

Life on the Margins

Well-known social commentator and activist Sr Stan comments on the Pope's intention for September.



There are hundreds of thousands of people living on the margins of Irish society. 671,183 people live on the poverty line, of which 186,602 are children. There are 143,633 older people living in poverty, an increase of over 55,000 since 2021.

An extreme form of marginalisation is homelessness. There is now a record total of nearly 12,000 people homeless. It is shameful that this figure includes 3,500 children. In the

past year alone 662 children became homeless.

These are just some of the marginalised people. We also have people with special needs, disabilities and mental health problems, the travelling community, LGBTQ+ community, among others. These are marginalised in a physical way and also psychologically and emotionally, and this can be very difficult for them.

For example, when I first did the

Pope's Intention: We pray for those persons living on the margins of society, in inhumane life conditions; may they not be overlooked by institutions and never considered of lesser importance.

research on homeless women nearly forty years ago, they described what it was like to be homeless. They felt their sense of self was eroded on a daily basis: not having a place of their own, not being able to close the door behind them, not having a place to wash and to leave their things. Worse than this was the way people treated them: ignoring them, walking to the other side of the street, shouting at them. This happens to people on the margins.

A most frightening aspect of modern life is the extent to which we can all be held responsible for actually marginalising people without being conscious of it. We have accepted competitive success as a norm, almost everywhere, in business, in life, and with less excuse, in education, in sport even at a young age. Those who reach the top are successful, and those who don't reach it or are way down are regarded as failures. They are looked on as mainly non-productive, and this justifies putting them aside as worthless, or nearly so, and society marginalises them and dis-



cusses them as problems.

The only real and long-term correction to the marginalisation of people is restraint on the part of those who have plenty or enough. More than that there must be unselfishness on the part of those who have power. I don't think that the Church emphasises enough the moral duty of restraint and generosity today and the duty towards people on the margins. The Church is not forceful enough in condemnation of waste and far too tolerant of consumerism. Neither do we as a Church use our voice to support people on the margins or be their voice in any meaningful way.

If people on the margins were to read the Scriptures they would rebel against their own rejection. They would raise up against the waste that is part of modern living. It is out of such rejection what we call liberation



theology has come. Here in Ireland, we have a great need for liberation theology, realising that people on the margins are not free people. The personal liberty of many of those on the margins of our community is destroyed.

Those with plenty or enough often say that what one person can do for those on the margins is so slight as to be negligible – why even try? This is to deny the spectacular increase in outputs when a few people come together to act. It denies also the efficacy of specifically Christian work and the value of a symbolic act. One who lights a candle can give light to a whole procession. That must be our guide as we reach out to people on the margins.

It is a great mistake to imagine that the people on the margins must always be the receivers. In the time

of Jesus, the educated, the experts and the well off took terrible steps to get rid of the shame of being continuously corrected by the carpenter's son. A few days later they found their assembly being addressed by Peter and John. These were 'uneducated laymen' who spoke to them with astonishing assurance. Where, they asked, did they get it? We need to learn this confidence from the poor, the marginalised, and when we do many will call us arrogant. They will contest our arguments. Neither Peter, nor John, nor Paul were worried about the charge of arrogance or contempt. They did not care what waters they muddied when they spoke. Quite often today, like Peter and Paul and John, the people on the margins can teach the Church that prudence is a very limited virtue. The world loves prudence. Often as not, it is a very convenient hindrance to inconvenient action.

When we are responding to people on the margins, we are responding to Jesus. Jesus said, 'whatever you do to my brothers and sisters, the poor and powerless, you do it to me'. These words are strikingly clear and unmistakable. Jesus identified himself with the people on the margins.

In 1977 Fr Pedro Arrupe, Superior General of the Society of Jesus said that the cry of Jesus, on the cross is the cry of the poor today. He said that the thirst in the throat of Jesus is the real thirst that cries to heaven as it did on Calvary, the cry of Jesus. This suffering is repeated in thousands of throats that clamour for justice and fairness when they beg for bread, for respect, for medical assistance, for shelter, for education, for freedom.