

## **NJPN Comment in the Catholic Universe — Henrietta Cullinan: Clothing and Justice**

Recently, two retail giants, Debenhams, with stores in 240 high streets, and Arcadia Group, owner of Top Shop among many others, went into administration, putting tens of thousands of shop workers, mostly women, at risk of losing their jobs.

While many are opposed to fast fashion, others still dream of a new outfit for every night out, even though these days there is never a night out. Knowing this, fast fashion brand Pretty Little Things has been giving away cash prizes of up to £10,000 in order to lure back its customers. By its very nature fast fashion depends on exploitation and wastefulness, with many clothes ending up in landfill.

I really enjoy clothes. I enjoy the sensation of different textures and colours. But through lockdown I've found upcycling a rewarding pastime. Through mending and darning jeans in particular, I have learnt a lot about their construction. Supposedly workwear, they turn out to be not fit for purpose. The fabric is brittle and comes apart after just a few washes. The rivets and buttons make them unrecyclable. In contrast, a wellmade cardigan can last as long as a building, unless it's attacked by moths.

In a time when I hardly step out of my pool sliders, clothes have acquired a new weightiness. Getting dressed to go out and meet a socially distanced friend, means taking care to be warm enough, and appear 'decent', as my grandmother would have said.

During Advent we're supposed to be getting ready. It is a custom, after all, in many cultures to buy new clothes for an important feast day. Clothing images feature strongly in an Isaiah reading from the Third Sunday of Advent. 'He has clothed me with a robe of salvation and wrapped me in a mantle of justice' [61:11].

In this image of bride and bride groom, adorned with ornaments and jewels, the garment in question represents perfect justice. Isaiah writes, 'Look, they are falling apart like a garment, the moth will eat them up' (50:9). Accusers with no case to answer are like a badlymade piece of clothing. This garment represents shame and emptiness.

Every fifty metres on my high street of boarded up shops there is someone hungry and begging. The council has forgotten the Christmas decorations. The high street giants need to read the signs of the times. In a time of injustice and inequality, we know their garments will fall apart.

**Henrietta Cullinan is a peace activist and writer.**