

Just Responsibility?

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Hello everyone - and thank you Paul for inviting me. It's really great to be here.

I think all of us here today and everyone watching online have a sense that this is a time to play our part to build common good in our communities.

In the next forty minutes or so I'm going to give you a taste of the spirit of Catholic social teaching. We'll explore the vocation of the church, the common good, notions of justice and how we are to take responsibility. And we'll see why, against the backdrop of profound cultural and political change, this tradition can help us understand what is going on - the problems we face - and guide us towards a coherent response rooted in the gospel.

Just a brief word about me - as Paul said I grew up an Anglican. I was a bit of a rebel. I didn't enjoy being a bishop's daughter. I became estranged from the Church. But in my mid twenties I had a conversion experience and I became a Catholic. Then about 11 years ago in my late forties, I experienced a prompting of the Spirit. I asked God to guide me. And that's how *Together for the Common Good* started. It has evolved organically and we encourage people to engage with the thinking and practice of the common good.

I've had no leadership training. I'm not a theologian. As a lay person and a non academic, that gives me a lot of freedom. I work across the Christian traditions and with many of the leading thinkers and church leaders. However today isn't about me, it's about you. It's about Catholic social teaching and how it can help you build the common good.

1. THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH AND WHY WE NEED SOCIAL THEOLOGY

The church has always been part of civic life. And whatever kind of church we belong to, there is an expectation that we are part of a good story that is just and impacts people's lives for good.

This is especially true of a cathedral - even for those who are not church goers, people do still perceive a cathedral to stand for something in a city, something beyond our individual interests, for something good, something just, something shared.

It took four centuries to build this cathedral - the scale and effort involved is beyond anything we can conceive of in the modern world - the working of each block of stone by hand - the labour of those men and the ambition of the construction speak to something profound in us, something about belief, something beyond the mundane: their instinct speaks to the transcendent in us. Their ambition whispers something about the nature of the human being.

But that assumption, that just by being in a church we're part of something good, is not enough - it mustn't be taken for granted - it needs to be tested, challenged, refreshed, nourished. Becoming too comfortable leads to mission drift.

With these talks, we want to do exactly that: to challenge, refresh and nourish. We know that the life and health of a city, of a place, needs a variety of strong institutions working together for the common good - local institutions that promote justice and which impact everyone's lives for good.

A church or a cathedral is one of those local institutions, but it has a special vocation which needs to be discerned by its community and in relationship with people and place: its neighbours and its locality. It should offer ways for everyone to share the life of that vocation and encourage its neighbours to discern their own. In this way a cathedral can be a great blessing in a city, just as a church can be a blessing in its neighbourhood.

It sounds ridiculous but the churches' contribution to justice and transformation must be authentically Christian. We have to ask what is truly Christian in our time of confusion and rapid change. Are we serious about resisting the powerful ideologies that compete for our attention, that can mislead good people - including people in the Church?

We need to check whether or not we are seeing the world through God's eyes. And this is where social theology comes in. It's a rather boring term for something extraordinarily exciting: God's worldview and His concern for our welfare in the reality of the world.

So in this series of talks, we'll hear from a range of speakers, each of whom, in different ways and from different positions, is drawing from the same deep well of Catholic Social Teaching - for shorthand, I'm going to say "CST".

2. ABOUT CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

CST is rooted in the gospel, in biblical tradition. It's not intended just for Catholics - it's intended as a gift to all people of goodwill. It is often called a hidden gem, partly because many Catholics are unaware of it. That is why we at T4CG developed the framework called [Common Good Thinking](#) to make it more accessible.

Of course people working within this tradition disagree - a very healthy thing. And that is because it has such a firm foundation. This is a social theology that is building on, and has been tested through, centuries of Christian tradition. It is grounded in natural law - and so it helps us tune in to God's worldview. If we can see the world as He sees it, then it transforms us and our sense of purpose.

Now, CST's understanding of evangelisation is holistic - with Christian witness integrated into the way we actually live, the choices we make in the real world. As Pope John Paul II said,

"The teaching and spreading of her social doctrine are part of the Church's evangelising mission. And since it is a doctrine aimed at guiding people's behaviour, it consequently gives rise to a "commitment to justice," according to each individual's role, vocation and circumstances."
(*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §41)

These days we hear a lot about "social transformation." And most of us - if we have our eyes open - can see the crying need for renewal in our country. However - from a Christian point of view, we know that civic renewal is not sustainable without spiritual renewal. And - spiritual renewal is not possible without a theology of the Holy Spirit that is grounded - on Earth as in Heaven - grounded in place and shaped around the truth of what it means to be a human person.

CST is a living tradition. The first official document, *Rerum Novarum*, was published in 1891. The reason for it was a concern about the damaging effects of the industrial revolution on human welfare. That response was based on Scripture, but also on the reality of people's lives around the world, including in that case the impact of exploitative practices on poor families in East London. CST is always grounded in real places - and in that way it offers a theology of place.

Since then, every document, although signed by the pope of the time, is actually drafted by teams of scholars and practitioners (including non-Catholics). The concerns of CST are always related to human welfare, according to the needs of the times:

CST is focused on upholding the flourishing of the human being and the natural world. It is concerned with human agency, social organization, true democracy, a healthy political economy, the importance of work, the dignity of labour.

It identifies the powers - particularly of capital and state - that threaten the integrity of the human person. It is concerned with true and false freedom, bioethics, the danger of moral relativism, war and peace.

It is profoundly concerned with justice, with balance: the just economy, the preferential option for the poor, responsibilities and rights, the culture of life vs the culture of death, our duty to uphold both human being and the natural world, an integral ecology, holding the tension between nature and person; between a globalised migration policy, for example, while affirming the belonging of nationhood.

It's interested in social peace and building a common good between different interests, by building local relationships.

And in recent years, CST has been concerned about the dangers of overly centralised power - whether state bureaucracies or corporate financial interests. It calls for a just relationship between labour and capital. But it is not anti-capitalist and it is not pro-state or anti-state: what it does is criticise all social systems that subordinate the human spirit.

CST is truly global in its thinking, and recognises that right now to enable human flourishing, the world needs power to be distributed, through strong, local institutions, and it regards families as fundamental.

Now, correctly understood, this tradition is non-partisan. It shouldn't be hitched to one party position or another. It is neither left nor right wing and doesn't fit standard party boundaries. Parts of it are radical, other parts are socially conservative. Its stated purpose is to build "a civilisation of love."

Theology of the human person

CST is centred on a theology of the human person, everything about it starts from that position, with an "anthropology", a view of what people are really like, that recognises the Primacy of God as opposed to the primacy of self. From this, we understand the Earth and the Cosmos to be God's world, His domain. And that our identity as human beings is in God. From this we get the *Imago dei* - that we're made in the image of God, the Triune God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. And from this anthropology we get the transcendent dimension of the human person.

And, as in the Trinity, it follows that we are relational beings - we're not atomised individuals. So this relational aspect of our identity is key to CST. Human beings are in relationship with all of creation and with God. CST has a concept called "integral ecology" - which was set out in the CST document *Laudato Si* just a few years ago - we relate to the natural world as God's gift, but never as an enemy to human flourishing. So for example CST rejects the anti-human tendencies of some environmental activism. That's something to keep in mind when we think about climate change.

There's an invitation to live in relationship with God and his created world. If we don't uphold the integrity of the human person, God can't work in the world and we cannot truly be in Christ, as Jesus said we would be in John 14:21 ("*I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you*"). God wants to work through each of us - this is why the integrity of the human person must be upheld and why the dignity of work matters so much. It's through this relationship that we discover our unique callings, our vocation. There are many kinds of vocation, it's not always obvious.

This attention to the sanctity of each person in CST is sometimes referred to as personalism. "*Personalism*" said John Paul II, "*states that the person is the kind of good which ...cannot be treated as an object of use....the person is a good towards which the only proper and adequate attitude is love.*" [*Love and Responsibility, John Paul II*]

What Catholic Social Teaching is not

It's important to know what CST is not. CST is ambitious and visionary, but it's emphatically not utopian: it recognises human life as messier and more beautiful than any utopia could be. It emphasises the right and the duty of people of faith to take responsibility for their actions.

It requires us to exercise conscience. It offers a set of principles, a framework for good judgement. And it calls us to work for justice and it rejects the "political quietism" of calm acceptance of things as they are.

But CST is not proposing a return to some past Christendom, let alone a theocracy. We live in a pluralist society and the Church is clear about its role: it teaches about principles but not to be prescriptive: lay people are responsible for developing policies and matters of statecraft, not the Church.

And it's not to be understood just as an intellectual framework. Our engagement with CST needs to be complemented by real involvement in the life of the Spirit. God wants us all in. If you're not living in relationship with the Holy Spirit, which to be frank, many Christians aren't, you miss the essence of CST. Relationship with God must always come before action. Listening to God, listening to neighbours, discerning where the Spirit is calling. This is because God is already at work, whether or not we are joining in.

Justice

And the same applies when we think about justice. CST emphasises that relationship with God - that is, righteousness - comes before justice. This series uses the word "Just" in the title of every talk. God is Just, He can't be anything else, and He wants us to share in responsibility for implementing His justice. But just as listening to God comes before action, righteousness - walking by God's side, being faithful to Him - must come before "justice".

What do we mean by justice? CST conceptualises justice in terms of the biblical approach, which starts with building "just" relationships – where we treat our neighbours as persons in the image of God. That is personal justice, which builds up into social justice.

Now this view of justice is based on the equality of human beings under God. It is different from demands for forms of justice - for example in terms of race or gender - that are defined by "equity", or "equality of outcome" based on identity categories. This approach can only be delivered by centralising more power to the state: this coercive approach is incompatible with the personal responsibility, the exercise of conscience at the core of CST.

We should be extremely cautious of those who dream *"of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good."* (TS Eliot). The call for rights without relationships or responsibility can lead only to coercion, and then division and resentment, and eventually a battle of all against all, threatening social peace. This route does not lead to a civilisation of love. Right relationships and righteousness come before justice. And this is how we bring justice into all the domains of our lives.

3. WHAT'S GOING ON - THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUALISM

So why is this series of talks happening now? Well, it's because, as Pope Francis said seven years ago *"We are not living through an era of change, but a change of era."*

We need to understand this new era, and not be blind to its deep problems. These talks will help us become politically literate in a way that is in alignment with the gospel, with natural law, and help us avoid being caught up in the corrosive influence of secular ideologies, so that we are better able to see with God's worldview and uphold the human spirit in the face of "the principalities and powers."

Now, one of the tools CST gives us is a way of conceptualising power. In simple terms it identifies three kinds of power: the two earthly powers of money and of the state, which if not constrained have a tendency to dominate and dehumanise. The third is relational power, which has a transcendent nature, because it relates to human beings in relationship. Relational power in the modern world is all too often subordinated by the dominant interests of money and state power.

The CST tradition recognises the inherent tendency of capital, of big corporate interests, to turn the human being and everything in the created world into commodities, and all the damage that involves. But CST is not anti-capitalist. It recognises the tremendous good that business does, its potential for creativity. It's just realistic about how easily business efficiency can become anti-human, and therefore it insists that capital must be constrained.

And in terms of the power of the state, CST is not anti-state, or pro-state. It is just anti-dehumanisation, and our big administrative states have a tendency to be coercive and undermine our agency as human beings. CST calls for more love in the system and for power to be distributed - through local institutions and the family.

So what do we mean when we say a new era? Through the lens of CST we can see that we're in a time of deep spiritual malaise. Our common life, our sense of mutual obligation, have been corroded over at least forty years, by forces with roots going back at least two centuries. We can see that a false anthropology, an individualistic, hyper-liberal philosophy is at work - which views human beings as rights-bearing individuals rather than transcendent social beings.

This philosophy - on both the right and the left - has had catastrophic consequences for our institutional and social relationships and on our sense of belonging. The family, community and place have all been undermined. A narrow economic logic, while enriching the already wealthy, has led to the degradation and abandonment of whole communities.

This individualism is unravelling parts of our society. You can see the effects, many of which were accelerated in the pandemic but were there years before it: breakdowns in trust, political polarisation, social fragmentation, rises in loneliness (among the young as well as the old), mental health crises, social isolation, addiction, self-harm, depression, nihilism. These are just some of the inevitable consequences of an inhuman system.

But it doesn't have to be like this.

Some of the dynamics around the Ukraine-Russia war have roots in this philosophy too, causing geopolitical instability, impacting the global economy. And domestically, the politics of pretty much every country that adopted this form of hyper-liberalism is facing uncertainty. In the UK we have a protracted period of political realignment while politicians of all parties struggle to grasp what is happening and how to respond. A whole political class is in trouble and this has direct implications for communities and everyday life.

This individualism has been more harmful than we might think. Some of its symptoms are more visible than others, and some who it hasn't affected materially often think everything is fine. But its effects are everywhere, subordinating the human spirit, desacralising the world.

The Enlightenment, despite its many benefits, heralded an inversion: putting the Self above God. We got things the wrong way up. And that generates a system that works against creation.

The human spirit is beautiful and incredibly resilient, people were made for goodness, and we see people bravely coping with all kinds of adversity all the time.

It doesn't have to be like this.

Given that we have a social theology, people are right to expect the Church to be more assertive in this area, to offer some resistance to the forces of individualism, to defend the sacred, to uphold the human person in the face of dehumanising forces. But many of the churches have been vulnerable themselves, distracted or intimidated.

Secular humanism wants us to stay in our lane. Society has been groomed to think that God is a fantasy, that religion is a lifestyle choice, that church should just be seen as a private club. And post modernist thought wants us to accept the false anthropology that human beings can be reduced to rights-bearing individuals. Some well-intentioned people in the church have been seduced into these worldviews.

4. OUR RESPONSE

But our social theology, God's worldview, shows us who we are as human beings: our identity. My identity can't be reduced to an intersectional category such as "straight, white woman". No, my identity and yours is as a transcendent human being in the likeness of God. This is who we are - before we're born, after we die, while we live our mortal life.

We need to get things the right way up again.

There are two realms, the earthly and the heavenly. We are used to operating in the earthly machine and it may be efficient, but it atomises, divides, and creates hostility. Meanwhile, God builds relationships, covenantal relationships that last, that bear fruit, they're characterised by loving kindness.

How we respond to and resist individualism really matters. The CST tradition offers us many constructive and practical ways forward. We can look at covenant, common good, and levels of responsibility, for starters.

Covenant

Covenant in Scripture has an expansive meaning which can have a transformational effect on our relationships, our churches and our civic communities. It's about God's unconditional promise to us in Christ. It is lasting and durable. In practice, it speaks to the ties that bind us together in ways that lead to the remaking of social life. It helps us re-weave the bonds of trust between generations and disparate interests. CST can help us translate these ideas into practice, through local forms of agency, in the economy, in business practices, in the workplace.

[Covenant](#) demands the best of us. When we make a covenantal commitment to each other, we agree to an accountability earthed in the institutions and the places where we live – in fact in biblical terms, the land itself is treated as a covenantal partner.

But sometimes we in the Church forget who we are. We end up operating from within an earthly paradigm, using managerial, technocratic approaches, thinking we can sort it all out on our own. But we can't. We need to listen to what Jesus said to Nicodemus: *"I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?"* (John 3:12). If we ask Him into our lives, then through the indwelling of the Spirit, we will begin to discern between the realms of heaven and earth.

We need to get things the right way up.

The world needs the Church to resist the dehumanising powers and to join with God in building the Kingdom in the places where we live. Place is the battleground because this is where people are. The paradox is that we encounter the heavenly realm in the neighbourhood, because God works through people.

The Church (that's us) needs to be involved in upholding the human space - generating that relational power - part of that resistance against the dehumanising tendencies of money power and state power. To do that, as the latest CST encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* says, we need to build local relationships of loving friendship.

In other words, we, the church, are called to a countercultural insurgency against individualism. That sounds like a political campaign. But it isn't. It is gentle. It's about tenderness. It's about spending time with each other. Restoring trust, building a common good between communities who've been divided. Building common good is the antidote to individualism.

Common good

I want to clarify what I mean by the common good: it is often misunderstood. People project onto it what they want it to mean: 'social justice', 'fairness', 'solidarity', 'equality', or some kind of utopia. It's none of those things.

And common good is not the same as 'social action' - unless it enables, empowers and involves - the "service provider" posture is not common good.

We describe the common good like this:

"the shared life of a society in which everyone can flourish - as we act together in different ways that all contribute towards that goal, enabled by social conditions that mean every single person can participate. We create these conditions and pursue that goal working together across our differences, each of us taking responsibility according to our calling and ability." (T4CG)

It's about upholding the human space. It's about agency. It's about balancing people's interests without excluding anybody. It's the recognition of a settled pluralism of identities and interests.

It's important to say that the common good recognises the reality of class. We must be honest about the consequences of globalisation and the dominance of middle class interests across our culture. Some working class communities - post-industrial towns for example - have been abandoned and dishonoured, marginalised. This is a breach of common good. Reconciliation is possible - not through class warfare, but by restoring just relationships.

There is a passage in Isaiah which describes this so well:

"Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in" (Isaiah 58:12)

That's not abstract, that's very specific.

There is currently a lot of focus on identity but without a class analysis we get the wrong conclusions.

The mutual hostility across identity groups - and the battle of rights around sex, gender, ethnicity, age, urban-rural, religious belief, ideology, Brexit-Remain, positions on lockdown and so on - are the inevitable products of hyper liberalism. The culture wars threaten the common good. But diversity of opinion is vital to deliberate and get to a shared sense of truth.

Common good is about building coalitions, building bridges, building relationships in real physical places with real people. It's not abstract.

When people live in separate worlds - they don't get to know each other, so they care less, then things get unstable. Everyone wants similar things when it comes down to it: family, work, belonging, love. Everyone is worthy of love and affection.

Responsibility: subsidiarity and local institutions

So at this stage I'd just like to talk about responsibility. I'd like to propose to you the principle of subsidiarity, which helps us place responsibility at the appropriate level. This is a key principle in CST and its definition is that decisions should always be taken closest to those they affect, and a central authority should not do things that can be done at a local level.

Now this is a key principle in CST, but often overlooked or misunderstood. It requires distribution of power and careful discernment about what decisions should be taken at what level. This is especially relevant at a time when central government has become so centralised.

While government and policy change have their place, the common good actually requires responsibility being taken at all levels of society. It requires each of us - as individuals and as organisations, businesses, institutions - contributing freely according to our unique vocational responsibility. So we get this multiple layering: top down as well as bottom up.

And at **national level**, CST would call for conditions in which capital and administrative power is distributed not centralised, it would require a coherent industrial policy for example, based on integral ecology - integrating green industry and incentives for place-based investment, local training and education, in order to sustain families and communities, and prevent people from having to leave.

At **regional level** we would see regional banking and energy providers, and greater collaboration, say, between higher education institutions, technology colleges, large employers, dioceses, religious associations, chambers of commerce – all collaborating towards the economic renewal of their region.

At a more **local level** CST would lead us to ask, for example, if a business remunerates its employees fairly, are their jobs stable, fulfilling, dignified, does the CEO and do the cleaners know each other by name? Is there a mutually respectful relationship?

And we'd want to see thriving local institutions - a whole variety, like football clubs, businesses, associations, regional banks, mutuals, charities, places of worship, employers, guilds, hospices, credit unions, universities, community trusts, schools - all working together as neighbours towards a renewal of the local civic ecology. Now churches have a [distinctive calling](#) here and are much more effective when they work together.

Churches can be part of the reweaving, bringing other institutions together. This can be informal or more formal, for example through (authentic) broad based organising, but only if it's in the interests of local people and leads to their empowerment.

As John Paul II said in *Laborum Exercens*, (the encyclical which is so good on the dignity of work), we need: *"a wide range of intermediate bodies with economic, social and cultural purposes; they would be bodies enjoying real autonomy with regard to the public powers, pursuing their specific aims in honest collaboration with each other and in subordination to the demands of the common good"* (*Laborum Exercens* 14)

So these are institutions that are rooted, they exist for the benefit of the area, they have local governance and leadership, they bind people together, they help people find meaning and purpose. CST sees this layer of institutions - which you could call civil society - as part of that relational power - a buffer against the centralising and totalising forces of dehumanisation.

We can see some neighbourhoods where this layer is thick and thriving. But in others it's so thin as to have been almost completely eviscerated. There are local high streets where the only commerce is extractive: a betting shop, a pawn shop, a chicken shop.

And finally at the **level of the family** - which CST regards as the fundamental building block of society - **and of the individual** - we can each play our part as moral actors, through the decisions we take, through our relationships, through putting common good principles into practice in our everyday lives.

5. THIS LECTURE SERIES

Our proposition to you is that common good theology can be a spur to renewal. This series uses 'just' in the titles of all the talks, so in terms of this introductory lecture, "**Just Responsibility?**", we've had a flavour of the CST tradition, we've looked at what's going on, and we've explored our calling.

In the second, "**Just Voting?**" we'll think about how to restore real democracy at the local level ... a real sense of agency among people who feel disenfranchised, through local structures of accountability, to distribute power and prevent the state becoming too centralised, drawing specifically on a local initiative in Grimsby.

In the third lecture, "**Just Being?**" we'll look at the nature of personhood and the importance of human freedom, we'll examine the forces that undermine our liberty, as well as thinking carefully about the ambitions of secular humanism to displace the Christian view of humanity.

In the fourth lecture, "**Just Church?**" we'll examine the vocation of the churches, the place of the church in the English polity - in particular that of the Church of England and its relationship with the country, with people and with place.

And then next year, in our fifth lecture, "**Just Economy?**" we're going to look at how the economy can be reformed so all parts of the country can thrive, focusing on place-based investment, de-concentrated capital, an industrial strategy that incentivises enterprise and jobs where they are needed, while also thinking about the role of the state.

Then the sixth lecture, "**Just Work?**" - we'll see how decent work is central to the common good - God's way of working through us to shape the world. We'll examine the dignity of labour, the need for balance between the natural world and sustainable jobs, the need to improve status and esteem of low paid and precarious work, we'll see the need for better training, the problems with Universal Basic Income, we'll see the need for balance in industrial relationships.

And the seventh lecture, "**Just Peace?**" we will intentionally be addressing social peace rather than peace in the context of war. At a time of social fragmentation and political polarisation, we'll look at the importance of freedom of expression in bridging cultural divides and building a common good between estranged interests, while also giving careful thought to issues of tolerance and identitarian ideologies of the left and right.

In the final lecture, "**Just World?**" we'll explore what it takes to build a truly integral ecology, a balance of human and planetary well-being, between livelihoods and environmental imperatives, while also giving careful thought to the estrangement of modern life from the divine indwelling within land and nature. We'll also look at the tendency of some environmental

activism to be anti-human, as well as how to hold the tension between local and global, people and planet.

So our series is underway. And I do hope that whatever your tradition, that you'll travel with us in person or online for this journey, and that together we'll become a body of people equipped to play our part in the renewal of the places where we live.

Do sign up to our newsletter, Together for the Common Good, which is at www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk - and you'll find resources, stories, essays and lots of information about the programmes we do with churches and with schools. I look forward to staying in touch with the people here in the Cathedral as we go forward.

So just to conclude:

At such a time as this, when the Church itself is vulnerable - going through profound change - it's helpful to think of a local church - or a cathedral - no longer as host but as a neighbour. A local institution that needs friends, and who can offer friendship in return.

The church has to learn to receive as well as give. To become a church that is a "community of place" - who listens - to God, to each other, to neighbours, discerns where the Spirit is calling. A relational church. Because God is already at work, whether or not we're joining in.

If I may, I would like to say a prayer for all of you:

I just want to thank you Lord for bringing all these people into this place together. And to ask you to bless every one of them and all their families and the people they meet. Bless them now as they go forward, and we trust Lord that you have this in your hands, that the fruit that will come from this is all for you.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Thank you.

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Jenny Sinclair is founder director of Together for the Common Good

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