



DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE

✠ *Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham*
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle



Pastoral Letter for Poverty Sunday - 17 October 2010

My Dear People

When we turn on the television, listen to the radio or read a newspaper, there's hardly a day goes by without a story about a natural or man-made disaster in a region of the world such as Pakistan or an African country. We see pictures and listen to reports of people left struggling for the absolute basics for life such as clean water, food and shelter. And yet here in our own country and region, it can be more difficult to see the poor and remember that they are with us always, as Jesus reminds us in the Gospel. There are many forms of poverty in our own local communities. Even though the United Kingdom is one of the richest countries in Europe, recent figures show that 13.2 million people live on 60% or less of the average UK income. And around us, 3.9 million children will grow up in poverty and will suffer from its limiting effects on their education, health and social relationships.

On this Poverty Sunday, we are invited to think and pray about the real meaning of poverty here in England and Wales and in the Diocese. *Caritas Europa*, the organisation of European Catholic welfare organisations, is leading a Zero Poverty campaign to raise awareness of the shocking effects of real poverty around Europe. And our Bishops' Conference organisation, Caritas Social Action Network, is supporting this effort.

There are real examples of poverty in each of our parishes and neighbourhoods, and equally, real examples of local Catholics doing their best to help the poor. The St Vincent de Paul Society, which is a member of Caritas Social Action, is a real witness to the Church serving the poor, the lonely and the elderly. But the strength of the SVP isn't in the amount of money it raises or even in the problems it helps to solve. Its real strength is that it sees Jesus Christ in the poor, and through them, serves Him. 'When you did it to the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:40) Sometimes it is easier to see the problems of the poor person before we see the person themselves. Sometimes we don't even see them at all. Pope Benedict, in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, teaches:

The Christian's programme – the programme of the Good Samaritan, the programme of Jesus – is "a heart that sees". This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly.
Deus Caritas Est, #34

And in their document entitled *The Common Good*, the Bishops of England and Wales teach:



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People who are poor and vulnerable have a special place in Catholic teaching: this is what is meant by the "preferential option for the poor". Scripture tells us we will be judged by our response to the "least of these", in which we see the suffering face of Christ himself. ... The poor are not a burden; they are our brothers and sisters. *The Common Good, 1996*

But poverty, either beside us in our streets, or in another country, can make us feel inadequate, or even helpless. We know that the Gospel invites us to love our neighbour as ourselves, as part of our love for God and of his love for us. But discovering who exactly my neighbour is, is not always straightforward. But as Pope Benedict teaches, it is with a seeing heart that we open ourselves to the needs of those in poverty.

Through the work of the Caritas organisations here in England and Wales and abroad, an enormous contribution is made to ease the effects of poverty and to stand up against social injustice. This is a great source for hope and encouragement for us all. I spoke earlier of the SVP, and there are other Catholic and ecumenical organisations which work just as effectively. Two further examples are *Housing Justice*, which campaigns nationally for justice in housing, and supports the homeless. Another organisation, the *Prison Advice and Care Trust* gives advice and practical help to prisoners and their families. There are many other agencies across the country working for migrants and refugees, children and families, people with disabilities, and older people and vulnerable adults. And for all of these we give thanks to God.

What can we do in our parishes and neighbourhoods for our neighbour? We can continue to support these organisations by supporting and sharing in their work through financial support and by volunteering to help. Our prayers are also an essential support for all their work. Another simple thing to do is to sign the *Zero Poverty* petition that can be found on the campaign website. If one million signatures are placed on the web site across Europe, it will trigger a call for the European Parliament to pursue four goals aimed at alleviating the effects of poverty and social exclusion. In these ways we take up our neighbourly responsibilities and walk with the most vulnerable and marginalised members of our communities at home and abroad, and so bear witness to the great love that God has for all his children, through Jesus Christ.

God bless you.

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