

Notes by Maurice Glasman forming the basis of his talk for the webinar on 30 April 2020, hosted in partnership by the Journal of Missional Practice and Together for the Common Good.

Preparing for a New Chapter: Revitalizing the Christian imagination for the Sake of the Common Good

Re-imagining the role of the Church in the light of the Common Good.

This is a new chapter but it's not a new book.

It's a new chapter but the content is ancient and enduring. And what is characteristic of this time of the virus is a yearning for real physical presence, which is not really inhospitable to the church. We are social beings and the paradox of the moment is that our isolation is driving a natural desire for connection with others.

We need to strengthen our civic immune system and the church can offer a diagnosis. And the Church can offer a practice. Catholic Social Thought, the common good as a negotiated settlement between estranged interests built on subsidiarity, the most local level possible for political and economic decisions, upon status, particularly that of labour which is dehumanised, and of solidarity in which an unchosen fate is transformed into a shared destiny through democratic politics. This has always been a source of inspiration to me in my politics, my ethics and my life. It has never seemed more relevant in divining the signs of the times.

The fundamental insight I draw from Catholic Social Thought is that human beings and nature are not commodities and there is enormous pressure, particularly under conditions of globalisation to claim ownership of creation itself and the new chapter we are entering will be one in which human beings and nature are not understood as exclusively commodities but will once more have a relational form in terms of the politics of human association and the stewardship of nature. Again, these are themes that have been well developed in previous chapters of church history.

In order to answer Lenin's question of 'What is to be Done?' it is necessary to ask Marvin Gaye's question of 'What's Going On?' What are the features of the new era within which we operate.

Pope Francis said last year that we are not living through an era of change but a change of era. This has been brewing for a while, beginning with the financial crash of 2008, which revealed a fragility that was not remedied and the price of which was paid by the poor, through the mayhem of Brexit and Trump and which is now being accelerated and concentrated by the Corona virus. The three big changes from the era of progressive globalisation should be defined.

1. The Nation State has re-emerged as the primary unit of politics. This includes a stronger role for democracy and for the land, and self-sufficiency. The ability to act, sovereign. This has been brought to intensity by the emergence of the virus where the people turned to the institutions of their polity for protection and for action.

2. The working class are clearly visible once more. Work, workers and the idea of the working class, the idea of vocation have been neglected under conditions of globalisation but it is no longer considered nostalgic or sentimental to talk about the dignity of labour. It is a re-sacralisation or a re-enchantment of the mundane. There is a new definition of the working class, it refers to people who cannot do their work from home. It requires leaving your home and doing something for somebody else, usually with your hands.
3. People are present in the places where they live and the importance of place has been re-asserted. In particular I will be stressing the civic ecology a set of local institutions that serve as an immune system to the threat of isolation, desecration and disease. Of the land. As with work, that which was invisible, neglected or abandoned is coming to light and that is a central part of the new chapter.

The parish is a geographical, ecclesiastical and a secular concept that describes the place you live in. It is covenantal, it evokes those who have died and those that are yet to be born. Andrew Rumsey has written on this beautifully. The presence of the church in the parish is a witness also to the reality and threat of desecration, that place doesn't matter and the church shares the fate of the place. Irrelevant to the future. That it is invisible in the globalised economy, that it is the place for the left behind, for the losers, that it is flyover country. The Church can speak with authority on that. It is a faithful witness. It is an institutional presence, a real physical presence and now the churches are abandoned, like a haunted house. The pressure on the church to abandon parish and place reached an intense form in the era of globalisation and is still menaced. You could say that it is a paradox that at a moment of the greatest use of the internet the sense of place is being rediscovered. The place where people live is no longer God forsaken and nor are they but they are in need of blessing.

Under conditions of the pandemic, these places are where people live and work, these are the places that supply the food and from which people distribute it. The places are necessary once more. They are part of the story in the new chapter.

In other words, what is happening is that which was previously denigrated and despised when it wasn't invisible and ignored, is visible and powerful. It is a truth. It is beautiful and our approach to it should be relational, faithful and in that way sublime. Sublime, because the Church is vulnerable, it is not there only to help but also to be supported, it needs to find friendship, to share a real physical presence with others. I am interested to know if you are longing for that too. The Church has rediscovered its vulnerability and to move from host to neighbour. This is important because the chapter is not written and the pressure to return to the past, to return to normal will be powerful.

We need to read the sign of the times and prepare to resist the famine that will follow the plague as capital seeks to recoup its losses. As workers are degraded, land sold off, businesses brought up and closed, parishes merged, cemeteries desecrated.

The church is vulnerable, you are in pain, you give love but you need it too. And that is the connection with those other institutions, traditions, interests and people that were held to have no

place in a globalised secular modernity. The cleaners, the farmers, the care workers, the nurses, the bus drivers and all those that were dispensable but are now so necessary.

So lets ask the Lenin question. What is to be done. You have been pushed out of the Church but we are allowed an hour's walk a day and there is space for a socially distanced procession, or pilgrimage to bless the mundane places that are now held to be sacred in your parish.

Bless the hospital, the police station and the supermarket. The truck stop and the garage. The land itself. You can bless the names of those who have died alone without a funeral. You can bless the land which is the source of our food which is vital now that the global supply chains are so unreliable.

There is a blessing that you need in return. Which is a commitment to sustain the holiness of the land and the people who live there so they do not return once more to a silent raging indifference. Civic immune systems of place have to be established and secured.

Trade Unions, farmers associations, small businesses, hospitals, schools. Relationships between institutions can be brokered, as Father William Taylor has done with Clapton Commons, for the common good.

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Lord Glasman is a Labour Peer in the British Parliament, Director of the Common Good Foundation and founder of Blue Labour, a radical conservative movement committed to the politics of the common good. His work has been influential across party lines. Coming from a Jewish background he is unique in his engagement with Catholic social thought: over more than twenty years it is this which has informed his political thinking and community organising work, both in the UK and internationally.

Watch the webinar: <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/news/preparing-for-a-new-chapter>