

As social mobility has ground to a halt in Britain, thresholds of deprivation have become easier to fall within, and harder to leave. What can Catholic traditions of social justice bring to a community in the north-east facing the worst crisis in living standards for 40 years? / By MADOC CAIRNS

The door that never closes

FOOD, TRAVEL, education, leisure, heating – the basic elements of what make a life a life – are what we call “necessities”. What’s necessary isn’t always possible. It depends on money, time, energy: resources circumscribed by circumstance, limited by opportunity, stopped by disability, illness, chance. Without them, doors close. Everything becomes an option – to heat your house, to eat well, or at all, to keep your pet or car or home – because so much is out of reach.

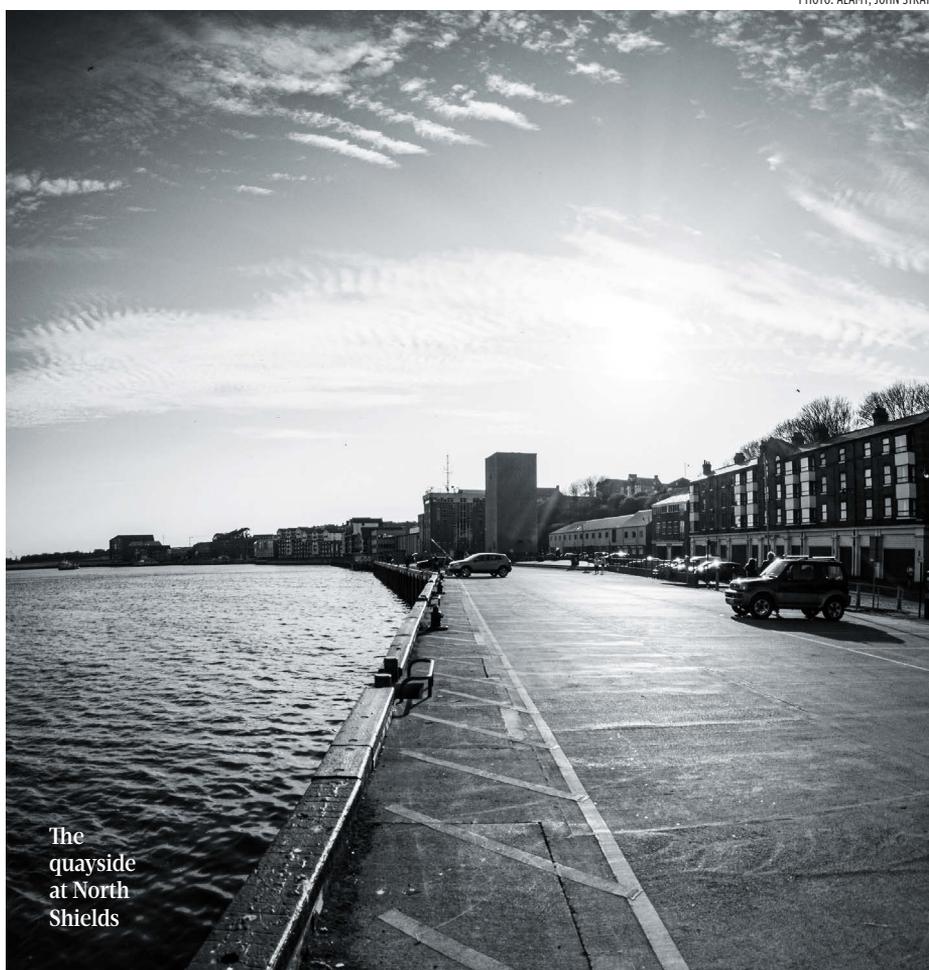
However you measure it, the cause is bitterly simple: money, or the lack of it. But the effects are complex. You can’t assume what people’s needs are, I’m told, talking to volunteers and activists: you don’t know what choices they need to make. And as important as they can be, it’s often not material things that really matter, that really hurt. The loss can be intangible, invisible: dignity, self-respect, self-confidence, hope. The flesh is cut: the spirit bleeds.

When the Passionist priest Austin Smith first moved to inner-city Liverpool, he remembered sitting in a council waiting room with a single mother. They were both financially poor, Smith wrote later; they were both in the office to apply for council housing.

Speaking to the woman, he realised something he’d missed in two decades of religious life: that poverty inhered not in condition but in control. Smith, bound to poverty by vocation and vow, knew that he could get up, walk out, leave the room, and that the woman waiting with him would always, everywhere, have to stay. Poverty is a closing door.

TRAVELLING AROUND the north-east of England – one of the poorest parts of Britain, if statistics are to be believed, – as the worst crisis in living standards for 40 years broke, I felt sharply and clearly that poverty is a process as well as a state; a set of choices that narrow and narrow till nothing of life is left. Past the din of the headlines and the rising prices and the bills piling up, if you listened, carefully, you could hear doors shut across the country.

Catholicism has a history in North Shields, Chris Hughes says, but not the one you’d think. Hughes is the parish priest of St Cuthbert’s, built in 1821: for French migrants, not Irish, and several decades earlier than you’d expect. The Irish came, of course, driven by hunger, drawn by the promise of work in the local fishing industry; although the industrial jobs went, as they did in so many parts of the country, newcomers kept coming: Catholic Poles, Syro-



The quayside at North Shields

PHOTO: ALAMY, JOHN STRAIN

Malabar Christians from India. St Cuthbert’s was rebuilt in the 1970s – it looks a little like an East German police station, Chris tells me – and it’s now a joint parish with St Joseph’s, an elegant mock-Gothic church.

Hughes has lived in the presbytery attached to St Joseph’s for seven years. Before that he was a university chaplain, a lecturer at Ushaw College, and – a long time before – a law student at Hull. He heard the call then, at the university chaplaincy, louder and louder as time went on. Eventually he stopped, and listened, and waited to catch it again, and followed where it led. He’s followed it ever since. It was hardest, he told me, just after ordination. Long years of study and discernment had culminated in months of silence: months spent, lonely, waiting for a vocation, a *vocare*, a call, in a less rarified sense. It’s not uncommon, he tells me: bishops like to make their yearly appointments all at once. At the diocesan level, it’s common sense. At the level of the individual, it can be torturous. It was

for Chris: it was, he says, looking back, a period of grace, confirmation in a calling. God held the door open.

Now in his thirty-fourth year of priesthood, he’s balancing the habitual problems of Catholic priests: shrinking parishes, ageing congregations, liturgy, parish finances. Combined with family commitments, the two parishes are a lot for one person; he has the support of his parishioners; one in particular, Doreen, helps him several days a week. In his free time he listens to music, reads books – theology, politics, a lot of poetry – and he has found himself, by accident, design or providence, involved in social action across the diocese.

Staying with Chris, sharing his life, witnessing his ministry, one of his influences seemed especially present in North Shields. To my knowledge, he never set foot there. Austin Smith’s journey into a new kind of ministry began with his move to Merseyside

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in 1971. With him came a fellow Passionist priest, Nicholas Postlethwaite, and a spiritual tradition he was trying to honour and renew.

Over the next decade, Smith saw many of the social problems warping his area get worse. In 1981, riots swept through Toxteth, bringing Liverpool 8 to national attention – and Smith to a new role as someone able to articulate the deeper causes of unrest. It wasn't a question of acting for the poor, he wrote, or even acting with them, but of existing with them: sharing their sufferings and their hopes. Smith died in 2011, but much of his writing is oddly prescient. In some of it, he sounds a great deal like Pope Francis.

North Shields is a long way from Toxteth. But there were riots here, too, in the 1980s. And here, too, are communities suffering years of neglect and underinvestment; inter-generational poverty and worklessness; compound injustice. In 2015, 28 per cent of children in the Newcastle-upon-Tyne area lived in poverty; deindustrialisation left deep scars on the region, and what social programmes the last Labour government introduced were rolled back under the years of austerity. By then, politicians of all parties had recognised something awry in Britain's social fabric. Change, voters were told, was on the way.

In 2021, data from the Institute for Public Policy Research showed that the proportion

of working households in the UK classified as in-poverty was higher than it had ever been. That same year, new poverty statistics were released. The number of children in poverty in Newcastle had increased to 42 per cent; the highest rate anywhere in Britain. In places like North Shields it's more than 50 per cent, and still rising. Like so many places in the UK, low post-Covid unemployment hasn't helped when wages haven't risen for decades: 70 per cent of children in poverty grow up in working families.

THE STATISTICS illustrate a grim present. They indicate, impersonally, irreproachably, that the future will be worse. Children in poverty are a third less likely to go on to higher education; even if they do, they'll earn at least a fifth less than more privileged peers. As social mobility ground to a halt in Britain over the last three decades, thresholds of poverty and deprivation became easier to fall within, and harder than ever to leave. Power, and powerlessness, are inherited conditions. Once a door closes, it doesn't open again.

Britain's professional elites are drawn overwhelmingly from a tiny minority of privately educated individuals; one-third of MPs, two-thirds of judges, nearly half of senior journalists. People with limited knowledge of poverty, and limited interest in how it starts; still less how it could end. For their part, people in the north-east seemed uninterested in

parliamentary politics. Not hostile – it's still somewhere Labour weighs votes rather than counts them – but not invested, either. The top won't bring change, I'm told by one campaigner – unless the bottom makes it.

"I don't want charity, I want justice," Sara Bryson tells me. She means it. Growing up in the west end of Newcastle she was surrounded by deprivation. She never realised how poor her community was for years, she says, because she had nothing to judge it by. It was all she knew. And all she was likely to know, either, until she had the opportunity – unexpected, unforeseen – to go to the United States as part of a delegation of children from across the UK. It was there, halfway across the world from home, that Sara discovered her life's purpose.

And it was only in the US – living on a Native American reservation – that Sara realised she had grown up in poverty. It was pretty much the only thing the two places had in common, she says. In a place so different from everything she'd known, the similarities shocked her. Worklessness, hopelessness, low expectations, problems with alcohol and crime: five thousand miles distant, the same pain.

AIM – the American Indian Movement, a group of radical anti-colonial activists – were on the move. Human action – political action – had impoverished their people. And human action could liberate them. The cause of poverty wasn't a lack of money but a lack of power; overcoming poverty didn't ask for sympathy; it called for organisation. Not charity, Sara tells me: justice.

She didn't join AIM – "We've had enough trouble with blue-eyed devils around here," they told her, by way of apology – but she brought back the lessons they taught her to Newcastle, held on to them for the years of study and work ahead of her, years that led her to the London School of Economics. After that, she worked in policy for years: government commissions, think tanks. But the link – between study and action, charity and justice – kept slipping out of reach. Doors kept closing: a lack of political capital, of political will, of interest, money, time.

Eventually Sara followed a common trajectory – back to Newcastle, to start a family of her own – but with an uncommon motivation. She didn't return home to settle down, but to stir things up. As the first organiser of Tyne and Wear Citizens, a local branch of Citizens UK, it was in her job description.

CITIZENS UK, founded in 1996, describes itself as "a people-powered alliance of diverse local communities working together for the common good". The members of Tyne and Wear Citizens I spoke to in North Shields have a more prosaic term for it: community organising. Citizens doesn't have individual memberships: instead, existing institutions – churches, charities, unions, campaign groups – affiliate, and become "hubs". Each hub is self-directed, working out their priorities and taking action accordingly.

I sat in on one Citizens meeting: the North

Shields hub, based out of St Cuthbert's. We started with a meal; a meal that became a conversation. It was a little like any local campaign, if a little more open ended and tightly organised; every attendee asked for what they wanted to see change in the local area, but none was given more than a minute to do so. What was striking about it was the emphasis on relationships as much as outcomes. The group meeting – youngest, aged 17, to oldest, aged 84 – broke down into one-on-one conversations, each participant encouraged to learn as much as they could about the other.

Conversation builds community, as Fr Chris – who set up the group several years ago – told me afterwards. In order to take action together, you need to trust one another. In order to trust one another, you have to know one another. Informal bonds like that aren't quantifiable, don't register in the same way as money or votes or soundbites do in the public square. But they're much more important, in a way. Without them, no public square is possible.

With them, change becomes reality. Out of conversations like the ones I saw came a campaign to properly fund a local park and playground. For years, it had fallen into disuse and disrepair: the surrounding park lacked trees or caretakers; the swingset lacked a swing.

“ONE OF the most radical disadvantages suffered by the powerless,” Austin Smith wrote, “is their ultimate exclusion from the conversation which creates society. The powerless are the object of language – they are constantly talked about.” But never, he added, talked with.

Their campaign ran into unexpectedly intense resistance. The local council stonewalled their requests, eventually sending them a letter stating – on official letterhead – that the swingset lacked swings on account of local dogs, who would eat them.

“When we saw that,” one of the participants told me, “we knew what it was really about” – contempt for working-class people. The group had more meetings, started more conversations, among themselves and among the local community, about what had to change and how to change it. What they came up with still raised grins, years later. “Has Father Chris told you?”

He had, although in truth I didn't mind it being repeated. Reporting on what are euphemistically labelled “social issues” you expect all kinds. But not a parish priest dressing up as a dog. And pretending to eat a swing. Local media were duly enthused, the council appropriately humiliated. Funding was found for the park.

Trees are growing there, now; Citizens helped organise a planting. Children play on the swings. All around them, invisible but not intangible, the extraordinary, ordinary passage of a whole community goes on. Life and time passes; a little lighter, perhaps,

than it had the day previous. And the conversations continue.

Jesus, Austin Smith wrote, “described, perhaps defined, the Kingdom of God in terms of the marginalised and the powerless of this world. They were, first and foremost, part of the meal and, therefore, part of the conversation.”

Some schoolchildren, part of the Citizens group, are talking about a new injustice: bus companies charging sixth-formers full price.

It's a small thing, in the big picture: the group are painfully aware of how bad the winter is likely to get across the board. But even big pictures are made up of small things. Letters have already been written, meetings arranged.

“A conversation, which offers hope of fulfilment in action, tests the depths of our sincerity and commitment,” Smith wrote, on his experience of mediating between residents and authorities in the aftermath of the Toxteth riots. “In authentic conversation one has, at least, the starting post for true liberation.” It was the first of three aspects of Christ he felt defined his ministry; a commitment to a common life with the other, a continual openness to the world and other human beings, dialogue as a way of life, conversation as conversion.

**To act together
you need to trust
one another. To
trust one another
you have to know
one another**

You can tell it was never meant to be here. The Key project was meant to provide support to young people experiencing hardship or at risk of homelessness. Various secondary initiatives came along with that: a cafe, a library and resource centre, free advice. Not a foodbank. But that's what much of Key is now; stacks of food stretching across half the entrance hall in South Shields; rows of soup, fridges of pies and bread; a mound of nappies. In a back room, the bank's most in-demand items are kept, gleaned from donation drives and hand-me-downs: school uniforms.

People will cut a lot of things before they give up on school uniforms, I'm told: they don't want their children to be singled out from the other kids, but it strikes deeper chords, too. People want to be able to provide for their children, to give them a life like other lives. It's an invisible need, and an invisible wound when it can't be fulfilled. In the quiet backroom, you can feel that need, claustrophobic, pressing in from all around.

Back out to the foodbank, another provisional measure turned permanent under years of cuts and crises, and I'm shown how the bags are packed. This way for single people; this way for families; this way for babies, the elderly, allergenics, vegetarians. Enough for someone to live on, not so much that the bank will run out. The economics of the bottom rung. I take one last look at the stores before

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I leave, piles looming incongruous near computer banks and library shelves. It's a painting of social crisis in boxes and bags. And it will only, someone says to me that evening, get worse from here.

"I'm thinking", David says "of making myself homeless". He's speaking to the members of a local church group – in North Shields, across the river – who've known him for some time. Through their food bank – and their friendship – they've got to know David as he edged his way off the streets and into a new life: securely housed, employed, part of society's respectable mainstream. Now they listened as he discussed leaving all that behind.

Homelessness has increased, year on year, for the past five years. Since 2012, the number of homeless people has increased by 450 per cent. In December 2021, well over a quarter-of-a-million UK residents were legally homeless. Between January and March of this year, that number rose by 74,000 and is expected to rise even further. Statistics can obscure important differences – between rough sleepers and those in temporary housing, for instance, or those reliant on relatives and friends for hospitality.

But they make something important clear: housing in the UK, itself a passport to participation in all kinds of public life, is being priced out of the hands of people who need it. Talking to Tyne and Wear Citizens, talking to the KEY volunteers, it's hard to escape the sensation of swimming against the current. In a society where community becomes the preserve of those who can afford it; help accessible by those who know how and who to ask for it; human relationships, trust, confidence, support, dependent on clearing an increasing number of barriers of ability, location, age – it's easy to see what church groups can do to help. It's also easy to see what they can't help with: the point where charity stops.

WHAT HAPPENS when your school simply can't cope with ever-escalating demands and every shrinking budgets? What happens when wages buy less and everything else costs more? When you can't pay for essentials, so you go into debt; and then, too often, when you can't pay the debt back, or pay your mortgage, or make the rent. When your options narrow to zero point, where do you turn? Which door will be the last to close?

Austin Smith tells a story. Once, talking to an inmate, during his time as a prison chaplain, he was asked a question: "Have you ever needed God?" Asked to explain in his own terms the prisoner put it like this: "When you're an alcoholic, and you're homeless, and you pass out on a park bench, and you're woken up the next morning by children playing nearby. When every door is shut on you. When you have nothing and no one and nowhere you can go. You need God."

"Have I ever needed God?" Smith thought about the question for a time. "To be absolutely honest," the priest said to the prisoner "I never have."

The second Christian duty that shaped



Fr Chris Hughes at a Tyne & Wear Citizens protest

Smith's ministry, as he saw it: willingness to exist with the broken and the powerless. And to suffer with them.

There's a third Christian obligation that Smith saw play out in his work in Toxteth, alongside a commitment to common life, and a willingness to share suffering along with joy. It's the shortest of the three, but perhaps the one most in need of explanation: to purge evil. The need for purgation, mortification, is an ancient practice. Smith, formed in the monastic, pre-Vatican-II strictures of passionist asceticism, took it out of the monastery and into the inner city.

Purgation isn't purely internal, or simply spiritual, he wrote. We can't talk about overcoming evil without talking about politics and economics, poverty and injustice. We can't reject evil if we can't see it for what it is. "Any attempt to understand the religious reality demands coming to grips with the political reality. Certain political, economic, social and cultural developments in our own times are not merely unjust, they are also blasphemous."

In 2019, the UN's special rapporteur on extreme poverty concluded his report on the United Kingdom. He said some things that were expected – poverty levels in the UK was not just a disgrace but a social calamity and an economic disaster, all rolled into one – and some that weren't. The "systematic immiseration of a significant part of the British population" was evidence, not of failure, he wrote, but of success.

"Successive governments" had dismantled key elements of the post-war consensus on social spending. Welfare, from social housing to unemployment benefits, was no longer ordered to the creation of a better society but a means to discipline, segregate and stigmatise those most in need. It was a social crisis, the rapporteur concluded, but one with a terrible, intangible toll: loss of relationships, independence, self-respect. Loss of dignity. Britain's experience underscored, he wrote, "that poverty is a political choice". A choice that keeps being chosen, again and again, decade after decade. A door that keeps being closed.

A refugee family is moving into St Cuthbert's old presbytery, Chris tells me. It's not a universally popular decision within the Church, he says, but enough parishioners are excited

about it that he looks forward to their arrival, from Iraq, with confidence. I meet a number of refugees during my time in Newcastle, most assisted in some way by church organisations. I'm told Ukrainian resettlement has drawn the Christian denominations here together; a work of mercy in more ways than one.

A SHORT WALK from the presbytery, in the church hall, another initiative Chris has come under some fire for supporting is in full swing. It's a little noisier than usual in St Cuthbert's, on account of two-dozen small children raising an unearthly racket in the plywood-panelled room. Mumspace was set up several years ago, beginning in Hackney, London: a common space for young mums and expecting mothers to play, talk, spend time together during and after the draining, often isolating struggle of pregnancy.

It's no substitute for paid childcare, but it offers something deeper and more valuable to participants: community, and something more than that. Mumspace is organised by local people for local people; the women helping out with tea and biscuits are often former – or future – participants. It's person-to-person, not top-down; something shared, not granted. In a small, steady way, it reknits relational ties frayed by decades of economic decline, social atomisation. It gives people time, space, friendship. Dignity can't be bought or sold, but it can be built.

It's in those bonds, Chris thinks, that the Church has something to teach the world; something to bring to the table. Catholic Social Teaching doesn't offer ready-built answers; it does provide a kind of grammar, a way to talk about politics beyond the conventions of the market and the state. And Pope Francis, he thinks, has added – or emphasised – some key terms to the lexicon: "accompaniment", "synodality", and "a poor church for, and with, the poor". Not everyone in the Church is listening to Francis, but – in a world where so much is going wrong – it seems he's on the right track. He gives Chris hope.

I'm sitting where a saint sat, 13 centuries ago, Chris says. It's not immediately apparent. There's concrete by the side of the river, now; St Bede seems a long way away. It's raining by the Tyne. Chris comes here for a break, sometimes, on busy days spent hopping across the area. It relaxes him, he says. In the rain, it's not immediately obvious how, but I wait, and eventually, I understand.

I think about what I'd seen; the good people, the bad times, the worse ones coming, and I think about a sermon Austin Smith gave not long before his death in 2011. "Let us not be fearful," he said, in the face of hopelessness, pain, death, "for there is this wonderful, living experience still." "In our suffering," he said, "there is always resurrection. There is always the possibility and reality of peace."

I look at the Tyne, rolling out to the sea. I catch curlews diving out of the corner of my eye; the shift of the river, the movement, faint, near-invisible, of the wind. The rain's stopping now. We have a lot more to do that day, Chris says, taking his car keys out. It's time to go.