

Meeting the challenge of seeing poverty face to face with the SVP

FOR most people, hunger is just a hypothetical concept. But for Winston Waller, a member of the Catholic charity the St Vincent de Paul Society England and Wales (SVP), working to prevent hunger for millions of adults and children in this country is top of his agenda.

PROFILE

Winston Waller tells Anita Boniface how his experience with the St Vincent de Paul Society led to a Parliamentary role on food poverty

Winston has been volunteering with the SVP to help families cope with low incomes and benefit sanctions and is now part of a group applying pressure on the Government to take steps to prevent food poverty across Britain.

An All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Food Poverty set up an inquiry chaired by MP Frank Field and the Bishop of Truro, Tim Thornton. The group consulted with members of several charities including the SVP, and Winston was asked to contribute with his knowledge and experience of dealing with people who live on the margins of society.

Asked why he first joined the SVP, he responds: "I was attracted because I am an engineer – we are very practical people, we like to fix things, we like to make things. We are practical as well as spiritual and we live in our hands, not our heads."

"The SVP seemed like a very practical organisation, doing practical work, so that resonated from the start."

He joined 40 years ago, and he hasn't looked back. He still volunteers as a member of his local parish group in Whitstable, Kent, and over the last two years he has also become the SVP President for Southwark Diocese.

As a member of his local group (known as a Conference), Winston, like all SVP Members, makes weekly visits to people in their homes who are struggling from loneliness and isolation, poverty, or sickness.

As well as being a Central Council President, he says that first and foremost he values be-

ing a member of his local Conference because of the person to person contact with people in need in his local area.

"That's where, for example, a family you visit could be sitting in the dark with no electricity, no gas, and no food, and you can put it right immediately by giving them financial assistance and a food parcel," Winston says.

It is this aspect of visiting people in their homes which makes the SVP stand out, he says, and gives them invaluable experience to contribute to the Food Poverty Inquiry.

"When we visit someone, we get to know them very well which is pretty unique. We in the SVP see poverty face to face. We see someone's home where they may have very little – it's cold and their house is damp and hard to heat and their children are poorly clothed," he says. "People might turn up to foodbanks, but to see people in their own homes is something else. That's the bigger picture. We see their real struggles."

He explained that with SVP food banks there is no limit to the number of times people may be helped, also the Society takes the food to its clients.

"We deliver, we visit and we offer friendship – it's not simply a case of dumping a box of groceries and clearing off," Winston says.

"We befriend, we become involved in their problems, and we help alleviate their suffering."

Winston recognises the stigma around depending on charities or government for help.

"Lots of people think those us-

ing foodbanks are scroungers, but they don't see the real plight of the poor in this country. It is difficult and degrading for someone to admit they cannot cope and then to ask for help – nobody does that lightly."

Recent television programmes have added to the bad press given to people living in poverty.

As one of the contributors to the Inquiry, Winston has tried to balance misconceptions about the poor, and highlight how food poverty can impact on anyone.

He says it's not just the unemployed who are struggling. Working people on low incomes are also vulnerable.

"It's right across the country, in inner city areas and out in the Shires," says Winston.

"We now have foodbanks in really well off areas such as Chelsea. If people lose their job, even if you live in a smart area, you can find yourself facing a much lower income that you are used to, and struggling to feed yourself and your family."

Winston is also keen to emphasise the dilemmas for those who are struggling. Benefit sanctions are common and can have a serious impact on a family.

"People are still being caught out by massive delays in their benefits or benefit sanctions. And at this time of year especially, when it's cold, people are having to decide whether to eat or heat which is particularly bad for children."

"Another issue," says Winston, "is that people might just be able to survive, but come the school holidays there is an increased food problem. For ex-

ample at Easter time, children are on school holidays so they aren't getting school dinners, and the heating has to be put on for the kids at home, whereas some parents might have done without this for themselves. This puts added financial pressure on families in poverty."

As part of his contribution to the Food Poverty Inquiry, Winston asked SVP members across the country to provide case studies of their experiences. This was to provide a picture to the Inquiry of what the situation is like today for people who are vulnerable.

What came through is that any change in people's circumstances – a relationship break up, getting married, having a child, sudden illness or disability – can lead to delays in benefit payments. That means that very often, when someone is going through an emotional and life changing event, they are being faced with financial hardship as well. For some families who have several problems such as mental illness, physical disability, poor housing and relationship problems, getting their benefits sorted is a very difficult task and takes a long time.

Winston says: "Foodbanks do a great job, but they are really designed for emergency cover during a short term crisis."

"But the SVP provides long term, ongoing assistance often for people with very complex needs. If you have had a breakdown, or if you're a single mother who has been abandoned by your partner, applying for benefits can be a challenge because you've got to do it on-line or go across town, which is a massive chal-

Information provided by SVP members to the Food Poverty Inquiry is included in their reports which can be found at: www.feedingbritain.com

To find out more about joining or donating to the SVP visit www.svp.org.uk or telephone 0207 703 3030.

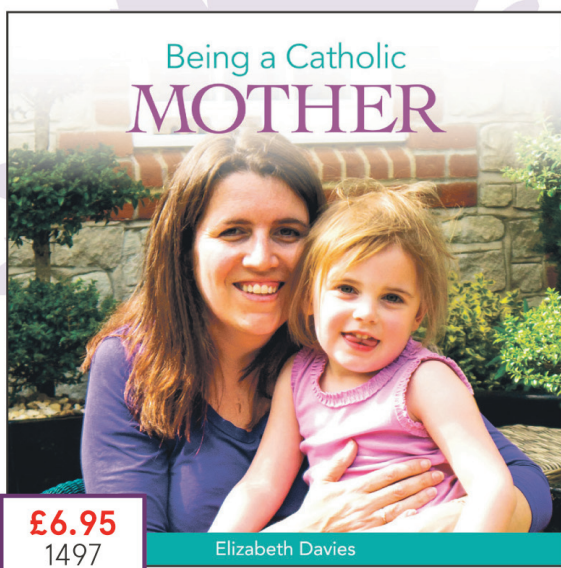


Winston Waller – "Lots of people think those using foodbanks are scroungers, but they don't see the real plight of the poor. It is difficult and degrading for someone to admit they cannot cope and then to ask for help – nobody does that lightly."

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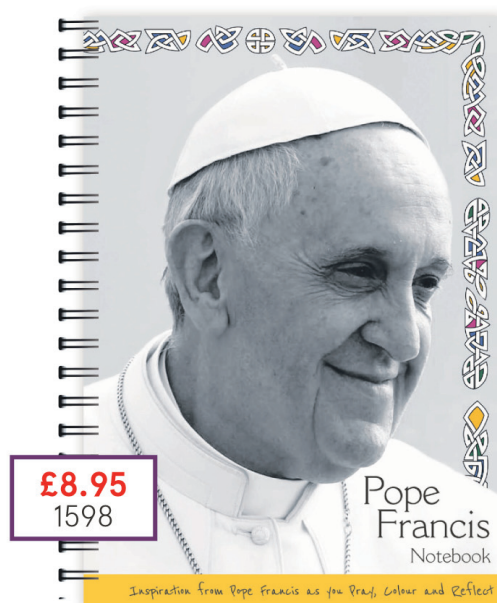
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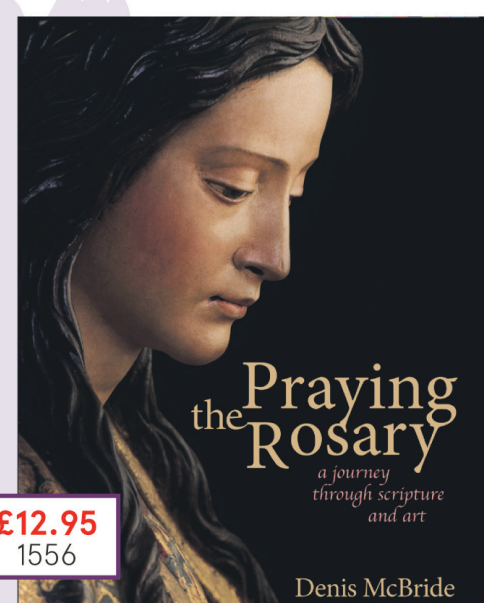
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