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A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Rising Inequality and Growing Fear: Can we Face the Future with Hope?

January 2025

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INTRODUCTION¹

The recent election of Donald Trump in the United States has raised interesting questions about the state of democracy and the rise of populism, and the way inequality contributes to an erosion of social trust. Populism, and what one might call a “narrow nationalism”,² is gaining ground across the world, and political elites, it seems, continue to underestimate its appeal. This is true in the Irish context too, where in a recent general election the nation almost witnessed the election of the head of a Dublin criminal organization to the Dáil. If nothing else, this ought to be a “wake up call” for all Irish politicians, and reminds us that many people in marginalized, poorer communities are losing confidence in mainstream politics.

Inequality, I argue here, is one reason why we are witnessing the rise of populism globally, and it ought to be taken more seriously for *two* reasons. The first reason is pragmatic: inequality is having a coercive effect on democratic institutions, so even if motivated only by self-preservation, the political establishment ought to address inequality if they wish to remain in power. Strong, vibrant communities, committed to the common good, are the bedrock of a healthy democracy. Second, there are deeper human considerations at stake here. Inequality is harming the human spirit since more and more people feel left behind, invisible, and irrelevant. Many are struggling with a deep sense of loss; they grieve for a time when they enjoyed greater social recognition, for a time when

1 This article is based on a paper given at the Irish Inter-Church Meeting on November 13th November, 2024 in Dromantine, NI. The theme of the Meeting was “Finding the Face of God in One Another”.

2 By “narrow nationalism” I refer a skewed understanding of nationalism that is anti-immigrant and promotes an exclusive, limited idea of belonging.

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they were recognized as valuable members of their community. But widening inequality makes it harder for lower paid citizens to make ends meet, and their social identity, so often connected to work and economic contribution, becomes threatened also. This loss of identity, coupled with feeling of grief and despair, damages the human spirit. It is no wonder that a promise to “make America great again” (or similar) generated such a broad appeal in the US given the level of political mistrust and individual suffering at present.

In *Fratelli tutti* Pope Francis reminds us that “new forms of poverty are emerging”, and he explains that “Poverty must always be understood and gauged in the context of *the actual opportunities available* in each concrete historical period”.³ In other words, poverty implies more than an absence of wealth, and we need to re-think its effects on the person and on society. Poverty denies people opportunities, it impacts negatively on health outcomes, it limits moral agency, and it makes access to a wide range of social services more difficult. In addition, poverty can damage a person’s sense of self-worth and it undermines civic solidarity. It limits political voice since poorer communities often feel forgotten and are less likely to partake in democratic activity. And we know too that crime and incarceration rates rise because of poverty, and that drug abuse and early death are more common among poorer sections of society.

Poverty and inequality are not the same thing, of course, although they are connected. Inequality hinders social mobility, in turn causing negative psychological and social consequences for those who are poor, unemployed, and socially marginalized.⁴ Thus, as Pope Francis notes, the human damage caused by inequality needs to be understood in new ways that go beyond standard economic indicators. People are suffering, often from the despair and grief that stems from a lack of opportunity.

In his recent book *Human Rights in a Divided World*, David Hollenbach notes that today “a lack of income or wealth prevents many people from attaining the health or education they need to live with basic human dignity. Inequality in the distribution of income or wealth are among the sources of severe deprivation”.⁵ As Hollenbach explains, the world has seen a decline in the overall number of poor people globally in recent decades, something to be welcomed. The World Bank records that those living on less than

3 Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, (2020), n.21. Emphasis added.

4 Kate Ward, “Jesuit and Feminist Hospitality: Pope Francis’ Virtue Response to Inequality”, *Religions*, 2017, 8, 71, p.2.

5 David Hollenbach SJ, *Human Rights in a Divided World: Catholicism as a Living Tradition*, (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2024), p.120.

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\$1.90 per day had fallen from 1.87 billion in 1990 (35.3 percent of the global population) to 769 million in 2013 (10.7 percent of the global population). This figure continued to drop until 2019. However, both the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine have meant that an additional seventy million people were pushed back into extreme poverty by the end of 2020.⁶ “During the pandemic income losses of the world’s poorest were twice as high as for the world’s richest, and global inequality rose for the first time in decades”, Hollenbach notes.⁷

Interestingly, Hollenbach tells us that although inequality between countries has been falling in recent years, inequality *within* countries has been rising. In the United States, for example, inequality is worsening. “The US and Western Europe are on different tracks. In 1980, in both regions, the people in the top 1 percent income bracket took home about 10 percent of the total income of their countries. By 2016 the top 1 percent in Western Europe had increased its share slightly, to 12 percent of the total, while in the United States the share of the top 1 percent had doubled to 20 percent of the country’s total income. In the same period, the share of national income going to the bottom 50 percent in the United States declined from 20 to 13 percent”.⁸ He goes on to explain how inequality in the US is also influenced by race, class and gender. In parts of America – especially the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia – life expectancy is lower than in Bangladesh and Vietnam. If what Pope Francis says is correct, namely that the poverty ought to be understood in terms of the actual opportunities available to people in any given time, then we can see that poverty and inequality is excluding millions from basic rights and the opportunity to live dignified, fulfilling lives.

ECONOMIC MOBILITY IS THE ANSWER!

How do we fix this situation? Some economists argue that increased generation of wealth will improve the lot of everyone, and people can work their way up the economic ladder. Not everyone agrees, however, and evidence certainly seems to cast doubt on this logic. Michael Sandel, for example, believes that “Mobility can no longer compensate for inequality. Any serious response to the gap between rich and poor must reckon directly with inequalities of power and wealth, rather than rest content with the project of helping people scramble up a ladder whose rungs grow farther and

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p.121.

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farther apart”.⁹ There are other concerns worth noting too. Relying exclusively on economic or market-led indicators to show how society is faring is dangerous for several reasons: First, this can cause us to see human value in economic terms only. The worth of the person is reduced to their contribution to the market and capacity to be economically productive. This way of thinking has been repeatedly condemned by popes from Leo XIII onwards.

Second, we risk narrowing the civic project to matters of economics. In doing so, we reduce public discourse to financial considerations, severely impoverishing it as a result. Worse still, social decisions are justified on economic grounds alone, and broader conversations about value, beauty, meaning, purpose are relegated to the sidelines, at best. A third reason to be cautious is because an over-reliance on economic arguments reconfigures our collective understanding of social recognition, of who counts and who does not. Social recognition becomes too closely aligned with economic output, and the value of persons becomes an economic question rather than a moral one.¹⁰ Economist Joseph Stiglitz issues a similar warning. He writes about the dangers of rising inequality, and believes that inequality is changing the very nature of society, including diminishing civic virtue and eroding social trust: “Those at the top come to believe that they are entitled to what they have. And this can lead to behaviours that undermine the cohesiveness of society. Those excluded from prosperity begin to expect the worst from governments and leaders. Trust is eroded, along with civic engagement and a sense of common purpose”.¹¹ Pope Francis too is critical of economic systems that exclude, questioning whether the market can ever really level the playing field for all people. He says:

Indeed, “to claim economic freedom while the real conditions bar many people from actual access to it, and while possibilities for employment continue to shrink, is to practice doublespeak” ... A truly human and fraternal society will be capable of ensuring in an efficient and stable way that each of its members is accompanied at every stage of life. Not only by providing for their basic needs, but by enabling them to give the best of

9 Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Allen Lane, 2020), p.24.

10 For a fuller account of this argument see Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, p.28. See also a recent interview with Sandel explaining the election of Donald Trump: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Um017R5Kr3A>

11 Joseph Stiglitz, “Inequality in America: A Policy Agenda for a Stronger Future”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 657 (January 2015), p.17.

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themselves, even though their performance may be less than optimum, their pace slow or their efficiency limited.¹²

I argue that as we continue to see inequality rise, and as more communities find themselves on the periphery, we will continue to witness greater political and social instability globally. It is too easy to dismiss the people who voted for Donald Trump, or Brexit, or Gerry “The Monk” Hutch as ill-informed, naïve, or gullible. The majority of these individuals have legitimate grievances; they are people who are struggling to get by, and who feel abandoned by mainstream politics. We must try to understand and address the roots of their grievances if we hope to build inclusive, participatory societies.

A POLITICS OF FEAR

One result of rising inequality is the emergence of a politics of fear. Why is fear such a potent political tool? Fear typically starts from a *real problem*, something that does in fact exist or is highly likely to exist. But fear can be easily transformed into something that has little to do with the original problem: fear “serves as a handy surrogate for it”, as Martha Nussbaum explains. Fear is strengthened by the notion of a “disguised enemy” within,¹³ and it feeds on our sense of vulnerability. Nussbaum speaks of the “fantasy of invulnerability”, referring to our attempt to shield ourselves from vulnerability through the acquisition of wealth, jobs and so on. But these efforts mask a fundamental human truth, which is that we are all vulnerable, finite creatures. This vulnerability can be used to elevate fear within communities and deepen social divisions. In the context of heightened social anxiety, we try to identify the people or events that can puncture our security and threaten our wellbeing, often blaming them without any foundation in truth.

Political groups and public figures arouse fear when they portray an impending event as a threat to our safety. They heighten our sense of vulnerability and emphasise our lack of control over the present situation.¹⁴ Fear becomes a key political tactic and an effective way of garnering support. Nussbaum suggests that in order to cope with our fears (and fear, of course, has a legitimate role to play in both personal and communal survival), we need three things: “sound principles involving respect for human

12 Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n.110.

13 Martha Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age*, (Harvard University Press, 2012), p.23.

14 *Ibid.*, p.31.

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equality; arguments that are not self-serving; ...and a curious and sympathetic imagination".¹⁵ It is worth exploring for a moment, I think, what is meant by a curious and sympathetic imagination, for this plays an important role in strong, robust democracies. How do we cultivate it?

We need to develop the skills and virtues that help build this sort of imagination. This requires investment in education and the strengthening of civil society. It also requires public spaces where people can encounter one another, share ideas, argue, and learn about each other's ways of life. These spaces enable rich engagement that traverses race, ethnicity, religion and (importantly) socio-economic standing. Churches could play a vital role here too, as could local community organisations (one might think of the role of the GAA in Ireland or other sporting groups). People need access to the social, educational, and recreational spaces that can make true encounter a reality. And when they come together in a spirit of shared hospitality, curiosity, and humility, fear is broken.

Nussbaum believes that what is also needed is the "habitual cultivation of displacement of the mind, a curious questioning, and receptive demeanor ... [we need] a willingness to move out of the self and to enter another world".¹⁶ One might consider how art, literature, poetry, music, and dance help broaden our imaginations and enable us to think in new, exciting ways. Or indeed how travel awakens us to new cultures and new possibilities. Pope Francis speaks of "encounter", an idea that has become a cornerstone of his teachings. I turn to this idea below, for it relates to what Nussbaum is saying here. In short, strong communities thrive when engagement, exchange, and encounter can occur in contexts of mutual respect and hospitality.

A curious imagination is critical for several reasons. In moral theology we speak of moral imagination, recognizing its role in the search for meaning and truth. Moral imagination enables us to consider other possibilities and new ways of thinking. We may not deflect from our original point of view, but moral imagination at least allows us to see "the other" and understand her values, insights and arguments. In the absence of moral imagination, we fail to push the boundaries of possibility and we do not allow ourselves to be open to surprise. Without it, we cannot imagine new worlds. Nussbaum says that "The imagination makes others real for us. A common human failing is to see the whole world from the point of view of one's own goals, and to see the conduct of others as

15 Ibid., p.21.

16 Ibid., p.140.

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all about oneself".¹⁷ One way to overcome this, and help cultivate the sort of imaginative, empathetic thinking that Nussbaum speaks of, is to foster proximity with others. This is why Pope Francis says, "authentic social dialogue involves the ability to respect the other's point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns".¹⁸ Proximity and encounter help us to recognise others, appreciate their perspectives, claims, and worldviews, and see that mutual learning takes place in contexts of trust and solidarity.

This type of imagining is not easy. It presupposes courage and a willingness to become unsettled. For encountering others, especially those who are unlike us in some respect, requires a degree of discomfort that many would rather avoid. Authentic encounter is made more difficult in times of widening inequality, for when hardship increases it is not uncommon to blame the stranger and "look after our own". Partiality can be a good thing, and loyalty to one's place and kin is generally a virtue. However, partiality can also be manipulated to hinder the curious imagination that Nussbaum speaks of. She goes on to explain:

Even when the imagination does move outward, its animal origins suggest that it will be easier to relate to the predicament of people in one's own 'group', whether defined by ethnicity or religion or nationality. Even when people have become in principle capable of seeing the world from the point of view of distant people and groups, intense sympathy with those closer to the self may often block this outward movement.¹⁹

Blind spots exist in our moral thinking; we are conditioned by religion, culture, ethnicity, politics. Moreover, social media has made it easy to circulate falsehoods, deepen unjust stereotypes, and spread hatred. In this context, and as a fear deepens, it is more important than ever to respect the diverse nature of modern society. A plurality of ways of life exist, and it is imperative to include all people in democracy's conversations. We must also respect conscience, and acknowledge a person's right to seek the truth and discern what is correct in accordance with their conscience.²⁰ However, as Nussbaum notes, "Our current climate of fear shows

17 Ibid., p.144.

18 Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n.202.

19 Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance*, p.147.

20 See the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis humanae*, for example. The Council Fathers reiterated the right to freedom of conscienc, albeit that the demands of public order and the common good need to be protected also. The right to freedom of conscience is not a right to do what one wishes in the name of conscience, and must be exercised responsibly.

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that people are all too easily turned away from good values and laws, in a time of genuine insecurity and threat. Our time is genuinely dangerous. As we have seen, many fears are rational, and appeals to fear have a role to play in a society that takes human life seriously. Still, at this point, the balance has all too often shifted in the other direction, as irresponsibly manufactured fears threaten principles we should cling to and be proud of”.²¹

ENCOUNTER AND PROXIMITY

Cultivating the social virtue of fraternity, and strengthening a curious imagination, is challenging in contexts of widening inequality, neglect, and deprivation. And as theologian Anna Rowlands explains, it is not helped by “a culture of well-being” that exists, whereby people try to avoid feeling uncomfortable by the suffering of others. For Rowlands, dialogue and encounter is the basis for new creativity and a new vision of social fraternity. It sustains the kind of encounter that is so important in tackling social isolation. The “difficult labour” that must be undertaken, Rowlands says, is to “listen, discern, and wait”.²²

This very much echoes what Pope Francis tells us. He calls for greater proximity to suffering; he wants a church that goes to the margins, a field-hospital church that can respond to the messiness and murkiness of life. He says: “Human beings are so made that they cannot live, develop, and find fulfilment except ‘in the sincere gift of self to others.’ Nor can they fully know themselves apart from an encounter with other persons”.²³ Proximity helps break barriers and dismantle stereotypes. It is why Pope Francis calls us to enter into the suffering of others and to get close to their chaos. For through proximity, openness, and mutuality we gain insights into the lived experience of the most marginalized among us. By going to the margins, we hear the stories of those who feel invisible and we are (hopefully) transformed by their testimony. As I mentioned above, society needs to create spaces where this sort of proximity can be realized, spaces where genuine encounter can become commonplace, and from where social transformation can begin. Proximity and encounter sustain connection, belonging, and relationality – we see the other no longer as stranger but as a companion, and we celebrate difference as a *gift*.

21 Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance*, p.244.

22 Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*, (London: T&T Clark, 2021), p.88.

23 Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n.87.

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Proximity allows us to know the women and men who experience poverty, exclusion, isolation; it enables us to see the distorted ways in which we have come to speak about the poor. And in so doing, encountering others might help create a counter-narrative to the destructive discourse that envelops so much public discourse today. Hearing these stories helps us see the stranger as a person, made in God's image, and it makes real to us the global realities that force people to the margins. Human encounter can be both personally and socially transformative, and can help heal the deep human wounds inflicted by the trauma of poverty, inequality, and social isolation.

CAN WE FACE THE FUTURE WITH HOPE?

The Christian faith is a hope-filled faith, and the Cross reminds us that sin does not have the final word. But the Christian message is hopeful in another respect. We are called to live the counter-cultural message of the Gospel, to go to the forgotten, the marginalized, the suffering. It is not a popular message, and does not speak to the sort of meritocratic thinking common today. But the Gospel reminds us that a better future is possible, and that we each bear a responsibility to become positive forces for change in the world. As Rowlands puts it, "The fundamental theo-drama construct of CST lies in a vision of social communion, gifted to us, fractured by us and continually in a process of restoration in which we are active, graced, fragile, failing and resilient participants in time".²⁴

Sustained by the Gospel, and by Christ's ministry at the margins, we find the courage to acknowledge the wayward elements of our lives and yet also hope. Let us not forget the many remarkable sea-changes witnessed in our lifetime and throughout history; peace in Northern Ireland, the abolition of slavery, female emancipation in many parts of the world, the collapse of apartheid in South Africa and segregation in the United States. These achievements were won by ordinary people with an unquenchable spirit, nourished by a deep conviction that a better world was possible. We have our champions, of course, but these social revolutions were sustained by women and men of good will who believed in the innate dignity of all persons. Today, we continue to witness this goodness in daily acts of generosity, sacrifice, and kindness. Despite our world's grave, urgent problems, people and communities come together to defend human dignity and care for the vulnerable in a myriad of ways. Inevitably, tough decisions must be made amidst the reality of limited resources and competing claims. This is the

24 Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, p.6.

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difficult business of the common good. But our faith can serve to motivate us to strive, as best we can, to make real God's Kingdom in our own time and in our own way. I end with the words of the late Vincent MacNamara that captures the hopeful, redemptive message of the Gospel:

Most fundamentally, what we are more confident about is that our lives are meant to be lived in a context of trust, in which our moral success or failure is not the last word. We live and move and have our being within a Presence who broods over the long evolution of our race, who knows that we carry the human stain, the elemental wound of human nature, who appreciates the curve of each personal history. Who is more sensitive to the complexity of our lives than any human legislator, even those who purport to represent him/her. Who does not judge as we judge. Who has told us to trust more in God's loving-kindness than in the righteousness of our doings. Who understands failure. We can only be patient.²⁵

25 Vincent MacNamara, *The Call to be Human: Making Sense of Morality*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2010), p.240.

The Role for Theology. Theology's turn to the humanity of the dispossessed and excluded exposes the grave damage of racism, of white racist supremacy; in doing so, theology exercises and models what Lane names 'critical protest.' In its critical protest on behalf of the dispossessed and excluded, theology must argue for justice and for a revolution of love. Love answers in concrete practical action the question, 'Who is the neighbour?'

– ETHNA REGAN & ALAN KEARNS (eds), *Critical Questions in Contemporary Theology*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2024, p.188.