

What to Do about Agenbite of Inwit?

A Case Study on Welfare Reform

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Through the story of a fictional public official wrestling with a very real social dilemma, the moral aspects of welfare reform are illuminated. As the nation moves into a period when assessment of the 1996 welfare reform will be taking place, the insights drawn from the author's narrative analysis provide a perspective on welfare that is informed by the tradition of Catholic social teaching.

“It seemed like a good idea, to reform welfare as we knew it,” mused Harriet LeBasher. Harriet was elected governor of Pleasantville in 1996, shortly after President Clinton signed into law the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.” Reversing six decades of social policy, this historic welfare legislation ended the long-standing cash-assistance program known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with its federal entitlement that guaranteed any eligible poor person could receive aid. AFDC served about four million adults, most of them single mothers, and more than seven million children. The new law is based upon the belief that welfare did more harm than good and ending it actually helps the poor. Thus, the emphasis is placed on pushing unskilled and semi-skilled mothers into the job market as soon as possible.

Governor LeBasher was a strong supporter of this legislative reform and welcomed the opportunity to devise a fair and compassionate plan for Pleasantville that could be a model for the rest of the country. She was a devout Catholic who attended daily Mass and was part of a Bible study group in her parish. Harriet

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also volunteered in the church food pantry from time to time. She had difficulty reconciling poverty with America as the land of plenty, especially now when the booming economy could provide for at least most of those willing to participate. While recognizing that some are too weak to compete, Harriet feared that the poor do not succeed, in part, because they have not been given the opportunity. Equality of opportunity is what had enabled her to become governor and she vowed that she would ensure the same kind of opportunity for other women. Harriet believed people could provide for themselves and their families if only they worked hard and made the necessary sacrifices. She had a strong sense of family as the primary social and economic unity with its foremost responsibility to raise children and to ensure their well-being.

Pleasantville's Welfare Reform Plan

With the governor's leadership, the state created a welfare reform plan called Pleasantville Cares (P-2) that aimed to provide opportunity to the poor, encourage self-reliance and responsibility through work incentives, and strengthen families.¹ It was a giant work program which featured a three-step employment ladder. Those people deemed "job ready" by the state's welfare officials were required to find work in the private sector. Those who were not quite ready would receive a monthly payment, in return for which they were expected to perform community service jobs or workfare, such as cleaning parks. Those more difficult cases, participants with serious problems preventing them from working, were placed in a transitional category. They attended training and education classes in return for assistance. In addition to the work requirement, Pleasantville Cares offered some incentives. The basic monthly payment would be increased by about 20 percent, from \$555 to \$673 a month. Participants would have free access to a variety of generous services as well, including child care, health-care, and transportation allowances. There was, however, a two-year time limit on receiving benefits. Each person enrolled was assigned to a "Financial and Employment Planner" who, in addition to determining eligibility for the program, helped in arranging training and finding work. To encourage inventive approaches to helping clients, the state contracted with five different agencies to administer the program in Pleasantville, with each setting up a job center in a different part of the city (Massing, 22).

Harriet's Biting of Conscience

Now that the two-year time limit on benefits had been reached, Governor LeBasher was faced with new challenges. An atmosphere of conflict and

doubt was developing. There were still a number of people who were not working or had found jobs but had since lost them. Moreover, Harriet had recently become aware of an increase in the number of people coming to the food pantry at her parish. Not only were the numbers growing, but those who needed assistance were primarily women, not on welfare, but working mothers. Her personal experience was reflected in a study done of food banks in several states that warned of a festering crisis among the working poor who are swelling the ranks of the hungry (Rivera, 38).

Harriet was troubled by the growth of hunger and poverty in spite of prosperity and job growth. She wondered if she had devised a fair and compassionate welfare reform plan. One had to be realistic, though, about even the most noble of plans to make people more self-reliant and responsible; not everyone will be helped. Besides, “you cannot make an omelet without breaking a few eggs,” she reasoned.

Of late an odd phrase that she had heard of in an English literature course she took years ago kept coming back to her—*Agenbite of Inwit*. It was the title of a fourteenth-century book written by an English monk about “the again-biting of conscience” (Williams and Houck, 108). Even though they were for Harriet not really bad bites but only nibbles, they were persistent and irritating enough that she decided to commission a study of P-2 by an independent team of economists, psychologists, and sociologists. She also invited a member of her parish knowledgeable about Catholic social thought to advise her of pertinent values and moral priorities related to the welfare issue. Harriet realized she could not simply translate religious values and moral principles into public policy, but she believed they were essential in guiding her to make political decisions in good conscience.

Assessment of the Plan

The study revealed some positive effects of Pleasantville Cares. There were personal stories being told, testimony to the difference P-2 had made in people’s lives. For example, there is Kyesha who works in Burger Barn as a hamburger flipper where she earns \$5.50 an hour. The job has become the anchor for her life, the center of her social universe, the source of all her closest friends, and her “salvation” from the spiral of violence in which she had felt trapped. She lives in a housing project with her mother, a longtime welfare recipient, who cares for Kyesha’s son, Anthony, while she works. While her relationship with Juan, the father of this “love child,” had broken up, he dutifully maintained some small financial contribution from his low-wage job. Without the push of P-2, the job her case worker helped her secure, the child care provided by her mother, and

Juan's contribution, however meager, Kyesha would constitute just one more statistic in the long litany of problems in the welfare system (Newman, 30).

Then there is Sheila, whose life had been transformed by the new welfare-to-work program. No longer hanging around the house idly, she has a job working in a plastics factory for \$8.50 an hour. Sheila is now able to provide for her three children and can be the role model for them that she never had. She likes getting up in the morning with a job to go to; she feels good about herself. Although she continues to suffer from anxiety and some depression from time to time, the support she finds from friends she has made at work helps her through the difficulties.

The study showed that Pleasantville had achieved national prominence as a state which had successfully reduced its welfare rolls and placed more people in jobs than any other state in the nation. After only two years, Harriet had turned the war on welfare into a much acclaimed social experiment. The percentage of clients placed in jobs had grown each year, and the average starting wage had risen from just above the minimum wage of \$5.15 to \$6.50 an hour. The state's tough work rules had swept more than 57,000 families from the welfare rolls with almost 90 percent of the families formerly receiving welfare checks no longer on the dole. For many, work has become a way of life, giving people purpose and dignity, and instilling in children the basic values of responsibility, diligence, and self-reliance. Moreover, taxpayers' anger at the poor has been taken away or at least minimized, bringing new civic commitment to investments in support services like child-care and employment opportunities.

In short, Pleasantville's crusade to end welfare as we knew it left far fewer people on the rolls, had put more people to work, and had begun to transform the culture of dependency into a culture of responsibility.

Criticisms of the Reform

The study of Pleasantville Cares documented many success stories, but it also suggested that there was cause for concern. Critics acknowledged that the governor had created thousands of community service positions but complained that she was too quick to assume these low-wage jobs would provide the skills needed for people to secure and maintain full-time employment in the private sector. Research showed the majority of people in workfare were not sufficiently prepared or trained for future jobs and were stuck in make-work jobs week after week until the time clock ran out. Her opponents queried, "How could sweeping schools or parks prepare workers for the skilled jobs that the market commanded? Hadn't the governor considered the fact that the average adult on welfare has eighth-grade reading and math skills?" Perhaps, critics charged, the governor was slow to realize that many of the women being pushed into the labor market have physical and learning disabilities, suffer from sexual abuse,

lack self-confidence, and endure frequent bouts of depression (DeParle, 11/20/97).²

A number of concerns were raised about P-2's impact on the family. The nature of jobs available to former AFDC recipients often makes it difficult for them to fulfill their parenting roles satisfactorily. For example, most of the jobs open to unskilled and semi-skilled women pay low wages, tend to offer unpredictable or limited hours, and provide few if any paid vacation or sick days. They usually do not offer health benefits, so going to work means a mother has to forego medical care for herself and her children. Thus, when conflicts arise between their jobs and family responsibilities, many women choose not to work for a time which results in their sinking more deeply into poverty (Edin and Lein, 1997).

Other familial concerns were uncovered which affect the ability of a welfare recipient to secure and maintain a job. For many single mothers, efforts to build a new life are complicated by powerful family bonds. Consider Lashanda, whose alcoholic, psychotic, drug-addicted mother remains in her care. She mocks her daughter's attempts to work, blames her for her drinking, and frequently locks her out of the house. Yet, Lashanda's fidelity is unwavering because her "mama is everything to her." As Jason DeParle reports, the conflict between loyalties to the job and loyalties at home is one of the most common situations poor women face when leaving the welfare rolls. So even though twenty-year-old Lashanda is an energetic, resilient woman who can quickly obtain a job, her primary focus is on her mother. Frequently skipping work to care for her mother, she goes from job to job, losing not only a paycheck but any benefits that she would have gotten in the former welfare system (DeParle, 7/4/99).

All of this confirmed what many had suspected would happen as a consequence of welfare reform. That is, "the loss of a national safety net would evolve into a series of state trampolines—better equipped to lift the needy into the job market, but much less certain to catch them—or their children—during the inevitable slips and falls" (DeParle, 6/30/97).

Despite strong growth in the economy, the income of some of the nation's poorest children and families declined since the work requirement went into effect. The increase in child and family poverty was caused largely by the erosion of safety net programs, i.e., cash and food assistance (Primus, et. al.). In short, if the old welfare system was essentially toothless, the new one seems to take a painful, perhaps even lethal, bite.

Values and Moral Priorities

In Roman Catholic social thought, the inviolable dignity of the human person created in God's image, whose essential social nature is realized in community with others, sets the framework of social policy on welfare. It is the foundation

on which just social structures must be built. Because of the social nature of the human person, bonds of community and solidarity are essential to promoting and protecting the dignity of persons. In their pastoral letter on economic justice, the U.S. Catholic bishops stated that the economy must be shaped by three questions: what does it do for people, what does it do to people, and how do people participate in it. The fulfillment of the basic needs of the poor is the “highest priority.” Thus, the fundamental moral criterion for just economic policies and decisions is: “They must be at the service of all people, especially the poor” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, nos. 19, 24, 28).

Unlike the dominant view of justice in American society that emphasizes the freedom and rights of the individual, in the Catholic tradition justice is understood in the biblical sense as fidelity to the various demands that arise from relationships. The biblical sense of justice is not concerned with a strict definition of rights and duties, but with the rightness of the human condition before God and within society. The test of the justice of a community is not how it treats the leaders but the least advantaged. You test the strength of a chain by how strong is its weakest link. As the U.S. bishops state: “The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be actively treated or passively abandoned as if they were non-members of the human race” (NCCB, nos. 77–79 at 77).

The Role of the State

Catholic social teaching views the state as having a fundamental responsibility to secure the welfare of its citizens against the fluctuations of the economy. Welfare refers fundamentally to the basic requisites of well-being, with striking a healthy balance in the areas of physical and mental health, personal assets, and material prosperity over time. Because of the inherent social nature of the human person, individual and social welfare are intricately interrelated. Welfare policy has an essential role in guaranteeing the basic conditions through which individuals and groups within a society achieve self-realization, freedom, and equality. It is part of the moral task of government to ensure that each person has access to the resources required for human development, and to guarantee the basic conditions through which individuals and groups within a society can realize their dignity in community with others (Glennon, 984–85). This is not, however, the responsibility of the state alone.

The principle of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching means that nothing should be done by a larger organization that can be achieved by a smaller group. A just, participatory society requires the dispersal of responsibility for basic well-being to every level of social life. In fact, mediating institutions such as families, church groups, community organizations, and labor unions can empower individuals to participate more fully and more meaningfully in society than state institutions. As Rev. Bryan Hehir concludes, welfare reform should be examined “not only in terms of specific proposals, but what one is saying about

the relative responsibilities of the state and of other elements in society in bearing responsibility for its most vulnerable people” (“Welfare Reform and the Catholic Church,” 696).

Moral Significance of Work and the Family

In the Catholic social tradition the understanding of work has a threefold moral significance. First, it is a principal way that people exercise their distinctive human capacity for self-expression and self-realization. Second, it is the ordinary way for human beings to fulfill their material needs. Third, work enables people to contribute to the well-being of the larger community. Work is not only for one’s self. It is for one’s family, for the nation, and for the benefit of the entire human family (NCCB, nos. 96–97).

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In his encyclical on the moral import of labor, *Laborem exercens*, Pope John Paul II affirms the positive construal of work as a necessary means to material sufficiency, personal development, and communal participation. He makes a distinction between the objective sense of work, that is the results of work, particularly technology; and the subjective dimension, as a free and self-determining activity. The basis for determining the value of human work is the subjective dimension—work is for the person, not the person for work (John Paul II, nos. 5–6).

To consider the worker merely a “tool of production” is a form of exploitation and thus an affront to personal dignity. Exploitation occurs because of inhumane working conditions, inadequate pay, lack of health assistance, or work schedules that are so inflexible that they deprive the worker of leisure or other rights. Workers have rights which are understood in the broader context of the fundamental human rights of the person. These include the right to a just wage (which should be sufficient to provide for a family’s well-being); the right to health care, pension, holiday and vacation pay; the right to work in a good and healthy environment; the right to join unions and bargain collectively; and the right of workers to participate in decision-making, ownership, and planning. Worker solidarity or associations of workers can promote justice in the workplace by exercising influence over conditions of work and pay, and also over social legislation. This solidarity must be

present whenever it is called for by the violation of the dignity of human work, by exploitation of the workers, by the existence of poverty and hunger, or by the denial of rights of workers (John Paul II, nos. 5–20).

Not only does John Paul affirm the positive human and social aspects of work, but he develops and deepens its meaning by emphasizing the spirituality of work. Work can enable people to come closer to God, to participate in God’s salvific plan, and to deepen their relationship with Christ. Workers share in the activity of the Creator by contributing in various ways to the growth and betterment of human life and society, i.e., caring for the needs of their family, providing needed services and goods. In addition, it is only in the light of the cross that the full meaning of human work can be understood. While work can be painful and burdensome at times, as people persevere and endure in union with Christ crucified, there is a redemptive dimension to labor. Viewed through the lens of Christ’s resurrection, we can see in the toil of human work a glimmer of new life, “a new good—the fruit of human work—already a small part of that ‘new earth’ where justice dwells” (John Paul II, nos. 24–27 at 27).

The family constitutes one of the most important communities for shaping the social and ethical order of human work. It is simultaneously a community made possible by work and the first school of work within the home. It is in the context of family life that members can learn to become responsible agents in society. The U.S. bishops urge that “all economic policies be evaluated in light of their impact on the life and stability of the family” (NCCB, no. 19). Welfare reform should help parents meet the social, economic, educational and moral needs of their children. This means that those whose work is raising small children should be able to do so without having to live in poverty. Social justice requires that institutions and public policy be structured so that mothers of young children are not forced by economic necessity to leave their children for jobs outside the home. Nor should women have to pay for advancing their careers at the expense of the family.

In *Economic Justice for All*, the bishops treat the economic issues faced by women as systemic problems and call for greater economic justice in the workplace. They analyze and condemn the causes of the “feminization of poverty,” i.e., low wages, limited chances of advancement, discrimination in wages, salaries, jobs with low status, little security, weak unionization, and few fringe benefits (NCCB, no. 207).

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In sum, we can draw from Catholic social teaching four moral priorities of a just welfare policy.

1) Human life should be enhanced and human dignity protected, especially the lives of poor children and their families. The target ought to be poverty, not poor families.

2) Work is to be encouraged and rewarded. Those who can work ought to work but it should be dignified, productive work that pays a living wage.

3) Work should strengthen family life, personal responsibility, and self-discipline. A parent should not be forced by work requirements to abandon family responsibilities.

4) Federal and state governments have a responsibility for ensuring the well-being of all citizens, cooperating with mediating institutions which can serve people with greater effectiveness, efficiency, and dignity (United States Catholic Conference Administrative Board, 674–77).

Harriet's Insights

Reflecting upon her experience, the effects of Pleasantville Cares, and values in the Catholic social tradition, Harriet came to see some connections with her faith. God's creative, caring work is evidenced in P-2's inventive approach to welfare reform with its three-step employment ladder. She also detected signs of the work of God the creator in the stories of women who had taken paid jobs in the workplace. They were contributing to the production of goods to serve the community, while at the same time ingeniously balancing paid employment with work in the home. Harriet gained insight into the meaning of God the redeemer in the story of Kyesha whose new job was "salvific," releasing her from the spiral of violence, isolation, and poverty in which she had felt trapped. Sheila's tale of work that had transformed her life, giving her a sense of self-worth provides clues to the redemptive dimension of labor. In addition, working in Burger Barn brought Kyesha into solidarity with other workers, providing support and new friendships.

It seemed to Harriet that Pleasantville Cares was a just welfare reform plan. It promotes human dignity through work incentives, empowering the poor to become self-reliant, responsible, and participative members of the community. The self-image and self-esteem of many former AFDC recipients had improved as they left the culture of dependency. Having a job enabled some people to move themselves and their families out of poverty. In addition, the family structure has been strengthened in several ways. Two-parent families are encouraged by rewarding work. When two parents work, the economic consequences for children are significantly improved. And with at least one working parent, children

have a positive role model. Furthermore, P-2 has helped people overcome poverty and dependency not only through its work incentives, but also through partnerships formed between the state and local businesses. Jobs have been secured and new employment opportunities created especially for single mothers with children, the primary participants in the program.

So, Harriet mused, “was it a good idea to reform welfare as we knew it?” Probably. The former welfare system perpetuated dependency, did not promote a work ethic, nor did it strengthen family life. What concerned the governor, though, was that despite a booming economy and low unemployment rate the numbers of working poor seemed to be increasing. Also, without a safety net to protect children and those who are willing, but not able, to work, people have fallen deeper into poverty. New questions began to trouble Harriet’s conscience. How is family life being strengthened if women who prefer to work at home caring for the family are forced to take a job or lose benefits? Should people be required to take a job, any job, even one that cannot lift them and their families out of poverty? Should the federal government be doing more to ensure the well-being of its citizens, especially the “least among us”? Perhaps welfare policy needs to be reformed again.

Agenbite of Inwit returns.

Notes

- 1 Pleasantville Cares actually reflects the Milwaukee experiment called Project New Hope.
- 2 This information is adapted from Jason DeParle’s study of the Milwaukee experiment called Project New Hope. As with other places where DeParle is referenced, I have drawn from his extensive research on the Milwaukee experiment.

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