

DRUG STREET CULTURE

Tony O’Riordan

MANY YOUNG PEOPLE IN WESTERN SOCIETIES TODAY flirt with the use of illegal drugs.¹ According to the British Crime Survey 2000,² around a third of all adults aged 16-59 had tried illicit drugs at some stage, and half of those aged 16-29. But for most people such use is a short-lived experiment, or else something they just do occasionally. Drug use does not become a problem in their lives; they continue in education, or contributing to society through employment. Generally, the habit tails off as they mature and their lifestyles change.

For a significant minority, however—one that is estimated in the UK to be perhaps a little more than 250,000—the use of drugs becomes a source of harm, both for the users themselves and for others. Illegal use, typically of heroin and/or cocaine, but often of other drugs, escalates into problematic misuse. And obviously this phenomenon, which is a feature of most large cities in developed countries, is enmeshed within systems of social and economic deprivation, of violence and of crime.

Currently there is an opiate subculture in almost all of the more deprived districts of Dublin. Research has indicated that children in these areas may start on intravenous heroin use when they are as young as twelve.³ In Dublin, one person in every hundred is addicted to heroin (an estimated 15,000 heroin users). In 2004, there was a 300% increase in the use of cocaine in the Dublin area. Perhaps even more worryingly, there was a 400% increase between 1998 and 2002 in the use of heroin outside the Dublin area. Drug dealing has created, and

¹ The focus in the essay is the Republic of Ireland though at times reference is made to the situation in Britain.

² *British Crime Survey 2000* (London: Home Office Publications, 2001).

³ Paul O’Mahony, *Mountjoy Prisoners: A Sociological Profile* (Dublin: Department of Justice Publications, 1997).



continues to fund, fifteen to twenty serious organized-crime gangs, mostly in deprived urban areas, who have armed themselves with a lethal array of weapons and are responsible for multiple murders, turf wars and other violence.⁴

Young people who are using hard drugs are inevitably drawn in large numbers into crime, especially mugging, shoplifting, robbery and burglary. This is how they raise funds for the purchase of drugs. A recent study estimated that 91% of drug users in Dublin obtained money from crime and that the typical age of first contact with the

police was fifteen.⁵ This study also estimated that drug users were responsible for 66% of all detected indictable crime in Dublin and over 80% of all burglaries, robberies, and thefts from cars. On average, drug users committed three times as much crime as criminals who did not use drugs. Of the group studied, only 3% of the users were employed, but they spent an average of £96 per day on drugs—an indication of their dependence on criminal activity to fund their addiction.

Drug street culture is a shorthand term for the environment in which many of these young people live out their lives. Such an environment is characterized by poverty, unemployment, delinquency, addiction, crime and violence. The harms associated with drug street culture are many. It wrecks the lives of drug misusers and their

⁴ The above figures are drawn from the *Irish Times* (6 January 2005).

⁵ Eugene Keogh, *Illicit Drug Use and Related Criminal Activity in the Dublin Metropolitan Area* (Templemore: Garda Research Unit, 1997).

families. Drug misuse results in around 1,350 premature deaths each year in England and around 400 in Ireland.⁶ Drug misuse by injection is a major cause of HIV and hepatitis infection.

Types of Church Response

How do Churches ministering in communities affected by drug street culture understand their mission? Birmingham-based minister and theologian Robert Beckford describes three broad types of response.⁷

First there is the 'withdrawal' response, which side-steps the issues associated with drug street culture and focuses instead on the world to come, 'preparing for life with Jesus in heaven through devotion to the spiritual life. To this end believers are encouraged to be hard-working, morally upright and socially passive.'⁸ This response does not completely ignore the problem, but its emphasis is on prayer, on inviting 'divine presence and power into the situation'. It is dominated by the attitude that the poor will always be with us. It takes the view that the Church cannot solve every social problem, and that its primary responsibility is to meet other needs.

Beckford labels a second main response the 'project-work' response.⁹ The focus here is on doing good works in order to help those who are caught up in the terrible consequences of drug street culture. Here the Church takes on the role of a welfare agency, and binds up the wounds of the injured. Often guided by prayer, the Church runs drop-in centres or outreach initiatives, with or without the display of outward ecclesiastical symbols. It seeks to provide opportunities for individual transformation through educational and rehabilitative programmes. The tendency in this approach is to confine the scope of the mission to individuals in the locality, and not to address the implications for wider society.

Finally, Beckford outlines a third response, which likewise affirms the importance of good works, but also struggles to challenge the social injustices that give rise to the problem. He labels this the 'prophetic' response, and in this he grounds his own approach to the issue of drug

⁶ British Crime Survey 2000; *Irish Times* (12 September 2004).

⁷ Robert Beckford, *God and the Gangs* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004).

⁸ Beckford, *God and the Gangs*, 6.

⁹ Beckford, *God and the Gangs*, 7.

street culture.¹⁰ Dublin-based priest Peter McVerry expresses the distinction between this approach and the previous one by using the arresting image of bodies floating down a river.¹¹ One instinctive reaction is to jump in and save people, to give them the kiss of life; another is to go upstream and see what is causing the casualties. He suggests that many young people are lost in Irish society, like bodies floating in a river of disaffection and disadvantage. While somebody on the bank needs to pull the bodies out and save them, it is also necessary to go upstream and find the cause. He argues that this involves seeing mission in terms of the need for radical reform of wider social attitudes and structures beyond the Church.

Beckford and McVerry agree that the ‘prophetic’ approach is the only appropriate one. At the same time, they observe that the urban Church is frustrated in its attempts to approach the problem in this way by the attitude of many, including Christians, towards people who live in deprived communities. For Beckford, the Church has largely either sold out to the capitalist values prevailing in society, or else has been bought out, as it were, through the alliances which the socially powerful have made with it. Individual Christians may have been ‘scared out’. The upshot is that members of the Church have simply given up on dealing with the most difficult and deprived individuals in society. In McVerry’s assessment, one of the main obstacles to building a more just society is the religious world-view and assumptions of the middle class.¹²

A mission in drug street culture is a mission to society as a whole. It seeks the conversion of society as a whole by showing how powerful elements within it help to create and perpetuate the conditions giving rise to drug street culture. A ministry of justice is a more than a ministry of consolation and comfort to those who suffer at the margins of society. It also challenges the perceptions of the powerful.

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¹⁰ Beckford, *God and the Gangs*, 8.

¹¹ Peter McVerry, *The Meaning Is in the Shadows* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003), 170.

¹² McVerry, *The Meaning Is in the Shadows*, 13.

Renewing Christian Mission—a Girardian Approach

In this context, a helpful resource can be found in the work of the French literary critic and anthropologist René Girard.¹³ Two of his ideas are particularly relevant.

Firstly, Girard claims to find a dynamic of rivalry and violence covertly operating in the maintenance of human social order. This violence is projected on to scapegoat figures, who thus become the focus both of collective guilt and of sacrificial expiation. These are normally weaker members of the society; the accusations made against them are generally false, and indeed often unconscious and unreflective.

Secondly, Christianity appears, when viewed in relation to this theory, as a liberating exception. The resurrection of Jesus, himself innocently scapegoated, is a sign that the true God is not controlled by the social mechanisms of violence. In Christ, God inaugurates a fundamentally different kind of human society.

The Christ of the Gospels dies against sacrifice, and through his death he reveals sacrifice's nature and origin by making it unworkable, at least in the long run, and bringing sacrificial culture to an end.¹⁴

By identifying the roles of rivalry and of scapegoating violence, and in so doing naming the predicament from which God rescues us, René Girard offers an exciting way of understanding Christian mission in the contemporary world. Christian mission involves revealing the hidden dynamics of a competitive society in which rivalry is contagious, and which tends to find unity in hostility towards its weaker members. The real task of working out our salvation, the real task of mission, is to escape this destructive, covertly violent religion and the rituals and structures based on it.

¹³ For what follows, see René Girard's own books, *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory (London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977 [1972]), and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (London: Athlone, 1987 [1978]). My interpretation owes much to Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), and to Gil Baillie, 'René Girard's Contribution to the Church in the 21st Century', *Communio*, 26 (1999), 134-153.

¹⁴ Girard, 'Mimesis and Violence: Perspectives in Cultural Criticism', in *The Girard Reader*, edited by James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

A mission in drug street culture can be greatly helped by a Girardian analysis of the criminal justice system. The social response to drug street culture has increasingly been to criminalise it. In an era when corporal punishment is regarded as uncivilised, and open violence unconscionable, the prison supplies a more subtle scapegoat mechanism. This mechanism is sufficiently discreet for people to be able to deny or hide from themselves its scapegoating character, and thus it remains culturally acceptable to most of the population. In a secularised society, the function of religious ritual in containing violence is taken on by other social systems, especially the criminal justice system. Girard speaks of the ‘enigmatic quality that pervades the judicial system when that system replaces sacrifice’. Society contains the violence that threatens it by developing systems of counter-violence hedged round with sacral legitimacy.¹⁵

Uncovering Things Hidden

If the Church’s mission in drug street culture is to address the underlying structural issues, one of its most important tasks is—in the root sense of the word—revelation. It should be trying to pull back the veil on what is happening in society, and to uncover the hidden dynamics at work. Not for nothing is one of Girard’s major works called *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. If we look at the matter in this way, we can see at least three factors obscuring the truth about the society within which the Church has its mission.

Lack of Awareness

Firstly, many people are simply unaware of the reality and extent of poverty in Ireland or in Britain today. It remains hidden. Even religiously minded people steeped in the Bible and Church traditions and doctrines are not sufficiently immersed in the reality of the poor. ‘There is no real poverty in our society’ is a view common in many church communities. The first step in a mission of justice, in a truly prophetic mission, is not a renewal of theology, but rather the establishment of contact with the reality of life on society’s margins. In this respect all the Christian Churches in Ireland and Britain today are found wanting. As Beckford points out with regard to Britain, ‘there

¹⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 23.

has been a long tradition ... of the Church escaping the troubles of the urban context and finding solace in the suburbs'.¹⁶ This is not to belittle the work of those church representatives who are working among the poor, but it is to draw attention to the shallowness of the Church's consciousness of poverty. Although Churches produce many pamphlets and books on the subject, poverty, or at least the poverty to be found in developed countries, does not appear to be a serious preoccupation among church members or leaders at a national level.

Misinterpretations and Irresponsibility

Secondly, people are often blind to the structural factors conditioning this poverty. In general, poverty is not the fault of the poor themselves. Many people regard the cause of poverty as some defect in poor people, either a moral defect—'they drink too much', 'they are too lazy to work'—or else a defect in character or education—'they don't know how to manage their money', 'they lack initiative'. But poverty has its deepest roots in the way in which we have organized the relationships between people, and particularly between groups of people, in our society, and in the structures and institutions that we have constructed from those relationships and which maintain them.

In a similar way, drug misuse and its associated criminal activity can be misunderstood as the result of a moral defect in those addicted to drugs. It sounds all too plausible to claim that people become involved in drugs for personal reasons of material gain, self-esteem, prestige or pure excitement. However, the genuine half-truth here obscures the more important point that all of these motives have an important social dimension and are strongly influenced by social contingencies. While it is theoretically possible for parents who live in deprived areas to insulate their children entirely from the surrounding culture, this is very difficult. Most children growing up in a deprived city area will be exposed to a strong and vibrant local youth culture, and will be powerfully influenced by it. And in some areas of Dublin, for example, that youth culture perceives drug use as exciting and attractive, offering not only pleasure and subjective escape from a

¹⁶ Beckford, *God and the Gangs*, 10. Here Beckford makes reference to the study by Kenneth Leech, *Struggle in Babylon: Racism in the Cities and Churches of Britain* (London: Sheldon, 1988).



bleak environment but also an accessible role model for material success and membership in a self-affirming 'anti-community'.

Even children who have been well socialised in a conventional way within the family will still experience powerful influences from their peer-groups and from the powerful subcultures surrounding them. This is especially true if the subculture involves taking hard drugs. Poverty and deprivation place families under significant stress, and can undermine the ability of parents to provide an environment for their children which fosters good social behaviour and sound moral development. The use of opiates has proved to be very seductive to young people from deprived backgrounds, whatever their family environment. The undeserved experience of harsh conditions and of being stigmatized in an inferior social role leads to disaffection, anger, boredom and lack of self-esteem. It prepares the ground psychologically both for crime and for drug addiction. Drug use, once established, imposes its own exacting and often criminal imperatives on the addicted.

Obviously the risk of serious, persistent delinquent behaviour and drug use is greatly increased by such personal factors as an impulsive temperament, low intelligence, poor parental discipline, or criminal behaviour among other family members. Nevertheless, these things are not necessary preconditions for delinquency in areas where delinquent

and drug-abusing gangs abound. Opiate addiction clearly entails a high risk of serious criminal involvement, quite independently of other risk factors for delinquency. Furthermore, in marginalised communities where people feel unfairly excluded, the normative moral values of mainstream society may be rejected, and replaced with a code that tolerates or encourages certain types of criminal activity. Juvenile delinquency and crime may result as much from this environment as from the failure of individual socialisation or from a 'criminal personality'.

The problems are particularly acute in Ireland because of Ireland's marked, persistent and particularly severe disparity between poorer and wealthier sections of society. Ireland has high levels of child poverty, and children there, according to the National Anti-Poverty Strategy formulated in 1996, have a 28% risk of belonging to a household with less than half of the average income. Ireland is also one of the most financially polarised Western societies; a recent UN study of developed nations found that only the US has a greater gulf between rich and poor.¹⁷ The recent upturn in Ireland's so-called 'Celtic Tiger' economy has done little to alleviate social inequality; on the contrary, it has benefited the better off. Social mobility, especially through the education system, is very limited for the most disadvantaged sectors of society: it is estimated that fewer than 1% of university students are the children of unskilled manual workers, despite the fact that this group forms about 15% of the population.¹⁸

Rationalisation

The third smokescreen obscuring the truth about modern societies such as Ireland is a rationalising belief that the social structures causing poverty are inescapable, and that we do not have the resources or the ability to tackle the poverty, injustice and inequality in our midst. Economic reality and the complexity of the present social system allegedly make these problems regrettable but inevitable. There is little we can do about them.

However poverty and inequality are not like a spell of cold weather: an unfortunate event that just happens for reasons outside

¹⁷ United Nations Human Development Report 2004, available at <http://hdr.undp.org/>.

¹⁸ Economic and Social Research Institute, *Report 27* (Dublin: ESRI Publications, 2004).

our control. A key element in a ministry of justice is the conviction that the poverty and inequality in our society are contrary to the will of God, and can be changed. The poverty of the inner city is not just a social problem whose solution must wait in perpetuity for money to become available. The situation can be changed, and what prevents it being changed is not the state of public finances, nor the global economic situation, nor any other circumstance, but our own unwillingness to change it. And we are unwilling because we are afraid of the adverse effect on our own lifestyles and opportunities of the changes that are required to eliminate poverty from our society. Poverty and deprivation continue because we are unwilling to pay the price of disengaging from competition and consumerism.

Poverty is not an unfortunate blot on an otherwise beautiful landscape, but a denial of the will of God for our society and the denial of the Kingdom of God in our midst. The continued toleration of poverty is, in the words of Latin American theologian Jon Sobrino, ‘a mega-blasphemy’.

Revealing the Scapegoat Mechanism

If we are to see through the smokescreens, and ourselves begin to struggle for change, we will need to recognise our own complicity in the scapegoat mechanisms. One of these is the criminal justice system as it responds to drug street culture, notably by a rapid and irrational rise in the use of imprisonment. Preying on the fears of their middle-class constituents, politicians have declared ‘war on drugs’ and ‘war on crime’ rather than ‘war on poverty’. The titles of books by leading criminologists illustrate the point; Jock Young uses the title *The Exclusive Society*,¹⁹ and the influential work of David Garland is entitled *The Culture of Control*.²⁰ The latter has eloquently outlined a new crime-control dispensation in contemporary western society. The idea that punishment should rehabilitate has gone out of fashion. Instead punitive sanctions are in vogue, as an expression of society’s outrage. There has been a change in the emotional tone of crime policy, degenerating into a new populism and into the so-called

¹⁹ Jock Young, *The Exclusive Society* (London: Sage Publications, 1999).

²⁰ David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Western Society*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

‘reinvention of the prison’: a return to the use of imprisonment as the dominant response to crime.

In common with many other Western countries, Ireland bears out Garland’s analysis. It shows signs of an increasing harshness in its response to those whose lives are influenced by drug street culture. Since the mid-1990s the prison system has been greatly expanded. In 2004 there were 45% more prisoners and 43% more prison officers than there had been in 1994.²¹ Significantly, this expansion took place at time when recorded crime was falling, and in the face of evidence that prison is not effective in combating crime. Commenting on a number of measures that respond to the crime emanating from drug street culture, one commentator writes:

These developments have been expensive, sometimes manifestly unnecessary, and occasionally retrograde. They were never informed by research findings and seldom tempered by rational debate.²²



²¹ Ian O'Donnell, 'Crime and Justice in the Republic of Ireland', *European Journal of Criminology*, 2 (2005), 99-131, here 107.

²² O'Donnell, 'Crime and Justice in the Republic of Ireland', 112.

Such expansions have originated as a reaction to a perceived crisis. In June 1980, 7% of respondents to a survey in the *Irish Times* thought that crime was the most important problem facing the country. In July 1996 the figure in a similar poll was 50%; and 88% thought the government was losing the fight against crime. Concern about crime had become a national priority. A significant incident was the murder in 1996 of an investigative journalist, Veronica Guerin, who wrote regularly about Dublin's underworld. Many saw this calculated killing as a sign that crime gangs felt they could operate with impunity, and it has been identified as a catalyst in the hardening of public and political attitudes. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin told mourners at Guerin's funeral that it was 'time to reflect on the drift in the direction of our society and to ask how it may be halted'.²³ Public anger and anxiety were inflamed in a moral panic, generating the conditions in which a harsh response to perceived lawlessness and violence became acceptable.

Further evidence that the criminal justice system is operating as a scapegoat mechanism is provided by considering whom the system targets. Amid growing concern about crime and the rush to punish through imprisonment, there has been relatively little action against the crimes associated with the competitive rivalries of the middle classes, such as white-collar crime, political corruption, fraud and pollution.

It is not insignificant that Ireland has simultaneously been experiencing unprecedented economic growth. Surveys reveal that the national preoccupations revolve around quality-of-life issues such as hospital waiting lists, the lack of affordable housing, increased traffic jams, and the cost of living. These preoccupations are suggestive of an increasing war of each against all, of a destructive competitiveness, or of the kind of 'mimetic rivalry' that, for Girard, becomes projected on to a scapegoat. From a Girardian perspective, it is hardly surprising that the competitive strains in this new economic growth lead people to identify crime, and in particular crime committed by a weaker element of society, as a significant problem. What are in themselves legitimate concerns about organized crime degenerate into a contagion of intolerance directed indiscriminately at poorer groups.

²³ *Sunday Times* (30 June 1996).

Overcoming the Scapegoat Mechanism

A central task in the Church's mission is to disrupt this scapegoat mechanism. Specifically, this means examining critically the role that the criminal law plays in responses to drug street culture. There are some clearly articulated church voices promoting ways of diverting young people away from crime, ways that are more just and effective than imprisonment.²⁴ There are many reasons to question the role of the criminal law as a response, whether to drug-related crime or to drug abuse itself. In Ireland, as in most European countries, the current policies in relation to drugs are based on prohibition: street drugs are illegal and their possession or supply is a criminal offence.

There is some evidence that prohibition works in situations when the demand for prohibited substances is low. Once the demand is high, however, prohibition encourages a lucrative criminal market. The 'drug problem' then becomes more than a drug problem; it creates a vast criminal economy. Ironically, once demand is high, the more efficient and successful the mechanisms of prohibition become, with the result that prices—and hence crime—increase. Prohibition thus exacerbates problems that were previously minimal or non-existent. It fails to regulate or contain the use of drugs; it simply hands over control of drugs to gangsters. In our efforts to restrain drug misuse, we merely increase the number outcasts and deviants.

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market***

Over the last twenty years, we have spent vast sums of money in trying to eradicate drug abuse. We have enacted tougher and tougher legislation; we have imprisoned tens of thousands of drug users. What is the result? We have an increasing supply of drugs to an increasing number of drug users in more and more cities and towns. Although the rhetoric of 'war on drugs' continues, the evidence suggests that the war has been over for twenty years, and that we lost. But we continue to fight, in the belief that the war is still going on and can be won.

There is a strong presumption that the only way to deal with drugs is to wage war through prohibition. I am suggesting that this presumption is operating within a scapegoat mechanism of the kind highlighted by Girard, and that consequently it prevents any rational

²⁴ *The Future of Criminal Justice*, edited by Christopher Jones and Peter Sedgwick (London: SPCK, 2002).

reappraisal of our approach to the harm caused by drug misuse. Can we find an alternative approach that is likely to be more effective in reducing the harm caused by drug misuse, and to reduce the number of those we class as criminal in our society?

An Alternative Strategy

An alternative to the prohibition of drugs is regulation. Regulation is not the same as legalisation. Legalisation suggests allowing a free market in the sale and supply of drugs. Regulation decriminalises the production, supply and use of drugs, but imposes legal controls over them. Regulation would impose restrictions on who could produce drugs, on who could sell drugs, on who would have access to drugs, and on where and when drugs could be consumed. Outside these restrictions, criminal sanctions would still be incurred, in the same way as they are with tobacco and alcohol, for example, when they are sold to minors. A debate would have to take place as to the precise nature of the regulations which would be appropriate. For example, public consumption of drugs might remain illegal; they might require a prescription; they might be only available from licensed pharmacies; they might have to be consumed on the premises, and so on.

Were drugs to be regulated in the way I am suggesting, then adults who wish to consume drugs would be free to make that choice, just as they are now free to choose to consume alcohol or tobacco. But where and how they purchased the drug, how much or how little (if anything) they paid, where and how they consumed it, would all be regulated by law. The regulation of drugs would remove the criminality associated with consuming drugs, wipe out the criminal gangs who are funded by illegal drug sales, abolish the need to fund a drug habit through crime, and reduce the risks involved in drug use by ensuring the purity of the products consumed.

Our current reliance on criminal justice to reduce both the supply of illegal drugs and the demand for illegal drugs has failed. It needs to be replaced by policies aimed at minimising the harm that drug misuse causes to individuals and to society. This entails taking the responsibility for drug enforcement away from the police, the courts, and the prisons, and transferring it to the Department of Health. It means medicalising drugs rather than criminalising their users. It means focusing policy, not on the elimination of drugs (which remains

a desirable objective), but on harm reduction (which is realistic and attainable). It involves seeing drug consumption as a public health problem, not a criminal one; it treats addiction as an illness requiring support and treatment, rather than as a moral failure requiring punishment. Regulation sees drug misusers as vulnerable people in need of help, not criminal outcasts. It uses resources to provide them with health professionals and counsellors, not lawyers.

Regulating drug use would not make it safe. Drug use is never safe, but regulation can reduce some of the risks associated with it. For example, it could virtually eliminate the possibility of contracting HIV or hepatitis through shared needles. That a practice is unsafe is not generally seen as sufficient grounds for making it illegal. Many other activities in our society are unsafe yet remain legal. Smoking, jet-skiing and motorcycle racing are dangerous, but if people wish to put themselves at risk we do not stop them. We may control their activity in order to reduce the dangers, but we do not criminalise it.

Regulating drug use will not solve the 'drug problem'. Some will always be harmed by their drug use, and some will die. But it may reduce the number of people to whom this happens. Regulating drug use does not solve its underlying causes: poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunity, or abuse. But it can prevent the further social marginalisation of drug users, and the increased aggravation that this occasions.

Needless to say there are many in society who would oppose regulation, and there may be good reasons to do so. However, objections have little validity if they are not based on evidence, and if the support for prohibition arises from an emotive reaction tied to the vested interests of the powerful in society. Such support will be inextricable from the dynamics of a scapegoat mechanism. The Church has a mission to expose the operation of the scapegoat mechanism, and it is also called to create a space where this issue can be calmly and rationally debated on its merits.

Challenging Demons

Christians have, for over 2000 years, used a variety of metaphors to describe the predicament of humanity, but more importantly to articulate the belief that God has saved us from this plight. Such language has informed an imagination that translates it into action,

into a social response to the complex problems of living in the world in the concrete circumstances of history. Embracing the conviction that in Christ God has saved us, Christians speak of people as released, transformed or reconciled, and seek to structure society in conformity with this deeply held conviction. However, there is always the danger that a Christian understanding can become skewed and conformed to the standards of the prevailing culture. If this happens, the social structures to which Christians contribute and which they support will be inadequate to the Gospel’s demands. Part of the mission of the Church is to find new ways of speaking and acting that make present, through hope and reality, a taste of the salvation brought about for us by Christ.

In Acts 16:20-21 two early Christians are accused by citizens of Philippi of ‘disturbing our city ... and ... advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe’. The events that give rise to this allegation tell a story of liberation through the power of Christ. Paul had freed a slave girl from possession by a demon—a demon who enabled her to tell fortunes and predict the future so that she ‘brought her owners a great deal of money’. What led to the disturbance was not that the poor girl had been freed from her affliction, but rather that the economic interests of her masters were adversely affected. The slave masters seized Paul and his companion Silas, and ‘dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities’. The mob joined in the attack and Paul and Silas were stripped and beaten and thrown into prison. Later that night the power of God intervened to vindicate their actions, and their gaoler was converted.

In Dublin, as in many cities in the developed West, there are thousands of young men and women possessed by the demon of drug addiction, which causes enormous harm to themselves and to those around them. There are also thousands who are enslaved by the economic and social system dominant in the West; this system brings suffering and hopelessness to those who live within drug street culture. But the system brings its owners a great deal of money. The mission of the Church in this situation is the same as it always has been. It is the mission of Paul to cast out the demons that threaten our destruction and keep us enslaved.

No doubt a Church that challenges these demons is likely to face strong opposition from those who benefit from the *status quo*. The mission to side with the victims calls forth the demons of mimetic



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Homeless man on the streets of Dublin

rivalry. There is something disturbing about the message of Jesus, particularly for those of us who are winners in the present social system. Our discipleship may provoke resistance, even violence. But we are called to identify with the Victim, and to remember the prayer of Jesus in his moment of victimisation: 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). Only the embrace of all humanity by a loving God moving towards us can reveal to us our violent ways, particularly towards the weak and oppressed. And only that embrace can free us from their pervasive grasp.

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