

Together for the Common Good: Liverpool, September 2013.

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Sharp compassion: Derek Worlock's journey.

Derek Worlock wrote a fascinating personal reflection in 1981, in which he recognised that he had changed. He sounds almost reluctant to admit it; 'If I look back, I have to admit that my outlook changed in those critical years before the end of the Council, immediately before I was made a bishop'ⁱ. He describes what influenced him to change; the Second Vatican Council itself of course, in which he participated throughout its four years, an intense and searching process that was both deeply theological and, in church terms, highly political; and the 18 months he spent as a parish priest in London's East End, his only period as a parish priest. There he worked with laypeople, mostly dockers and their families, and with a team of priests, introducing change at what must have been a furious pace.

But the real beginning, he goes on to explain, was in his involvement with Young Christian Workers, YCW, a lay-led movement which grew rapidly in England and Wales in the post-war decades. Whilst working as secretary to Cardinals Griffin and Godfrey at Westminster during the fifties, he was asked by some YCW leaders to be chaplain to their team. As they built the YCW movement, they became his source of practical theology and undoubtedly sustained him as he did them. The team included people like Patrick Keegan, who grew up in Hindley near Wigan, left school at 14 to work in a cotton mill, and became the International President of YCW. Keegan, who was the first layperson to speak at Vatican IIⁱⁱ, became a friend and inspiration to Derek Worlock.

By the time he wrote this reflection, Worlock had been in Liverpool for five years. The decade then beginning would change him even more. The eighties in Liverpool was the decade of Thatcherism, the riots, Hillsborough; of steeply growing unemployment and the de-industrialisation of the city, leading to painful and still evident social consequences. But he had come to Liverpool already convinced that the Church's business was with the world, with the social and political challenges affecting people's lives.

Our purpose here is to see what we can learn from the experience and achievements of the Sheppard/Worlock partnership that will help us to renew faith based partnership work for social justice. Our shared starting point is this conviction: that we cannot be authentically Christian without realising our responsibility to engage with and influence the social, political and economic realities which affect people's lives. But how did we get to this point? And how do we help others, particularly future generations, to discover this life-changing commitment?

We are exploring here what influenced and motivated Worlock and Sheppard, to understand better how their partnership was shaped. We can then reflect on our own influences and sources of inspiration, and consider how we share these with others.

In Derek Worlock's journey, there are three powerful themes.

First, what could be regarded as a kind of apprenticeship: the years of work with YCW and his 'team', and the brief parish interlude, gave him skills and convictions about practical politics and change, and shaped where he stood. Admittedly, for a Catholic priest, he already had an unusual political awareness. His parents were both political, his father first a journalist and then a political agent, and his mother an active suffragette, who worked with poor women and tutored Derek about the facts of inequality and its human face. And he himself had dealings with many of the significant figures of the post war political world alongside and on behalf of the Cardinals to whom he was secretary.

But the YCW team, and the vision of Joseph Cardijn, the Belgian priest who founded it, gave him something more. YCW was built on some core principles: the apostolate of like to like; the dignity of young workers, in Cardijn's words, 'more precious than gold'; the vocation to which they were called, to transform the world around them; and the method they would use to do this, summed up in the words 'See, judge, act', in which attention is paid first of all to facts, then to the light shed by the Gospel, and then to what needs to be done to change things. Unlike other Catholic action movements across Europe, YCW was based on building small teams who would be the leaven in their workplaces. It was not a Catholic world that they aimed to build, but a transformed world, an ecclesiology then well ahead of its time.

Derek took from YCW some emphases that shaped how he worked in all the years that followed: that the task of the Church is to be alongside people, to accompany them as they struggle for their dignity and their rights; that action begins from analysis of facts; that the Gospel will show us the way; and that we need, and must call, form and sustain, lay leaders. It was where his lifelong commitment to what was then called 'the lay apostolate' began.

If YCW gave him a standpoint and a method, and together with the parish in Stepney, opened his heart, Vatican II and the later Synods he attended gave him an ecclesiology and a mandate to engage fully in both ecumenical and public life. The Council was undoubtedly a conversion experience for him, not of the sort that shaped David Sheppard's life, but rather a gradual process, a reconstruction of almost every aspect of what he believed the Church must be and do and what bishops are for. As a 'peritus', or expert, he was involved in drafting work on the Vatican II document on laypeople, which is not one of its best, and much more importantly, on its final powerful and positive vision of the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes*.

He brought to his work in the engine room of Vatican II the convictions and experience from YCW and Stepney, especially relating to the role that lay people as leaders and activists can

and should play; and his commitment to what was then called ‘the social gospel’. As he debated many drafts of *Gaudium et Spes*, he absorbed its profound theology of the church as a servant, with the tasks of reading the signs of the times and being a leaven within society, of healing and elevating human dignity, of being a sign and sacrament of unity and community, sharing people’s joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties. This vision became deeply embedded within him.

The third theme is Liverpool itself. In 1976, after ten years as Bishop of Portsmouth, where he introduced many pastoral and ecumenical initiatives and built a close working partnership with Labour MP Frank Judd, he came to Liverpool. It was a city of tribal loyalties, sectarian history and strong working class culture. At that time it had a Catholic population of over half a million, around an eighth of all the Catholics in England and Wales. Worlock often said that Pope Paul VI asked him to give priority to ecumenism – to reduce sectarian division – and to social need. But as he and David Sheppard rekindled their earlier acquaintance and built an enduring friendship and partnership, I doubt that they had a plan or a strategy. It seems more likely that it was need, invitation, and opportunity that came together, and influenced how they then grew, taking on the role and positioning for which they became so well known.

When they looked back in 1994, they said that the situation in the city gave them ‘special circumstances’ in which to witness; ‘it would have been betrayal of our responsibilities not to apply gospel principles to the needs and injustices afflicting those we have been called to serve in the challenging and stressful years we have been together in Liverpool’ⁱⁱⁱⁱ.

In those twenty years of his ministry in Merseyside, Worlock continued to change. He was of course deeply influenced by David Sheppard, and the intensity of their mutual commitment, evident in both their writings and their partnership, probably remains unique. Was the depth and intensity compelled by the extraordinary events of that decade? Would it have been the same if they had both been in, say, Portsmouth? It is impossible to know. What we do know is that when asked to speak, to be present, to advocate, to mediate and to bear witness, they did so. They headed protest marches, supported regeneration, pleaded for jobs, argued against cuts, and fought for justice. They listened, and they gave voice to those not able to make themselves heard. They were, in a way, radicalised by Liverpool and its people. But they would probably both have said that it was simply a matter of the Gospel.

So what do we learn? I’ll come back to this in part two.

Part Two

The writer Peter Hebblethwaite once wrote to Derek Worlock commenting on Jon Sobrino’s explanation that the Church in El Salvador transformed itself because it had a project. The lesson was that people change not because of exhortation to change but because they are

engaged in a project which cannot be carried out unless they change^{iv}. This probably applies as much to the ecumenical and inter-faith task as it does to social and political engagement. The project that Worlock and Sheppard faced was undoubtedly dramatic, as the 1980s unfolded. But it was not just their readiness to engage, or the compelling challenges to the city, that account for what they achieved. They developed a model and methods of working from which we can still learn today. I'll comment a little on what Derek Worlock in particular brought to this from his formation and tradition.

For Derek, getting to the facts, and building an analysis, were vital elements of the task. The lesson of YCW was to start with the reality. It's impressive, reading WHITH, to see the range of sources of social and economic data they quote, ranging from the Gifford Report that followed the Toxteth riots to the details of EU funding for UPAs. It's likely that David encouraged use of sources such as these, alongside the facts of experience that Derek would have learned to value, as use of secular social data and expertise is not often a notable strength of the Catholic public voice. Both sources together – data and experience – gave an underpinning to their voice, and provided credibility for their arguments.

But for Derek, the facts had another significance, as part of what he described in his 1994 CAFOD lecture as 'sharp compassion'. Compassion, he said, must be specific, not general. 'It is the particular crisis which calls forth effective reaction'^v. Speaking to the National Conference of Priests about priests and politics, he said 'I cannot accept the desirability of retreat into generalised principles when there is an actual situation commanding attention'^{vi}. He went on to suggest that if you confine yourself to generalisations, you run the risk of moralising or being 'churchy', a risk that as Christians we don't always avoid.

He knew too that being specific is what gets you into trouble, both within the Church and in wider public debate. Perhaps he took positions which some today would argue against or which are open to accusations of political or economic naivety, as Longley suggests in 'The Worlock Archive'. Here we touch on a wider and fascinating debate about the voice of the churches in the public square, and the role of church leaders in particular.

Anthony Harvey, in his critical study of the Churches' public voice, 'By what authority?', argues that churches should assume no privileges other than the right to participate in public debate as one voice among others, and that at best, they can 'articulate and give coherence to a latent moral consensus' which is shared with wider society. Faith traditions, he suggests, can often give this moral consensus a particular clarity of expression, drawing on their ethical resources. In other words, they act as a 'moral watchdog' or 'ally of the conscience of right thinking people'. He is wary of churches or their leaders claiming any distinctiveness in their public voice, or proposing any particular solution as authorised by scripture or expressing God's plan.

But other theologians make a different case. The idea of 'middle axioms', untidy provisional judgements which attempt to bridge the gap between principles and realities, has been

explored by Ronald Preston, John Atherton and others. Middle axioms are a way in which churches and leaders can contribute something substantial and specific to public debate rather than falling back on moral generalities which make little impact. The elements of a middle axioms approach are worth summarising: they make use of empirical evidence, and relevant expertise, and bring these into dialogue with theological insights; they develop through a dialogical and ecumenical process, building sufficient agreement on the interpretation of evidence to allow a well-founded judgement to be made; and they involve listening to people's experience of the issues addressed.

Did Sheppard and Worlock merely articulate a shared but latent moral consensus? In the divisive political context of the 80's, it is arguable that they went further than this, not least because they took their inspiration from the Gospel, which is always more radical, even than Catholic Social Teaching. It is also arguable that they found their way into many elements of a middle axioms approach, albeit imperfectly and in an episodic way. One of the strengths of their partnership was that across many years and challenges, they pursued a consistent set of themes. For Worlock, for example, the importance of work, and the damage wrought by unemployment, was a preoccupation from his earliest days with YCW. Work for him was the key to people's dignity and the guarantor of so much that families needed to flourish. He brought his theological convictions into daily dialogue with the impact of unemployment and the changing nature of work as he listened to many local voices, from factory workers to industrialists. Based on all of this, and usually with David Sheppard, he spoke out, not claiming expertise, but as a witness, and advocate.

It is interesting now to note a surprisingly limited direct use of Catholic Social Teaching in Worlock's texts. Now hailed in intriguingly widespread places as a resource for social and political analysis, its breakthrough point in the UK was 1996, when the Catholic bishops published 'The Common Good' in the run-up to the 1997 General Election, a few months after Worlock died. After the Gospel, his primary source was always Vatican II, despite the substantial series of social teaching documents issued by Pope John Paul II.

To my mind, and to many in the city at the time, what mattered was that he – indeed they – tried. They took risks and spoke out. Provisional judgements, even if ultimately flawed, can keep policy debate alive to more perspectives than would otherwise be available. They may also, to use a now-fashionable phrase, 'nudge' opinion at all levels. And most importantly, they also enact a much needed solidarity.

But there is a cost to achievement such as theirs. Their project, their partnership, had to be given priority, often over other compelling demands. Although they were as active in intra-church matters as in ecumenical and social issues, not everyone saw it that way. Worlock was much criticised, which he found painful. More difficult perhaps is the sense that the priest who wanted to promote and enable lay leadership himself became the focus as their profile grew, and with it, their influence. They would both, I think, have wanted to leave a more lay centred church.

The model they evolved teaches us much, even if today an equivalent would have to be inter-faith rather than merely ecumenical. They worked extremely hard at the process of building and working as a partnership; but not at the cost of excluding others. Whenever possible they included Free Church partners, and the support and company of Grace and others close to them were always acknowledged. They each received gifts from the other's tradition and experience, and used them gladly. And they recognised and used each other's strengths – Derek's analytical, strategic and writing skills were examples - and covered each other's backs. Above all, they listened, to people at the bottom of the pile particularly, and found their agenda there.

Derek Worlock did not find it easy to come to Liverpool. But he gave his heart and soul to the city and its people. He found here a depth of friendship and a close knit kind of family in which David and Grace Sheppard, alongside others, were crucial. And for anyone who watched him greet people in the Cathedral narthex after Mass, there could be no doubt about the love he had for his people and the love he received in return. This was the city's gift to him and it became his home.

Their partnership is still inspiring today. It was often a rollercoaster of events and demands – for us as much as for them. But at its heart, ecumenism and work for justice were pursued with fidelity and deep humanity. Their legacy across the city and region, and in the life of the churches, is immense.

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Notes

ⁱ Worlock, D. 'My personal journey' published in *The Tablet*, June 1996

ⁱⁱ *New Life*, Winter 1981: c/o YCW Archive.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sheppard, D and Worlock, D. *With Hope in our Hearts*, Hodder and Stoughton 1994. P. 19

^{iv} Cited in Longley, C. *The Worlock Archive*. Geoffrey Chapman, London, 2000.

^v Worlock, D., 'The Sharp Compassion of the Healer's Art': CAFOD Pope Paul VI Memorial Lecture, Liverpool, 1994.

^{vi} Worlock, D. 'Priests and Politics; Address to the National Conference of Priests, September 1991, published in *Briefing*, Vol 21, No 18, September 1991.