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FAITH IN SOCIETY: RENEWING SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

INTRODUCTION

The last time I was here in Oscott College was in the presence of Pope Benedict. Who can forget those marvellous days last September, or the great encouragement we all received from our Holy Father's presence and words? He strongly affirmed the role of faith in our society today.

The Prime Minister, in his response at Birmingham Airport at the time of the departure of the Holy Father, also made important points. In particular he spoke about the determination of the Coalition Government to create 'a culture of greater social responsibility'. And, he stressed, the faith communities can be 'architects of that new culture.'

Soon after that Visit, the Bishops' Conference reflected on it and spoke out about our determination to play our part in this effort. We initiated three steps which, as a Conference, we could take. The first took place in Liverpool last February. It was a Conference bringing together many who are involved in the activities of the Catholic Church in social responsibility. They do not often meet. Indeed part of the purpose of the Conference was to draw up something of a profile of those activities, although we quickly realised that we are far from having a full picture of them.

The second step was to consider more deeply and explicitly the conceptual framework of ideas which shape Catholic social action. Hence there was an academic seminar in London a short while ago on this theme. A discussion paper based on the day is being issued very shortly by the Bishops' Conference. I hope it will be useful.

The third step takes place on 6 April and is in the form of a public Conference for those in political institutions, in the civil service and in public service to engage with both the reality and the theory of the Catholic Church's presence in our society today as it looks to foster a culture of greater social responsibility.

In what I want to say this evening, I am going to draw on all of this.

Further, what I want to say will present to you some of the key concepts, or tools that an architect of greater social responsibility might need to draw on. These will include an understanding of the human person, and of that person in community; the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity; the role of key intermediate institutions in society; the theme of gift and giftedness. Finally I will reflect on how this vision of society and our commitment to it shapes our prayer as a priestly people.

THE PERSON AND THE COMMON GOOD.

There are many different phrases by which people express their understanding of what it is to be a human person. One such phrase is 'homo economicus'. This means that the true meaning of the person is to be found in economic activity, in buying and selling, in meeting our own desires and needs. This, it is suggested, is what gives meaning to our existence.

We will not agree, I'm sure, that this is a complete explanation of the meaning of our existence. But it is certainly expressive of much current day-to-day behaviour. Indeed some would say that today everything has a price, even friendships and relationships: they are a matter of calculation of benefit and risk and, at the end of the day, there is a balance sheet!

Another similar phrase in use today is that of the 'unencumbered self'. This suggests that what we are striving to achieve is a way of life in which I can stand alone, as far as possible free from duty towards others, free to pursue just what I want, in my own space, with my own time, in my own way. Once again, we will recognise that this cannot be the whole picture. Yet we also recognise that it is popular.

Bringing together these two understandings of what it means to be a person leads to the ironic conclusion: *Tesco ergo sum!* We are brought together only by the market!

Our Christian vision of what it is to be a human person is much fuller, more rounded, than that. We are, essentially, relational beings. We understand ourselves correctly only in relationship with others. We come into the world in the context of relationships. We know that our destiny is best understood in relationship to God. We find our fulfilment, most significantly, in relationships with others. What we treasure most about life is always tied up with our relationships to others: to those around us, to the Lord, to God.

Indeed, within this understanding of the person is another important truth: we are beings who are always reaching out beyond ourselves. We reach out towards a greater understanding of the truth, of love. We reach out, instinctively, for that which goes beyond us: we are 'self-transcending beings'. We know that we are not self-explaining or self-sufficient.

Now if this is the fundamental truth about every person, then it is the highest truth also about how we live together in society. Within our communities, within our society, the good of every person is what is most fundamental.

Another way of putting this is that no-one should be written off: not the elderly, the prisoners, the unborn, nor the less gifted. All are endowed with dignity and qualities proper to a human being as such.

'Homo economicus' will not see it thus: recognition is tied to contribution. A person unable to contribute will be held in little or no regard.

The ‘unencumbered self’ will not see it thus: recognition will be granted to those who have ‘made it’, who have achieved status and self-sufficiency – the ‘celebrity comes to mind.

But in our architecture, the purpose of the enterprise is the common good, the good of each and every person in society. Now the common good is more than the sum total of the good of individuals. That is an additional sum. The common good is more like a multiplication, in which the presence of a ‘0’ always means that the result is ‘0’, no matter how many others numbers are in the multiplication. This means that if anyone is totally omitted from the good produced in a society then the common good is not being served.

Some trends in society diminish this focus on the good of the person. Bureaucracy and regulation, of themselves, do that. Think, for a moment, of the effect of regulation in some care-homes. A patient refused medication that is needed. Some staff simply tick the box: ‘refused’. The effort to coax, to entice, to persuade that person to take the medication is not part of the regime of regulation. A trust in regulation actually fosters inhumanity, for humanity is always a matter of social relationships. Humanity is served by how we get on together as well as by the effectiveness of our service of one another. So both are needed. Indeed, we can say that if social relationships have been so weakened, then the reliance on regulation may indeed come to the fore. Welfare workers do indeed need protection when social relationships have broken down long before contact is made with official sources.

If this sense of the ‘common good’ is to thrive, not only is a vision of it required but also a depth of compassion. It is compassion, or fellow-feeling, which helps us to bridge the gaps between us. While there is indeed a moral imperative to keep the focus on the person, there is also a need for a certain quality of person to sustain that practical effort. The Archbishop of Canterbury, for example, frequently speaks of the kind of ‘character’ needed in society today. Others tend to explore the traditional notion of the ‘virtues’ as a way of highlighting some of the qualities needed for this vision of society to be realised: prudence to temper rashness; courage to counter opportunism; justice towards others rather than an insistence on rights, and justice towards God rather than today’s idolatries; temperance rather than consumerism and excess.

This insistence in our architecture on the common good begins to point to the true purpose of wealth creation, undoubtedly a good in itself, but properly aimed at the common good of all. This, too, is the purpose of financial services and, indeed, of the state itself, existing not for some purpose of its own, but in order to serve the common good of its people.

Here may I add another thought from our Christian perspective. In the delivery of services, especially to those who are less well off, we need more than professionalism. We are responding not simply to an opportunity, but to a clear moral imperative. And that is best understood in its deepest Gospel roots: as a act of love. Indeed the common good is fully served by that Christian vision of love: the self-forgetful love seen in Christ himself.

SUBSIDIARITY AND SOLIDARITY

These two interlocking principles are key to the work of an social architect. Taken together, and held in tension, they set sights on the detailed application of some of the broader principles we have been looking at.

Subsidiarity insists that action be taken at the most efficient and appropriate level, as near as possible to the recipients and contributors. Subsidiarity is a guard against excessive centralisation and a champion of the local level. It is, in some ways, a version of localism.

Yet subsidiarity also contains the Latin word ‘subsidium’, pointing to the truth that the local level often needs the support of the higher level in order to fulfil its proper functions. That help may be professional, financial or administrative. But it should be offered to assist effectiveness, not to exert control.

Subsidiarity is based on the recognition of the legitimate competence to be found at the lower level. And this is where the place and importance of local level institutions come in. There are many institutions which make up civil society. They can be clubs and churches, societies and local enterprises. But their health and effectiveness is crucial to the health of a society as a whole. Indeed the state itself is always ordered to this level if it is to serve the common good.

The effectiveness and vitality sought at this local level should also include political participation. Local institutions should have their role in the political life of the society and their members encouraged to do the same. In other words, these local institutions can never – properly speaking – be deemed to be private or semi-private if they are seeking to serve the common good. They must have their space, and integrity, within the wider civil society for they serve a crucial role as intermediaries, especially in finding balances between the interests of the individual and those of the state.

In contrast, and in interplay, with this is the principle of solidarity. Solidarity means always thinking in terms of ‘we’ and not ‘me’. Solidarity expresses the fundamental bond between all people. It is learned and fashioned in the family, in the wider social settings of childhood, in school, at work and reaches out into the fuller society, indeed the global network of mankind.

Solidarity creates a ‘fellowship of goods’. As a principle it can be simply expressed: wherever some are excluded, then no-one can fully enjoy the good things of life. This we can sense, for example, at a family gathering from which some are excluded because of bad feelings. It is the essence of the Gospel parable of Dives and Lazarus. Since we are fundamentally bound together, then the good things of life are part of this ‘fellowship of goods’ and never simply a private prosperity.

Solidarity is obstructed by sin. It is the opposite of selfishness, which, of course, finds a way in everywhere. Structures of selfishness, of sin, impede a true expression of solidarity. For example, the wrong use of private property, the wrong use of power, the wrong use of information, information gathering and publicity, are all experienced as the sinfulness of structures, rooted in the selfishness of individuals.

If solidarity is to be seen and experienced then there are some crucial tests to be put about how actions impact on the poorest. The repeated publication of photographs of paedophiles cause repeated distress to their victims. Is this considered by editors? The paying of huge bonuses is an affront to the poor, especially those who have suffered proportionately more than others in the financial crisis. Complex bureaucratic procedures impact most on those who might be most dependent on them. Solidarity has some hard, demanding and, maybe surprising edges.

GIFT AND GIFTEDNESS

Beneath, or within, these structural points lies a fundamental spirit or additional dimension. So far we have looked at an understanding of the person and the common good, at the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, at the role of intermediate institutions and at the uses of power and property. But now I would like to underpin them all by a further reflection.

This is a dimension strongly put forward by Benedict XVI in his Encyclical 'Caritas in Veritate'. There he says that written into all truly human affairs is a logic of gift. Gratuity gives shape to who we truly are and all that we best perform.

What does this logic of gift mean? Well each of us comes into the world as a gift. And we are welcomed not only as a gift, but also as a giver – a giver of joy, hope, anxiety and love. And this continues throughout our activities, when understood at their best. Indeed, there is a gift within every worthwhile exchange.

I saw a furniture van the other day and its slogan said: 'We are happy when you are happy.' Moving furniture was not the whole story. There was something more to be had, which gave the actual task a new dimension. In teaching and learning, too, there is always an element of gift, something constantly exchanged between the teacher and the learner. And think of team activities such as music or sport. The outcome, for the most part, is more than the sum of the individual contracts. There is a goodness given and received, a joy that rubs off onto the other. It is this additional 'extra' that truly makes us who we are and to which we respond when the best is brought out of us, too.

Pope Benedict is looking for ways in which we can begin to recognise this 'gratuitousness' of all social interaction. When we can name and recognise it, then we can foster it, build on it and discover again what an important element in our well-being it truly is. It is not, of course, absent. There are many ways in which individuals and companies try to 'give something back', including a 'social dividend' in their aims and calculations. But this dimension of economic and social activity could be much more widely recognised and promoted.

Indeed, this sense of gift and giftedness needs to start with each and every one of us. It is the key to being a volunteer and to many community-style initiatives. We need to get up, to get involved with others, to get into giving mode and thereby discover so much that is best about ourselves, our neighbourhood and our society. The 'Citizens' organisation is a good example of this.

This theme of 'gift' has deep roots in the language and experience of our faith. Eucharist is the great school of gratuity. At Mass we learn that everything lives by

gift, and that everything is fulfilled by being given and received. In fact we can go further and say that this trace of giftedness, of giving and receiving, is the very trace of God in all things.

This points, of course, to the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, that mystery of God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons between whom and within whose unity there is a constant and creative exchange of love and truth. Out of that flow of love and truth comes creation, from there is born the restlessness of our hearts, and in that same flow all creation will find its fulfilment. This is what fulfils the sense of self-transcendence that we identified earlier as a hall-mark of our human nature. We reach out because we know we are not self-explaining, nor self-sufficient. We are a gift and we reach out in thanksgiving and praise.

All of this is fulfilled in the person of Christ, he who is pure gift, given and returned in the mystery of life and salvation. In this Christ is a cosmic figure, a point of truth for all time, from its beginnings to its final end. And in this he reminds us that our giftedness reaches across the generations. We are indebted to those before us. We are responsible to those who follow.

Christ shows us, too, how the truth of gift is ultimately seen in the Cross and in the Resurrection. The cross, the sign of total self-forgetfulness, is the true picture of love, of God's ultimate solidarity, and the resurrection the picture of its fulfilment.

A PRIESTLY PEOPLE

In conclusion I would like to say that the work of building a culture of greater social responsibility is also a profoundly spiritual one. All that we have been talking about touches the spirit of the human person. And that spirit finds its true focus and purpose when it comes into unity with the spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit. Within that experience of faith, prayer is the first fruit. So what shape might our prayer take when we have in mind this task of building up social responsibility?

Permit me to return to the Visit of Pope Benedict. In his homily in Westminster Cathedral, the Holy Father said this:

‘The visitor to this Cathedral cannot fail to be struck by the great crucifix dominating the nave, which portrays Christ’s body, crushed by suffering, overwhelmed by sorrow, the innocent victim whose death has reconciled us with the Father and given us a share in the very life of God. The Lord’s outstretched arms seem to embrace the entire Church, lifting up to the Father all the ranks of the faithful who gather round the altar of the Eucharistic sacrifice and share its fruits. The crucified Lord stands above and before us as the source of life and salvation “the high priest of the good things to come”.’

In this meditation, the Pope directs our thoughts to Christ the High Priest, who embraces us all on the Cross, thereby including us in that one great act of offering. Then, he makes this same, unique sacrifice available to us in every celebration of the Mass, so that we may experience it afresh in this real and sacramental manner. What is more, Christ, risen into the presence of the eternal Father, makes an everlasting

offering to the Father of all that is united to him, until everything is renewed in the new creation.

Our participation in this great and continuous priestly act of Christ is our priestly mission. We are to be a priestly people, consciously offering our lives, our world, to the Father in union with Christ himself. This we do through our participation in the Mass, through our daily prayer, not least our Morning Offering, through our constant striving to be one with Christ who alone has the power to make us part of his offering to the Father. Then nothing in our lives remains futile or pointless, no suffering, no frustration, not even death itself.

This is the priestly ministry to which we are called. As Pope Benedict said: ‘Let us pray then that the Catholics of this land will become ever more conscious of their dignity as a priestly people, called to consecrate the world to God.’

This is our high calling, one which we can affirm, explain to our children, encourage and celebrate.

In closing, some more words from the same homily of Pope Benedict:

‘I invite you once more to look to Christ who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection. I ask you to unite yourselves ever more fully to the Lord, sharing in his sacrifice on the Cross and offering him that “spiritual worship” which embraces every aspect of our lives.....and in doing so may your join....in building a society truly worthy of man , worthy of your nation’s highest traditions.’

+Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster.