**UBI expert testimony: Prof Matthew Johnson, Lancaster University**

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There are many different ways of introducing the qualifications for my testimony. I am Professor of Politics & Policy at Lancaster University. I have contributed to a number of leading publications on the health case for Universal Basic Income (UBI) and am Principal Investigator on a Wellcome Trust funded project examining the prospective impact of UBI on anxiety and depression among 14-24 year olds. However, the qualification I wish first to draw upon is my coming from a family of working class trans-generationally lapsed Catholics and being raised in the West End of Newcastle.

Our lapsing occurred four generations ago on both sides of my father’s parents’ families. My grandfather’s father retaliated to being beaten with a cane by his parish Priest in Brandon, Durham for not attending Mass by punching him. Having been viewed as someone capable of attending university, he was de facto excluded from and blacklisted within the community and forced to move to Newcastle in search of work. He ended up being a union leader in the shipyards in the inter-war period and died of industrial-related diseases, shouting on his death bed, that there would be ‘nae priests in this hoos’. My grandmother’s family were Irish Catholic migrants, who lived in Benwell and attended St Joseph’s. My grandmother recalled tales of begging for leftovers from the priests’ meals, having literally half chewed food thrown at her and other children after an often lengthy wait in the freezing cold. Their family lapsed when, grieving on the morning of the death of the second of three babies to die shortly after birth, the priest barged his way into their living room to demand that my great-grandmother be ‘churched’. The priest was physically thrown out and the family renounced their Catholicism immediately. Far from forgetting about the Catholic Church, the act of lapsing had a transgenerational effect of burning it into our minds as an object of institutional subjugation, exploitation and oppression. For us, references to ‘the Church’, remained references to the Catholic Church, even in a country with established Anglicanism. As an academic, I have met countless others who find themselves in a similar position, mainly in Ireland, but also throughout Britain: the Church seen as akin to an abusive ex-partner that looms large over the family. Why is this relevant to the policy of UBI?

As a faith, Catholicism has express concern both for the dignity of work and compassion for suffering. However, the way in which it has expressed those concerns has created structures that permitted the very sort of outcomes that led to loss of faith and trans-generational anger. By arrogating responsibility for provision for the poor via alms, the Church adopted roles that the Roman state had previously performed via the *Cura Annonae* or ‘care of Annona’. The *cura* was, in a very real sense, one of the first forms of basic income. By granting free, but not enslaved, residents of Rome bread, oil and other essentials, the state freed its citizens from the possibility of domination by those who would exploit vulnerability to extract demeaning services. Citizens lived in the knowledge that they could survive without fear of starvation. This helped to ensure that they could exercise clear judgment in the kinds of employment they undertook, avoiding particularly demeaning conditions that became commonplace upon Rome’s fall. As the Roman state dissolved, the Church increasingly institutionalised charity as virtue by endorsing and organising forms of giving through alms and private donation. While this is grounded in virtue, it has created precisely the sort of real-terms inequality of status and inter-personal dependence that gave rise to the sort of abuse, exploitation and subjugation that has blighted the Church as an institution in recent years.

The Church has often served those in the poorest communities, who perform the most dangerous and harmful work and are mired in the most egregious desperation that is realised in abusive relationships, drug misuse and crime. All the evidence suggests that such conditions are likely to increase as we face the dual crisis of the environmental emergency and the loss of jobs to automation. Not only is the number of jobs likely to reduce considerably, those jobs that do remain will have to be carefully circumscribed for their impact on the environment. As a Professor at a leading University, it is my duty to testify that, no matter how industrious or brilliant they may be, our students face unprecedented challenges in finding work. The jobs they find are inevitably beneath roles for which their qualifications were intended. Doing well, today, depends largely on luck and having parents who know others. Doing badly, today, is almost entirely beyond anyone’s control. If people find work, that work is often poorly paid, conducted in dangerous and mind-numbing conditions with no prospect of progression. If people find themselves out of work, they have few opportunities to re-enter the workforce. Older workers, who started life in low-productivity, relatively high sociality, jobs, often find themselves completely lost in high-productivity, low sociality jobs of today. Effort, alone, is, by and large, wholly incapable of dragging someone out of their circumstances. Moreover, the evidence shows that, the more effort they put into their jobs, the more likely they are to develop stress-related illnesses, rendering them less able to take advantage of the few opportunities for advancement that remain.

Put simply, there is decreasing evidence of dignity in work and increasing evidence of people being subject, again, to the kind of conditions that pervaded during my grandparents’ youth. That is apparent in the rise of food banks which, while offering an essential service, highlight the capacity of individuals to abuse the vulnerability of others. There is no evidence that there are means of creating forms of employment that could change these circumstances.

In these circumstances, the Church should resist an impulse to return to granting individual priests power to distribute alms. It should become an advocate for redistribution while recognising separation of Church and state; taking care of people’s souls while leaving the state to take care of people’s bodies. The single biggest means of achieving this is by supporting the only policy capable of responding to the radical, unpredictable and all-encompassing sources of vulnerability within our socio-economic system: UBI.

The UK welfare system is long overdue for reform. Universal Credit was supposed to replace previous complicated schemes, but has been extremely inefficient. Claiming it requires people to fill in various complicated forms. It takes weeks to receive the first payment and is withdrawn too quickly when people start to earn small amounts of money. This means they stop benefits when people need them again quickly. That puts their entire life on hold, leaving them to rely on Wonga and other pay day lenders, like the dreaded Provvy of my grandparents’ era them, for cashflow. Universal Basic Income (UBI) guarantees everyone weekly income when they do not earn without fear of its being cancelled when they do. Paying everyone regardless of work status, age and amount of savings may at first seem extravagant and wasteful. However, the cost of administering means tested schemes far exceeds any payments to those who would be ineligible at present. In 2020/21, there was an estimated loss to the nation of £7.6 billion from fraud or error. UBI eradicates this and leads to a slimmer, simpler state for us all to navigate. This is aside from the changes in taxation that would eliminate any increase in income for the highest earners.

The current welfare system disincentives work for several reasons. In order to receive disability-related benefits, people have to demonstrate that they are completely inactive. Making oneself healthier by being active, socialising and participating in society increases the chances of losing benefits. Having disincentives to work traps people in poverty, not just economically, but psychologically too. Being unable to provide for oneself is debilitating. It is bad for self-respect and mental health and provides a bad example for children. Counter-intuitively, evidence suggests that, where UBI is introduced, these disincentives to work are removed. This is because, by paying everyone regularly, there are no longer disincentives stopping people from working and people are no longer stigmatised for receiving benefits. This means that people have the ability to be active, better themselves and provide the best role model for their children.

In effect, UBI is a living pension for all adult citizens, providing state support for basic needs in the same way as the Roman *Cura* before it. It would be a safety net during short periods of unemployment, giving people some time to support themselves and their family while looking for employment. This helps to stop them slipping into poverty and ensures that they do not face homelessness. As many infamous cases have shown, this is vital for us, as the current system does not keep us secure. There was the case of the diabetic British War Veteran whose Universal Credit payment lapsed, leaving him with no money to top up his electricity meter. This meant that he could not keep his medicine refrigerated, meaning that he went into a diabetic coma and died. In our country, people should not have the stress of worrying about meeting basic needs. We should not have to worry that taking on short-term work will leave us unable to support ourselves. UBI secures us from the many unpredictable events in modern society.

Pope Francis has done much to shift the Church in the right direction. Not only has he highlighted inequality and environmental crisis as evils to be confronted, he has called for states to take responsibility for the bodies of their citizens. As my wife considers the Christening of our young children, it is this temporal leadership that has attracted her to the possibility of conversion and me to the possibility of supporting her. This is taking place against a backdrop of residual anger in both of our families about the Church’s abuse of working people. That anger will not disappear until it is clear that the Church is leading on the crises of the day. Advocating for a policy with roots in ancient Rome should be a decision that aligns naturally with a modern Catholicism with a commitment to virtue bound up with practical recognition that mistakes of the past cannot be repeated. In separating Church and state in provision of security, UBI reduces scope for the Church to be associated with exploitation.