

TITLE: Suffering and the Church: how long will we live as if we do not know?

By Lydia Monds

'People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money....always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.' 2 Timothy 3:2a and 7.

Recently, I gave a talk at a conference for faith-based NGOs from around the EU. I gave a rant. After working in the development sector for nearly seven years, mainly within the Church, I have reached a point where I am unable to talk without ranting.

I think this is an inevitable result of being exposed to chronic, catastrophic human suffering on a daily basis.

My frustration does not stem solely from the injustices endured by the majority of the world. Anger has crept in as time and time and time again the reality of our compliance in other's suffering is not given the urgency and attention it deserves. It is hidden in plain sight or even more unnerving, seen but collectively ignored, even though the relentless consumerism of the minority is the primary reason for pandemic suffering.

Today, we have more access than ever to news of what is happening in other parts of the world. We are confronted with inequality and injustice that are the life-experience of the vast majority of the world. And we cannot pretend that we do not know.

Yet we demand more choices in our supermarkets, good quality products at reduced prices, taller, fancier coffees with the best roasted beans, faster, more intelligent technologies and we do so on the backs of slaves. And we cannot pretend that we do not know.

Currently our knowing creates a response to give a little more, buy a little more fairtrade, and when the guilt is appeased, slip back into regular habits that don't tug on purse strings or conscience. But what if our knowing became an all-pervading truth to us? What if we allowed the Truth, who is Christ, to permeate our thoughts, our hearts, our decision-making, our lifestyles, our knowing about the others on whose backs our lifestyles are built?

The Church is a generous donor. We are moved by the plight of others. The above observations should not negate the pockets of hope seen in individuals and parishes all around the country. But it should challenge us to push for our response to go deeper, to ask *why* such suffering prevails and to be willing to make changes within ourselves that go beyond compassionate giving to changed lifestyles and to prophetic outrage, speaking out against those systems and structures that benefit the few and that keep the many poor.

We pray for and give to the 60 million people who are either internally displaced or who have fled their countries because of conflict, persecution or natural disasters. We are aghast at those living in temporary settlements for years on end, in a state of limbo, their lives on hold, hopelessness chipping away at their resolve. And yet the Magdalene Laundries of our time, the Direct Provision Centres in our own country remain unchallenged by the collective Church, left to the few parishes who share community with the people 'living' in these centres.

We pray for and give to people in Bangladesh who have had to flee their homes because of rising seas, land erosion and floods. Yet, we fail to connect the dots that their fleeing is partly and directly caused by *our* over-consumption and our excessive relentless emissions. Many of them flee to the cities where they live in squalor and are exploited, often to the point of slavery, by the garment industries, the same ones that provide *our* clothes.

We pray for and send money to people in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Ethiopia, who are becoming displaced from their land as thousands of hectares are deforested by multi-nationals to grow cash crops that will be exported for *our* food - food that we then waste at such a rate that it is estimated Western countries throw away the equivalent of what the entire continent of Africa produces in a year.

We pray for and send money to people who are displaced in the Democratic Republic of Congo due to lack of Governance and ongoing civil war. Five million people have died since the late 1990s and millions more have been displaced and live in destitution and in fear of militia. Due to a total breakdown in governance, up to 80% of women have been victims of sexual violence. These wars are exacerbated by the mass mining of DRCs natural resources to provide the minerals (cobalt, gold, tin) needed for *our* phones, *our* electronics and *our* jewellery.

We pray for and send money to impoverished communities in South Africa who did not flee when international mining companies set up shop on their doorsteps and are now living in areas ten times more toxic and radioactive than Chernobyl because of uranium dumping. This is for the armament industry, a trillion dollar industry that keeps Western economies wealthy, whilst devastating communities and entire countries. And then we falter in our response to the resulting refugees.

As we pray for and give to needs worldwide, we need to recognise our own interconnectedness, our own compliance through relentless consumerism that perpetuates the suffering and displacement of millions around the world. We are amputating limbs and then, in our compassion, sending the equivalent of sticking plasters.

All of us are on a journey. None of us have arrived.

The Church's response cannot be a token gesture. And it certainly cannot remain fragmented. Imagine if every single church denomination in Ireland decided that at every level - individual, parish, diocesan and centrally - the main issue it would preach, address, live, was for the rights of the dispossessed. Imagine if everyone who makes up the Church all lay down their own needs and interests and collaborated to see Kingdom values established in our local housing policies and global refugee responses.

[What if our priority was to see people's dignity valued over and above the economy - an economy that is so precarious, it *wants* a property bubble to sustain it and is willing to allow thousands of people to go homeless rather than reign in banks and landlords and protect the most vulnerable.] What a prophetic and Christian act if we could speak with a united voice into that crisis! Spending ourselves on behalf of others.

The Church must model what it believes. And as we stop pretending that we do not know, our cry for change must challenge us and move us to respond in a way that we become the answer to our

own prayers. We must be willing to curb our lifestyles and to demand that production and supply of goods promote peace, through food security, land rights and fairly-obtained, fairly-traded products.

May God bring us Peace. But may He also keep us restless and hungry for the peace of all people. May we go deeper in our compassion to a place of solidarity, where our collective ranting is a voice for all who are disconnected, either by chronic poverty or by chronic greed. The time has come for the Church to reclaim the cry '*Disturb us O Lord.*'

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