who “prefer not to settle in one place but belong to the number of those who are always on the move” is emphasised (Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*, 1987, III.3).

Across the body of Catholic social teaching, there is insufficient attention given in its treatment of homelessness to the vast numbers of children who live and/or work on the streets. As mentioned earlier, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* makes one reference to them in the section on the dignity and rights of children. “Street children” are one of the most vulnerable human groups, on whom homelessness has a particularly devastating effect. When a child has to scavenge for food, resort to violence in order to find protection on the streets, is open to economic and sexual exploitation from an early age, suffers the physical effects of inadequate nutrition and healthcare, or misses out on basic education, the long-term effects on him or her are serious and sometimes irreversible. These effects of street-homelessness on children remind us that housing is more than shelter; it is a minimum provision for the development of human capabilities and human flourishing. The impoverishment and dispossession of street children results not only in their own capability deprivation, but also denies the human community the gifts of those who never reach their potential.

Overall, Catholic Social Teaching takes a broad approach to the question of homelessness, while also recognizing that the issue is most critical for the street homeless. However, it must be noted that there is a reductive tendency to view the street homeless – the roofless – primarily as victims of personal circumstances. Without denying that addiction, imprisonment, or marriage and family breakdown, can be circumstances which contribute to people becoming homeless, many who end up on the streets have experienced multiple challenges and deprivations, personal, social and structural. Notwithstanding the reductive tendency alluded to, homelessness is presented in Catholic social teaching as a complex and structural problem: (i) related to a number of other political and socio-economic factors such as education, food, healthcare, and work; (ii) reflective of inequalities between North and South, and inequalities within individual societies; (iii) impacted by urbanization, the most significant demographic phenomenon; and, (iv) resulting from the absence of just housing policies.

Our understanding of the impact of homelessness, particularly street homelessness, can be enriched by dialogue with scholars who write about the concept of home from a phenomenological perspective. Kimberly Dovey, an architect and urban critic, writes expansively of the home as that which brings order, identity, and connectedness to our lives. Having a home means we know where we are, we have a certain possession of the world; we are identified with a place, connected with people, and connected with the past and the future (Dovey, 1985, pp. 33-64). Too often the lives of the street homeless are dismissed as chaotic, for we take for granted the order, identity, and connectedness which having a home secures – to different degrees – for most of us. This scholarship could also help develop a more fulsome account of the faces and figures of homelessness, and shape the approach to consciousness-raising about its real impact which Catholic social teaching endeavours to engage in within and beyond the church.

ETHICAL ANALYSIS: A MATTER OF RIGHTS, JUSTICE, AND LOVE

This is a hymn
for all recommending
a bootstrap as a way
to rise with effort
on your part
This is a hymn
may it renew
what passes for your heart. (Goodison, 1988, p.19)

Having a home is a matter of rights and of justice. Homelessness is thus a violation of human rights and structural failure of justice. The “right to an adequate standard of living” – recognised in international documents – is the right that founds a rights-based approach to the problem of homelessness. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948) specifically mentions the “home” within a general rubric of privacy (1948, art. 12). The concept of home, of course, evokes a much broader personal, political and legal context than that of privacy. The home is also the environment within which society intends that family life should flourish. The UDHR recognises the family as “the natural and fundamental group unit of society ... entitled to protection by society and the State” (1948, art.16). The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1966) associates that recognition of the family with the promotion of economic, legal, and social protection of family life by such means as social and family benefits, fiscal arrangements, and provision of family housing (articles 10 &11). The Holy See’s *Charter of the Rights of the Family* (1983) calls on all States to support an expansive set of family rights, including the right to decent housing, “fitting for family life and commensurate to the number of the members, in a physical environment that provides the basic services for the life of the family and the community” (art.11). The right to provision of family housing (or shelter) within international documents has received little focus by commentators with some notable exceptions,

such as Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum (1997) identifies the right to shelter and housing as part of a set of rights in the area of property and economic advantage which “can be analysed in a number of distinct ways, in terms of resources, or utility, or capabilities” (p. 294). The right to housing can be seen as a right to a resource necessary for a decent level of living, or “as a right to attain a certain level of capability to function”. In her list of central human capabilities, Nussbaum identifies adequate shelter within the capability of “bodily health” (1997, p. 287), and “being able to hold property” as a component of the capability of “control over one’s environment” (p. 288).

Reflecting the input of over sixty countries, the 1987 document offers an interesting challenge, to both societies and States, not to adopt a cultural preference approach to the right to housing, an approach which could be seen as a reflection of ethical relativism in the social sphere. In regions where a large part of the population, individuals or families, spends its entire life on the streets, it is “sometimes presented as a pretext that the lack of housing is proper to a certain type of culture. Anything which does not meet the basic needs of a person, alone or in a family, cannot be considered part of any authentic culture” (Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*, 1987, III.2). While recognizing the diversity of the faces and contexts of street homelessness globally, Catholic social teaching emphasizes that culture cannot be appealed to as an excuse or justification, because the right to housing is a universal right.

In his “Message for the 2003 World Day of Peace”, Pope John Paul II spoke of the development of a gap between emerging rights in advanced societies, “the result of prosperity and new technologies” while basic rights to food, drinkable water, housing and security, remain unrealised for many (2003, para. 5). In 2015, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to housing, Leilani Farha, offered a similar observation about the lack of priority and urgency given to this basic right to a home, noting that homelessness is not explicitly mentioned in the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals. Farah’s approach

focused on the link between homelessness and the enjoyment of the right to adequate housing, as well as other human rights, including the right to life and non-discrimination:

Homelessness is an extreme violation of the rights to adequate housing and non-discrimination, and often also a violation of the rights to life, to security of person, to health, to protection of the home and family and to freedom from cruel and inhuman treatment. However, it has not been addressed with the urgency and priority that ought to be accorded to so widespread and severe a violation of human rights. (United Nations General Assembly, United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015, December 30, I.4)

Notwithstanding Farah’s observations on the lack of urgency in the face of a serious human rights violation, religious and secular agencies often use a human-rights approach to challenge homelessness, advocating for: the right to a home as a constitutive element of an adequate standard of living; the home as a locus of privacy and protective space for the family as the fundamental unity of society; and non-discrimination (due to parentage or other conditions) in the application of these protections to children and young persons.

Catholic Social Teaching, with its rich and relational understanding of human rights, has a role to play: (i) in addressing the paucity of attention to homelessness as a violation of a universal human right; (ii) in advocating with those who are “duty bearers” to meet their obligations; (iii) in empowering the “rights holders” to claim their basic right to a home. A rights-based approach does not provide the whole ethic *contra* homelessness but it is a fundamental reminder of human equality, a concept beautifully expressed by John Finnis: “...equality, the truth that everyone is a locus of human flourishing which is to be considered with favor in him as much as in anybody else” (1980, p. 221).

Homelessness can also be understood as a structural failure of distributive justice and a

distortion of God's plan. The principle of the universal destination of all goods is rooted in the Genesis portrayal of creation as a gift and of the human person as steward of that gift, a gift that is social. All people have a right to the goods of creation to meet their needs, and no one has a right to squander resources when others are in need. The property ethics of Catholic social teaching is a complex area, but the key dimensions could, perhaps, be summarised as follows: 1. Private property is valid and necessary, related as it is to dimensions of human creativity, flourishing, and relationality; 2. The right to private property is neither absolute nor unconditional. It cannot be used to the detriment of the common good and is, as John Paul II said in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), "under a social mortgage", with inherent duties just like a conventional mortgage (para. 42).

Housing is recognised in Catholic social teaching as a demand of the common good, a basic right, and a necessity for a truly human life. Housing and property are social goods that "cannot simply be treated as market commodities" (Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*, 1987, III. 3). This critique of the commodification of housing is consistent with that articulated more recently by Leilani Farha at a 2017 press conference: "housing has become financialized: valued as a commodity rather than a human dwelling ... housing has lost its currency as a human right" (UN Human Rights, 2017, March 2). Farah issued a strong challenge to the "connection between real estate wealth and the political elite – an exclusive club that leaves the vulnerable powerless to influence decisions or claim their rights" (2017, March 2).

In the current property crisis, our cities have people without homes and homes without people. Property speculation often violates the principle that property serves people. The 1987 document observes that there can be a conflict of

interest between tenant rights and the capacity of small property owners to renovate substandard housing, resolvable only through specific policies for renovation. It must be noted, however, that a stronger condemnation of those who violate tenant rights is absent. The document calls for an urgent resolution to squatter settlements developed as a result of urbanization. The suffering caused by legal evictions is raised, noting that their legitimacy does not negate the ethical concerns when people have no place to go (Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*, 1987, III. 3).

The principles of stewardship and the universal destination of all goods, key principles of Catholic social teaching, are being re-shaped in our

time in light of environmental degradation and climate change. Those who are poorest are affected by the environmental crisis in a particular way. The *Compendium* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, June 29) alludes to the particular impact of environmental pollution on the poor: "... countless numbers of these poor people [who] live in polluted suburbs of major cities or in huge complexes of crumbling and

unsafe houses" (§, 482). In *Laudato Si'* (*On Care for Our Common Home*) – an invitation to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home – Pope Francis (2015) refers specifically to homelessness created by climate change (para. 25). The encyclical links our stewardship of the earth with the universal destination of goods, also citing the Paraguayan bishops on the natural right of the *campesino* to "a reasonable allotment of land" to establish a home (para. 94). *Laudato Si'* identifies lack of housing as "a major issue in human ecology" for "having a home has much to do with human dignity and the growth of families" (para. 152).

Catholic social teaching argues that homelessness is a failure of distributive justice at local, national

"Housing is recognised in Catholic social teaching as a demand of the common good, a basic right, and a necessity for a truly human life."

and international levels. It offers an account of distributive justice that supports the idea that housing is a social good – not simply a commodity – and that States have a responsibility to ensure just distribution of housing. The traditional principle of the universal destination of all goods is being re-examined in light of the impact of climate change on homelessness, challenging us to new and creative accounts of distributive justice.

The 1987 document on homelessness emphasises broad participation in the development of just housing policies, participation that involves not just governmental and non-government actors, but everyone who becomes aware of the “extent and depth of the drama” of homelessness. Those who are homeless are also participants in this advocacy and action, aware of their rights, and should be provided with “if necessary, [with] adequate legal assistance to defend these rights”, for the great tragedy is that people and families become accustomed to “sub-minimal conditions of existence” (Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*, 1987, III. 3). Participation ensures that opportunities are opened broadly and mistakes are avoided. The principle of participation challenges the methodology of research and development in the area of homelessness to ensure that those affected are consulted about their experience of homelessness, and involved in advocacy, planning, and policy development.

The ethical analysis of homelessness is underpinned by another principle of Catholic social teaching, the preferential option for the poor. It is very striking that the 1987 document on homelessness uses the language of the preference for the poor. “The commitment of the Church to the homeless is a humanitarian and evangelical commitment; it is also an expression of a preferential love for the poor” (Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*, 1987, Conclusion section). Published a year after the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s second instruction on Liberation Theology, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (1986), it can be argued that there is an intentionality in the use of this liberationist language by the

Pontifical Commission. The option for the poor is a substantive theological concept, i.e., it is scripturally located, developed in the tradition, and systematically conceived in modern theology. It challenges theology to dislocate itself from its abstract universality and find a *locus theologicus* in the concrete realities of our time. This preferential love for the poor is both personal and social. The option for the poor only becomes real when it is concretized in history in the lives of people who are poor and impoverished, roofless and homeless.

Street homelessness is an obvious manifestation of the underside of our world, but the underside unveils a different reality that is often hidden to us. We can only learn about the underside by taking seriously the perspective of the dispossessed and homeless of our world. Liberation theology teaches us that the cry of the poor and homeless is not just the representative human voice, not just a cry to God, but also the cry of God. God’s revelation is not just *for* the dispossessed and homeless, but *through* them. The commitment to the homeless, as an expression of the preferential love for the poor, must be undertaken with a sense of reciprocity of enrichment, something experienced by anyone who has worked alongside those who are homeless and dispossessed.

SHAPING OUR MORAL IMAGINATION

A particular Biblical and Christian vision is brought to bear on homelessness in the documents of Catholic Social teaching. The insights of the Hebrew Scriptures illumine our understanding of homes and homelessness, for example: the psalms sing of happiness in one’s own home (e.g., Ps. 128/127); and exile and homelessness are understood as a source of lamentation (e.g., Jeremiah 4: 20). The Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace reminds us that Christianity “inherited from Judaism” a sense of the value of housing and home as something that transcends the material, something “social, affective, cultural and religious” (Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*, 1987, III. 4). Even God wished the people to choose a “dwelling” for his name (e.g., Dt. 12.2).

In the Jewish tradition, it is said that before Elijah died he declared that he would return in each generation disguised as a poor person and knock at the door of Jewish homes. The treatment Elijah received when he knocked at the door “would determine whether humanity was ready to enter the Messianic age” (Kroloff, 1992).

The social tradition of the church reminds us that Christ himself was homeless when he was born; “there was no place in the inn” (Luke 2:7). This Lucan reference to the homeless Christ child is powerfully evocative, if often interpreted sentimentally rather than theologically. One of my favourite poems in the Irish language *Oiche Nollag* (Christmas Eve) by Máire Mhac an tSaoi (2011) (b. 1922) recalls our Christmas tradition of lighting a candle in the window to welcome the passing Christ child. Each verse ends with the refrain: *Luíodh Mac Dé ins an tigh seo anocht* (The Son of God will lie in this household tonight). The Christmas welcome for the Christ child is intended as a seasonal reminder of a broader hospitality to the many guises in which the Christ may visit our homes.

In each person on the streets (hungry, thirsty, naked), we are asked to recognize Christ himself (Matthew 25: 31- 46). Our response to these encounters is the clearest criterion for the judgment of our lives outlined in the gospels. Christ’s self-identification with the least in this parable is direct and unambiguous. The story of Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-31) is presented as a parable of judgement on the “absolute indifference” to the beggar at the gate. These Gospel texts are the most cited biblical texts in Catholic social teaching’s discussion of homelessness.

There is also a rich tradition of Patristic ethics, usually in the form of homilies, in which the realism of Christ in the poor is expressed strongly, even provocatively, and with which Catholic social teaching does not sufficiently engage. John Chrysostom, that great exponent of practical ethics and critic of social inequality – for whom unfair distribution of wealth was a form of robbery – had a profound conviction that the presence of Christ in the poor and homeless is a real presence:

For what is the profit, when His table indeed is full of golden cups, but He perishes with hunger? First fill Him, when He is hungry, and then abundantly deck out His table also. Do you make Him a cup of gold, while you give Him not a cup of cold water? ... Let this then be your thought with regard to Christ also, when He is going about a wanderer, and a stranger, needing a roof to cover Him; and thou, neglecting to receive Him, deckest out a pavement, and walls, and capitals of columns, and hanged up silver chains by means of lamps, but Himself bound in prison you will not even look upon. (Chrysostom, n.d.)

Scriptural images and insights do not give us a directly applicable solution to homelessness, but they give us sensitivity to values – particularly if we read them with those on the underside, those who are dispossessed – and they shape human character and action. They are formative of a broader hospitality – an opening of doors and hearts – that is personal and structural, both a disposition and a commitment to action.

SHAPING THE WITNESS AND ACTION OF THE CHURCH

It is interesting that the “street” has emerged as a theme in the current pontificate. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), Pope Francis (2013) refers to the “street” as a locus of evangelization, the place where our shoes get muddy going out to “the fringes of humanity” (paras. 45, 46). He challenges us to “draw near to new forms of poverty and vulnerability” but also to view the streets “with a contemplative gaze”, recognizing the presence of God in streets and squares (2013, paras. 210, 71). Francis offers practical expressions of this theological view including breakfasting with homeless persons on his 80th birthday and opening a free launderette near the Vatican. His advice to give money to people who are begging resulted in an Editorial in *The New York Times* entitled “The Pope on Panhandling: Give without Worry”. Francis reminds us that the way of giving is as important

as the gift. “You should not simply drop a bill into a cup and walk away. You must stop, look the person in the eyes, and touch his or her hands. The reason is to preserve dignity, to see another person not as a pathology or a social condition, but as a human, with a life whose value is equal to your own” (The New York Times Editorial Board, 2017, March 3). Pope Francis witnesses not just to what can be done practically, but also to the encounter with the other who is homeless, challenging their marginality and dispossession by bringing them to the centre.

We draw upon a rich tradition of ethical principles in Catholic social teaching, a fulsome theological anthropology, and a deep reservoir of imaginative Biblical stories and images to shape our responses to homelessness. The key 1987 document by the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, and subsequent references to homelessness in Catholic social teaching, are indicative of a broad understanding of the complexity of homelessness. The praxis of many Catholic agencies – often collaborative endeavours with other religious and secular non-governmental and governmental agencies – points to a multifaceted response by the Church globally. Catholic social teaching, and the practice shaped by this tradition of social thought, must continue to respond to the solvable problem of homelessness through:

- Practical, material help to provide safe and dignified shelter to homeless persons and families, and accompaniment for those who cannot yet, for a variety of reasons, move off the streets. However, as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) acknowledged in a 1988 response to the 1987 document of the Pontifical Commission, “we cannot pretend that soup kitchens and shelters represent a truly humane and effective response to poverty and homelessness. Charitable efforts cannot substitute for public policies that offer real opportunities and dignity for the poor” (1988, para. 11).
- Catholic social teaching, and the broader field of theological ethics, challenging the commodification of housing.

- Advocacy for and with those who are “roofless”, emphasizing that homelessness is a human rights violation, and calling on governments to meet their responsibilities in this area.
- Advocacy for just housing policies that favour the poor, recognizing that this is a prerequisite for the attainment of social justice.
- Dialogue with authorities about legislation for safe, secure, and affordable housing for those in inadequate housing.
- A preferential concern, in advocacy and planning, for children who live and work on the streets.
- Discerning new pastoral priorities and practical initiatives in the face of the impact of climate change on homelessness.
- Collaboration in all of the above with other Christian and, where possible, interfaith initiatives.

In 1987, the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace said the homeless poor were “waiting for a concrete answer and ... for a bold social policy” (Conclusion section). Thirty years later, many are still waiting in a world where homelessness is a global human rights crisis, and increasing categories of precariousness risk expanding “the world tribe of the dispossessed/outside the halls of plenty/looking in”. (Goodison, 1988, p.20)

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