

People living in poverty and their relationship to local church communities: An exploratory qualitative study in Mechelen, Belgium

**Authors:**

Annie Dillen^{1,2}
Elke Van Hoof^{1,2}

Affiliations:

¹Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

²Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Project leader: Y. Dreyer

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Corresponding author:

Annie Dillen,
annie.dillen@kuleuven.be

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Much literature on church and poverty issues takes the church as the actor and people living in poverty as the acted upon, those who have to receive care or who will benefit from the church's diaconal action. Not much is known about experiences of the church and the religion of people living in poverty themselves. The aim of this article is threefold: (1) To learn more about possible difficulties, also possibilities, for participation of people living in poverty in Catholic parishes in Flanders; (2) To give a voice to people living in poverty, to help them to express their 'ordinary theology' (Astley 2002) and to make their experiences visible to a broader ecclesial audience; (3) To discuss the ecclesial experiences of people living in poverty and people who know their experiences quite well, in light of church documents.

This article presents the results of an exploratory qualitative study in Mechelen, a medium-to-large city in Flanders, Belgium. We present the results of semi-structured interviews with 20 participants – 7 caregivers and 13 people living in poverty.

We found both pragmatic difficulties and more religious difficulties for participation in parishes, named by people living in poverty, as well as by (voluntary and professional) caregivers. Pragmatic difficulties are, for example, mobility or time (in relation to working hours on Saturday/Sunday). More religious-related difficulties concern the doubts about God in relation to their own suffering, aspects of the moral teachings of the church (e.g. about homosexuality) and questions about the Eucharist itself, experienced in a non-satisfactory way. More positive experiences concern the silence or rest people experience in the church or the experience of a community. We discuss findings relating to experiences of 'inclusion' of people living in poverty within church communities and more private religious practices, named by people living in poverty.

In a next step, we compare these results with other empirical research. Finally, we discuss what it can mean to be a 'church of the poor' and what 'friendship with the poor' might be and how this concept can be evaluated.

Introduction

A few years ago, we wanted to focus a particular issue of the journal published by the Interdiocesan Council for Family Ministry in Flanders, Belgium on the topic of poverty and the church. Our search for possible articles was quite disappointing: we could think of many people who could write about what the Roman Catholic Church is doing for people living in poverty in Belgium, in structured or less structured ways. We could even think about organisations, nowadays pluralistic, but with Catholic roots, where people living in poverty are really taken seriously and are full members in the organisation. But an answer to the question on how people living in poverty experience the church was not to be easily found. Neither could we answer the question of what aspects played a role in the invisibility of rather large numbers of people living in poverty in local church communities. Solidarity and community-building with people in poverty is not easy, but good practices could be named. To reflect on *being* in church with people in poverty seemed to be much more difficult.

A similar phenomenon can be found in international literature. Much literature on the church and poverty issues takes the church as the actor and people living in poverty as the acted upon, those who have to receive care or who will benefit from the church's diaconal action. Within Europe and the United States, very little is known on experiences of church and the religion of people living in poverty themselves.

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In the past few decades, however, many practical theologians have made a shift in focus. Although practical theology and pastoral theology have traditionally been concerned with the question of what pastors should do and how ministry should be conceived, recently more and more attention is also being given to the experiences of people themselves. In line with research about 'lived religion' (cf. Failing & Heimbrock 1998; McGuire 2008) or 'ordinary theology' (Astley 2002), we want to give a voice to people living in poverty and make their experiences visible to a broader ecclesial audience. We also want to discuss the ecclesial experiences of people living in poverty and people who know their experiences quite well, in light of recent church documents.

This research question also fits in another relative recent trend, namely a stronger focus on aspects of class within practical theological research. During the past decades, many practical theologians have been very attentive for issues of sexism and racism. Classism, however, has received far less academic attention, as the American practical theologian Joyce Mercer (2012:432–443) remarks.

Research method

From November 2013 to February 2014, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study in Mechelen, a middle-large city in Flanders, Belgium. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 participants: 7 caregivers, mainly volunteers, and 13 people living in poverty. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their participation in three organisations that support people living in poverty. Two of these organisations have Catholic roots and are more or less related to the Catholic Church in Flanders. The other organisation can be called pluralistic. The *Koraalhuis* is an organisation related to the parish of the cathedral, in the centre of the town, where all persons, especially people living in poverty, are welcome. They get to eat or drink something and talk with each other or with caregivers and/or pastoral workers. There are a fair number of non-Christians who visit the *Koraalhuis*, especially Muslims. For the interviews, we selected people who could have an interest in the Catholic Church. *Saint Vincentius*, in the North of Mechelen, is a Catholic charity organisation, mainly focused on providing food and other material help for people living in poverty. *De Lage Drempeel* is a totally different kind of organisation, situated at the centre of Mechelen, and is recognised as an organisation where people living in poverty are given a voice. Participation is a core term in their approach, as well as contributing to policy-making together with and in favour of people living in poverty. *De Lage Drempeel* is not linked to a parish or to a larger Christian movement, but is pluralistic.

When searching for participants in this study, we asked the caregivers of these three organisations to connect us with people living in poverty participating in their organisation, and of caregivers who have an idea about the Christian background of the people living in poverty. The people living in poverty are participants that are selected by the caregivers because they think they have at least, somehow, a link with

the Catholic Church. Informed consent forms were given and signed. It turned out that 10 participants living in poverty called themselves Catholic, 3 not. All of them were baptised. The 13 participants living in poverty were mainly women; only 2 of them were men. All were between the age of 32 and 80 years. The caregivers were aged between 42 and 91 years. Only one of them worked as a professional, and this group also contained only two men.

The interviews were conducted with different versions of an open questionnaire provided to caregivers and people living in poverty to elicit demographic information, general religious information and answers on open questions about church, parish and religion. The questions about church were focused on relations with a local parish, as we did not want to ask questions about the church in general. We asked questions about *diakonia* (as receiving care but also giving care), liturgy, *koinonia* (community) and kerygma or catechesis. When asking about religion in general, we asked specifically for aspects of piety, regular practices at home or in a church (as the rosary, processions, burning candles and praying). We asked about the content and the image of God within prayer and about belief in a life after death. We especially asked about ways in which they are supporting others or are helping the church or the religious community. The caregivers were asked about their impression of the experiences of the people living in poverty. Generally, we wanted to ask them whether they see factors related to poverty that play a role in the experience of religion and church.

Each person was interviewed for about half an hour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. If we use names of participants, they are fictive names, not real ones. We used Nvivo 10 software and conducted a general content analysis. We will report about the main results, using both the interpretations of the people living in poverty and the caregivers. We asked specifically about the experience of people living in poverty with religion and church. We also asked about the way in which caregivers perceived how people living in poverty would experience this.

Results

We found pragmatic difficulties and more religious difficulties for participation in parishes, named by people living in poverty, as well as by (voluntary and professional) caregivers. Religious-related difficulties concern the doubts about God in relation to their own suffering, aspects of the moral teachings of the church (e.g. about homosexuality) and questions about the Eucharist itself, experienced in a non-satisfactory way. Pragmatic difficulties generally concern mobility or time. More positive experiences concern the silence or rest people experience in church, and the experience of a community.

We will explain each aspect. Some people indicate that they experience God mainly outside the church, at home. Natasja for instance said: 'I do not think that the church has something

to do with faith. No, I do find God at home (...). Many participants indicate that they have religious objects at home, such as a statue of mother Mary, a cross, an icon or a paternoster. Some participants wear a cross they received from someone who is very important for them, such as their deceased husband or their daughter. The relationship with the other person through the religious symbol is very important. Someone else says she does not have the money to burn a candle, as she spends her money on her son. She has done this before, but now money is lacking.

Some of the participants also indicate that faith itself is difficult for them. Some people have experienced so much that they have difficulties in thinking about God and their own suffering together. The theodicy question becomes clear in the remark of Anita: 'I have been a very strong believer and now is that a bit less, because I had so much misfortune in my life. And then I am thinking, where is He now and why doesn't He help me?' Someone else says: 'If God would exist, then I wouldn't have experienced all these situations in the psychiatric hospital'. The difficulties in life might lead some of these people to a struggle with faith. This is also influenced by their image of God as rather distant and almighty.

Others might have difficulties with the teachings of the church or the way in which the Christian faith is traditionally expressed. A quote of Tanja explains this: 'That we are (...) sinners, if they talk about the Bible then it is only about sins. Only about (...) that if I would like to live in a luxury house, then this is avarice, if a man lives together with a man, then it is sin, I totally disagree with that'.

Specific church rules also make it difficult to have a sacramental wedding in the church, as some of the participants are married for a second time or are married to a partner who has been married to someone else before. In the Roman Catholic Church, a second marriage is impossible. Others have a partner who is unbelieving.

Some interviewees express this longing for change in a very general way. Ilse says, for instance, that 'they might do new things in the church to attract people'. Yvonne says: 'if the church would be more modern, then I would feel more attracted to go. Yes, but of course not every week'.

There are also more pragmatic reasons why people living in poverty find it difficult to participate in Eucharist or in a parish in general. One of the reasons Kevin indicated for not having really been involved in a local parish is that they moved a lot during the past years. Others indicate that transport to the church is sometimes a problem, especially because of the lack of public transport in the evening. Going to Mass on Christmas Eve might therefore be a problem. Other pragmatic difficulties concern the financial costs related to rituals. This was, for instance, indicated by someone who could not have confirmation, as the ritual and the party afterwards would have cost money. For others, the idea that the church is asking for money while it is perceived as so rich is also very difficult.

Participants living in poverty also indicated time as one of the reasons for not going to church or being involved in a parish. One gentleman mentioned he works on Saturday nights in a disco, reaching home only in the wee hours of Sunday morning. Thereafter, it was too difficult to go for Mass on the same morning, as this person's more pressing need was to rest.

For many people, an important reason for not being involved in a parish probably concerns their religious upbringing. Natasja, for instance, indicates that she has never been accustomed to going to church, as she was not educated in the Catholic way. She says: 'you have to learn to go to a church. It is not that I do not want to go there. I would like to go, to a Mass etc; I do think it is interesting'. Anita has another experience. Her parents did not educate her in a religious way, but she continued believing, because she hopes God will help her in difficult situations. This expression shows that the experiences of difficulty do not always cause unbelief but might also go together with a stronger trust in God.

Most of the participants indicate that they go to church only for a wedding or a funeral. One person indicates that she goes to Mass every day and reads in the church and functions as an altar-server. Someone else sings in the choir, and another plays the organ in different churches. These are examples of a form of participation, although these examples do not include any form of decision-making within a parish.

Although most of the participants do not often go to church, some of them indicate that they are attracted by the beautiful and impressive architecture and by the possibility to find some rest in the church sanctuary. The silence is something that attracts people. It is remarkable that one of the caregivers explicitly thought that finding rest would not have been a reason for people living in poverty to go to church. He says: 'I think that the reason that you need to have to go to church, that this reason is something these people do not have (...) namely meditating, to feel oneself connected with many things. I can go to church for this reason. The rest and the things, I find it there'. This expression of his personal idea about why people living in poverty do not go that often to church might be based on an underestimation of the experiences, the needs, the values and the coping strategies of the people living in poverty. It is at least interesting to see how the rest of the church, the prayer, the meditation and the beauty of the church are not preserved for a small cultural or societal elite but are important for people with various backgrounds.

Some of the respondents express the relevance of the Christian faith itself. They also express the relevance of the community of the faithful. Some of the people living in poverty indicate the relevance of being recognised by other members of the community. They indicate that it is very nice if people recognise you and if you belong to a group. This experience is however not shared by everyone. Ida, who sings in the choir in the church, and participates from time to

time in parish events, says: 'I do feel myself at home there, and also not (...). I am not really involved with the others (...). They do not come to sit around me and they all go to those men with a lot of money'.

Some of the participants indicate that it is important that their children are baptised or receive their first communion, as this is a way to learn about faith and tradition. A very important role is attributed to the parish priest. Someone indicates that the parish priest is really good, because he also knows something about her deceased son. Kevin indicates that he goes to a particular church because their children received their sacraments there, and their daughter was buried at that church.

Discussion

As we did not interview a larger group of people in the general population, we cannot really make comparisons. We also did not gather statistical materials that would allow us to compare with existing data. However, on the basis of general sociological data about church practice and our knowledge about the Flemish context, we can interpret the data. In general, church practice and religious involvement is rather low in Belgium. The responses of the participants are therefore not really surprising when it concerns general religious ideas.

We can compare the results with international research with people living in poverty. Other researchers also indicate on the basis of their empirical research that the people living in poverty they have interviewed express their preference for the experience of religion within a home setting. Going to the church is not always evident. Philip Schwadel, for instance, has done quantitative empirical research about the religion of teenagers (aged between 13 and 17 years) living in poverty (Schwadel 2008:125–149). He used telephone interviews and compared the answers with other survey data. One of the results was that teenagers living in poverty pray and do have a personal faith but report lesser attendance in organised religious activities, such as going to Mass. Although our Flemish research cannot compare with other groups of believers, Schwadel's findings are similar to our findings that participation in organised religion is sometimes difficult, whereas they speak much more easily having religious practices at home, such as praying or wearing religious symbols. Faith that is put into practice, that shows itself in concrete actions, seems to be very important for the interviewees in our research in Mechelen.

The research method and the interviewees of Schwadel were very different from our sample and design. The research of the American researcher Suzy Sullivan is more in line with our research (Sullivan 2011). She interviewed 45 mothers living in poverty and 15 pastors. The results are similar with Schwadel and with our findings. The mothers might be more inclined to praying or to private religious practices than to participating in organised religious activities. Sullivan's research could partly explain what kind of barriers people

experienced in relation to organised religion. They had problems with certain doctrines of the church. This was also clear in our research, where especially the elements of the church teaching related to the life and the struggles of the people in poverty were mentioned. There were also differences in the findings of Sullivan and ours. Some of the mothers did not want to go to a church-related social organisation, because they would feel the pressure to participate in liturgical and community life (Sullivan 2011:63). This aspect is absent in the Flemish research, as the link between liturgy and social care is less strong. The interviewees did not mention any aspect of mental pressure to participate in the church, although some of them visited Catholic social services. Of course, the interviewees in our sample were selected on the basis of their possible interest in church and religion. The American sample contained intentionally people with all degrees of religious interests.

We get more insight into the meaning of the results from Mechelen if we compare them with the German sinus-milieu studies. In Germany, there is a long tradition of research in different 'milieus', or environments. These 'milieus' combine the social class with the fundamental orientation (high, middle, low) with the way in which people think about values (more traditional, more in line of modernisation and more innovative, experimental) (Ebertz 2008:17–34). In a next step, the relationship between religion and the 10 milieus could be analysed on the basis of quantitative and qualitative data. We only summarise the conclusions here. There are three milieus related to the lower class. Firstly, there are those who are more based in tradition in general but also in relation to church and religion. Secondly, there are those who are focused on consumption and materialism, or those who want to possess things in order to be part of society, to be like the others. For this vulnerable group, the church often shows its face through charity, through its social services. Thirdly, there are the 'hedonists', those with a focus on enjoying life, trying to get rid of an excess of rules. In this milieu, the church is rather often seen as unnecessary. The individual relations with 'something' that is higher are the most important (Ebertz 2008:22–29). If we presume that the participants of the Flemish study are more or less similar to the vulnerable group that focuses on consumption and materialism, we see some similarities and some differences in the description of the religious attitude of this milieu. The German study describes the general attitude of this milieu as very critical towards church and very pessimistic about possible changes in the church. In the Flemish study, the critique on the institutional church was indeed also clear. Nevertheless, we heard a few examples of hope, positive experiences and possible changes. These changes can realistically happen on a local level. Some participants might be attracted much more by the experiences of sitting together and burning a candle, than going to the Eucharist, as one of the caregivers says.

The focus on individualisation of religion, found in the Flemish study, but also in the American studies mentioned above, is also in line with the German milieu study. Personal belief seems to be very important, much more than the

institutional church. This is of course a characteristic of the whole society in Belgium, but nevertheless, it becomes especially clear in the sample.

Conclusion

Various aspects should be taken into account when thinking about pastoral ministry, parish development and leadership.

- The positive and negative ways of dealing with difficulties in life and religion is important. For some people, religion might be an important coping factor, for others it becomes a deadweight, something that does not help them at all, because they do not see how God could accept all their suffering. The possibility of these different reactions needs to be taken into account when approaching people.
- The various practical problems of not being able to participate in church should be acknowledged by pastoral leaders. It is not always a matter of bad will. There might be many reasons why people cannot go to church, that fall out of their own control.
- It is important to see that faith might be important in the life of people living in poverty, especially also expressed in relation to religious material symbols.
- A parish that wants to be more inclusive needs to work on a personal connection with the parish priest and the welcoming of people in general, especially people living in poverty, by speaking with these people and greeting them.
- Certain elements of the Christian theological tradition, as it is often proclaimed during liturgy, might need to be reconsidered in light of the experiences of people living in poverty. We might ask whether the focus on sin, for instance, should be so strong, or whether the church's speaking about greed could not be explained with more nuance. Greed is a problem, but is it the sin of those living in poverty that they want to be like the others, or is there a broader structural problem? The teachings about divorce and remarriage, for instance, are difficult for many Westerners in the Catholic Church, especially for the people in our sample, as they are often confronted with these realities. They want to find a warm and loving community in the church and not a judging institution that condemns them once again.
- The reflection on and discourse about being a church for and of the poor needs further critical investigation. Pope Francis puts a particularly strong emphasis on being church with and of the poor. The auxiliary bishop of the vicariate Vlaams-Brabant-Mechelen, Leon Lemmens, has written similar things in his vision for his vicariate (the Flemish part of the archdiocese Mechelen-Brussels).

We elaborate this last point further. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), pope Francis writes 'This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor'. He explains this as follows: 'They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. (...) We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice

to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them'.¹

This is a very beautiful intention, which is also the intention behind this research. Nevertheless, we also have to look critically. To learn from people living in poverty and to 'be their friends' is very important, but not evident, as we learned from our research. The term 'for the poor' might also suggest that people living in poverty are first of all objects of the church, those who will receive the care. In the reflection about the kind of organisation and social services where people living in poverty meet and where the interviewees could be found, we discovered a huge difference between the one that is more charity-based and paternalistic, and the other more participatory organisations, much more focused on empowerment. This focus on real participation is still rather absent in the church teachings and many Christian organisations. Many people want to give something to people living in poverty. The reflection on how they are giving is not always present. At the same time, we also want to warn against functionalisation of diaconal work and people living in poverty. It is very important that people in poverty are recognised for who they are, and not just because they represent Jesus, because they might help the caregiver to grow in faith or because they need to be evangelised. In the texts of the auxiliary bishop, Leon Lemmens (2013:36), we read very interesting paragraphs on friendship with poor people but always in the context of evangelisation. It is very important that mutuality and reciprocity, although the relation is somehow unequal and asymmetric, is strived for as much as possible.

It is our sincere hope that the results of this research might stimulate the trust of those people working in the church in the capacities, the faith, the willingness and the authenticity of people living in poverty. They are the church.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

A.D. was the supervisor of this research and has written this article. E.V. was responsible for data collection and data analysis. E.V. also contributed to the insights presented in the 'discussion' paragraph.

¹'Apostolic Exhortation', Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, No. 198, viewed at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

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