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Catholicity for the ending of poverty

Susan Durber

It is not, and should never be, easy to reflect on poverty, whether theologically or otherwise. If we have any compassion at all as human beings who gaze upon the world, we will find it painful to see the ways in which poverty, in all its forms, limits and destroys human lives. The sights, smells and reality of poverty are distressing. Christian Aid, the UK churches' agency for international development, is assuredly right to say that "[P]overty is an outrage against humanity. It robs people of dignity, freedom and hope, of power over their own lives."¹

It is also hard to find the right words to say in the face of poverty, if we write, as this author does, from a place of privilege and comparative wealth, as one who has financial security, plenty to eat, an education, political power, access to health care and security from violence. It is a risky thing to attempt to write about poverty when you do not stand in the shoes of those who are poor. I know that I need to name my own privilege before I can say anything, and I can only speak from the place where I actually stand. It has often been easy for people who are not themselves poor to deceive themselves and their readers and to write in ways that aren't going to be truthful or helpful; finding ways of explaining poverty away, or trying to make it less scandalous or shocking than it really is or should be. It could be tempting to say, even in subtle ways, that poverty is just part of an inevitable reality or even perhaps that people are somehow to be blamed for their own poverty. Sometimes poverty is romanticized by those who, from a position of comfort, somehow imagine that those who are poor are happier than those oppressed by too much. Sometimes people mistakenly assume that because it can be a good thing to decide to live a simple life, or to take a monastic vow of poverty, poverty *itself* is a good thing. It is easy to forget, if you haven't really experienced poverty yourself, that when Jesus promised blessings to the poor he did not say that *poverty* is a blessing but that those who are poor *will find blessing* in the Kingdom of God when their poverty will be overcome. These mistakes, so easy to make, reveal that anyone seeking to make claims about poverty, its reality

¹ See <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/chair-advert.pdf> (access 03.04.2017).

and its meaning, theologically or otherwise, must find partnership with those who really can speak about the reality of poverty from experience.

The World Council of Churches has consistently warned of the danger of “the bourgeois captivity of theology”.² There are moments in the church’s life and history when this has been all too evident. We should beware of shaping our theology from the point of the view of “the rich”. So, what is written here can be only one voice, speaking from the limitations of one particular experience, inviting discussion with others.

1. The need to cross the gap

If there is a gap between one author’s experience and the possibility of seeing the world with anything like a true sight, there is also an increasing gap opening up around the world, between rich and poor. There is a well-documented rise in inequality in today’s world.³ It is also increasingly apparent that, for most people, all our views about economic systems in the world today and our seemingly “instinctive” reactions to words like “globalization” are consistently shaped by our experience and our place in the world. The discussion about economics that took place at the meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches at Accra in 2004 showed perfectly how experience so shapes reflection and opinion.⁴ A great divide opened up between Christians of the global North and of the global South as they reflected on neoliberal economics. While some saw a system that is just about the best option we have, even though it needs careful moderation for the sake of justice, others saw market economics simply as “death-dealing”, and this divide was mostly, though not always absolutely, a reflection of the divide between global North and South. There is a question then about how we can speak to each other across these widening gaps.

The church has always provided a particular kind of hope that gaps like these vast chasms of division can indeed be bridged, that solidarity and communion can be found amongst human beings in ways that enable us

² Julio De Santa Ana (ed.), *Towards a Church of Poor. The Work of an Ecumenical Group on the Church and the Poor* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1979), 117.

³ See for example: Oxfam report *Even it Up: Time to end extreme inequality*, 2014, in: https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/cr-even-it-up-extreme-inequality-291014-en.pdf (accessed 02.04.2017).

⁴ The World Alliance of Reformed Churches, *The Accra Confession*, 2004, in: <http://wrc.ch/accra/the-accra-confession> (accessed 02.04.2017).

all, together, to discover the truth. This is a vital part of what it means to talk about catholicity. This hope is embodied and made visible in particular ways at Christian baptism and at the communion table as the old markers of human identity and status are “overcome” by a new kind of being “in Christ”. This reconciliation and recreation is so much at the heart of the Gospel that it must shape all our Christian responses to the experiences and the challenges of poverty. Overcoming poverty will not be achieved, for example, simply by the rich becoming more charitable, or by the poor becoming more militant, but by a transformation and communion that makes us *one* people who belong together and who begin to share each other’s experience. Each and any of us might need to be cautious about speaking from our own place in the world, but we are re-created in Christ, and we are given the gift of becoming part of a body that feels, experiences and tends the wounds of the whole body. As I grow in communion with others in the global community of the church, my own body can begin to feel and own something of the pain and knowledge of others who stand in a very different place from me. That is why it might be important for those Christians who are relatively wealthy to come as close to the real, physical reality of poverty as they can. We are all part of the body of Christ that must know what it is to smell an open sewer, to hold bodies malnourished and thin, to hear the voices of those who can speak from their own dignity of the embodied experience of poverty. One of the gifts that the church can offer the world is actually this potential to transcend and transform the gaps that define us as human beings, the gaps that hide the pain of others from us and deceive us into thinking that our own reality is the only one. No Christian can really rest with eating only at his or her own table. We are part of a bigger self, a bigger community and we are called to the table of Christ. That must define who we are and who we might become. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches’ meeting in 2004 *did* become a place where global North and global South listened to one another, even though the conversation was painful, because the WARC is part of the communion of the church.

2. A parable

One place where this kind of hope of “crossing the gap” is revealed – this hope of a humanity renewed by Christ’s gift to the church of catholicity – is in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). The story sets before us a stark image of the “great chasm” between rich and poor.

We hear of a rich man, who feasts every day and who wears the finest clothes while, at his gate, sits a poor man who has nothing to eat and is so weak that he cannot even prevent the local dogs from licking the sores on his body. When both of them die, the rich man has a funeral and goes to Hades, while the poor man (with no funeral for he is too poor) is carried by angels to be with Abraham in heaven. The rich man pleads with Abraham to let Lazarus come and cool his tongue, and then asks for someone to go and warn his brothers about the fate that awaits them. But Abraham says that the great chasm between them can't be crossed.

It can be easy for this parable to make the readers who identify most obviously with the man who eats every day and wears fine clothes simply feel guilty, for the times they (we) ignore "the poor at our gate", the street homeless in our cities, or the people whose suffering is made evident in the news media. But it does beg some questions. Is the hope for a reversal of fortunes in the *next* world really good enough as an answer to poverty? Such a promise might even work to *keep* people in poverty now, while we all wait for a solution in the next world. But don't those in poverty need bread today rather than the promise of jam tomorrow? Is a reversal of fortunes really the kind of radical transformation that is at the very heart of the Gospel that Jesus preached? It is striking that, in this parable, the rich man is not really changed even by such a terrible experience as Hades. He still treats Lazarus as his servant, as though he could command him to come and quench his thirst or take messages to his brothers. It seems as though all he has learned is that those who are like him need a warning of what they might face, and not at all that poverty needs to be overcome for the sake of the suffering of the poor themselves. He cares, even at the end, only about his own kind. The gap between the rich man and Lazarus has not been crossed, only changed to a different kind of gap. However, there is perhaps another source of hope in the story. The parable seems at first to say that the gap between the rich and the poor will not be crossed, but that it will just be reversed. In life, and even after death, a chasm separates them and Abraham warns that no one can cross it. *But* there is a hint that someone will. The story says that "even if someone were to rise from the dead." The reader of Luke's Gospel knows that by chapter 24 someone *will indeed* rise from the dead. And if the great chasm between life and death can be overcome, as we know that through the resurrection of Jesus Christ it has been, then in God's love and providence, the great chasm between rich and poor could be overcome too. The parable thus hints at the possibility that the Gospel brings, suggesting that the old chasms can be over-

come, even, we might hope, the great chasm between the rich and the poor. This parable is thus not simply a story to make the rich feel guilty about the poor, but a sign of hope that the great gaps between life and death, between rich and poor, between male and female (and more than these) can be overcome through what God has done in Jesus Christ. This is the promise of catholicity, the welcoming of all into one community that stretches beyond and through the boundaries that we have presumed are fixed and sure to create something quite new.

The parable, and with it the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ, is both an encouragement and a promise that the greatest divides we can imagine, the highest walls we can build, the deepest paradoxes we can construct and the most intractable problems we face, can be overcome, within the mysterious and generous love of God. The theological conviction that the crossing of these great chasms into a new solidarity between human beings is God's will and gift is key to what is meant by catholicity. This transforming solidarity may be found in the community of the church, both locally and globally. While so many forces in the world divide us so that some can be oppressed or overwhelmed by others (like the rich man and Lazarus), the Gospel offers a different vision of divides overcome and community remade.

3. What does the Gospel teach us about poverty?

Whatever we want to say theologically about poverty, it is important to make clear that poverty is not God's will for any of God's people. There is a Victorian hymn verse, now almost always omitted from Cecil Frances Alexander's popular hymn, "All things bright and beautiful", which says

The rich man in his castle,
the poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly,
and ordered their estate.⁵

Such a hymn, with this verse included, would have us believe that someone is poor because God has made them so, an understanding which makes of poverty a good thing. God's will could hardly be otherwise. While it is possible to understand why such a theology of poverty was popular and

⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Things_Bright_and_Beautiful (accessed 23.09.2017).

how it could find support even in some places today, as a comfort to the rich and even perhaps in some ways a comfort to the poor, this is not a theology that matches either the witness of the Bible or the testimony of experience. The traditions of the Bible presume that the world, as God intended it, is one filled with abundance, joy and delight, for all people. We are created to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28), in ways which go far beyond the sexually reproductive. We are given the task of working the earth, “to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15), that is, to participate in the fruitfulness of earth. We have not been given an austere world in which resources are rationed meanly, but a generous, abundant world. In Jesus’ parable of the sower (Mark 4:3–9) we see the Kingdom of God imagined as a place where abundance is given and celebrated, and where death and scarcity are ended. The parable pictures the Kingdom of God through the language of generosity, abundance, even extravagance. This is the world that God is bringing.

There *are* stories in the Bible that warn of the dangers of acquisitiveness and greed, like the parable of the rich fool who hoards possessions only to find that his life is demanded of him (Luke 12:16–21). And there are texts which urge us to restrain from covetousness or exploitation and to frame our desires in ways that will nurture others and the earth. But much more foundational is a sense of the gratuity, the undeserved blessing, of human life. We are not meant for poverty, but for life in all its fullness within a generous and abundant world. So, poverty, theologically, does not belong within God’s creation or redemption of the world. When people do not have life in its fullness we can be sure that this is not God’s intention or doing. And this is to say more than that everyone should have at least \$1.25 a day. It is to say that all people should have all that is needed for life to be good; freedom, peace, safety and security, access to education and health care and basic services like water, community and culture, a political voice and the ability to shape their own future. Christian Aid defines poverty as “(...) a lack of power; the power for example, to have your say and be heard, or to know your rights and demand them; the power to have access to essential services or to share fairly in the world’s resources or to live in the security not only of surviving, but also of thriving.”⁶

⁶ Christian Aid, *Partnership for Change. The Power to End Poverty. Executive Summary*, 2012, in: <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/partnership-for-change-summary.pdf> (accessed 03.04.2017).

Poverty is about being denied the fullness of life which is God's will for all people. Poverty can also be experienced and defined as being on the wrong side of the divide between rich and poor. It is something relative, about a person's place in the world and in the scheme of things. Research has shown that many of us will be happier living in a more equal society even though we might not have, in absolute terms, very much.⁷ The lived experience of material poverty is very different in countries where there are high levels of inequality than in places where most people live a similar kind of life. Inequality breeds resentment, violence and the sense of an injustice done that makes life tainted and harsh. Poverty is felt and experienced as disempowering and demeaning when there are some who have no opportunity to access what they see others having in scandalous abundance. Poverty is not only about what a person has or does not have, but is about being excluded from society, culture and the human community, about having no power to change the way things are, no way to effect political change or make one's experience known or even noticed. It is about being invisible and unregarded, like Lazarus in the parable. Poverty is a much subtler phenomenon than having little money. It is as much about the lack of ability to share in tomorrow as about the possibility of starving today. It is about being left behind.

Theologically speaking, it is important to say that poverty is not a punishment for sin, nor an inevitable fact of life, nor an unfortunate, but necessary, side effect of otherwise good economic programs and practices (all of which arguments might ease any theoretical discomfort by making poverty somehow a "good"). If people are suffering in the ways that we see those who are living with poverty suffering then this must be something that God calls us, in the church, to address. In his book *God the Economist*, which has been remarkably influential among church communities around the world, particularly in the global South, Douglas Meeks writes that "the starting point for economic thinking should be the suffering caused by the present household arrangements. Why can we not see what is before our eyes?"⁸ This should be as true for theological as for economic thinking. Gustavo Gutierrez wants us to understand first of all that poverty is about raw, human suffering. He says, before he says anything

⁷ Richard G. Wilkinson/Kate Pickett (eds), *The Spirit Level. Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

⁸ Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist. The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 17.

else about “preferential options”, that poverty is truly and intensely bad. He writes “[i]n the final analysis, poverty means death: lack of food and housing, the inability to attend properly to health and education needs, the exploitation of workers, permanent unemployment, the lack of respect for one’s human dignity, and unjust limitations placed on personal freedom in the areas of self-expression, politics, and religion. Poverty is a situation that destroys peoples, families, and individuals; (...) [it is] ‘institutionalised violence.’”⁹

Poverty should not be conceived as a blessing or a just punishment, for it is violence and death. It does not belong within the Kingdom of God. Similarly, riches are neither a reward from God nor a sign of God’s blessing. When they are won at the expense of others or in rivalry with others, from a world in which many are in poverty, they are a sign of a world at odds with the ways of God.

There are those who would draw our attention to what is called “prosperity theology”, a theology that suggests that wealth is a sign of God’s blessing. Any judgement of such theology must be affected by whose voices it is that we are hearing. If such a theology is used to justify the exploitation of the poor by unscrupulous pastors, for example, then it is clearly dangerous and false. But when, as sometimes happens, it comes from the mouths of the poorest of the poor, it can be seen as a legitimate cry for the blessings of a generous God to be given to those who are righteous and who need them. Fullness of life is God’s will for all, but the kinds of extravagant riches that can only be made at the expense of others, are not God’s will. Many of us will need to have our eyes opened to reveal a truer perspective on what is “fullness of life” and what might actually be extravagant exploitation of others. But there is ample testimony in our world, on every doorstep, to the suffering that poverty brings.

So, if poverty is not God’s will for any of God’s people, and if Jesus promised good news for the poor, how should we respond?

4. Charity

It is tempting to think that the first response to poverty should be about calling the rich to give to the poor. This has been the classic response of the church, and the first and most immediate way that many of us try to

⁹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988, revised edition with a new preface), xxi.

“cross the gap”. Churches all over the world have a strong and often generous, even sacrificial, culture of service and of charitable giving; from soup kitchens to food banks, from credit unions to homeless shelters. Many churches are also generous in seeking to address *global* humanitarian need. But, there are rewards to be found in giving service to the poor, and this sense of reward can sometimes blind us from seeing that what we are doing is not necessarily the way to end poverty. You can find newspaper pictures of smiling volunteers ready to open a soup kitchen or foodbank, people responding with great generosity. But if such service is not accompanied by sorrow, and even anger, that there is such human need in the first place and that it has been created by an unjust society, then it becomes distorted. The existence of food banks and soup kitchens, and even international aid agencies, should not be seen first as signs of the church’s generosity, but rather as a sign of sinful world. The truth is that the church often has a more ready theology of *service* than it has a theology of *transformation*. Service is undoubtedly an important part of Christian discipleship, but without a theology and practice of transformation, a theology that asks why the poor are poor in the first place and looks for ways to change that, poverty will not be ended.

An approach that begins and ends with charity also has its focus on those who are rich, the generous people who give, rather than on those *who are actually experiencing poverty*. It depends on appeals to the rich, rather than on listening to the poor. It can sometimes work to keep open the gap between rich and poor, rather than work to overcome it.

5. Justice

Thinking about how to end poverty has often moved from a “charity” way of thinking to one which begins with “justice”. If we think only about charity, we focus on the virtues, or potential virtues, of the rich. We may encourage them to let go of something of their privilege and we will congratulate them for it, but their privilege and the structures that support it will remain. But, if we start by thinking about justice rather than charity, we are forced to think about both the rich and the poor, about the systems that create the gap between them, and we are forced to think about changing the way the world is arranged.

But sometimes this approach has its limitations too. It can be tempting to think about justice in a rather abstract way, as being about what is “owed” to someone, or as something that could be viewed almost like a

kind of arithmetic; two for you and two for me. And tackling poverty is not just about economic theory and political challenge. You can distance yourself from those in poverty by making your response abstractly political. Justice in the sense in which the Bible talks about it is more than this. It is about being in a relationship with someone so that you want to make sure that the “other” has what is “right” for them. It is about *love and mercy* too. This means that biblical notions of justice are founded not so much on abstract notions of arithmetic “equality” but on love and compassion.

6. Solidarity

There may be an even more important place to *begin* in responding to poverty than either charity or justice. Sam Wells is rector of St Martin-in-the-Fields, a church in London that is well known for its engagement with poverty.¹⁰ In a lecture called “What’s Wrong with Poverty?”¹¹ he argues that the addressing of poverty is not best understood as being about the overcoming of someone else’s limitations (giving them what they lack) or getting justice for them. What needs addressing first is the way that poverty separates people from others, the isolation it creates. He says that the first thing is to establish a human connection, to be *with* people. He urges the church not so much to think of itself as being *for* other people, even “on the side of” people, but about being *with* them, just as God is not only on our side, but came to be *with* us in the incarnation. It is not enough to be a church that is about transformation and justice, if you cannot bear first to be *with* those who are poor. Being *with* is the place to be until there is no longer the kind of distinction between *us* and *them* that can really be sustained, but only really us. Wells is speaking primarily about very local and visible street poverty, but his suggestion could also transform the church’s thinking about global poverty. When we find a way to be truly *with* each other then we can see much more clearly what needs to change in our society, in our economies and in our own lives.

What Sam Wells reveals and highlights is that the place to begin in overcoming poverty is in the kind of “being with” that comes from the gift of crossing some of the great chasms that divide human beings from one another. This “being with” is surely related to the gift of catholicity, that welcome into a renewed global community that characterizes Christian

¹⁰ St Martin-in-the-Fields, Trafalgar Square.

¹¹ Delivered at St Mary-le-Bow Church in London, March 19, 2014.

identity. We surely need, in responses to the cries of the poor, all sorts of places in our world where people can really meet each other across the divides of wealth and poverty. In a world increasingly marked by inequality, and in a world where the gaps between human beings and communities are increasing, the church is an important place where these divides are crossed and overcome. That is the vocation and gift of a church that practises and learns to live a true and profound catholicity in a global world.

7. Overcoming poverty

A church *really living catholicity and solidarity* (and not simply a church that is being charitable or that campaigns for justice) could not resign itself to poverty as an inevitable part of life. It could never settle for sustained compassion and campaigning, for foodbanks and fundraising as simply constants of church life. Pope Francis has said that when he calls the church to be a church for the poor he is not talking about programs of assistance (aid and service or works of mercy and charity) but the kind of Christian life which is based on a being “at one” with those in poverty.¹² This is also not only so that we can better understand poverty, but it is actually about understanding and even receiving God. It is a theological imperative. There is a temptation for the church to understand itself as servant of the poor rather than as community of the poor. If we have a solidarity approach, we will be less likely to foster the kind of dependency on “charity” that gives the rich a kind of satisfaction, but which is ultimately demeaning for others.

Dorothee Sölle, a theologian who might be described as the liberation theologian of Europe, once wrote: “a theology which does not articulate the suffering community, does not speak for it, think from it, feel from it, is de facto a theology of oppression.”¹³ A church built on the kind of solidarity and catholicity that builds bridges between rich and poor would always demand that poverty should be *ended*. It could not spiritualize salvation, but would see the end of poverty as, in part at least, what salvation truly is. It would have a theology that would speak to the daily needs

¹² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2013), 100.

¹³ Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking about God. An Introduction to Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 97.

of all people in a way that is as bodily, real and vital as the pain of poverty.

The church is called to be a community in which humanity meets itself and listens intensely to itself and in which the realities of life are discovered, not in abstract, but through relationship with people. The communion table, the place where the body of Christ gathers and where the body of Christ is received, is a place at which all the people of God meet each other and meet with God on an equal footing. This means that our relating to one another cannot be about a kind of instrumentality, as though we are only here to “do” certain things “for” one another. We are united by a common cause, but we are in communion with one another, and we are part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

A theology of poverty needs to be rooted then first of all in this kind of catholicity and communion. As Rowan Williams has put it, “central to what Christian theology sets before us is mutuality (...). The model of human existence which is taken for granted is one in which each person is both needy and needed, both dependent on others and endowed with gifts for others (...).”¹⁴ If we take it for granted that my own well-being is inseparable from the well-being of all others, then we cannot settle for a world in which some will always continue to be poor. Our community with each other will itself impel us to end poverty. This is not simply because we feel an imperative to “be generous”, but because we recognize our own oneness with, and even dependence upon, those who might seem to have nothing. Our “destiny”, as Rowan Williams puts it, is connected with the poor of the world, those who live just around the corner and those far away.

8. Conclusion

I believe that it is because I am a Christian that I do, it turns out, have something to say about poverty. I have no right to speak from my place in the economic scales of the world. I have no right to say much as someone from the global North. But, as a member of the church, as a part of Christ’s body, praying and longing to live in communion with my brothers and sisters and Christ, baptized, receiving Christ’s body at his table, I know something of what it means to be part of a suffering and holy body. I have heard the Gospel, and someone, Jesus Christ, has come back from the

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, ‘Theology and Economics’, in: Idem, *Faith in the Public Square* (London – New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 228.

dead to show me what is God's will and hope and promise for creation. And so, as many Christians even from the richer global North, I cannot and will not rest until rich and poor are fed in fullness, as God intends and as God has promised. I am part of a global world, but my way of living in it is shaped inexorably and completely by my belonging to a church that is learning how to receive the gift of a true catholicity.

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Zusammenfassung

Armut sollte niemals romantisiert werden, sondern als das angesehen werden, was sie wirklich ist: ein Vergehen gegen die Menschlichkeit, das Menschen voneinander trennt und Menschen ihrer Hoffnung beraubt. Die Welt, in der wir heute leben und die von einer globalisierten Wirtschaft geprägt ist, schafft zwischen Arm und Reich eine grosse Kluft im gegenseitigen Verstehen und Erleben. Als wahrhaft katholische Gemeinschaft hat die Kirche den Auftrag, die Kluft zu überschreiten. Dies gelingt ihr nicht nur mit freigiebiger Wohltätigkeit, sondern mit radikaleren Lösungen: der Suche nach Gerechtigkeit und Solidarität, sodass Menschen, die jetzt voneinander getrennt sind, beieinander sein können. Das Gleichnis vom reichen Mann und dem armen Lazarus legt die wahre christliche Hoffnung offen, dass es möglich ist, selbst die tiefsten Trennungen, sogar die Kluft zwischen Himmel und Hölle, Leben und Tod oder Arm und Reich in der Kraft des auferstandenen Christus zu überschreiten.

Key Words – Schlüsselwörter

Poverty – Gap – Charity – Justice – Solidarity