

The Challenge to Live Simply

Christine Allen

This Advent, the *livesimply* project challenges us anew to live simply, sustainably and in solidarity with the poorest members of our global community, explains Christine Allen. Why is a concern for those in the midst of poverty so central to Catholic teaching?

In 2006 the Catholic Institute for International Relations adopted the new name “Progressio”. It is a name that reflects a concern for progress and the development of people, in an inclusive way. Furthermore, the name has a resonance for the Catholic community through *Populorum Progressio* - the encyclical written by Pope Paul VI in 1967. Discussing the need for urgent action to respond to poverty in the world, at a range of levels from the individual to the international, the document has as its central theme the very notion of what it means to be human.

In these times of economic downturn, the focus on always having more and on constant acquisition regardless of the social and environmental impact, is beginning to be challenged. But such a challenge was central to an encyclical that was written over forty years ago. Talk about Catholic Social Teaching being the Church’s best-kept secret!

Living our faith

In 2005, orchestrated by CAFOD and with support from Progressio and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, a project was developed with the aim of creating a stronger understanding and awareness of Catholic Social Teaching, and of *Populorum Progressio* in particular. Called *livesimply*, the project took as its central theme the notions of progress outlined in the encyclical: that it was about being more, not just having more; that we find a truer sense of what it means to be human not through things, but through our relationships with other



people and with God; that the levels of poverty and inequality in our world were not merely unsustainable, they were sinful. The encyclical reminded us of our responsibilities to one another in a global community. *livesimply* was an opportunity to garner the Catholic community together under a banner of seeking a different world, and one that started with us as individuals. Over the last two years, the *livesimply* network has developed and expanded. It

now includes over 60 Catholic organisations – dioceses, religious orders, agencies and associations in England and Wales. There are also four ecumenical partners.

Rooted in the desire to promote the messages of the encyclical – full human development, and our responsibility and role in seeking this – the project has sought to put flesh on the bones of various principles underpinning social teaching: the dignity of the human person, the common good, the preferential option for the poor.

We have an incarnational faith. We believe that God became human in Jesus and therefore God became poor, powerless and vulnerable. The gospels tell the story of the life, mission and death of Jesus and this sets an example of how we should act towards others. Jesus stood out against the social and cultural expectations of his times in the way he interacted with the Pharisees, in the way his disciples understood him, and most of all on the cross. So it is with us; in a world of greed, selfishness and consumerism we are called to be good news for the poor.

livesimply claims that being engaged in social justice work is an essential part of our faith. It is not an optional extra, and this call to engagement is not just enshrined in scripture, but comes to us through a rich heritage of social teaching. It is about thinking and praying about transformation and change, about finding ways to *live simply, sustainably and in solidarity* with our sisters and brothers throughout the world, millions of whom live in terrible poverty.

Living sustainably

It might seem odd for the church to talk about living sustainably. It's a phrase often used by the green movement, and environmental matters weren't really that strong in the original encyclical. However, we believe that the world was created by God and therefore is sacred. This reverence for the earth is something that in our twentieth-century industrialised world, we have just begun to rediscover. The *livesimply* project reminds us that caring for the earth isn't just a pursuit of the environmentalists, but is part of our Christian heritage, even if for too long the Christian message of stewardship was drowned out in favour of one of domination and subjugation of the earth. Over time, the concept of stewardship has become more prominent within the Church and Paul VI made reference to our responsibility not just to those who are living now, but to future generations. This responsibility is as pressing now as it ever was.

The Genesis story tells us clearly that creation was loved by God and declared good. Theologians such as Donal Dorr, in his books *Integral Spirituality* and *Spirituality and Justice*, remind us that humanity must live in a right relationship to the rest of the natural world. Over time humanity has sought a subjugation of the natural world rather than a kinship with it. It is this challenge of building right relationships with one another and the world that is central to the *livesimply* project and one that all the members of the network seek to respond to in their diversity of their work.

Living simply

Living simply is often seen as just being about living with less, and to some extent this is true. The early Christian church offered some insight as to how this was done – by living in a community whereby different members had different skills and had to

work together, supporting one another as parts of one body. The Church has a strong tradition of evangelical poverty that many religious and lay people still live out today. It is one interpretation of the “preferential option for the poor” as outlined by the theologians and Bishops of Latin America in the sixties and which Pope Benedict reaffirmed as central to our church in Aparecida last year.¹

In *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI is clear that poverty is a degradation of the human condition and as such is a sin against God. But, the solution to poverty is not an emphasis on wealth. We need only look at the Parables of the Pearl (Matt 13:45-6) and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31) to see clearly the Gospel message that riches, or more importantly a worry about riches, will turn your attention from the things that are most important in life. This isn't just about a better prayer life, or asceticism, but about encouraging us to focus on the right relationships in the world and in our lives. If the rich man was prepared to sell all he had for the pearl of great value then he saw something beyond just the money.

To some extent, Christians rediscovering the message that yearning for more material goods won't make you happy might not come as a surprise. The message is central to many of the world's religions. But living simply is more than that. It is asking all of us to find the space for the more valuable things in life. Recently the theologian Tina Beattie interpreted living simply as a life of grace. A life of grace is about seeking fulfilment within both ourselves and in our relationships with others.

Excessive poverty and excessive wealth *both* mitigate against simpler lives. So the message is as relevant to Nigeria as it is to Knightsbridge. Living simply is not asking people to struggle to feed their family, but challenges us as a global community to recognise that a rich-poor divide, such as the one present in our world, should not exist. Living life with grace means going beyond transactions, into full relationships, into recognising our inter-dependence upon one another.

Living in solidarity

Righting the wrong relationships is central to living in solidarity. It's not about a fuzzy warm feeling, but a real desire to engage with difference. It's about

intercultural sharing, about an ability to empathise and understand the issues and struggles that people face, and do something about them – like Progressio development workers do. Development workers are skilled people who work in solidarity with local organisations and communities to help them respond better to the challenges they face. It's a bit like having an in-house consultant, in the form a person who comes to share their skills with humility and enable local organisations to better provide services, secure funding and lobby for change.

We see so many people in our rich societies who do not seem to engage with the concept of solidarity at all. At times, like the present, when there is an economic downturn, it can be easy to slip into self-protectionist mode. But the downturn is also an opportunity to discover ways to live more simply and sustainably, and thus find ways to live in solidarity with those who are poor in the world. Of course, the *livesimply* project isn't going to tackle the global economic crisis, but it is interesting to see that across the population at large in the UK, the dissatisfaction with consumerism and short-termism is growing and people are looking for something more.

Finding ways to live according to a longer-term agenda can bring hope to more people than just yourself. For example, buying fair-trade produce can seem like a luxury in an economic downturn, but it provides much needed income for people far worse off than ourselves, and is a simple measure to take to show your solidarity.

Solidarity is about going beyond oneself, to experience and engage with the other, and also to bring the other into your thinking and life. Whether through prayer or practical action, it's about breaking down the barriers that we create, to reach out and build right relationships.

The message of solidarity and justice is strong throughout church teaching, from the emphasis on solidarity and justice in the workplace of *Rerum Novarum* (1891) through to the call to love our neighbour in *Deus Caritas Est* by Pope Benedict in 2005. We can also turn to scripture: in the Old Testament, and the prophets especially, we hear how much God detests injustice and the inequality of those that accumulate and do nothing whilst others

have nothing. The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25 reminds us that the final judgement will not be concerned with the things that usually enter our heads when we think of our religion – for example, how many times we attended Mass – but rather with how we behaved to Jesus when we encountered him in our brothers and sisters in need. Our prayer life and religious devotions are things that have to help and sustain us in our desire for the common good.

livesimply - A message for rich and poor?

CAFOD, Progressio and Roehampton University recently organised a joint conference to look at the theological underpinnings of *livesimply* and to reflect more fully on the three concepts.

At the conference, Maria Clara Bingemer, a theologian from Brazil, reflected on the project from the perspective of the poor. Her message was that, without wanting to romanticise the poor, we have a lot to learn from their experience and the way in which base Christian communities in slums and shanty towns interpret the hope inherent in our faith.

Those living in poverty recognise their interdependence upon one another. This is largely because their security comes not from having things, but from their relationships with one another. For them cooperation will yield better results than competition. For them, the Gospel really is full of good news and hope – they read a story of liberation from the poverty, slavery and injustice that are often the reality of their daily lives.

For Maria Clara, the message of *livesimply* is a challenge to the rich. It is our lifestyles, attitudes, structures and models of “progress” that need to be challenged. Poverty isn't an accident, it isn't a neutral thing; poverty is a by-product of systems and of the failings of politics and to a large extent human desire. All of us need to change our lives and lifestyles if we seek to have an authentic change. We need to find appropriate ways to live out the “preferential option for the poor” in our own contexts.

It was hearing the experiences of Archbishop Kaigama from Jos in Nigeria, that made me reflect on living simply in a very different light. At first, I was conf-

used when I heard that CAFOD had taken *livesimply* to Nigeria. But the Archbishop spoke about the danger of people being focused on material things being very relevant in Nigeria. Even there, with poverty all around and always nearby, people, even those in the church, were tempted to focus just on themselves and lose sense of their community, and the needs of that community and beyond. We need to learn from people who have less, he says, that although wealth might well be a way out poverty in the short-term, it isn't how a person finds their full humanity.

livesimply – the next phase

To some extent, *livesimply* might offer the possibility of creating basic Christian communities. Reflecting on the teaching and the Gospel in the light of social problems offers a hope by which the preferential option for the poor can become real.

At the beginning of Advent this year, the *livesimply* message moves into a new phase when we will be asked, collectively, to respond to 'Community Challenges'. Any parish, organisation, or group in the Church can decide on something that will help us all live more simply, more respectfully of the gift of creation and more in touch with the poorest people in our world. These 'Challenges' can be rooted in: learning; lobbying; lifestyle change; liturgy and social Action. The quickest way to find out what is going on is to visit the *livesimply* website at www.livesimply.org.uk.

The *livesimply* project has given Progressio an opportunity to engage the Catholic community. Our campaign on terminator technology was one of the action opportunities in the first phase of the project, in which people were asked to sign up online and promise to support a particular challenge. Now our East Timor campaign and other work will offer opportunities for people to respond to the Community Challenges and act in solidarity in a

variety of ways. In August 2009 we will see the tenth anniversary of the Timorese people's vote for independence and commemorate the massacre and violence that ensued. Ten years on the people in one of the poorest nations in the world still yearn for justice. You can join by supporting Progressio's campaign.

Final words

The recent economic downturn offers something of an opportunity for us to reflect more fully on the challenges of our faith. Whilst this is not to disregard the serious implications of job losses and economic insecurity on peoples' lives, it offers a new way to think more simply, about what is really important, and potentially to offer new models of development, that are based on full human values – on wellbeing, on happiness – not just on material acquisition. It also offers an opportunity to lobby to find ways by which we meet basic human needs without sacrificing the capital of the earth.

livesimply isn't about being called to be miserable, nor to be "happy" in some superficial way. It is about being more sensitive to what is important and about being aware of the struggles that we face in our lives. It is also about recognising where we are, our constraints and opportunities, and finding the grace that enables one to live in a creative way. In the context of the struggle and complexity that we have to face, it helps us to think and live differently.

Christine Allen is Executive Director of Progressio and member of the livesimply Executive Committee.

¹http://www.progressio.org.uk/progressio/internal/97026/the_option_for_the_poor/