

Reconciliation, together, for the Common Good

Thank you to Fr Paul for inviting me, it's really an honour and a pleasure to be with you.

May I speak in the name of the living God +

When Fr Paul asked me to speak my first reaction was 'I'd love to' swiftly followed by worry that I wouldn't be up to it. I'm not an experienced speaker. But when I saw that St Therese was involved I thought, well maybe it will be ok! Her simple theology, her heart, her simple faith made it seem do-able.

Fr Paul has asked me to tell you a bit about the group I started called Together for the Common Good. We are inspired by the ecumenical partnership of my late father, Bishop David Sheppard, who was the Anglican Bishop, and Archbishop Derek Worlock his Catholic counterpart, in Liverpool during the 1970s, 80s and 90s.

Like them, Together for the Common Good wants to encourage Christians of different traditions to work together for the Common Good. We do this through facilitating conversations with people across estranged positions. We always ensure a balance of different Christian denominations. For example we are holding cross party cross denomination conversations in parliament, and working on a pilot Common Good Conversation bringing together people to discuss housing, property and homelessness. We are producing a book on the Common Good, and we are writing up our research on ecumenical joint action for social justice. We are Anglicans, Catholics and Free Church members and we also work with people of other faiths and secular allies.

Why are we doing this? Our political economy is increasingly favouring the rich while the bottom is falling out of our society; something profound is happening which is creating devastating consequences for the poorest and most vulnerable. We need the Common Good.

Christian morality has been reduced largely by the media to issues of sexuality but Christian morality is in fact about everything to do with human dignity. So Together for the Common Good is about encouraging all Christians to see that the gospels are about justice as well as charity and that there is a need for every one of us to play a part. The church (that means you and me, not just the clergy) needs to reacquaint itself with this, its natural territory.

Charity is a wonderful thing but on its own holds the dangerous potential of propping up a system that generates poverty and inequality. It can sustain the status quo and can provide the rich with an excuse to keep the poor at arm's length. Whereas the Common Good is about solutions that allow all to flourish, where no one is excluded. It is therefore, about reaching across different interests, and as Jean Vanier says, about encountering the other.

We understand the Common Good to be the set of conditions that allow all to flourish without exception. But it is not 'a thing' that can be neatly described in one sentence, nor is it a political third way, nor is it the big society, it is not about volunteering. No, it is a practice. The Common Good comes about through the 'best possible conversation' where estranged positions can be reconciled using the application of the principles of Catholic social teaching. Increasingly Christians of other denominations, other faith traditions and secular allies are turning to these principles and finding them useful.

We are advocating all Christians working together, with others to bring about transformational change. We will need to reconcile polarised positions. It will require every one of us to work for this at all levels. We need to counter the excessive power of the market, but also of the centralising state that encourages dependency. We will do this by building up civil society. The Christian churches above all, have the networks and Christianity has a fundamental commitment to reconciliation and standing by the most vulnerable, so we are each being called to stand up here. This is too important to leave to politicians. We have a gift to share, we mustn't hide it. There's no doubt this will require courage and it won't be easy. There will be resistance. Like St Therese we can only do what we can, and do it step by step.

We're all inspired by something aren't we? Together for the Common Good is building on the foundations laid by the partnership between my late father Bishop David Sheppard, an Anglican, and the late Catholic Archbishop, Derek Worlock. Their appointments to Liverpool coincided and they arrived within 6 months of each other in 1975-1976. My father took a bottle of wine round to Archbishop's house on the night of

Derek's arrival. They agreed to meet. It may be easier for people to believe that it was, but it was not, just chemistry. There was no instant rapport.

But, straightaway together, they saw the urgent needs of the city. Naturally there was disagreement on doctrine but they decided to put differences aside to prioritise the needs of the people.

They discovered they shared priorities – to overcome the divisions of sectarianism and to see every person in their dioceses flourish, to ensure that no one was left out of opportunities to thrive. And where they saw conditions that conspired against this they felt they had to act. Unemployment, prejudice, deprivation and racism were making it impossible for some sections of the community to thrive. They could have approached things separately but they were inspired to see that they were more than the sum of their parts: there was a complementarity to their partnership.

They realised that their calling was to demonstrate solidarity and partnership so they set about planning their relationship; it wasn't reliant on whim or circumstance or driven by looming issues. There was discipline in relationship building. They committed to it, spoke on the phone most days, prayed regularly together, shared platforms together, made joint speeches and travelled together to South America, South Africa, Assisi, and across the UK. In one instance David was invited to Enniskillen and refused to attend unless Derek was too. He didn't go and wrote to the Minister to explain why. But they were loyal sons of their traditions and never crossed the line. They talked about experiencing the pain of not taking communion together.

They discovered that their traditions shared the preferential option for the poor and their love of people brought them together. But they weren't classic anti-poverty campaigners; they worked with all sections of the community including the establishment, industry and civic leaders and encouraged everyone to see that society is only truly successful if everyone flourishes. They were acutely aware of authenticity and deliberately spent time deep in communities, listening when no one else was listening.

They became bridge builders and honest brokers, mediating between polarised positions, between government and local government, between communities and police during riots, between police and Hillsborough families, between industry and unions. Here there were divided communities and very deprived communities, to all intents and purposes abandoned by central government. Communities of the left-

behind. Essentially this was a political friendship across deep difference borne from human courage and the Holy Spirit.

I came to all this by a very circuitous route. I understand the backstage of the Anglican Church, growing up in a bishop's house, a public building; I watched it all as a child in South London and all through my teens in Liverpool. Being the bishop's daughter was an unwelcome burden at that time. After I left home I didn't go to church. It was in my mid 20s I met my future husband and through him encountered the Catholic Church. I had a powerful conversion experience.

When I was received into the Catholic Church it felt like coming home, like I was starting all over again. St Therese was very helpful to me at that time: a private spiritual journey, a ten-year period where I sought obscurity and privacy and struggled with direction. During this time I discovered Jean Vanier and his teaching about humility and vulnerability. And I was given the gift of motherhood in my late thirties and through that found a real purpose in life.

My parents both had a profound faith, which I didn't appreciate when I was young. When my father died in 2005 we were very blessed with an extraordinarily happy bereavement. Then my mother died in 2010, and as with my father we did much of our grieving together while she was still alive so I was very well prepared. She gave me a gift - in the manner of her dying - a certainty of life after death. There was no grief, because I knew where she had gone. I have had an acute sense since then that every day of my life is precious and I must now use well what I have been given.

So my role changed. As the only child I became responsible for my father's legacy. I wondered to what extent was he familiar with Catholic social teaching? And how much Derek knew about David's tradition of urban ministry? I started to think about the cross-fertilisation process that made their partnership so fruitful. One day I found myself drawing on the back of an envelope – I drew a cross: with the intersection at the heart of the words ecumenism and social justice. I remember thinking 'something special happens at that intersection'. I didn't know any more than this, it was like looking through a blurred lens and I couldn't see clearly. But I did feel I had to do something about it. I didn't know what, but kept praying and asking God to show me. I felt that I was being asked to carry forward something but felt completely out of my depth. I began to feel as if God had brought me through my own rather messy journey to prepare me for something.

Over a year I followed a trail, meeting people, reading, writing, praying. Gradually Together for the Common Good began to emerge. I began to see, like St Therese, that all the spiritual doubts and difficulties in my life that I'd seen as stumbling blocks were now stepping-stones.

So is the inspiration behind Together for the Common Good useful here? Rather than going over and over the same ground about how can we reconcile the Protestant and Catholic communities, why not instead think about what needs to be done and what can we do together? It's through helping the weak that we will find our hidden resources and strength, it's through living a deep encounter with the vulnerable that the Common Good will be revealed. Similarly it's through working side-by-side that we will learn to trust. The key is to face outward and not inward. It's all in the body language – by standing side-by-side and focusing on a joint project you cannot focus inward. It is humbling and mitigates against pride. Focus on the human needs in society, not on each other's differences.

The principles of Catholic social thought can help here. They have for too long been a hidden treasure: human dignity; community and participation; care for creation; dignity in work; peace and reconciliation; solidarity and subsidiarity. They are tied to the gospel and are meant to be used together and not separately. They are a special gift that the Catholic community can share with the world.

How do you think these principles could be applied in your community? There needs to be a direct link from our faith to our actions. Our spiritual lives will be limited if we keep the real world at arm's length. This is why Pope Francis wants us to get 'bruised, hurting and dirty and smelling like sheep'. We're not always going to get it right but we need to get stuck in.

When you see deprivation, this is a form of abandonment; Jean Vanier calls it a humiliation. The rest of society doesn't care: so in that situation we need to live alongside people who are humiliated by poverty and disadvantage and make friends. It is our task to bridge the gap of ignorance and misunderstanding between areas of affluence and deprivation: facilitate that encounter and work against inequality.

This is what Pope Francis means by 'a church for the poor of the poor'. It will be done in small steps by everyone taking responsibility and not waiting for politicians, or church leaders, to take the first step. As he says in the wonderful *Evangelii Gaudium* 'we are all missionary disciples', he means you and me; we can't stand back and leave it to the clergy. This is a new time.

And don't give up our Christian gift of reconciliation to politicians. It's not good enough to say we'll settle for an uneasy balance of power: it's about forgiveness. But forgiveness is not in the human condition, it is a grace, so we need to pray for it. It is a gift. Look at the Tutsi and Hutu stories in Rwanda; the painful, beautiful work of forgiveness in South Africa. It all depends on you and me to take up the cross wherever and whoever we are.

David and Derek said in their book, *Better Together*, 'Over and over again we were advised to leave well alone because it was impossible to tell how close to the surface there still lay the sectarian violence and hatreds of the past. We both weighed the advice as seriously as was merited - and decided that we must press ahead.' They put the needs of the city first, and demonstrated their joint witness, which in a way, gave permission to others; and over time, sectarianism withered away.

Going back to the cross on the back of that envelope three years ago: the words social justice and ecumenism. God wants us to be at that intersection. Something happens when we collaborate on a common project with Christians of other traditions, particularly across Protestant Catholic boundaries. There is something special, inherent in that and it sets an example of bridging across difference. And by virtue of our joint networks and our shared commitment to the most vulnerable, I believe that we as Christians particularly are being called to a special collaborative role in the great task of building a movement for the Common Good in civil society. Once we are together, we will also need to work with those of other faith traditions and our secular allies.

I am not without doubt. I have always lacked confidence and in spite of everything I do suffer from 'imposter syndrome' expecting someone to come and tap me on the shoulder and say 'you really don't belong here!' or 'you're out of your depth, leave it to the big boys!' Internal voices of doubt plague me too: 'why are you wasting your time? Just walk away.' I worry too much and then realise how stupid I've been and turn back to God and ask for more help. I need constant spiritual nourishment to overcome this. I have spiritual direction and make short retreats as often as I can.

Sometimes it's not always clear what we should be doing and what God wants for us? Even if we know what we need to do, it can be difficult to take the first step.

Is there anyone else here today who is held back because they feel they're out of their depth, inadequate or 'unworthy'?

My favourite part of the mass is "I am not worthy to receive you ", "just say the word, and my soul shall be healed ". If you, like me, struggle with feelings of unworthiness, it's reassuring to know we're in good company. Moses, David, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul all knew what it was like to feel unworthy. If you want examples of people in the Bible who thought they had it all together, then your examples are Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Herod and the Pharisees. Which group would you like to identify with?

Jeremiah thought he was unworthy too. Jeremiah's excuse for why he should not be a prophet for God was "I don't know how to speak" because he was too inexperienced. Moses said that same thing 800 years before - he felt he was too old for a new career at 80. God did not accept Moses' excuses, and He also did not accept Jeremiah's excuse. Neither Moses nor Jeremiah felt they were qualified. Pope Francis says his favourite painting is of St Matthew by Caravaggio, where Matthew is being chosen by God and saying 'Who, me?, surely you don't mean me?' God works through our weak efforts and our clumsy abilities.

Trusting in God is always full of surprises. Jean Vanier says it sometimes means following a crazy dream and saying I don't give a damn what people might think. All I know is, it must be done and we shall see what happens. There is sometimes a reckless willingness to make a bold gesture that comes from listening to the Holy Spirit.

The journey I've been on with my colleagues at Together for the Common Good was not calculated or planned but has unfolded. It was something we sensed we should do. There has been a powerful pull all along, in spite of the doubts. I'm not always sure, but I'm getting better at understanding that something inside: that still, small voice of conscience.

Blessed John Henry Newman talked a lot about conscience. Jean Vanier also talks a lot about conscience, about listening to what God is saying to us. This is a very quiet and solitary, beautiful thing. You may not hear the voice of God like Moses. But don't you think the answers come in other ways? Like the next day you meet somebody and one thing leads to another and before you know it the situation is beginning to change. The point is to be intentionally open, every day.

We make life harder for ourselves all the time. I find, if it's not coming easy, it's usually because I'm trying too hard or worrying too much, taking back the power from God. We need to surrender to him, over and over again. If you hand over controls to God something unpredictable will happen, something good. God's way is different from ours,

his timing is different too. That's the way he works.

Jesus knows how difficult this is. It is especially difficult to believe in hope when we are surrounded by messages of hopelessness and cynicism. But he has called us to be Friends, not servants, and he will give us the graces we need. We are in good company. All the apostles, the saints have had the same 'slowness of heart to believe', they have all felt inadequate. They are there ready and waiting to encourage us. All we need is to ask for the grace to listen to God. We need to ask for courage to act on God's will to live a deep encounter with others. This will not be done in grand gestures; it will be done in small steps.

We can take up the tools of Catholic social teaching to tackle the thorny social issues in our society. Whether it's problems that people experience around housing, wages, employment, running a business, access to finance, education, these tools have the potential to help us find ways to build the conditions that enable all to thrive, where no one is excluded from good opportunities. We need to step up and take joint responsibility and not leave it to a remote political class. We need to cultivate relationships with people one by one and build up civil society. And by acting together, we will embody reconciliation and our witness will encourage others to do the same.

This is what we mean by being agents of change for the Common Good. The Common Good will only come about if everyone does their little bit. And we mustn't fear conflict and division, or be drawn into negativity: to do that is to allow evil to triumph! Rather we must do as Jean Vanier suggests: accept conflict and get in there - to be instruments of reconciliation. We will need to be in contact with all the estranged positions in the community, particularly those who are hurt, angry or in pain.

We can pass hour by hour living as people who have no hope, oblivious of our loving God who in Jesus is showing us how to live and is using all manner of examples to show us how to live. Or we can quietly make a deeply personal choice of God over self. The very fact that you make that choice is enough. Keep it simple; St Therese will be walking with us, one step at a time. Jesus will do the rest; he will give you the grace to do whatever he wants you to do.

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