



NJPN Comment

From goal to vision

Fr Rob Esdaile

The word 'GOAL!' was splashed across the front pages of newspapers last week, not because of the resumption of the Premiership season but because a 22-year-old Manchester United player, Marcus Rashford, who himself had experienced childhood hunger, had forced the government to agree to provide food vouchers over the summer holidays for children on free school meals.

Perhaps most striking was the footballer's celebratory tweet after the Prime Ministerial climbdown: 'Just look at what we can do when we come together. THIS is England in 2020.'

As we enter probably the deepest recession in the country's history, we need to focus intensely on the growing impact of poverty on the young. Even before Covid-19, nearly a third of children (4.2 million kids) were growing up in poverty, with 1.3 million eligible for free school meals. During the last three months more than 200,000 children are estimated to have had to skip meals. Undoubtedly the economic situation of families is going to worsen dramatically as the furloughing scheme comes to an end.

One early indicator of the direction of travel is the rapid growth of dependence on foodbanks. There was an 87 per cent increase in food parcels issued by the Trussell Trust's network in April (with a 107 per cent increase in parcels destined for children). What was originally a last-ditch defence has become 'the new normal' for many.

Meanwhile, more than a third of pupils are reportedly not engaging with school work, whether through lack of parental support, difficult domestic situations or personal mental health issues, the full extent of which we shall only be able to assess fully once children return to the classroom. The effect of current pressures is the creation of a wounded generation that will carry the scars of social exclusion and educational failure through life, with implications for the health and happiness of everyone. What Pope Francis called 'the throwaway society' – one which tolerates exclusion and allows hope of a better future to die in the hearts of its young – cannot thrive.

Let Rashford's tweet become our question: 'Just look at what we can do when we come together.' What can we do? What future do we commit to, post-Covid? What 'new normal' do we want? Ensuring that children don't go hungry in the holidays shouldn't feel like a great victory. But 'THIS is England in 2020'. So yes, celebrate Rashford's 'goal'; and then ask: what's next?

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