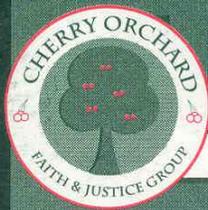


# ONE CITY TWO TIERS

A Theological  
Reflection on Life  
in a Divided Society



Cherry Orchard Faith and Justice Group

# **ONE CITY, TWO TIERS:**

## **A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON LIFE IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY**

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March 1996

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## *Introduction*

We came together first as a Faith and Justice group, to look at the situation in which we live and compare it to what the Gospel says about life. We have gradually developed a strong concern about the evil and suffering which are the effects of unjust economic and social division in Ireland today. As committed Christians we believe that the Gospel demands that we protest against this division, to work for change, and to look for signs of hope for a better, more socially cohesive, future. We have been meeting together over a period of four years, and now wish to share our reflections with a wider public.

Some of our group live in Cherry Orchard, a public authority housing estate in south-west Dublin and speak out of this experience. While we do not claim to speak on behalf of anyone else, it may be supposed that our experience will be broadly similar to that of many people in other such estates in Dublin and other urban centres throughout Ireland. Others in our group come from a theological background in Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy. We believe that it is one of the tasks of theology in Ireland today to spell out as clearly as possible a Christian response to the scandal of social injustice.

There have been many technical reports analysing the problems we deal with and suggesting solutions. These reports are valuable, and yet there seems to be a lack of will to act on them. Perhaps the blockage is as much a matter of desire and values as of technical know-how? Our contribution is not of a technical nature. Instead we try to tell our story and reflect on it in such a way that we might help to create a climate in which the change which is so urgently needed is more likely to come about. While our Christian backgrounds are central to our way of reflecting, we address what we have to say to all people of good will. In particular we address our remarks across the class divide in Irish society: it is our conviction that Irish people need to cultivate solidarity, instead of division, between the social classes in order to commit ourselves to the technical changes needed to bring about a more just society.

In the first part of what follows we recount our own experience of life in a local authority housing estate, in the light of our understanding of the scriptures. We place this experience within the broader context that a social analysis provides and we reflect theologically on it. In the second part of our text we deal with particular issues of great concern – unemployment, the situation of women, education – all in the context of the Church. Our style of proceeding is to present these issues of concern and to reflect theologically on them.

## **Part One: Our Own Story**

### *The Experience*

In a first consideration of our experience we immediately realised that we live in a physical environment that is under strain. Our houses are well designed and built, and there are plenty of green spaces in the lay-out of the estate. There are few facilities, however – one corner shop for over 5,000 people, no public phone boxes, no schools, cinemas or local health centre, an inadequate public transport service. The Corporation has only recently (after twelve years) taken the estate officially “in charge”; and there is little evidence of the kind of attention to public areas that other parts of Dublin would take for granted. There are signs of wear and tear everywhere – graffiti on walls, broken glass and litter strewn on pavements and roads, and remains of burnt-out stolen cars removed by the public authorities on a daily basis.

These physical signs of decay and strain are an accurate reflection of the human predicament for many of us. It is a grim, relentless struggle for most people to make ends meet and, in particular, to do the best they can for their children. There is very little discretionary income to enable any real freedom of choice. Instead, for many, the Community Welfare Officer, the Vincent de Paul and money lenders are all very significant figures. Unemployment (around 50%) is such that male morale in particular is low, with fathers and husbands experiencing a loss of dignity and esteem. There is intense pressure on women, who often are burdened with the task of keeping the family together and supplementing social welfare payments with part-time, low-paid jobs. There are many single-parent families. There is also evidence of hidden violence against women. Children tend to leave school early and to under-perform academically, so that the cycle of long-term unemployment is reinforced. Many of them are bored, with little spare money, few leisure facilities and poor social controls in operation. There is a great deal of petty crime, much of it involving joy-riding, theft and drug dealing, which creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation among the law-abiding majority. The

area has a bad name due to unfavourable media exposure, and this makes it more difficult for residents to obtain work. Church attendance is around 10%, way below the national average.

Of course life is not like this for everyone in Cherry Orchard – at least not in every respect. But we are describing a true *situation*, and this situation affects everyone who lives here. Because of this situation many live on their nerves, dominated by fear and pressure. It is easy to begin to believe the image which the media presents, to blame ourselves for what has gone wrong, and to lose hope that any change for the better can take place. We noted in our own group how tempting it was not to own and use the talents and gifts we ourselves had, especially in face of the begrudgery and thanklessness which often accompany efforts to improve things.

At this and other points we were at times encouraged and at other times puzzled by what the Gospel seemed to be saying to us, at first view. We recognised ourselves in the parable of the talents in Matthew's gospel – often for us too it seemed safer to take a back seat by burying our talents. In this way also we identified with the temptations of Jesus – we too wished for some magic wand to be waved which would change things, without having to take the much more risky and fearful route of personal involvement. We understood why many were tempted further simply to give up the struggle and to choose destructive means to get by: alcohol, drugs, giving up on family responsibilities, buying stolen goods and in general looking for miracles to happen. We were puzzled by the “blessed are the poor” of the Beatitudes. It did not seem to us that this meant we were to condone dishonesty and criminality in our own community – there was vigorous criticism of extreme abuse of the social welfare system, and in particular of those who pushed drugs and robbed. And yet the gospel preference for the poor helped us understand that in many respects people here were treated as second-class citizens by the police and legal systems, so that very often local criminals were small fry compared to the more large-scale corporate and professional fraud which exists and which is tackled with far less severity by the authorities.

Similarly it was felt that, despite the great efforts of teachers and schools, educational opportunities were far from being on a par with the more well-to-do areas of Dublin and elsewhere: free education exists only in name, because the extra costs and needs of keeping children at school cannot be met. It is hard to motivate children to learn when the home situation is very often so pressurised and employment prospects so poor. As we began at this early stage to consider the alternatives to the present situation we were stimulated by those passages in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-47, 4:32-35) which speak of the kind of sharing of life which went on in the early Church. In this context there was some criticism of better-off people living outside areas like our own who have a vested interest in keeping power for themselves and do so by means of better education and lower taxation. In saying this we recognised that money in itself was not a bad thing, that it was not wrong to be ambitious, and that people in our own area were no saints either when it came to greediness. But while it seemed to us that the teaching of the Gospel on poverty and wealth was reminding us that real wealth involved such things as health, happiness and love; and that material riches, while not in themselves evil, were insufficient for happiness; yet the absence of sufficient means was evil, and made life very difficult at all levels. Furthermore, the ghettoization of a city like Dublin, with huge gaps between rich and poor, was a great scandal in a Christian country. “Blessed are the poor” could not mean that people in our situation were being told to struggle on and not look to better our condition; but it did mean that there was more to life than money, and that those with money and power were obliged to share what they had so that the kind of huge gaps between those who have and have not, which make genuine relationship impossible, are eliminated.

We felt that God does not want people to suffer unnecessarily, and we noted the anger of Jesus when he encountered abuse and injustice in whatever quarter (his attitude to the Pharisees; the cleansing of the Temple). We wondered at times about the attitude of the Church on some of these issues. So, for example, it seemed that in some respects the Christian Mission group, with its provision of clubs and personnel for young people, was ahead of Catholic Church practice, at least in our area. And it seemed that often both

Bible and Church had contributed to the second-class citizenship of women: in this respect teaching on sexuality and the usual interpretation of Mary's humility in the Magnificat were extremely undermining. Nonetheless we noted that in his first public preaching (Luke 4) Jesus went out of his way to spread a message of good news to all those who were in captivity of any kind, and that this was the consistent characteristic of the Kingdom which he announced. It seemed to us that this was a message of hope for our own situation.

On this more positive side we noted the resources which we had within the community to tackle our problems. The Bungalow Resource Centre and the Orchard Community Centre give new focus to efforts at community development. The Orchard Community Centre caters for children by organising clubs, Karate, Irish Dancing, Football and various other activities. The Cherry Orchard Money Advisory Service has an office in the Centre and gives advice on Social Welfare, budgeting and money management. LINK, a service that helps people compile CVs and apply for jobs, is also in the Centre. Self-development groups and courses (mainly participated in by women) have boosted morale and led to different initiatives in education, business and community involvement.

The local Development Council has grown stronger, has developed a number of community projects, and has succeeded in awakening political interest in our area. There is an enduring sense of neighbourliness, especially evident in times of crisis like illness and bereavement. There is a great ability to celebrate, a good antidote to despair. We have had several very successful summer projects for children, a few moderately successful cleaning-up operations of public spaces, and lay involvement in the church grows steadily. These and other positive signs give us confidence, then, that we can play our part in changing the situation: but is this enough? What about external factors, over which we have no direct control?

### *Our Experience – The Wider Context*

A second consideration of our experience focused more explicitly on trying to understand it within a wider social context. The Cherry Orchard area encompass Raheen/Cloverhill (1975-'79), Gallanstown, Elmdale and Croftwood (1983-'87). There are approximately 1,100 houses in our area, with an estimated population of about 5,600. The estate was built as part of a public housing policy which at that time determined that no new public housing was to be built in the inner-city, with inner city residents being rehoused in suburbs such as Ballyfermot, Damdale, Clonkalkin and Tallaght. There was little encouragement for class integration in the process (private housing developments were located in other areas of the city). A small, if growing, number of houses in our own area are owner occupied; the majority are still Corporation tenants. Fifty per cent of the population is under 15 years of age, in 25% of households there are 6 or more residing, 27% of households are registered as single parent families, and up to 50% are claiming unemployment assistance or benefit. The people are mainly in the semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic groups. There are no schools in the locality and parents spend at least £2,000 per week on school transport. It is estimated that over 50% of the population has left school by the age of 15. The scarcity of resources and facilities has already been mentioned. All this amounts to the kind of multiple deprivation situation we have described above, in which many adults live lives of quiet desperation and a significant number of disaffected young people involve themselves in such things as joyriding, vandalism, drugs and so on. These things are used as an escape from the real world, which they feel is rejecting them. Furthermore, the growing drug problem in the area generates serious crime.

We have struggled to understand the symptoms and causes of this situation, which is different from what most people in Dublin and the rest of Ireland experience. Most of the time people presume that they are free and are held personally responsible for what they make of their lives, but in fact the way things are organized in society in terms of roles as men and women, teenager, house-wife, priest, lay person and so on. There are expectations built into

these roles which can take us over in a way that we become less free than we would like to think we are. We questioned whether we ourselves could do anything to change things for the better here, since we are neither politicians nor business people. How many others in Ireland, including many middle-class people, are genuinely concerned about the serious inequality in our society, but feel powerless as private citizens to intervene in a process that seems so inevitable?

With regard to roles, men seem demoralised as their traditional role of breadwinner becomes redundant with the spread of unemployment. On the other hand, women say that their traditional roles allow them to get more involved at community level. From this we see that we need not be simply trapped by roles, but that we have an ability to change them. Jesus broke through the hard and fast definitions of roles in his own society by how he related in a liberating way to women, children, non-Jews and so on. Can we, in whatever role we occupy in whatever socioeconomic group in Ireland, be liberated like the Samaritan to make our contribution to a better Ireland and not be trapped like the priest or Levite into an understanding of role that makes us powerless to address the problems staring us in the face? Can the Church review its role by going beyond sacramental ministry to be the kind of catalyst for change called for by the Bishops in their *Work is the Key* document?

We noted that the major causes of the problems in our area result from how our society is organised and structured. The main structural problem here is wide-scale unemployment. This has huge implications for life here, including the roles people adopt. Studies confirm what we experience on the ground – that unemployment is closely related to poverty, poor health, lack of educational achievement and crime. It is not true to say that we are all free and have the same chance to make something of our lives. The side of the track we are born on largely determines the different possibilities, and indeed probabilities, open to us. But does it have to be this way? We looked at some of the causes of unemployment and the remedies which might alleviate it. Once again the issue of education emerged as central. There is an uneven

playing field whereby places like ours have to rely heavily on a Free Education Scheme which is not really free, while other areas can subsidise superior facilities from their own private resources. This is a vicious circle which must be broken. Education is needed to tackle poverty and unemployment but poverty and unemployment militate against educational achievement. It demands an even greater targeting of educational resources towards areas like ours.

The tax and social welfare system needs to be reformed so that people do not lose money when they take up employment. The impact of technology often leads to growing unemployment. It seems that the values which fuel technological growth can be those of greed and power and can result in an individualism which is destructive of community. A constructive and responsible use of technology is needed. The government needs to take the tough political decisions required to tackle unemployment and social division. Reputable bodies like the ESRI claim that there is real hope of radical change if the more well-off sectors of society were to sacrifice some of their economic power and advantage. Furthermore, everyone should become subject to the same stringent accountability in the payment of taxes as the PAYE sector.

Two further structural perspectives helped us to understand our situation better. First, there is a cycle of decay which can easily come about in public housing estates like our own. Typically such urban estates are seen at the start as potentially attractive and hopeful developments. However due to a combination of bad planning by the public authorities, e.g. no amenities and poor lay-out of estates, and external factors like the growth of unemployment, there is the danger of a gradual slide into a demoralised breakdown.

A typical pattern goes something like this:

At first the estate is popular though unemployment puts pressure on low-income families, especially as more children are born.

Inadequate Corporation planning, services and budget lead to poor facilities and wear and tear on the housing stock and environment take their toll.

Poor communication between the residents and the Corporation results in scapegoating on both sides.

As the environment decays further local people become reluctant to bring visitors into the area as social control breaks down and people will only take responsibility for the insides of their own homes.

People begin to move out, to look for transfers as the reputation of the area disimproves.

Social control continues to weaken so that children realise that they have power over adults who are intimidated from intervening in cases of anti-social behaviour.

The spiral is complete as the image continues to disimprove, the media frequently comment negatively, employers simply 'don't want to know' and people begin to ask themselves: does this place have a future, or am I serving a sentence by living here?

This cycle of decay does not have to happen. Bu if it is to be broken it needs joint activity between local people and the relevant outside agencies such as Corporation, Government. We would stress that in our own case there has been an upsurge of local community development over the last few years which has effectively put a brake to this cycle. However if we are to rally reverse the cycle of decay, we require the backing of ordinary Irish people who can empower Government and Local Authorities to introduce the kind of radical policy which will effect real change by making it clear that they want this even though it will involve some personal sacrifice.

A second structural perspective was opened up by an analysis that views Irish society as composed of four basic groups who relate to one another in a

particular, hierarchical way. The dominant group comprises those who own most of the wealth and resources in the country, and includes banks and multi-nationals. The second group comprises those who organise the system, such as civil servants and other public officials. This second group tends to work in the interest of the dominant group. The third group comprises those who produce wealth, i.e. the workers. The fourth group are those who are marginalised, such as the unemployed, the disabled, travellers and so on. The lower two groups are manipulated by the dominant group (which also has control of the media), so that they end up fighting among themselves rather than against the injustices which they suffer from. This analysis may be somewhat simplistic; nonetheless we recognised its validity in terms of the way power is often exercised in our society. For example, the concerted lobbying about the Residential Property Tax is a good illustration of the way the first two groups can move so well to promote their own interests.

A more explicit theological reflection on this situation attempts to articulate how our Christian faith might lead us to a better understanding of how God is present in what we experience, and what kind of action we need to take in response to this presence.

## *Theological Response*

A *theological* response to what has been presented in the previous pages should help us to:

SEE where God is present in the situation in our area;

KNOW what God thinks of the situation in our area;

DO what God wants for the situation in our area.

First, to SEE. Where is God? Well, in principle God is everywhere. But, for example, when people treat others unfairly or deny them their due, God is pushed to the side. This is the case in what was described in the previous pages. Our community, as God wishes it to be, should be a place where all the members get a fair chance to develop their skills and potentials. But this does not happen where men and women cannot participate fully in the community due to unemployment; where half the children are unable to remain in school beyond the age of 15; and where the area is deprived of the most basic facilities such as adequate shops and public transport. These things do not happen on such a large scale in most other places. It is in accordance with God's will, in the light of every person's dignity made in the image and likeness of God, that such things do not happen here either. When they do, God and God's will are somehow pushed out. Those who offend human dignity (and therefore God) by asking men and women to live under conditions that are neither adequate nor fair should be opposed. To be present more fully, God needs people: people who can highlight the problems that make the community suffer and people who can find solutions to these problems. God's presence with those who suffer is never affected, but God's *power* is – for other people can oppose it.

God's presence is also found in *protest*. As Jesus protested against the rich turning their backs on the poor, so does God protest today at the sight of children leaving school early. God protests too at the absence of basic services such as: schools, doctors, telephones, a health centre, adequate lighting, buses at night, shops, a library, and playing facilities. A *human* environment is about

more than bricks and mortar. God does not want people to suffer and is therefore present here especially in their awareness of, and protest against, the injustice that they experience.

Second, to KNOW. How can we know what God thinks of the situation of our area? We know from the Bible what God is like. God does not stand idly by, but gets involved. When the people of Israel were suffering and being walked on in Egypt, God heard their cries of distress and sent Moses to lead them out of that situation. God still hears and calls on us to speak out against injustice. Those who have power and influence must use them to put an end to unfair conditions.

We know what God thinks especially through Jesus. Jesus is the involvement of God in our world. What did Jesus do? He came poor and lived poor; he was not one of the privileged. He spoke of himself as bringing Good News to those who are afflicted. His words were backed up by actions: he sided with the poor, asked the rich to let go of their possessions. He healed the sick and took care of people. He described as a good neighbour the one who looked after the injured man on the side of the road. He forgave sinners and helped people to stand tall and face themselves and the world again. He tried to heal divisions in the community and to tear down barriers. He always looked out for the people at the edges of society; he had a special eye for them, and for children too.

Through Jesus we come to know how God sees things. It is not hard to know what his attitude would be to grossly inadequate facilities; or to children never getting the chance to develop their full potential due to lack of education. He would be angry about unemployment: about how it forces people to the margins of society and deprives them of the means to participate fully in it. He would criticise economic policies that increased wealth while doing nothing to increase employment. Why wonder what Jesus “would” say about these things? It is clear from the Gospels how he chooses to be involved.

It is impossible to imagine Jesus not being angry about what happens here. He would be very unhappy about the children: no schools, no buses, and truancy; unhappy about the 50% rate of unemployment; unhappy about the lack of facilities, about the pressures on families, about the violence against women and children, about the downward cycle that tends to perpetuate the problems and to get the area a bad name. Jesus – and that means God – could not but be angry about these things. We KNOW this because we see in Jesus' own life and actions that he does not want human beings to suffer.

Third, to DO. Imagine if you were one of the economic planners, or educationalists, or whatever, in this situation, would you like to have to explain to Jesus that these circumstances were inevitable and could not be changed? Jesus would not take that for an answer. To the dominant, those who own the resources, he would say: *share what you have*. To the organisers, those who run the system, he would say: *include those who cannot take part now*. To the workers, those who produce the goods, he would say: *you share in god's work; be mindful of you sisters and brothers who cannot*. To the marginalised, those who are pushed aside, he would say: *you are my special concern; I will not rest until you come in out of the cold*. Jesus, the person of God among us, has a word for everyone, but it is not always the same word.

The question is, right here in Cherry Orchard today: how is God seeking to act through people? God is seeking to act in and through the community, affirming its own experience and inviting it to take more charge of its affairs. God is seeking to act through the different authorities (local, educational, environmental, social welfare) in a committed and fair use of power. God is seeking to act through the Church, the Church as both learner and teacher of what the Gospel asks in this particular situation. God is seeking to act through the many gifted individuals whose talents should be harnessed, not wasted. God constantly seeks to act, and human beings are the *place* where God acts today. This paper wants to draw attention to the responsibility of all those who call themselves Christian to listen to God's voice and to let it make a difference now. For God is always speaking. *And God speaks to everyone* –

*the dominant, the organisers, the workers and the marginalised – and God has a definite, but different, word for each.*

## **Part Two: Particular Issues of Concern**

Our reflection on our own story has led us to focus on some particular issues which are of central importance. These have to do with the experience of unemployment, the situation of women, and the role of education. In what follows we take each of these issues separately and attempt to give a theological response to the human dilemma that they point up.

### ***The Experience of Unemployment***

Long or short term unemployment can have disastrous effects on the family, leading even to its break-up. Doubt sets in; is it my fault? Am I the cause of this? Then you realise you are not alone. Hundreds of thousands of people are in this predicament through no fault of their own. What the state gives is the minimum. It should be remembered that when unemployment benefit was introduced it was to help people until they got another job – meaning for a short period. Now whole families live in constant hardship, barely surviving on this minimum amount. It doesn't cover even basic needs. It is a matter of ducking and diving all the time with the money. To give the children what they need, even in the matter of clothing, is impossible. As simple a pleasure as a trip to the seaside or to the pictures can be a burden to your budget.

The hardship of the constant struggle fifty-two weeks a year is a test of the love and faith of husband and wife. Some do not survive. For the children all the love and attention you give them is not enough. They see what is going on, father and mother facing a continuous fight to survive. Families suffer. Children become vulnerable to all sorts of things: vandalism, drink, promiscuity, drugs and AIDS. Very soon they realise that certain things can be got and others cannot. They know that they are born on the wrong side of the track, that they are handicapped from the beginning. Their experience contradicts what they are taught in Church and school about Christ and justice and equality. At a very young age many switch off from the Church and even from school.

Injustice is particularly evident in the area of education. A child from an unemployed family, even with a good Leaving Cert, has very little chance of going on to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education. Even at the earlier stage if a child shows enthusiasm for learning you cannot really nurture it to the extent it deserves. You are not in a financial position to do so. You are beaten before you start. For a parent, looking at this is heartbreaking. The child soon switches off, realising that this is not for them through no fault of their own or of their parents. They see that the playing surface is uneven.

The Church claims to uphold the rights of the family and yet when a family is threatened by unemployment, not of their making, not a word seems to be said. Most people on the dole want to work. They want their pride and dignity back, to feel part of society, to have their own life and that of their family in their own hands. Like Martin Luther King, they also have their dreams.

Many of the unemployed feel that there is no bond between them and the Church. This gives rise to questions about injustice and whether the Church practises what it preaches. Some people turn off at being asked to pray every Sunday for Church and Government leaders. They ask how they pray for people who seem to have different sets of rules, who organise things in such a way that so few can have so much and so many can have so little. Is it the same God who is prayed to in our area and in the better off areas when God seems to teach us to do one thing and others to do the opposite? What are people hearing in areas like ours? What are they hearing in other areas?

The Church has a powerful voice but we do not hear about the injustice of unemployment from the pulpit. The Church must listen to its people and their concerns or there will be no Church in the very near future. It often seems that the Church only holds strong views on divorce and abortion. Other issues of social and economic injustice affect many more people and seem to be a low priority on their agenda. Does this lead to the conclusion that Church and State are hand in hand? You don't rock my boat and I won't rock yours?

### *Theological Response*

Where is God in all of this? What would God want of all of us who directly or indirectly contribute to this situation? Firstly life itself and love are two goods that are often found in the situation described and God is in what builds up both. To know the power of a love that can support and help you find the courage to fight back in spite of experiencing despair is surely a way to know God. Being a parent and not being able to provide for the family might destroy the relationship between husband and wife and parents and children. But God can be here too, in the refusal to be beaten down by the situation. Other ways of being a parent can be known. Children can experience their parents' love in ways that may be denied to many in families where there are no financial worries but where perhaps there are poor relationships between family members.

There is a huge challenge in our culture in keeping a marriage and family together 365 days a year. Even people who are financially secure may miss out on family life and relationships with their children. How much more difficult is it for people who never get a break from the relentlessness of the 'bills, debt, borrowing and more debt' cycle?

God wants us to have love and support and good family relationships perhaps especially in difficult and strained situations. But God wants us to have this and more, to have life and to have it to the full. That is what Jesus was about when he took the side of those who were excluded or suffering, when he intervened to show us what God expects in the face of injustice. A memorable example of such intervention is Jesus' driving out of the money-lenders from the Temple.

One aspect of having life to the full is to share your talents and skills, to feel that you are contributing to society. God is also in the anger and resistance to the basic injustices that deny these goods to so many. God is in the rightful outrage that unemployed people feel that God's presence will be stronger when other people join in the outrage. And God is in the practical efforts to

improve things; in the involvement in community and the solidarity of people working together for their rights and for the rights of those who cannot do it for themselves.

The Gospel is preached in situations where people's life experience is very different. Being long-term unemployed means you are **powerless** yet **responsible** for so much, beginning with the life and welfare of your children. Having no real control, in the sense of decision power, over important areas of life leads quickly to people becoming statistics, losing their sense of self-worth and questioning themselves as to whether they are to blame for their situation. What can happen among many of those who have work, and the material wealth and power that go with it, is a tendency to a lack of questioning, the assumption that their position is entirely due to themselves and their own efforts and hard work. There is lack of awareness of our inter-dependence; of the fact that having a job with good pay and condition is often related to or dependent upon other people not having a job.

What might God or our Christian tradition be saying to the other side of this story, to those in well paid employment? Again it's a matter of looking to the Jesus story, to what Jesus was about. Jesus didn't just talk about a better way; time and again he intervened. He acted to change situations that did not uphold the dignity and value of persons. He was angry and used strong language when the situation demanded it. It follows that situations that we can identify as causing or contributing to the suffering, hurt, or exclusion of others cannot be tolerated. Our Church should not be silent on injustice whether among its own members or in society at large. We all need to be awakened to it. There is a gap between Christian faith and teaching about justice and Christian practice of charity without justice. It should be pointed out more consistently and strongly by leaders in local churches, particularly in better off areas. The distinction between charity and justice needs to be more widely explained and reinforced. It is necessary that people in the better off groups know that it is not just a matter of giving their spare money to this or that crisis appeal, but that everyone should share in the goods and benefits of society – whether it be jobs or education or whatever – by right and not by concession. Being

Christian demands nothing less. It is necessary that the distinction between personal justice and structural justice be more widely explained and reinforced. The Church is in a good position to invite people of different classes to come together in an imaginative way to propose a re-ordering of Irish society, so that the value of solidarity and sharing could be implemented practically. This involves a change of structure and of culture, as well as personal conversion.

In the matter of education, free school is not really **free**. Even if children from unemployed families stay on against the odds and do Leaving Cert. the question of availing of 3<sup>rd</sup> level simply cannot arise for the large majority. Other groups in the same Christian community not only have the money, or the possibility of borrowing it, for the education of their choice but they can also cushion every possible blow to ensure that their children will go on to 3<sup>rd</sup> level. For example, they can afford grinds and a variety of extra-curricular activities. This increases their chance of a job which can lead to power and status in society. And so the whole cycle starts again with the difference that the gap gets wider and it becomes even harder for those who are left out to get anything like their fair share of the good things. To this could be added the problems of health care, problems with equality before law, and so on.

The attitudes of some towards those who have no work must change. As a minimum the right to whatever is needed to keep families in reasonable comfort relative to the rest of society must be recognised. Many people would believe and say that they do not knowingly contribute to injustice. What is required is for these people to get off the fence and work actively for justice.

### *The Situation of Women*

As the majority of men in the area are unemployed the women feel that they have had to take on the role of importance in the home. They have had to become experts at handling money. Working out the family budget and trying to make ends meet gets harder all the time. Some women have taken part-time jobs to help stretch the budget. When a woman goes out to work she can earn approximately £60 or else her partner's dole is cut. This creates a Catch 22 situation whereby if she has a good job, her partner gets no dole and he ends up resenting her. Many a marriage has ended because of smouldering resentment. Some women with jobs are also working full time in the home. This applies mainly to the older age group where men were not brought up to help in the home. 'That is women's work' is their motto. Younger men do not seem to have as many hang-ups about role reversal.

Many women feel that officials try to push them around and talk down to them. In particular they mentioned the rent man. A lot of women are lacking in self-confidence due to their circumstances. Some have no jobs, no outlets, no leisure activities or they are stuck at home with babies with no help and no one to talk to. Due to the fact that there is no school in the area a large number of children are bussed out every morning. The mothers of these children cannot even avail of the new school-home liaison service located in the school as it is too far to walk there if you cannot afford the bus-fare. Having to bus children out also leads to absenteeism if the parents cannot afford to pay for the bus.

In Ireland there are no statistics on the extent of violence against women in the home. However, *Women's Aid* know it is an everyday occurrence. Their National Helpline received over 6,000 calls in 1993 from women who are being abused by their partners. Some of the women in this area are part of those statistics. Many women in a violent situation will put up with it for a very long time and go to extreme lengths to cover it up. They seem to think it is their fault or, because they grow up in a violent situation, that it is the normal way to live. This is not exclusive to married couples. Young girls in their teens are being abused by their boyfriends and instead of getting out

while they still can they are going into violent marriages. When a woman is constantly abused the day comes when something snaps in her and when that happens what can she do? Where can she turn for help? There are no refuges or easily accessible counselling services in the area.

When asked if they would turn to the Church for help, the answer was a very definite No. Women feel excluded from the Church in the sense that they never hear a homily that sends out the message that they are not punchbags. The Church does not offer refuge or counselling services for victims.

One woman who is in a second relationship (her husband left her) said that a priest once told her he would not give her communion while she is living with her new partner. This could have a knock on effect if she stays away from church and keeps her children away because of this priest's personal approach.

All parents agree that drugs are one of their main concerns for their children and are a growing problem in the area. There is a great need for more education about drugs and the harm they do. Maybe if there was an advice centre and support for parents they could start to tackle the drug problem.

The area has been the focus of adverse media attention in recent times; unfortunately the good things that are happening are never highlighted. The Bungalow Resource Centre was set up by the Daughters of Charity in 1991. This is a great asset to women and there is an amazing sense of support in this Centre. The Centre runs classes in Personal Development, Parenting, Befriending, Stress Management, Enneagram, English, Music, Knitting, Sewing, Crochet and Craft. Everyone who joins the Centre is encouraged to take the Personal Development course and this has been a great success. A lot of women have gone on to further their education and fifteen of them received Diplomas in Maynooth College in September 1995. The English classes have also been very successful, with women passing both Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations. The Centre was picked as a pilot project by the C.D.U. unit of V.E.C. for an outdoor pursuits course and the outcome was amazing. The women completed a very valuable course in hillwalking,

canoeing, swimming and orienteering. They learned that the good things in life do not always come in a package and that they would be better off buying their children a pair of hiking-boots rather than an expensive pair of designer-runners. A course like this would be very beneficial to young adults and teenagers. More than five hundred women have completed courses in recent years, but it is the women that have not been reached who are the real worry. It seems education is the answer to a lot of our problems, but who is going to supply the means for this? Could the Church do more in this area?

### *Theological Response*

A theological response to this description of life for women here could be focused in two areas. First, in order to understand the situation better we need to look at how the Christian tradition and Church practices have contributed to the marginalisation of women. Secondly, if we acknowledge this contribution we can suggest ways in which our Christian beliefs and theology could become part of the solution.

The experiences of women in Cherry Orchard, which are reflective of those in other areas also, pose serious questions and challenges to the Church and our traditions. As we can see, many women feel excluded and ignored. The experiences and voices of women have been absent or ignored, even silenced in the formation of theology and the practices and teachings of the Church. Many who wish to remain within the Church have for some time now been voicing this experience of exclusion while others simply walk away in despair. Women are unhappy with the way in which the traditional teaching has kept them within strictly defined roles, carrying the full responsibility for child-rearing and home-making. These roles have been based upon deep-seated attitudes towards women which are thousands of years in the making, even pre-dating the Christian tradition. Women's images of themselves and their roles in society have been deeply affected by their religious upbringing and education.

Models and ideals for women have been presented which encourage them to be passive and submissive, to sacrifice themselves and their own identities for the sake of others. Unhealthy messages of suspicion and mistrust have been given about women's bodies and their sexuality, about their ability to make moral decision. The sanctity and the permanence of marriage has been stressed to the extent that many women who find themselves in abusive relationships feel huge guilt if they manage to leave them. These women who suffer abuse and violence – whether psychological or physical – can be trapped not only physically and economically but also by their own lack of confidence and self-

esteem. They can feel ashamed and guilty about their own mistreatment and denial is the climate in which abuse thrives.

As we have seen, many women feel that the institutions and structures of our society, including the Church, are not on their side. They cannot rely on them or turn to them for help and support, they feel unsafe in the world. Instead of looking to the Church for strength and inspiration they see it as perpetuating the situation, at times even justifying and legitimating it. They seldom, if ever, hear their actual experience reflected in homilies, pastorals, etc. On the other hand, how often have women been encouraged to offer up their sacrifice, to identify with Jesus' suffering on the Cross, to identify with Mary, as the meek, humble and passive mother of Jesus? Women have been encouraged to suffer in silence and to bear all patiently. The image of a male God standing in judgement of women cannot offer inspiration, liberation and a sense of self-worth to women already full of self-doubt and self-blame. An urgent question for today's Church and contemporary Christian theology is posed by those who look to the Gospels and Christianity for the sources of courage and strength needed to resist subordinating.

Just as there are hopeful signs described above regarding the Resource Centre, so too is it possible to find signs of hope within the Church's reflection on the situation of women.

Many thinkers, women and men, are responding to the challenges. Women's experience is beginning to be taken seriously. Theologians are beginning to reflect on this experience and to trace how some of the traditional teaching and preaching of the Church may have contributed to our problems.

It is becoming possible to look again at the tradition and to see that the actions and the death of Jesus can in fact shed light on what a loving God wants for us. Jesus died because of his commitment to love and justice. His crucifixion was to bring an end to all crucifixions, not to perpetuate them. Jesus' death was the price he paid for solidarity with the excluded and marginalised in his society. He saw injustice and named it. He confronted the powerful and

influential and was angry where he saw abuse. He showed how the love of God and the love of neighbour cannot be separated.

With regard to women, Jesus loved, affirmed and gave dignity and pride to them. He did not ever ask a woman to be submissive and passive. He listened to and learned from women and in this way he radically departed from the customs and practices of his time, scandalising those around him.

Many women who feel alienated and excluded from the Church wonder where is God in all of this. Through looking again at the Christian message of liberation, that it can be the Good News. We find that God is to be found on the side of the oppressed, that God is there in the Resource Centre and other similar experiences. God will be seen as the source of empowerment in the struggle against injustice. An image of God emerges as One who does not wish women to suffer, to lack confidence, to think badly of themselves, to feel ashamed about the way they are treated.

On a practical level the work to be done by the Church and committed Christians seems clear and in many ways realistic. It is not an impossible task; it can start in small as well as more radical ways. The prophetic voice of the Church must protest at injustice and critique the systems which discriminate against or oppress women, including its own structures and symbols. Awareness-raising is a first important step. The real, lived experience of women needs to be taken more seriously and listened to. Decision-making and policy-making bodies have to include those directly affected and must be more accountable to them. Homilies, liturgies, and the texts used in liturgies could be more sensitive to people's real needs. Theologians and those in theological training have to be more aware of the realities of the lives of women. Deep-seated attitudes and values must be explored and challenged. The practical resources of the Church could be directed towards the valuable work of personal development and education and greater efforts could be made to reach out to those on the margins and beyond.

### *The Role of Education*

Our area is almost unique in Dublin in having no school of any kind within the parish. Children have to travel anything up to 1.8 miles to get to primary or secondary school. The precise figure is important, because if it were 2.0 miles free transport would be provided. But as it is parents have to pay £2.50 per child per week to have their children bussed to school, and over £70,000 leaves the area each year in this way, with some parents paying over £15 a week, often out of social welfare payments. It sometimes happens that parents have no money for buses, and the children (and their parents if the children are small) at the far end of the parish have to walk miles along roads that are often bleak and windswept to get to school and back. Or the parents simply keep them at home. In many other areas of Dublin and elsewhere, children would get lifts from parents or neighbours in these circumstances, but in our area very few people have cars. In an area where the tradition of faithful school attendance is not very strong, this situation gives little incentive to improve it.

There are no precise figures for levels of educational attainment in our area, but in other local authority areas in Dublin about 35 per cent of children leave school before the age of 16, which is much higher than the national norm. About one fifth of the workforce in the area would be classified as unskilled manual, which is double the proportion nationally, so skill levels are also low. It is hard to find an adult in the area who has attended Third Level, and almost as hard to find a young person going on to Third Level.

For whatever reasons, many children in our area drop out of school before their Junior Certificate. The school attendance of some of them becomes very bad while they are only eleven or twelve, and some children of this age have effectively dropped out. It is easy for children to drop out. After fifteen days unexplained absence their names are usually just struck off the roll. Children are most vulnerable to drop-out in their first year of secondary school. It does not seem to be recognised how traumatic the transition from primary school is. Instead of having just one teacher who knows them well, they can now have eight or nine teachers. They also have eight or nine subjects, which many of

them just cannot cope with. There is a case for making first year, rather than fourth year, a transition year.

In our area there have never been any School Attendance Officers, because when the area was built ten years ago it was outside the Corporation boundary, though it is now long inside it. School Attendance Officers have been a great help in other areas of the city. They usually make their impact through their informal influence on the children and their families. As it is the Gardai have responsibility for school attendance in our area but their profile is not suitable for this role, as they would be the first to admit.

In the Ireland of today a low level of educational attainment is a distinguishing characteristic of those most vulnerable to unemployment and poverty, so it is not surprising that unemployment levels in the area are up to 50 per cent and that many people are in serious debt. A recent ESRI report shows that in Ireland nearly all of those unemployed for over five years had no second level qualification. About two thirds of those from unskilled manual backgrounds do not obtain an educational qualification, as against only 10 per cent from the professional class. Education, or its lack, plays a central role in the creation and reproduction of disadvantage.

If long-term unemployment was to be eliminated in areas such as ours it would be necessary to improve the educational and skill levels of the people. If this were done, more people would be qualified to compete for the employment opportunities on offer, so that employment would be shared around more. In the longer term more high-tech companies with good levels of pay would set up in Ireland and this would help to get rid of the low paid employment which is all many of our people are qualified for at present. This in turn would help to reduce the polarisation of our communities into rich and poor.

What are the obstacles to bringing education and skill levels in our area up to the national norm? There are many problems, and while some of them are particular to our area, others are shared by other disadvantaged areas.

In an area where unemployment is high, the costs of keeping a child in school can impose quite a burden. 'Free' education is a misnomer. Costs could include school transport (about £100 a year per child); books (as much as £80 per year exclusive of grants); stationery; uniforms, track suits and better footwear, clothing and toiletries; 'voluntary' contributions, which in our area usually comes in the shape of weekly draws to support the school; exam fees; school trips; materials for Home Economics classes.

In a poor home, a child at school may be seen as a drain on the family finances rather than as a source of future earnings. Moreover, teenagers need a lot of pocket money, which they are unlikely to get in many poor households. Some of those who stay on at school get part-time jobs, though these are often unsuitable, e.g. working in pubs, and they interfere with their studies. It would be of great benefit if some agency were able to devise a part-time job scheme whereby young people could earn pocket money doing jobs more suited to their situation.

There are other homes, perhaps those in which there is a weaker tradition of school-going, where teenagers opt to leave school altogether and take up low-paid jobs baby-sitting, working in local shops and so on. Money in the hand is seen as more important than money in the distant future. In the Youthreach programme the young people are paid allowances and this is a big incentive for attendance. The issue of school dropout is so serious that there may be a case for extending this arrangement to other children, though perhaps only in special schools, given the administrative problems of making distinctions between children.

Peer pressure is very strong in schools. Children are ridiculed for having 'rented' books or 'uncool' clothing. They experience embarrassment and exclusion if they cannot afford school trips (sometimes abroad). For poor children, giving up school can be an escape from nagging teachers, teasing companions, and complaining parents.

However, it is not just a question of money. We have to face the fact that for some families in our area going to school is not seen to be as important as it would be in middle-class areas.

The reasons for this are very complex. For one thing, in previous generations *is was* a question of money, in that school fees were prohibitive for many families, and a culture of early school leaving has been created in poor areas. It may also be true that the constant struggle to make ends meet narrows the horizons and saps the energy of poorer people. Many of them can only live one day at a time. In a recent inner-city survey many mothers interviewed said that they did not consider the future and do not plan ahead. Opportunities for work, or to participate in a course for which one is paid, play a major part in the decision to leave school. Peer pressure is very strong, and if a lot of children are leaving school early, the parents of the others have an uphill battle to keep their own children in school.

Middle-class parents are mostly well-educated themselves, and transmit their values, interests and concerns to their offspring. Values and interests are different in working-class areas. School subjects which might be interesting to middle-class children are more keen to do things that they see as immediately relevant and practical, whereas few school subjects apart from English and Arithmetic are. In Ireland, as in Europe generally, education systems are beginning to show more flexibility in curriculum content and teaching methods, to engage children more, and hopefully this will make school more attractive.

There is also a common belief in areas like ours that it is a waste of time going on to Leaving Certificate because you still will not get a job. This belief may arise because it is more difficult for young people from our area, because of their 'address', to get a job than people from other areas. But the fact is that young people in the area with Leaving Certificates have done much better than others.

In the inner-city survey mentioned above it also came out that the children had a bad relationship with most of their teachers and they felt that the teachers did not respect them. Some teachers in working-class areas irritate children and their parents through their expectation of behaviour and values which are really quite middle class. For instance, one local teacher spent a lot of class time instructing the children to make nutritious sandwiches the night before and keep them in the freezer overnight. For the teacher this was a perfectly sensible suggestion, but to many of the children (and their parents) it sounded ridiculous.

We are fully aware that persuading children to stay at school is not the end of the story. Where they do stay on until Leaving Certificate children from disadvantaged areas achieve, on average, poorer results than those from better-off backgrounds. The difference may be due to the 'informal' education that middle-class children get at home, which is not always available to working-class children. At any rate, in 1989 only 41 young people from an unskilled manual background entered Third Level Education in Ireland. Although schools which are designated as disadvantaged get additional resources from the state these need to be greatly increased if there is to be anything like a level playing pitch. Class sizes are too big to cope with literacy and numeracy problems.

We are hoping to have a Lifestart programme operating in our area soon. This is a pre-school programme aimed at helping and encouraging parents in the training and education of children during their earliest years. It has been found to be of great value in making education more valued in disadvantaged families. It is important to start with the youngest children and try to break the cycle, because it is much more difficult for adults who have missed out on education to catch up and adult programmes like VTOS are not given enough resources.

In our area, where we have no school, we are lucky to have a Women's Resource Centre run by religious sisters where adults can go for various courses, including Leaving Certificate English. But something for the men is

needed too, and of course it would be much better if we could persuade young people to complete their education while they are still at school.

### *Theological Response*

As a group inspired by Gospel values we are very concerned with the level of educational disadvantage suffered by many people in our area. Apart from allowing them to participate in the economic system through a job, a good education enriches people and broadens their horizons.

The Catholic Church has involved itself in education through the centuries. In some cases this may have been with a view to control and indoctrination. But if one considers the popular saints of the Church, such as St Vincent de Paul, St Dominic, St Francis de Sales, St Ignatius of Loyola, (as well as uncanonised saints such as Mary Aikenhead, Catherine McAuley and Ignatius Rice), it is clear that they saw a lack of education in people in the same way as they saw poverty: as something to be remedied if people were to be able to live fully human lives in the image of God. Some of the orders founded by these men and women have schools in our parish today and they do very good work in what is often a difficult environment.

Over thirty years ago the Second Vatican Council reminded us that everyone, regardless of age or condition, has an “inalienable right to an education”. Education prepares us for life and enables us to secure a job. But education also helps us to appreciate better God’s creation, which is the nearest we can come to knowing God. It helps us to appreciate ourselves as created – to know that we have dignity, that we matter, and that God wills us to develop our minds and to contribute to society. But without education this becomes difficult. Nowadays, when young people lack education, they often, as a result, lack occupation as well. They have fewer options to fill their spare time. Because they find it harder to think of constructive things to do the sometimes do destructive things instead. In the Parable of the Talents, the master was angry with the man who had buried his talent in the ground – a story which is surely applicable to us as a people if we neglect to educate ourselves and our children to the best of our abilities.

One area where a lack of education can be a hindrance is in work with community organisations. The Vatican Council gave special mention to the area in its Decree on Education. God intended us to work together to build up his kingdom. When we are working with community groups we need to be able to express ourselves well, in writing or in speech, if we are able to get our point across. A lack of education handicaps not only the individual, but the whole community. As a community we are probably less effective in getting our case across than more affluent communities because we do not have so many educated people who are able to lobby effectively and produce impressive reports.

Our society has become so competitive that real education, which draws out the potential of the human spirit, is in danger of being replaced by the cramming in of loads of information and second-hand ideas.

The Bible tells us that God is on the side of the poor. When we picture the poor we most likely think of lack of food, clothing and shelter. But in Ireland today the greatest poverty that people have to endure is a lack of education because it determines almost everything else in life, and because when an adult suffers from it no amount of money can put it right. As a group committed to Christian values, education must be near the top of our list of priorities.

## *Conclusion*

We have told the story of a community suffering a great injustice. There are many such communities in Ireland at present. Ireland has two faces: on the one hand, economic prosperity and participation in the boom; on the other, deprivation and relegation to the margins. There are the employed and the unemployed, the powerful and the vulnerable, the voiced and the voiceless. This is unjust. Such injustice does not come about by accident; nor is it simply inevitable. The way we have organized our society is chiefly responsible for it. Clearly, some of us benefit at the expense of others, whether we choose to recognise it or not. As Christians we have to respond to this situation.

We have sketched out the technical details of such a response. There are plenty of other groups and reports which have already shown how our society might be restructured. But we know that unless the will for a radical restructuring is there, it simply will not happen. We also know that there is real resistance to change on the part of those who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. We are urging Irish people of whatever social class to put pressure, as individuals and groups, on government to give leadership in this area. We make a particular appeal to Christians on the basis of their faith in the Jesus of the gospels with his special concern to fight injustice. How can we worship the same God, in the same religion, when we are divided in ways that are so painful? We draw particular attention once again to the possibility, recognised in Catholic Social Teaching, that one can consider oneself a good person, go to church of Sunday and be kind to one's neighbour, and yet be part of a social system that is profoundly unjust. This we believe is the situation in Ireland at the moment, and there is a real opportunity for people of good will to move in the direction of change.

We draw attention also to the much neglected aspect of Christian teaching which encourages us to be angry at injustice, and to use this anger in a constructive way in the service of love. This is what the Irish Bishops meant when they stressed the need for a proper indignation in the context of our unemployment problem. We are all called upon to engage in Christian protest

at our present situation, a protest which only escapes being self-indulgent if it translates into action for change.

We have already seen that seemingly impossible situations (the Berlin Wall, South Africa, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Bosnia) can move forward. Can we bring the same energy and concentration to bear on this problem of a divided society in Ireland? As Christians we believe that in so doing we are not fighting on our own against all odds, but are responding to God's grace, working through love.