

AROUND THE TABLE WITH POPE FRANCIS: A PLACE AND A VOICE FOR THE POOR

JOHN WALLIS MEMORIAL LECTURE, 2021

I feel very privileged to be asked to share these reflections with you today. I extend my gratitude to the members of the John Wallis Group and 'Highways and Byways' more broadly, for honouring me with this most gracious of invitations. I hope I don't let you down!

My connection with the Missionary Sisters of Service and the vision of Fr John Wallis began 30 years ago in Toowoomba. I was a young and inexperienced Religious Education Consultant, regularly offered support and hospitality by the Sisters who ran the wonderful Family Book Shop. I was, and continue to be, inspired by this open, warm, authentically Australian group of women.

What an honour it is for me, all these years later, to be invited to share these ideas in honour of the legacy of Fr John and the work of the Sisters. My only sadness is that I can't be with you in person.

It is important that I acknowledge my indebtedness to the many nameless people of India, Peru, Africa and the majority world whom I have encountered in my life's journey. I have learned more about the priorities for Christian life, the Reign of God, and mission from my time with these people than I ever did in any formal University studies.

I will share the stories of some of these people today.

While addressing our topic from within the Christian tradition, I also acknowledge the struggle of justice and compassion in all faiths and none. I agree with the Indian activist Swami Agnivesh when he said that:

The enemies of religions cannot be other religions. The enemies of true religion are poverty, injustice, illiteracy, exploitation, discrimination, and all that subvert the possibility of fullness of life for all people.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer went a step further. He argued that the struggle for justice should transcend the imperatives of any religious belief. While awaiting execution in a concentration camp, he wrote that we should act for justice 'as if God was not there'. We should change the world because it needs changing, not just in response to a Divine command.

My presentation today has been given the title:

“Around the Table with Pope Francis: a place and a voice for the poor.”

Let's begin by asking: Who are 'the poor' for whom we must find a place and be a voice?

We can sometimes succumb to the temptation, particularly in the West, to 'spiritualise' poverty. That is, to focus primarily on those we might refer to as 'spiritually' poor.

Those people who passively allow life's priorities to be determined by the dominant culture, those who have lost direction spiritually or those who are searching for meaning in the context of a society dominated by rampant consumerism and secular 'Gods' and idols.

It is not the plight of these people that I will address in this presentation.

The poor of whom I will speak today are those for whom life itself is a heavy burden; many have no name, no recognised existence.

They are people who lack adequate educational and healthcare opportunities and are excluded from decisions that affect them and their children.

The poor are those who cannot take life for granted, those for whom staying alive each day is their primary task, and many of them die before their time.

Scholar John Dominic Crossan refers to these people as the 'expendables' in the eyes of the world. Gustavo Gutierrez calls them the 'non-persons.'

I will argue that it is our response to the plight of these people that determines the authenticity of our commitment to the Gospel and fidelity to the Reign of God that Jesus proclaimed.

As Pope Francis has warned us, the Gospel of the marginalised is where our credibility is at stake, discovered, and revealed.

Allow me to begin by relating two experiences of being around a table.

I was once with my family at an outdoor restaurant in Lima, Peru. The restaurant had a canvas outdoor dining barrier that separated its footpath space from those of neighbouring restaurants.

We had just finished the meal and were paying the bill. A young girl, who had been watching us eat from some distance away, came and sat on the ground just outside the barrier. Accompanying this young girl was a baby; it could have been her own child, or possibly her little brother or sister.

When you eat at this restaurant, you are served a complimentary bowl of roasted corn as an appetiser; similar to how, in Australia, we might be offered a bowl of peanuts: very cheap, easy, and makes you thirsty.

As we were a large group, we had several bowls of this 'cancha', as it is called in Spanish.

As we were about to leave, the young girl asked if she could have the leftover bowls of corn that were on our table.

To my great shame, I found two or three half-empty bowls of corn and handed them over the barrier to this young girl and her baby.

A couple of minutes later, the girl noticed that some of our soft drink bottles weren't totally empty, and she asked if she could have the dregs in these bottles. This was too much for me, so I asked the waitress to bring a fresh soft drink so the girl and her baby could have one.

We left the restaurant that day, but the image of that young girl and the baby haunted me into the night. It still haunts me!

I profess to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, who was a great 'includer' of people. The 'scandal' of Jesus' ministry was that he didn't go around handing out food; he didn't hand down bowls to people - he sat down at the table with them. He invited them to the table!

I was deeply ashamed that I had not invited this young girl to eat at our table. I went back to the restaurant the next 2 days at lunchtime, not for the food, but rather, hoping for the opportunity to find that young girl and her baby and invite them to the table.

Another occasion, another restaurant in Lima.

As people were eating, a poor man, accompanied by his little son, entered the restaurant and began offering sweets for sale to earn some money in a semi-dignified manner.

As some of the patrons of the restaurant complained to the waiter about the presence of this 'intruder', the staff began to usher the man out of the restaurant.

As he was leaving, I couldn't help but see out of the corner of my eye that his little son, dirty and unkempt, had struck up a friendship with a boy of a similar age who was the son of one of the 'well-heeled' patrons.

Whilst all of this 'class battle' was happening between the adults, these two little boys became friends and were playing together in the corner, totally unaware of any distinctions between them or any societal or class norms that they were breaking.

Our Gospel tells us clearly that unless we become like these little children, our potential to see God and God's vision for the world will be clouded. As long as we allow exclusion and discomfort with 'the other' to dictate who we call our neighbour, we will continue to miss the point of our Gospel, and our humanity will continue to be impaired and incomplete.



Inclusion is at the heart of the Gospel, and exclusion is the Gospel's greatest betrayal. Richard Rohr was right when he argued that the only thing that Jesus excluded was exclusion itself.

The entire ministry of Jesus was to render divine love and compassion visible, tangible, and concrete. He touched the untouchables. He showed that God was not pleased with the blind following of laws and rituals. He entered the lives of the victims of these laws: those with disabilities, the lepers, the elderly, and the widows.

Jesus declared suffering, in his society, seen as a sign of God's disapproval, to be a sign of God's presence. To declare these people 'children of God's kingdom' was a direct challenge to the religious establishment of the day. One could well argue that it was Jesus' commitment to inclusion that ultimately cost him his life.

In the tradition of Jesus, mission invokes what martyred El Salvadoran Jesuit Rutilio Grande called an 'impossible neutrality'. It takes sides, becomes political and asks disturbing questions about the way things are and why this is so.

Fr Rutilio warned his people not to be content with a God in the clouds, a muzzled, mute and tame Christ. He proposed that if Jesus were to appear again in our world with his subversive message of inclusion and justice, many of us might call for his arrest and silencing. Why?

Because 'mission' is about the 'God of the poor', while most of us are not poor. It's about 'the view from the poor', while we may know nothing of what that looks like. It's about challenging social structures that can produce inequality, while those same structures may be very beneficial to us and our security.

Mission to the poor asks difficult questions that accept no easy answers:

- How do we speak of a God of love and compassion in the midst of poverty, marginalisation, and exclusion?
- How do we tell the poor and voiceless that God loves them, and that the Gospel is 'good news' for them as well?

Some years ago, I travelled with a friend to Sri Lanka to meet with theologian Fr Tissa Balasuriya.

We arrived at the sprawling compound where Fr Tisa lived and were met by this tiny little man with scraggly long white hair.

"So, you've come to talk theology!" Fr Tissa said when we first met. He promptly led us out of the room, down the stairs, across the compound, into the street, into a rickshaw, and before we fully realised what was

happening, we had travelled for 45 minutes to the outskirts of Colombo to a slum area in which he had built a school for the poor.

He took us to an area on the unfinished roof of the school, right in the middle of the slum, sat us down and said: "Now we can do theology!"

Fr Tissa didn't need to say any more; his message was so clear. We cannot do theology or reflect on the Reign of God without the poor and what the Gospel's message of 'good news' means for them.

Joan Chittister put it so well:

To say that we believe that God loves the poor, judges on their behalf, wills their deliverance, but to do nothing ourselves to free the poor, to hear their pleas, to lift their burdens, to act on their behalf, is an empty faith indeed.

And as Gustavo Gutierrez repeatedly told us:

Unless we place ourselves alongside the poor, unless we look at reality through their eyes, we are unable to see, recognise, or worship the God who walks with the poor.

I was walking in New Delhi early in the morning, just as the city was waking up. I came across a family, a mother, a father and four children who sleep on the footpath in an area of the city just beside an ATM machine. I watched the family prepare for the day, cooking their breakfast and rolling up their bedding, all in the shadow of this modern machine.

I wonder what goes through the minds of people like these when they see others coming to the ATM, pushing in a few numbers, and, as if by

some miracle, great gifts of money flow from the machine to the lucky person who knows the code.

So many questions arise:

- What must it be like to be a 'two-dollar-a-day family' and not know the code?
- What must it feel like for that father to see other people so favoured by the 'gods' that great quantities of money flow to them when he, after preparing his family for the day, will have to go off to beg or work as a day labourer for a pittance, just to keep his family alive?
- How do you explain to these young children that it's not their father's or mother's fault that they can't access this flow of wealth from the machine that adorns their living space, in the way that a painting sits on the walls of our living rooms?
- How do these parents eventually explain to their children that they may never have a code for access to security and a dignified life?
- How could we ever convince this family on the streets of Delhi that they are sons and daughters of the same loving God who offers the fullness of life to everyone?

I was walking one evening in Calcutta. The centre of the city becomes a dormitory for thousands of people who sleep here but are cleared away in the mornings so that the day's business in a bustling city can begin.

Just off the main street, I spotted another family. They were asleep on the footpath in front of a modern furniture store. Just inside the store window was a large double bed, complete with a thick mattress and linen. This family on the hard concrete was separated from this

comfortable bed by a simple sheet of glass. Two worlds, a metre apart but as different as is imaginable.

More questions emerge:

- What stops a father from smashing the glass so that his family can have a decent place to sleep?
- What type of world is it that allows this stark separation to exist?
- How do these children grow into any sense of why they are on the outside, when there is ample unused bedding clearly in sight?

For many people who visit the 'majority world', it is the plight of children in the midst of poverty and exclusion that raises so many questions and causes the greatest distress. For some, it challenges their very capacity to keep believing in a loving and compassionate God.

Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov was one of these:

I am a believer, but then, there are the children. That is the question I cannot resolve. If everyone must suffer, pray tell me, what do children have to do with it? It's quite incomprehensible why they should have to suffer. It's not that I don't accept God; I just most respectfully return his ticket.

The term 'preferential option for the poor' is commonly used in articulating priorities for Christian mission.

In Spanish, the use of the verb 'optar' implies making a significant decision in accord with one's deepest values and priorities; a decision that has lifelong consequences. One opts to marry a certain person, immigrate, or pursue a certain career. For lesser, day-to-day choices, a different verb is used.

The choice of this verb by the Latin American theologians from whom the phrase originates was deliberate and implies much more than a simple choice between alternatives. It implies that God decides to stand with and for the poor because of God's very nature.

God prioritises the poor because God is love and compassion and wishes full humanity for all. Poverty and marginalisation are an affront to God. Living in an inhuman situation is contrary to God's will.

The decision to embrace a 'preferential option for the poor' implies a deliberate orientation in our lives and our structures towards the plight of the poor; towards their needs and concerns.

It demands that we accept that we see the face of God most clearly in the poor. It requires us to accept that ignoring the poor means that we ignore God.

For most of us, aligning ourselves with this preferential option requires conversion.

The movie *The Motorcycle Diaries* tells the true story of the early life of the revolutionary Ernesto (Che) Guevara. As the young man recently finished his medical degree, Ernesto and a friend travelled around Latin America on the old motorbike. During his travels, he developed a deep appreciation for the plight of the poor in Latin America at the time, who were victims of structural injustice. The movie is a study in change and conversion.

My favourite scene in the movie is when Ernesto is celebrating his birthday with priests and nuns in a leper colony on the banks of the Amazon in Peru. As a doctor, he specialised in treating tropical diseases. The actual place where the lepers live is an island in the middle of this very wide river, separated from the world.

At one point during the party, Ernesto goes outside and looks towards the island. In a moment of decision, he dives into the river and swims towards the lepers on the distant island. On the riverbank, his friends call him back because it is dark and dangerous, and Ernesto has suffered from chronic asthma all his life. On the shore of the island, however, the lepers are encouraging him to continue swimming towards them.

For me, this is a wonderful image of conversion; of movement towards 'the other'; of letting go of the 'self' and baptism into solidarity with the poor. He reached the island, was embraced by the lepers, and his life, regardless of the future choices he would make, would never be the same. He has made his option; he is with the poor; he has swum the river.



This was a journey of conversion that Oscar Romero and Pope Francis have both made.

In their early lives, both men were conservative, legalistic defenders of the status quo in the relationship between the Church and the state.

In the case of Romero, it was the persecution of his people, culminating in the assassination of Fr Rulilio Grande, that galvanised his 'conversion'. No longer could he be a bystander when people were being killed for standing with the poor.

After his conversion, Romero warned that:

‘... a church that doesn’t provoke any crises, a Gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, isn’t really the Gospel but rather, very nice, pious considerations that don’t bother anyone!’

Similarly, Pope Francis, who was the conservative head of the Jesuits in Argentina at a young age, refused to stand with two confreres who were persecuted due to their choice to work with the poor. Fr Bergoglio demanded that these two priests abandon this stance and return to traditional roles within the Congregation. They both refused and suffered horribly.

Francis refers to his process of conversion to the poor as ‘untying the knots’. The knots of excessive rule-following and the prioritisation of established order over the plight of the marginalised.

He may have been referring to his own journey when Francis once reflected:

The word “solidarity” is a little worn and, at times, poorly understood, but it refers to more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mindset...

Since becoming Pope, Francis has consistently prayed for a church of and for the poor:

- A Church which promotes service and compassionate engagement with the world as indispensable to the way we worship the God of love who stands with and for the poor.

- A Church that strives to usher in the Reign of God: the promise of fullness of life and true freedom for all in our troubled world;
- A Church focused on getting the Kingdom of God and its message of justice and truth into the world, rather than people into its ranks;
- A Church not so worried about how the world might change it, but rather, how it might strive to change the world; and,
- A Church which strives ceaselessly to tell the poor and the excluded ones that God loves them and that the Gospel is good news for them as well.

And so, friends, what are the 'knots' that we must untie, in order to free ourselves for greater commitment to the marginalised? How prepared are we to 'swim the river' and be baptised into solidarity with the voiceless? The journey from which no Christian is exempt.

We are told in Chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel that the only question we will have to answer at the end of time is how we have treated the poor.

We will be judged by God on one basis: did we care for the poor? Did we give bread to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked?

There is no orthodoxy test referred to here; no creedal formula to recite; no catechetical requirements to measure up to; not even questions about private morality. Only the question of how we have treated the poor.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the catch phrase 'Outside of the Church, there is no salvation!' motivated the Church's mission.

However, if we take our inspiration from Jesus' priorities, we might say: 'Outside of the poor there is no salvation!'

And so, friends, to conclude.

My presentation this evening has probably been more of an exhortation than a lecture. I hope this hasn't disappointed you!

If we wish to sit at the table with Francis in his church of and for the poor, a table with room for those children in Peru, those families in India and the millions of other voiceless peoples, we must commit and recommit ourselves to fight for their right to be there.

We are all created from love, by love, to love. We are called to be the loving, compassionate and inclusive face of the Divine to all we meet.

There is no other path to God but the path of justice.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah:

...the worship of the people is meaningless without justice... learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Today I have made many references to India, Peru and the 'majority' world.

Some might say that it is easier to embrace a mission of radical inclusion or an option for the poor in these places, as material poverty and exclusion are so visible. However, when tempted to think this way, let's remember the words of Mother Teresa: 'Calcutta can be found all over the world if only we have eyes to see.'

I will finish with the words of Dom Pedro Casadaliga from Brazil:

...we must keep repeating it: without the poor there is no salvation, without the poor there is no Church, without the poor there is no Gospel.

My deepest thanks to all, and God bless the memory of Fr John Wallis.