

Catholic Social Teaching and Housing

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Introduction

'Have youse (yis) no homes to go to?' – the traditional, plaintive cry of long-suffering publicans, trying to clear their premises after closing time, can sound somewhat hollow and ironic to many in today's Ireland. We live at a time when housing supply does not meet demand; when, in the wake of the collapse of the property bubble, home-owners may struggle to meet mortgage repayments and many fear re-possession; where those in negative equity may find themselves unable to move from their current home even when there are pressing family or financial reasons for them to do so; where waiting lists for social housing are at an alarmingly high level, and where many are unable to access or remain in private rented accommodation because of unaffordable increases in rents in many areas.

At the bottom of this ladder of deprivation lie those who are homeless, including the so-called 'new homeless'. Homelessness often comes to public attention around Christmas time or when there is a particularly dramatic illustration of its effects, such as the death of someone who has been sleeping on the streets, but too often it slips down and even off the public agenda.

In a previous publication,¹ the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice analysed the multiple failures of housing policy in the years of the boom, including the too-easy availability of credit and of tax incentives, a godsend to investors, which meant that housing became a commodity, to be traded like stocks and shares, not a home to meet a basic need, and right, of every person. The analysis concluded that these failures reflected 'an underlying unwillingness to acknowledge that every person has a right to decent housing and that the State has a duty to respect and promote that right'.²

The purpose of this present article is to examine briefly how this right to housing is treated in Catholic social teaching. Since Cathy Molloy already discussed this topic in a previous issue of *Working Notes*,³ with particular reference to the 1987 document of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *What Have You Done to your*

Homeless Brother?, the focus of the present article, after a recapitulation of the basic teaching and a brief comment on the use of rights language in this debate, will be on the contribution of Pope Francis.

Catholic Social Teaching on Housing – General

There is a basic matrix of principles and values at the heart of Catholic social teaching, out of which application is made to particular social issues.⁴ Founded on the fundamental dignity and equality of all human beings, this matrix includes notions such as the common good, the universal destination of goods (even if there is a right to private property, still the goods of the earth are intended for all and the use of private property involves a social responsibility), and solidarity (with a 'preferential option for the poor').

As applied to the issue of housing, the relevant documents⁵ again and again refer to housing as a universal human right (indeed, Pope Francis calls it a 'sacred' right⁶), with concomitant responsibilities on states and societies to honour that right. Increasingly in Catholic social teaching there is mention of the need to take into account environmental factors in developing housing policy, which ought as well to integrate features such as a living community, a sustainable infrastructure, and 'mixed housing for mixed communities'.⁷

Of particular interest in this vision of society is the structural role of markets. While recognising the market 'as an irreplaceable instrument for regulating the inner workings of the economic system', Church social teaching notes the 'risk of an "idolatry" of the market', and underlines the market's limitations '... which are easily seen in its proven inability to satisfy important human needs, which require goods that "by their nature are not and cannot be mere commodities" ...'.⁸

Closely related to the role of markets is the principle of 'private ownership with social function', applied directly by the Irish Bishops to the issue of housing.⁹ Pope Francis writes of the same principle in the context of solidarity, and puts it strongly:

*Solidarity is a spontaneous reaction by those who recognize that the social function of property and the universal destination of goods are realities which come before private property. The private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, so that they can better serve the common good; for this reason, solidarity must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them.*¹⁰

From Vision to Policy

Without vision and values we too easily default to a pragmatism which inevitably favours the more powerful. But while vision and values play an important heuristic function in pointing towards a certain direction, it would be foolish to imagine that the translation of vision into policy is a simple matter and that the Church ‘can provide clear practical guidelines to politicians, economists or planners’.¹¹ The need, then, is always to bring the vision and values into dialogue with concrete analyses and policy options – of the kind to be found elsewhere in this issue of *Working Notes*.

There is also a need to consider the question of how individual rights, including rights in relation to housing, can be balanced against the need to protect and promote the common good.

There is certain unease about what is seen as an inflation of rights language, without concomitant attention to the responsibilities and duties (of whom?) required to address these rights. In an interesting discussion, educationalist David Tuohy reflects on the tension between the discourse of the common good and that of individual rights and the need to develop a public language of politics which integrates the two.

He notes the positive history of the concept of human rights, emerging from a struggle against the arbitrary use of power by elites or indeed the tyranny of the majority. However, he then distinguishes between ‘liberty rights’ (affirming the agency of the right-holder to pursue their own interests) and ‘claim rights’ (which include the duty of other people to act in a particular way for the benefit of the right-holder), so that ‘the establishment or declaration of rights is not a magical guarantee of their realisation’.¹² And so, where there is competition for scarce, limited resources, there can occur a situation where ‘rights are in conflict with one another, not as concepts, but in relation to their distribution’.¹³

In this context, the rhetoric of rights, in general, is that they claim to ‘trump’ other considerations in society¹⁴ but the ‘expansion of rights has led to rights-inflation, which devalues the currency of rights language. If everything is promoted with the same seriousness and urgency of a human right, then it is hard to distinguish priority areas’.¹⁵

This analysis cautions in general against an overly facile use of rights language which rhetorically claims to trump all other considerations without recourse to the complex analysis required to yield workable policy options. However, it can surely be argued that in Ireland, in the particular area of housing – where, during the boom years, ‘we saw over a doubling of the numbers on the social housing waiting list’¹⁶ – there were, and indeed are, sufficient resources to ensure a more equitable distribution of housing in our society and alternative policy options to bring this about.¹⁷

Pope Francis on Housing

It seems clear that Pope Francis belongs to the more radical, anti-establishment shift in Catholic social teaching from Pope John XXIII onwards, identified by Donal Dorr.¹⁸

Pope Francis has called the right to housing a ‘sacred’ right

We have already noted Francis’ reference to housing (and to land and work) as ‘sacred rights’¹⁹ and his reference to the social function of property.²⁰ In this latter context, he goes on to urge, quoting Paul VI in *Octogesima Adveniens*, that where necessary ‘... the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place goods more generously at the service of others’.²¹

Francis praises cities that by design ‘are full of areas that connect, relate and foster the recognition of the other’²² but bemoans the reality that: ‘Houses and neighbourhoods are more often built to isolate and protect than to connect and integrate’,²³ effectively relegating people who are poor to the fringes of society.

In an address delivered at the ‘World Meeting of Popular Movements’ in October 2014 he insists: ‘I said it and it repeat it: a house for every family’.²⁴ In that address, he emphasises also ‘tenancy

security’, as well the importance of ‘a community dimension’, and of vibrant neighbourhoods, with ‘adequate infrastructure (sewage, light, gas, asphalted roads) ... schools, hospitals or first aid clinics, sports clubs and all those things that create bonds and unite ...’.²⁵

As befits the Bishop of Rome within a church that defines itself universally, Francis draws our attention to the reality that housing, and its lack, is a global phenomenon, with conditions elsewhere in the world often a great deal more extreme than those found in developed countries. In particular, with typical frankness, in his address to the World Meeting of Popular Movements, he highlights how ‘immense cities show off proudly, even arrogantly, how modern they are’, yet in them housing is denied to many people, including children. He deplores the resort to euphemisms, such as ‘street people’ and ‘without fixed abode’, to refer to people who lack housing, and comments:

*Isn't it curious how euphemisms abound in the world of injustice! ... I might be wrong in some cases; but in general, what lurks behind each euphemism is a crime.*²⁶

And of course, as is also characteristic, Francis not only analyses or condemns, but also acts, as is evident in the recent provision by the Vatican of washing facilities for homeless people in Rome.

What is Distinctive about Francis' Articulation of Catholic Social Teaching?

In his statements and addresses on social issues, Francis locates himself firmly at the core of Catholic social teaching in understanding that change involves structural as well as personal and communal dimensions and that the translation of vision and values into social policy is complex. However, he is insistent that the biblical imperative to a preferential for the poor is so clear that ‘no ecclesial interpretation has the right to relativize it’ and moreover that complexity should not induce paralysis: ‘Why complicate something so simple? Conceptual tools exist to heighten contact with the realities they seek to explain, not to distance us from them ... So why cloud something so clear?’²⁷

What distinguishes Francis’ articulation of Catholic social teaching is not so much new content²⁸ but rather the *priority* given to the teaching and the passionate and evident *conviction* with which it is expressed. Francis understands the gospels in a liberation theology tradition which places the

poor at the centre of the Kingdom which Jesus came to announce and effect. For him, this is not just a social consequence of the gospel – a kind of ‘add on’ – but rather the poor are at the centre of reality and ‘... the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one’.²⁹

If the love and mercy of Jesus, revealing who God is, are what is most important, then this love is universal, for us all, but in particular it is addressed to those who need it most, who so often are ignored, cast aside, made to feel unlovable. And so, remarkably, two of the five chapters (Chapters 2 and 4) of *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Apostolic Exhortation issued by Francis in November 2013, are devoted substantially to the social nature of reality, while elsewhere in the document it is clearly and naturally assumed.

There is, in addition, a palpable passion in the way Francis preaches this social gospel – not just in his concrete, colourful language, his repeated insistence on its truth, his sharp analysis – but also in his actions and witness. One thinks in this context of the reform of the Vatican Bank and his serious efforts to address the issue of accountability with respect to clerical child sexual abuse; his initiatives on human trafficking; his provisions for homeless people in Rome and his many symbolic gestures, including his simple style of living, and his embrace of people who are sick or disfigured.

Pope Francis deplores the resort to euphemisms, such as ‘street people’ and ‘without fixed abode’, to refer to people who lack housing ...

There may also be at least one significant change of content with respect to the teaching itself. Donal Dorr has drawn particular attention to the address by Francis to the ‘World Meeting of Popular Movements’ (Dorr prefers the term people’s movements) and sees in it an option for the most controversial aspect of liberation theology (hitherto approached with reserve by the central Magisterium) – its active encouragement of poor and oppressed people to struggle effectively but non-violently for a just society and in so doing to challenge the rich and powerful.³⁰ And it is

interesting to note, as we have remarked, that one of the three key areas addressed in this speech was precisely the area of housing.

It is arguable that popes have become too powerful, sometimes to the point, if not of idolatry then at least of an unhealthy cult of celebrity and even power, with a consequent temptation for the rest of us to accept everything they say uncritically and to avoid our own responsible engagement in the issues they address. It is clear that Francis does not want to be that kind of pope – he wants to be more collegial, to consult; he wants all of us to own the gifts and responsibilities that come with our baptism and to contribute through our ‘sense of the faithful’ to Christian wisdom, prophecy and governance, always as a positive contribution to humankind in general.

To this end it may be useful to note the kind of distinctions used by theologians when assessing papal pronouncements (distinctions which, in many cases, have sensible secular analogies). In this kind of hermeneutical framework, not everything that the pope says is to be taken as carrying equal weight, and so, for example, there is an ascending authoritative weight to be given to off-the-cuff remarks, to apostolic exhortations or encyclicals, and – at the apex – to pronouncements with the rest of the bishops at an ecumenical council.

I think this is important, not least given the fact that for now we have the gift of a pope who likes to express himself openly and spontaneously and in so doing sometimes gets it wrong and has to apologise afterwards. I think we may allow someone to have some cultural blind spots without thereby calling into question his undoubted inspirational leadership on so many issues, especially when positions are stated in a more considered way and correspond to or are clearly a healthy development of the Christian tradition as a whole and received as such by the ‘sense of the faithful’. In this latter context, it will be interesting to see how the apparently informal remark about not judging gay people (‘who am I to judge?’) may play itself out in the more formal setting of the Synod of Bishops next October.

I think in this way too Francis has done us some service – he has shed the mystique of a false notion of monarchy and infallibility and yet managed to lead in an inspiring way. We too are called to some learning here – to re-imagine what being pope and leader means, and the kind of positively critical

spirit with which we are called to respond, which will involve bishops at local level taking on their own leadership functions in more adult fashion and we ourselves being empowered to exercise leadership where appropriate.

Conclusion

Catholic social teaching is, of course, rooted firmly in Scripture as well as in human rationality. Right through the Hebrew Covenant (the Old Testament) there is enormous respect for the notion of home and dwelling place, associated in particular with the notion of family and community.³¹

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In the New Testament a new aspect emerges: Jesus is born in circumstances away from home, where ‘there was no place for them in the inn’ (Lk 2: 7) and in his adult ministry he opts for an itinerant life-style,³² relying on the hospitality of friends and supporters and at times ‘with nowhere to lay down his head’ (Lk 9: 58; Mt 8: 20), having to stay ‘outside in places where nobody lived’ (Mk 1: 45), living ‘outside the camp’ (Leviticus 13, 46), like the leper whom he had cured. He has particular care for the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the naked (Mt 25: 42ff), those at the margins of society – the parable of the rich man and Lazarus lying at his gate is a vivid portrayal of what separates those luxuriating in their wealth from those who lack the basic necessities, with a clear indication of whose side God is on (Lk 16; 19–31).

What we can say from this Scriptural background is ‘that our Christian tradition, inherited from Judaism, attributes a fundamental value to ‘housing’ which we can still recognize today’³³ and which is often expressed in relation to family. The particular slant given by the New Testament is a concern for those without a home and solidarity with them.

In an interesting theological reflection on this tradition, Siobhan Garrigan³⁴ cautions against a narrow notion of home which people appeal to when they do not want to love across the boundaries of difference, do not want to have

an outward-looking disposition or display an ‘openness to the Other’. This domesticated kind of notion does not challenge us to tackle issues such as homelessness and is out of sync with the subversive singularity of the witness of Jesus in the New Testament. Garrigan notes the ritual of lighting a candle in one’s windowsill on Christmas Eve to welcome the stranger – Christ – roaming the world, a tradition which is very much according to the more subversive note struck in the New Testament.

It may be noted, finally, and following on from Professor Garrigan’s reflection, that the Catholic social teaching on housing outlined here is very much at one with the thrust of Ignatius of Loyola and his spirituality. One of the Decrees arising out of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (GC34), held in early 1995, noted that: ‘It is part of our Jesuit tradition to be involved in the transformation of every human culture ...’ and that “‘Ignatius loved the great cities’; they were where this transformation of the human community was taking place’,³⁵ and he wanted Jesuits and their co-workers to be involved in this process. The ‘city’ in this sense was a symbol of Jesuit efforts to bring fulfilment to human culture, to bring about a more just way of living together, a dream which we share with many of other religions and none. The Jesuit Refugee Service to migrants and asylum seekers ‘who have no homes to go to’ is part of the contribution to the practical realisation of this dream.

This dream, for people who are Christians, is also at the heart of the gospel of Christ and will always provoke resistance. It calls on us for an ongoing conversion of mind, heart and behaviour, which Francis is calling for from the whole Church. Again and again, he has criticised what he calls a ‘globalisation of indifference’, which is at the root of injustices such as the housing situation we have been discussing. The same Decree of GC34 puts it thus:

*One of the most important contributions we can make to critical contemporary culture is to show that the structural injustice in the world is rooted in value systems promoted by a powerful modern culture which is becoming global in its impact.*³⁶

Being converted means not resting satisfied with the good PR someone like Francis generates for the Church, but being disturbed ourselves by situations of injustice and trying to respond as best we can.

Notes

1. Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, *The Irish Housing System: Vision, Values, Reality*, compiled by Michael Punch, Dublin: Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 2009.
2. Peter McVerry, ‘Foreword’, in Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, *The Irish Housing System: Vision, Values, Reality*, *op. cit.*
3. Cathy Molloy, ‘Aspects of Catholic Social Teaching on Housing’, *Working Notes*, Issue 50, June 2005, pp 21–4.
4. See Gerry O’Hanlon, ‘Catholic Social Teaching and Inequality’, *Working Notes*, Issue 75, December 2014, pp 22–26 (at 22–3).
5. For a selection, see: Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), 7 December 1965, n. 26; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *What Have You Done to Your Homeless Brother?*, 1987; *The Work of Justice: Irish Bishops’ Pastoral*, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1977, n. 105–6; Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, *Prosperity with a Purpose: Christian Faith and Values in a Time of Rapid Economic Growth*, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1999, pp 24–28; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2004, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2005, n. 166; n. 365; n. 482; n. 504; n. 535. See also: Intervention of Monsignor Diarmuid Martin, Secretary to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, at the UN Habitat II Conference on Human Settlements, 13 June 1996. (<http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCJPHABI.HTM>)
6. Pope Francis, ‘Address to the Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements’, Rome, Tuesday, 28 October 2014. (http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141028_incontro-mondiale-movimenti-popolari.html)
7. Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, *Prosperity with a Purpose*, *op. cit.*, n. 48.
8. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church Compendium*, *op. cit.*, n. 349, with reference to Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens* (The Eightieth Anniversary), Apostolic Letter, 14 May 1971 and Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (The Hundredth Anniversary), Encyclical Letter, 1 May 1991. See also: Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), Evangelical Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, 20 November 2013; Pope Francis, ‘Address to the Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements’, Rome, Tuesday, 28 October 2014, *op. cit.*
9. *The Work of Justice: Irish Bishops’ Pastoral*, *op. cit.*, n.106.
10. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), *op. cit.*, n. 189.
11. Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor and the Earth: Catholic Social Teaching*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012, p.454.
12. David Tuohy, *Denominational Education and Politics: Ireland in a European Context*, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2013, p. 95.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
16. Peter McVerry, ‘Foreword’, in Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, *The Irish Housing System: Vision, Values, Reality*, *op. cit.*
17. See in particular the prescient analysis in: Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, *Prosperity with a Purpose*, *op. cit.* and Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, *The Irish Housing System, Vision, Values, Reality*, *op. cit.*
18. Donal Dorr, *op. cit.*, pp 440–67, especially pp 440–46.
19. Pope Francis, ‘Address to the Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements’, 28 October 2014, *op. cit.*
20. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, *op. cit.*, n. 189.

21. *Ibid.*, n. 190.
22. Pope Francis, 'Address to the Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements', *op. cit.*
23. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 75.
24. Pope Francis, 'Address to the Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements', *op. cit.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, *op. cit.*, n. 194.
28. This may well follow in the planned encyclical on the environment, expected to be issued in mid-2015.
29. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, *op. cit.*, n. 198.
30. Donal Dorr, 'Liberation Theology Comes to Rome', *The Furrow*, Vol. 65, No. 12, December 2014, pp 616–621.
31. See entry under 'House' in Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, London/Dublin: Chapman, 1967.
32. See Jose Antonio Pagola, *Jesus: An Historical Approximation* (revised edition), Miami: Convivium Press, 2014, chapters 4 and 10 and pp 457–9.
33. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *What Have You Done to Your Homeless Brother?*, *op. cit.*, Part III, n. 4.
34. Siobhan Garrigan, Loyola Professor of Catholic Theology at the Loyola Institute Trinity College Dublin, Inaugural Lecture on 'Theology and Homelessness', 3 November, 2014.
35. Decree 4, 'Our Mission and Culture', n. 24–n. 26 in *Documents of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus*, Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995. (Also available at: http://www.sjweb.info/sjs/documents/CG34_D4_eng.pdf)
36. *Ibid.*, 24.

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