
Poland, economic growth amidst widespread household poverty

During the past Christmas season, the average expense of a Polish family amounted to 1,500 zlotys (about 375 euros). The figures are contained in the "Report on Poverty" drawn up by representatives of the "Szlachetna paczka" initiative (Generous Strenna/gift, a Catholic initiative) seeking to alleviate the hardships of the poor every year at Christmas time. Even though in 2019 the national economic growth rate exceeded 4%, one in three Polish families - the Report points out - cannot afford a week's holiday. The Report shows that the number of people in absolute poverty in Poland is increasing year after year and that people spend less than €2 a day. In 2018, the number of destitute people, which grew by almost half a million compared to the previous year, exceeded 2 million.

A piece of stale bread... "I'm more worried about the cold than about being hungry," said Maria (75 years old), occasionally taking a piece of stale bread out of a small bag. "I only eat when I'm about to faint from hunger," she continued, trying to hide her discomfort with a tentative smile, and added, "to make the bread last longer, I roast it in a pan, and so I don't waste anything. Mary is alone and, like 41% of elderly people in difficulty, she rarely sees her children who live elsewhere.

She lives in a tiny flat with no bathroom in a medium-sized Polish town.

In the only room stands an old coal-burning stove, which however consumes a lot in winter. Coal and wood are expensive, while an electric stove is out of the question: the electricity bill would be unaffordable.

Medicines and health care. That's one of the many stories recorded by Strenna volunteers, published in the Report whose authors point out that 17% of Polish inhabitants don't have enough money to afford expensive medicines or specialist medical visits or, ultimately, the dentist. In 2018, in an economically flourishing Poland, there were 276,000 elderly people in absolute poverty, 60,000 more than in 2017. State allowance amounts to less than 600 zlotys (150 euros) per month. Thus, after paying electricity, gas bills and rent, many people have to decide whether to buy food rather than medicines necessary to alleviate pain caused by illnesses that are often chronic or not properly treated.

Payments and bills. In Poland, the number of people in 'relative poverty' has also increased in recent years. The authors of the Report note that 45% of Polish households have no savings, while 5% cannot even afford regular payments of bills or taxes.

According to the Report, 14% of Poles (about 5 million people) can't afford to spend more than half of the national average.

Data from the Central Statistics Bureau (GUS) show that the average monthly income per capita in Polish households between 2018 and 2019 did not exceed 1,715 zlotys (approximately €500).

Volunteers and benefactors. In 2018 Generous Strenna volunteers helped people whose average per capita income was below 366 zlotys (92 euros). Eighty-two per cent of them have a sick or disabled family member and 30 per cent can't cover the costs of treatment. In Christmas 2019, Generous Strenna reached out to 14,652 families who received assistance averaging 3,149 zlotys (787 euros). Generous Strenna, launched in 2019 for the 19th time, is supported by the dedicated commitment of 11,000 volunteers made possible through the contribution (economic and material) of more than half a million benefactors.

A visit and a smile. Before bringing the Christmas Strenna into every home, the volunteers visited 23,000 families several times to find out about more about their lives, their needs and dreams. In total there were 37,750 meetings in 633 locations throughout Poland. "Very often a handshake, a friendly smile or a brief conversation prompts the most precious gift in the life of the needy: an impulse for change, the hope of overcoming a difficult situation", Strenna founders write on the initiative's website www.szlachetnapaczka.pl, remembering that "very often more than material help, the disadvantaged need attention and the care of other people."

All-year-round support. As seen from the experiences of volunteers visiting thousands of houses throughout the country, material help is often not enough. Szlachetna Paczka has therefore developed other initiatives that offer legal support and health care to individuals who find themselves in a difficult situation as a result of illness or problems with the law. These families are given access to special programmes.

In the case of the elderly, a special aid package includes support for participating in meetings and for the social inclusion programme at local level.

And these are no longer just Christmas gifts offered throughout the year. Alongside Generous Strenna it must not be forgotten that in the country there are many other initiatives for destitute people and families, including Caritas and other ecclesial realities. Since 1993, for example, in the month of January the Great Charity Orchestra (Wielka Orkiestra ?wi?tecznej Pomocy) organizes a concert in one of Poland's most important localities, at the end of which it announces the amount of money received through the collection and sale of various objects offered for auction by prominent personalities. This year's achievement, announced Sunday, January 12, exceeding all previous highs, topped a total of 115 million zlotys (over € 28 million). The promoters of the initiative will allocate the collected funds to the purchase of medical equipment for the paediatric wards of hospitals throughout the country.

Anna T. Kowalewska