



# HIV, the poor and the Church in modern Britain

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## **No salvation outside the poor**

*“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?...’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ (Mtt 25: 37-40)*

Fifty years have passed since the Second Vatican Council opened. The Council initiated profound new perspectives on the way in which the Church should engage with the modern world. Subsequent papal encyclicals have affirmed and reiterated a call for the Church to be engaged with the reality and totality of human experience as it is lived and experienced, most importantly in the lives of the poor, the marginalised and the dispossessed.

The 1971 World Synod of Catholic Bishops summarised this commitment to an evangelical and transformational solidarity: *“the Church’s vocation (is) to be present in the heart of the world by proclaiming the Good News to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted.”*<sup>1</sup>

In many ways the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio to the Holy See in March 2013 has vivified the Church’s call to radical solidarity with those living on the margins: the Bishop of Bling<sup>2</sup> bites the dust, and the successor to St. Peter drives around the Vatican in a second-hand Renault 4.<sup>3</sup> The contentious debates which shrouded liberation theology in the 1980s have given way, in this post-Soviet world, to a gnawing anxiety about the economic, social, moral and spiritual failings of the market *rampant*.

James Sweeney CP argues that there are two principal reasons for this growing awareness of the centrality of what is effectively a “preferential option for the poor”: (a) the reality of poverty, exploitation and chronic under-development and greater understanding of the underlying causes of exclusion, exploitation and injustice; and (b) a renewed awareness of the central place the Bible and the Christian tradition assigns to the poor in the narrative of salvation: *“Extra pauperes nulla salus”* (there is no salvation outside of the poor) (Sobrinó 2008).

## **HIV/AIDS and the poor in modern Britain**

So how can the Church’s exercise a “preferential option for the poor” in its dealings with people living with HIV/AIDS in modern Britain? There are legion and painfully

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<sup>1</sup> *Justitia in Mundo*: World Synod of Catholic Bishops 1971 (Para.5)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24638430>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24036965>

documented international examples of the links between HIV/AIDS and poverty.<sup>4</sup> In the Developing World, the virus primarily affects the poor and other marginalised groups such as migrants, sex workers, drug users and men who have sex with men. But there is a growing body of evidence which points to more and more people living with HIV/AIDS in Great Britain experiencing the damaging effects of *relative poverty*: particularly among groups which experience diverse forms of multiple deprivation and exclusion.

There are more than 96,500 people living with HIV/AIDS in the UK. A 2010 report on Poverty and HIV by NAT (National AIDS Trust) and Terrence Higgins Trust (THT) showed that at least one in six people diagnosed with HIV in the UK had experienced “severe poverty” between 2006 and 2009 and that the level of poverty experienced by people living with HIV had increased in recent years.<sup>5</sup> This research identified six drivers for increasing levels of poverty for people living with HIV/AIDS in the UK:

- an immigration system which limits the ability of many migrants living with HIV/AIDS to generate and receive income;
- poor physical and mental health arising out of poverty but also pushing people living with HIV/AIDS towards poverty;
- high levels of unemployment (90 per cent of applications to THT’s Hardship Fund were unemployed and causal factors were physical and mental health problems and immigration restrictions;
- poor quality housing (including UKBA housing) with resultant negative health impacts;
- responsibility for children (one quarter of applicants to THT’s Hardship Fund had caring responsibilities for a total of 6,800 children).

In addition, a 2011 report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) on the needs of people aged over 50 living with HIV found that respondents reported twice as many other long-term health conditions as the general population; identified mobility problems and difficulties with everyday tasks; were less economically active, less likely to have a financial cushion for old age and were more reliant on welfare benefits. Many did not have enough money to manage on and had serious financial worries for their future.<sup>6</sup>

### **HIV/AIDS related poverty – a call for a new approach**

HIV/AIDS has been with living with us openly for 40 years now. In the early days of the pandemic in Britain, the Church was both cautious and aware of its need to muster a pastoral response. In latter years, the painful reality of the virus has been largely relocated in the mind of Church leaders and opinion formers in the developing world. There are good reasons for this, but HIV is still an unwelcome guest in our own homes, congregations and communities here in Britain.

The theologian Johann Baptist Metz invites us to reconstruct theology from the bottom-up; in a world in which discourse about *God* “*after Auschwitz...cannot maintain*

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<sup>4</sup> I believe this evidence strongly refutes the generalisation made by Edward Green that “*There is no credible evidence that gender inequality, poverty, discrimination, stigma, war and civil disturbances, racism, or homophobia actually drive the (HIV) epidemic in Africa. Hence reducing these social ills will not reduce HIV infection rates, and the billions spent here are wasted.*” (Green E (2009) *Broken Promises*, Harvard (p.91-92)

<sup>5</sup> NAT and THT (2010) *Poverty and HIV 2006-2009*, London, NAT and THT

<sup>6</sup> Power L *et al* (2011) *A National Study of People Over 50 Living With HIV*, York, JRF

*historical innocence*”.<sup>7</sup> We can’t do theology without looking at the reality of human life in its social and historical context. With regards to HIV/AIDS, our social and historical reality is a pandemic which has claimed the lives of 25 million people<sup>8</sup> to date: 33 million people continue to live with the disease.<sup>9</sup> Reports by NAT and THT indicate that even in a developed country like Britain, poverty, deprivation and exclusion are adversely affecting the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS. *How can theology learn from the experiences of the poor and dispossessed who are living with HIV/AIDS in our own country?*

Our “preferential option for the HIV positive poor” might include the following elements:

- our Church being willing to see “reality from below” through the eyes of people living with HIV/AIDS in their daily struggles to find place and meaning;
- our Church and society recognising in the socio-economic, political and cultural sphere the causes of human diminishment affecting people living with HIV/AIDS, and also possibilities and opportunities for promoting and supporting well-being;
- our Church seeing in the lives of the poor living with HIV/AIDS a place of encounter with God for all humanity, rich and poor alike;
- appreciating that the dynamics of salvation must integrate material, social and personal transformation for all, including our brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, grandparents and children living with HIV/AIDS. There is no privatised pathway to God<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the social, political, economic and cultural conditions which exacerbate the HIV/AIDS pandemic in our world calls us loudly to challenge to “structural sin”. The theologian Gerald West notes *“the real danger of structural sin is that we usually do not recognize it. In order to see structural sin for what it is we need those who are the victims of particular structural sins to teach us. For example, women will teach us about the pervasive structural sin of patriarchy; black people will teach us about the enduring structural sin of racism; ...and the poor will teach us about the structural sin of global capitalism.”*<sup>11</sup> What does the combination of sickness, stigma and exclusion in the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS tell us about “structural sin” and how do these factors manifest themselves in modern Britain?

In the New Testament, the word for “poor” *πτωχός* principally refers to people who are without resources, reduced to begging and lacking in wealth, influence, position, honour: *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”* (Luke 6:20). But the word *πτωχός* also refers to those lacking in learning and culture: poverty in the New Testament is, therefore, a marker for wider exclusion and marginalisation. Pope Francis recognises this and his pontificate has been an epiphany for the Church, helping it to rediscover its roots among the poor. In Britain too, the Church is invited to rediscover its roots in the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS who feel marginalised, stigmatised or excluded.

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<sup>7</sup> Metz J B (1997) (Translated by Ashley J M) *A Passion for God: the Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, New York, Paulist Press

<sup>8</sup> Source: Avert <http://www.avert.org/worldstats.htm> cited 11/11/10

<sup>9</sup> Source: Avert <http://www.avert.org/worldstats.htm> cited 11/11/10

<sup>10</sup> Sweeney J (1994) *The New Religious Order*, Bellew, London

<sup>11</sup> West G (2005) *Structural Sin: a South African Perspective*: the Other Journal.com: An Intersection of Theology and Culture <http://theotherjournal.com/2005/08/08/structural-sin-a-south-african-perspective/> [cited: 21/12/11]