

# How Much Equality is Needed for Justice?

Gerry O'Hanlon SJ

## Introduction

Critics of Ireland's decade-long economic boom often, with an eye to justice, express considerable concern about 'rising inequality and about the core features of the strategy adopted by the Government to combat poverty'.<sup>1</sup> This is so despite the fact that since 1994 the percentage of the population living in 'consistent poverty' appears to have fallen from 16 per cent to 7 per cent.<sup>2</sup> However, since the late 1990s, 'relative income poverty' has persistently remained around 20 per cent, higher than it was in 1994.<sup>3</sup> Would it be more just to return to a poorer but more equal Ireland, or is this the wrong kind of question to ask? Can we say instead that this is not a choice Ireland needs to make?<sup>4</sup>

While we have systems in place to measure 'consistent' and 'relative' income poverty on a regular basis, we have no systems that routinely measure relative poverty in terms of access to health, housing, education, social supports and transport.<sup>5</sup> If, over the next decade, the Government moved to address the issue of inadequate public services and social supports, would this satisfy critics, even if considerable relative disparities in income and wealth remained? Or do we also need to address more directly these relative disparities, by means, for example, of greater tax equity?

And what if one goes beyond Ireland and considers the issues of equality and justice in the world at large – how are they and ought they to be linked?

## Contrasting Perspectives

In a provocative piece from an avowedly Christian perspective, Mary Kenny argues that equality – except in respect of the unique value of every human person – is not Christian doctrine but rather a notion ushered in by the French and Russian Revolutions.<sup>6</sup> In fact, she argues, parables such as the Prodigal Son, the labourers in the vineyard, the unequal distribution of talents, all show that life is not fair, and what matters is not equality but the way you use what you have been given. And so, she asserts, what Christianity

teaches is kind and loving behaviour towards everyone, as well as issuing a warning to rich people not to be greedy, cruel and arrogant, since it is true that riches often lead people astray. So, concludes Kenny, at a secular level equality theory sets people up for a life-time's unhappiness: 'if you are always comparing yourself to others on the grounds of a lack of equality, you will certainly be miserable', while in the scale of Christian values the doctrine of equality is 'historically heretical'. Is she right?

In a very different analysis, John Baker argues for the intrinsic connection between equality and poverty (and by implication justice).<sup>7</sup> His definition of equality is wide-ranging: it includes the egalitarian (if not strictly equal) distribution of resources, equality of opportunity, equal respect and recognition, equality in power relations and equality in relations of care, love and solidarity. Does Christianity, *pace* Kenny, entail something like this strong definition of equality?

## Catholic Social Teaching on Equality

### *Human Dignity and Equality*

Fundamental to Catholic social teaching is the assertion of the basic dignity and equality of all human beings. This basic equality – also asserted in secular human rights discourse, even if more as a self-evident truth than one which can be proved – is said in Catholic social teaching to be grounded in two revealed truths of the Christian faith: the creation of humankind in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1: 26) and the taking on of human flesh and nature by God in the human being that is Jesus Christ. Every human person is gifted into birth by God, is called to be a sister or brother of Jesus Christ and to become part of the rich love-life of God's own self.

For Christians, this deep earthing of human dignity in the ultimate reality that is God explains and justifies secular human rights discourse, not to mention that instinctive grasp of humankind's misery and grandeur which characterises literature, philosophy, and the human sciences down through the ages. 'Sceptre and Crown must tumble down...': in the end, beggar or king, the

wonder and mystery that at our best we instinctively grasp in every human being entails a basic equality that is due to our identity as beings who are from and for God.

### ***A Framework of Principles***

Given this basic equality, Catholic social teaching develops a framework of principles and values which it believes can help to structure our lives together.

We ought to live according to the principle of **the common good**, a principle which, in contrast to any notion of isolated individual self-fulfilment, entails ‘the sum total of social conditions which allow people either as groups or individuals to reach their fulfilment more fully and easily’.<sup>8</sup>

This is complemented by the principle of **the universal destination of goods**: even if there is a right to private property, still in some basic sense the goods of the earth are for all and the use of private property involves a social responsibility.<sup>9</sup>

Catholic social teaching involves in particular a **preferential option for the poor**: all, including those who are poor, must have access to the level of well-being necessary for their development.<sup>10</sup> There must be also effective conditions of equal opportunity for all and a guarantee of objective equality before the law.<sup>11</sup>

The principle of **solidarity** – not a ‘feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people ... but a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good’<sup>12</sup> – makes it clear that the unity and equality of humankind is marred by the existence of stark inequalities.<sup>13</sup>

The principle of **subsidiarity** preserves the right of consultation and decision-making at appropriate lower levels of society, avoiding the excesses of totalitarian State intervention.<sup>14</sup> Complemented by the values of truth, freedom and justice, the principle of subsidiarity reminds us of our role as citizens in civil society as we play our part in founding what Catholic social teaching boldly, and in almost utopian vein, calls the ‘civilization of love’,<sup>15</sup> towards which all human striving tends.

### ***Diversity and Inequality***

Given this basic framework, with its strong presumption of equality, there is room, however, for diversity and even inequality. We know that, controversially, this notion of equality in diversity

(familiar to us in Ireland in the context of the politics of Northern Ireland) has been used by the Catholic Church to defend the non-ordination of women. But even if this application is contentious, the principle itself need not be: so, for example, men and women are different in many ways but are equal, and the world is the richer for having all kinds of other examples of equality in diversity (colours, sounds, physical characteristics, personality traits and so on).

Matters begin to get a bit more difficult and complicated when we come to the notion of the kind of diversity that is accompanied by inequality. In a comment on the remark of Jesus that ‘You will always have the poor with you ...’ (Mt. 26:11) the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* notes that: ‘Christian realism, while appreciating on the one hand the praiseworthy efforts being made to defeat poverty, is cautious on the other hand regarding ideological positions and Messianistic beliefs that sustain the illusion that it is possible to eliminate the problem of poverty completely from this world’.<sup>16</sup>



*How much redistribution is needed for justice?*<sup>13</sup>

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These remarks do indicate that poverty is to be combated, and we may suppose that the caution expressed relates to historical experiences like the project of communism, which is criticised for its false anthropology in that basic human values, such as freedom and truth, were sacrificed in the name of a justice and equality that were not achieved. In his encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, marking the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope John Paul notes Pope Leo XIII’s prescience in pointing up the dangers of ‘socialism’ – that ‘The remedy would prove worse than the sickness...’ – and in warning that encouraging ‘the poor man’s envy of the rich’ is

not an adequate way to address the social question.<sup>17</sup>

More blunt is the comment of the US Catholic Bishops in their much-praised 1986 Pastoral Letter, *Economic Justice for All*:

*Catholic social teaching does not require absolute equality in the distribution of income and wealth. Some degree of inequality not only is acceptable, but may also be considered desirable for economic and social reasons, such as the need for incentives and the provision of greater rewards for greater risks.*<sup>18</sup>

Maybe Michael McDowell is closer to Catholic social teaching than we might have thought?!

### **Wealth Creation**

There is indeed in Catholic social teaching some considerable encouragement of wealth creation in terms which are rarely cited. So, there is a defence of the right of private initiative in economic matters against those who have wanted to limit it 'in the name of an alleged "equality" of everyone in society', which has resulted 'not so much in true equality as in a "leveling down"'.<sup>19</sup> Business planning, innovation, risk taking, wealth creation, entrepreneurial ability are all praised.<sup>20</sup> The Church recognises the 'proper role of profit as the first indicator that a business is functioning well'.<sup>21</sup> There is reference to an 'authentic concept' of business competition.<sup>22</sup> The free market is praised as in many circumstances being 'the most efficient instrument for utilising resources and effectively responding to needs ... a truly competitive market is an effective instrument for attaining importance objectives of justice'.<sup>23</sup> All this needs to take place in the context of environmentally sustainable development.<sup>24</sup>

This approval of wealth creation, this utilisation of talents which are unequally distributed, must, according to Catholic social teaching, occur within a context which respects that basic framework of principles and values outlined above. And so the US Bishops, after their remarks on the admissibility of some inequality, go on to say:

*However, unequal distribution should be evaluated in terms of several moral principles we have enunciated: the priority of meeting the basic needs of the poor and the importance of increasing the level of participation by all members of society in the economic life of the nation. These norms establish a strong presumption against extreme*

*inequality of income and wealth as long as there are poor, hungry and homeless people in our midst. They also suggest that extreme inequalities are detrimental to the development of social solidarity and community.*<sup>25</sup>

### **Love and Justice**

Again and again, faithful to principles such as the common good and solidarity, Catholic social teaching condemns stark and extreme inequalities whether they exist within or between nations. Even if there are different talents, still each person and each nation has a right 'to be seated at the table of the common banquet' instead of lying outside the door like Lazarus, while 'the dogs come and lick his sores'.<sup>26</sup>

And so, if wealth itself is not condemned, but rather 'immoderate love of riches or their selfish use',<sup>27</sup> there is an obligation on the rich to act always with love for the poor, a love that involves not just almsgiving but also the social and political aspects of poverty as well as the demands of justice.<sup>28</sup> This will even mean that the rich, the more fortunate, 'should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others'.<sup>29</sup> There is also a warning that an excessive affirmation of equality of rights 'can give rise to an individualism in which each one claims his own rights without wishing to be answerable for the common good'.<sup>30</sup>

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There are several reasons given why serious disparities, inequalities, imbalances of any kind (economic, social, political, cultural, and religious) are to be avoided. When they involve the denial of basic human needs and rights, such inequalities are an offence to the basic dignity of oppressed people. When they involve an excessive gap between different sections of society or between different countries, there arises a lack of social solidarity and real community, with dangerous consequences for all (not least, by

implication, the threat of violence).<sup>31</sup>

In more positive terms, social solidarity will bring benefit to the richer nations, both within their own countries and in their dealings with the rest of the world. Without it, they live 'in a sort of existential confusion ... even though surrounded by an abundance of material possessions ... a sense of alienation and loss of their own humanity has made people feel reduced to the role of cogs in the machinery of production and consumption'.<sup>32</sup>

Something of this sense of alienation can surely be observed in contemporary Ireland, as we struggle to find meaning in so much affluence, when around and about us, in Ireland and more visibly in other parts of the world, so many are clearly not 'seated at the table of the common banquet'.

### Implications

It seems to me that a prophetic but also a wise perspective issues from Catholic social teaching on equality. The fundamental equality of all ought to result in ways of living together that ensure basic human needs are met and that relative inequalities are not so excessive as to wound solidarity and be a blight on human dignity and respect.

There is no precise measurement given in Catholic social teaching as to what might constitute excessive inequality, but plentiful indicators are provided to help in the discernment of particular situations.<sup>33</sup> Envy at the existence of a certain degree of inequality is not a sufficient indicator that there exists injustice.

Throughout an exploration of Catholic social teaching on equality, one is conscious that this is no mere abstract, academic exercise but involves real people often living in intolerable situations: there is real urgency about getting the analysis right.

Certain implications flow from the preceding discussion of Catholic social teaching. Clearly, there do exist stark and even death-dealing inequalities in our world, and in prophetic mode we need academics and activists of all kinds to engage with this evil. At the same time, there is a cautionary or wise undertow to the prophecy: a utopian advocacy of what is not achievable can result in a leveling down that is worse than what went before.<sup>34</sup>

In this sense, I would suggest that the Christian values of altruism, preferential option for the poor, solidarity and *kenosis* (self-emptying) are not sufficient criteria on their own for sound social and economic policies: within the notion of the common good, there must exist too a healthy respect for self-interest, wealth creation, profit, entrepreneurial risk-taking, as well as an ethic of consumption.<sup>35</sup>

When applied to Ireland this suggests an interesting scenario. It is certainly the case that poverty still needs to be tackled, that inequality (particularly when compared to levels in some other wealthy EU countries) is excessive, that one way to address this situation is to realise the so-called social dividend accruing from this time of affluence. And in this context there is always the imperative for poverty and justice lobbies to denounce injustices and skewed ways of proceeding: the default position of governments and indeed societies very often is to favour the well-off.

### *Constructive Dialogue*

Perhaps it is also important for those of us who are inspired by Catholic social teaching to engage more constructively with the wealthy and powerful, some of whom may very well be susceptible to what Christian teaching has to say about the conduct of business, social affairs and politics.

Do we too easily fall into an exclusively oppositional mode of discourse? There is a discernment of spirits needed here: how to be true to the gospel condemnation of the danger of riches without falling into that begrudgery which is often the Irish form of envy?<sup>36</sup>

The preferential option for the poor cannot be discharged responsibly by prophetic condemnation only: it requires engagement with the powerful to come up with good solutions for all. The rich and powerful need to be persuaded and wooed as well as condemned; they need to be engaged with on their own turf, with respect for the issues they face: this, it seems to me, is what Catholic social teaching on equality suggests and it is what we in the church often fail to do. Constructive engagement of this kind is needed to translate values, however admirable, into workable policies.

With regard to the wider world and its scandalous inequalities, we in Ireland do well with respect to aid and issues around debt relief, but seem less

aware that our trade policies are an intrinsic part of this picture. We need to move to a situation for ourselves and others in the western world where such policies are less protectionist and self-serving and more just to developing nations. And in an increasingly globalised world we need to actively seek to establish the kind of international institutions that can effectively deal with the challenges of a more equal model of globalisation at all the requisite levels – economic, political, cultural, social and religious.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

It is interesting, given the Church's negative experience of the French Revolution in particular, that equality is endorsed so strongly. That negative experience is perhaps reflected in the careful situating of equality in the context of other values and the dislike of terms such as 'class struggle', even if, of course, there are other, more positive reasons for such a nuanced approach.

I wonder, even if he had cared enough to bother about Lazarus at all (Lk 16: 19–31), would it ever have been possible for Dives to literally sit down with him at 'the table of the common banquet'? Perhaps too much divided them at all kinds of levels; perhaps this would not have been what Lazarus himself wanted? Dives is condemned because he did nothing – a sin of omission, perhaps a rationalisation on his part that, given all the complications, there was nothing that he could do to make the situation better.

We are urged not to fall into the same trap of self-serving rationalisation. No human being ought to be deprived of basic human rights, and the gap between the better-off and the less well-off ought to be such that, at least metaphorically, we are open to sitting at the same table. This end-point is more likely to be attained by an evidence-based approach than an ideological one, be that ideology a discredited socialism or the predominant and dysfunctional neo-liberalism. It is an end-point worth giving one's life to, not so much to avoid condemnation, but rather to honour the wonderful gift to us all, rich and poor, of being created in the image and likeness of God, called to be a sister or brother of Jesus Christ.

## Notes

1. 'Poverty and Inequality', *Working Notes*, Issue 55, May 2007, p. 5.
2. Central Statistics Office, *EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2005*, Dublin: Central Statistics Office, 2006; 'Poverty and Inequality',

*Working Notes*, Issue 55, May 2007, p. 7.

'Consistent poverty' is defined as falling below an income poverty line (set at 60 per cent of median equivalised income) and lacking two or more items from an index of deprivation. (These items include being able to keep one's home adequately warm, being able to afford two pairs of strong shoes, having enough money to buy presents for family members at least once a year.)

3. *Ibid.* 'Relative poverty' is defined as having an income that is lower than 60 per cent of median equivalised income.
4. 'Poverty and Inequality', *Working Notes*, Issue 55, May 2007, p. 7.
5. 'Voting in Pursuit of Justice', *Working Notes*, Issue 55, May 2007, p. 3.
6. Mary Kenny, *The Irish Catholic*, 19 April 2007, p. 15.
7. John Baker, 'Poverty and Equality: Ten Reasons why Anyone who Wants to Combat Poverty Should Embrace Equality as Well', in Combat Poverty Agency and Equality Authority, *Poverty and Inequality: Applying an Equality Dimension to Poverty Proofing*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency and Equality Authority, 2003, pp. 12–25.
8. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Dublin: Veritas, 2005, n. 164.
9. *Ibid.*, nn. 171–81.
10. *Ibid.*, n. 172; n.182.
11. *Ibid.*, n. 145.
12. Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (The Social Concern of the Church), Encyclical Letter, 30 December 1987, n. 38.
13. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 192.
14. *Ibid.*, nn. 185–88.
15. *Ibid.*, nn. 575–83.
16. *Ibid.*, n. 183.
17. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (The Hundredth Anniversary), Encyclical Letter, 1 May 1991, n. 12, in David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, New York: Orbis Books, 2005.
18. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, Washington DC: Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, United States Catholic Conference, 1986, n. 185.
19. Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (The Social Concern of the Church), Encyclical Letter, 30 December 1987, n. 15, in O'Brien and Shannon, *op.cit.*
20. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nn. 336–37.
21. *Ibid.*, n. 340.
22. *Ibid.*, n. 343.
23. *Ibid.*, n. 347.
24. *Ibid.*, nn. 461–87.
25. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *op. cit.*, n. 185.
26. Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (The Social Concern of the Church), n. 33 in O'Brien

and Shannon, *op.cit.*

27. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 184.
28. *Ibid.*, n. 184.
29. *Ibid.*, n. 158.
30. *Ibid.*, n. 158.
31. *Ibid.*, n. 192.
32. *Ibid.*, n. 374.
33. I could find only one explicit reference in Catholic social teaching to the notion of 'relative poverty' – cf *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, op. cit.*, n. 362.
34. See also Seamus Murphy, SJ, 'Utopianism, Advocacy and Consequentialism', *Milltown Studies*, No. 28, Autumn 1991, pp. 5–23.
35. In a 1999 Pastoral Letter, the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference argued that there is an urgent need to develop 'an ethic of consumption'. (*Prosperity with a Purpose*, Dublin: Veritas, 1999, pp. 139–144) The Pastoral Letter acknowledges that this is 'probably the least developed area of the Church's social teaching ...' (p. 139). See also Padraig Corkery, *Companion to the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Dublin: Veritas, 2007, Chapter Eight.
36. Andrew Greeley, 'Will Success Spoil Cathleen Ní Houlihan?', *Doctrine and Life*, Vol. 57, No. 8, October 2007, pp. 46–52.
37. 'The architecture of global governance has massive gaps in its coverage', John Palmer, 'European Integration: A Vital Step on the Road to a New World Order', in Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, *The Future of Europe: Uniting Vision, Values and Citizens?*, Dublin: Veritas, 2006, p. 136; also *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 369; n. 371; n. 441.

**Gerry O'Hanlon SJ is a theologian and a staff member of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice**