

Panel 2: Treasures of the Left?  
Speakers: Fr Michael Docherty, Jenny Sinclair, Lord Maurice Glasman  
Chair: Rachel Burgin

*Panel brief: Following an edict of persecution, St. Lawrence was instructed by a Roman prefect to bring forth the treasures of the Church. In response, he rounded up the poor and marginalised, the alienated and dispossessed, and presented them to his Imperial antagonist. For such impudence St. Lawrence would forfeit his life, but he was making something clear: our value rests with how we treat and cherish the least amongst us.*

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### **Jenny Sinclair**

#### *The Treasures of the Church and the Common Good*

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Thanks very much to Blue Labour for such generosity of spirit, inviting someone like me, not a member of the Labour Party, nor any political party. It's really an honour to be here.

Responding to your question, I'll explore why St. Lawrence saw the poor as the treasures of the church; I'll share a little of what I've learned since starting *Together for the Common Good* and I'll explore the areas of common ground we share with Blue Labour. Finally, I'll suggest why you might see the people of the church as your natural allies.

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*Faith in the City*, the Church of England's commission published over a generation ago, spoke about "communities of the left behind." It said:

*"Poverty is not only about shortage of money. It is about relationships; about how people are treated and how they regard themselves; about powerlessness, exclusion and loss of dignity."*

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For too long, a 'progressive' agenda has held communities with traditional views *in contempt*.

They have been ridiculed and ignored. They feel patronised and insulted.

And when people from traditional, proud cultures experience *humiliation and powerlessness* they will eventually respond.

The pollsters and media missed what was happening - because they've been deaf to this too and because this 'basket of deplorables' had been shamed into hiding their views.

And even now that the lid has been lifted and divisions laid bare, some are still refusing to face reality.

We're now seeing the dangers of a self-righteous brand of liberalism.

Meanwhile, Blue Labour has been a consistent voice quietly warning and witnessing to the truth.

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So why did St. Lawrence present the poor as 'the treasures of the Church'?

His point was that *people matter more than things*.

And, that vulnerability and humility are qualities to be treasured: these are qualities often found in people who are excluded and ignored. And this can manifest as anger.

He was saying that the poor show us what it means to be human, which is what the Christian tradition is interested in.

There is a theological view that the word 'poor' is understood to mean *the experience of non-power*. This can be economic but also social, material, relational, educational, spiritual.

Someone who is living with the experience of non-power has a sense of their need for other human beings. The awareness of needing others. The opposite of individualism. That is a very profound truth and a beautiful thing, which is why St. Lawrence made that gesture presenting them as treasure.

The paradox is that the strong and powerful become less human when separated from the poor.

We are all members of one body.

We need an examination of conscience. Who has been overlooked?

In the churches we should ask if there has been a tendency to rank the needs of some over others.

Sidelining the interests of fellow human beings in our own country will lead to consequences that affect all of us.

It's in all our interests that everyone thrives, which is why we talk about the Common Good.

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The Common Good is not a utopian ideal to be imposed by one enlightened group upon another. (This is totally missed by the liberal left and by the libertarian right).

The Common Good needs to be built *by us, working together across our differences*.

It requires people whose interests and circumstances are different, to *encounter* each other in *relationship*.

The awareness of needing others.

But it's no easy task. It requires unlikely partnerships.

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*Together for the Common Good* has its roots in the 20 year relationship between my father and Archbishop Derek Worlock – they worked together across *their* differences, putting the city of Liverpool first in a time of polarisation and division.

They encouraged *local leadership* among 'communities of the left behind.'

Built bridges between mutually suspicious groups.

Listening to all sides – business, unions, Catholic, Protestant, the affluent, the left behind, the police, the black community, the Militant, the Thatcher government...

Their method for building Common Good was *reconciliation*.

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*Together for the Common Good* began with an idea in 2011. In an increasingly polarised time with growing inequality and social fracturing I thought the Sheppard-Worlock model might still have currency, not just for church leaders - but now, for all of us.

*We want people of good will to work together, across their beliefs and political differences.*

So we try to act as a catalyst, building relationships, encouraging Common Good conversations; assisting others, incubating ideas, developing resources, holding public debates, sharing information via our website, publications and our newsletter which now goes to several thousand subscribers.

We're firmly non-partisan, ecumenical and independent. We work particularly to forge relationships across the many different and estranged Christian traditions, but with other faith communities and non-religious organisations too. With only a tiny core team we punch above our weight thanks to many partnerships and alliances.

We draw from across the Christian social traditions, and like Blue Labour, we're particularly inspired by *Catholic social teaching*.

Its great strength is its maturity. It's not ideological or prescriptive.

Its principles are 'human dignity, the dignity of work, equality, respect for life, reconciliation, subsidiarity, solidarity, participation, association, and the preferential option for the poor', and it highlights the importance of intermediate institutions.

All together it makes for a powerful recipe for building a common life.

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So - we've had Brexit, then Trump and we anticipate more coming down the track. Everything is changing super fast and we need to be ready. Those who still don't understand what's going on will be poorly prepared.

*Reconciliation is very important now.*

We need to get out of our silos and build relationships across all sectors of society.

Beyond party loyalties.

People in the metropolitan bubble should listen to those who have been overlooked for so long, and get to know them.

We need to tell each other the truth.

We need to make the effort, and have the courage, to listen to unfamiliar voices. (To understand where they're coming from: that includes listening to the likes of Trump's advisers like Steve Bannon and UKIP people, and traditional conservatives, not only the familiar voices across the left).

We'd do well to understand how social media algorithms drive us into deeper niches and dangerously make interaction *less* likely with people different from ourselves.

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Blue Labour understands all this but needs a popular language that reaches more widely.

I regularly meet people across the churches who are your natural allies, but they've never heard of Blue Labour.

My first encounter with Blue Labour was in Coventry, in a room with a group of rather gloomy men consoling each other with impenetrable political jargon, but their melancholy - perhaps because of its truthfulness - was strangely attractive!

I confess it took me a while to wade through academic language like 'left orthodoxy' and 'post-liberalism'...

But now the challenge is to get Blue Labour ideas out of the seminar room, and into people's kitchens and front rooms.

To do this, it seems to me that St. Lawrence is prompting Blue Labour to ask for help - from the very people in the heartlands who you want to reach. They have the language, the elusive narrative.

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And here, there are people in the churches who are natural allies for Blue Labour.

They are *already in* the 'hard to reach' areas others gave up on a long time ago.

They are living in the outer estates, the abandoned towns, choosing to stay and live within 'communities of the left behind.' Embedded, raising their kids and *choosing not to leave* when promotion or metropolitan temptations beckon;

More and more now they understand the importance of working *alongside*, rather than *speaking for* the poor; moving from handouts to a hand up;

They have sustained many of the 'intermediate institutions' - like local clubs and associations - and built the bonds between them;

There are the thousands doing the unglamorous work in food banks, debt counselling: they know people in the struggling communities *personally*;

The reach of the vast range of different church networks – Evangelical, Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Quaker, Baptist, Black Pentecostal etc – over forty-one different denominations in this country - is broader and deeper than most people realise.

Some are working to reshape the economy - running credit union networks, major ethical investment firms and are instrumental in the fast-growing impact investment sector, showing it's possible to change the way the market works by *participation*;

Some are entrepreneurs proving it's possible to be *successful as well as ethical* – driving the 'mission-led business' agenda;

Some are fostering relationships where there's mistrust and suspicion, *keeping people in the room*;

Some are challenging managerialism and over-regulation in the social care sector;

Some are major players in the education sector, turning failing schools around and empowering young people;

Some are re-purposing church land and buildings to provide affordable housing and community land trusts and space for local start-ups.

They're infecting their competence with compassion.

Bringing tenderness and kindness into *systems that have lost their soul*.

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The story of decline in the church is actually more nuanced than reported. The numbers of the dutiful have fallen, but among the committed, numbers are rising. Some sectors are seeing rapid growth. Bible-bashing is rarely a feature now.

The instinct is to serve the local community, rooted in a sense of place.

Global as well as locally rooted, dealing with *life and death* on a daily basis, they offer a common focus for people across all economic and social groups.

At their best, they are a living witness to a philosophy of love.

They believe that people matter more than things.

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Traditionally there's been strong support for Labour across the churches.

But: by far the majority can't support the party while it is hijacked by ideological joyriders.

(It's true there are people in some parts of the church still pinning their hopes on the current Labour leadership, swept along by the dominance of the liberal agenda. But they will be disillusioned. And then what?)

The majority in the churches want to contribute to a just society in more constructive ways, not by protesting.

They are more likely to respond to a different Labour story: one that's mature, *non-tribal* and one-nation. A story that values family, faith, ethics, virtues, relationships, communities, rooted in real places with character and history. A story that equips the country for rapid change and new opportunities.

But - the story needs to be for everyone - it must be built around a generous inclusiveness. It must be financially credible with a bold rethinking around vocation and education, the economy and the legitimate role of the welfare state. It must be genuinely pro business and expect people to take responsibility.

Although I'm not a member of any party, I'm grateful for Blue Labour. I've learned a lot from you.

I hope you can build the alliances and generate the story that the country so badly needs, starting with the treasure in your traditional heartlands.

Thank you very much.

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*Jenny Sinclair is founder / director of Together for the Common Good, which aims to bring the principle of the Common Good alive and encourage people of good will to work together across their differences. Starting as a project five years ago, it has now developed into a movement engaging across the many different church traditions, as well as with other faiths and non-religious organisations. T4CG maintains a non-partisan position, draws from Christian social traditions, in particular Catholic social thought, and is inspired by the unlikely partnership between her late father, David Sheppard (Anglican Bishop of Liverpool) and Derek Worlock (Catholic Archbishop of Liverpool), who a generation ago worked together, using reconciliation as a means of building the Common Good, brokering relationships in a time of polarisation and division. Jenny is married with two teenage sons and lives in London.*