



Relational, respectful, reciprocal: the road to renewal

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1. INTRODUCTION

Hello everyone. Thank you John, thank you Elizabeth, thank you Helen, for the invitation and all the team for such a warm welcome.

It's great to be here with you.

Yes we're going to have to get used to living with change.

Let me tell you briefly what we're going to cover in the next half hour or so.

- We'll look at what's going on and the causes behind this period of upheaval.
- And we're going to explore what God might be doing in this time of profound change in the Church.
- We'll consider what mission means, and what it means for you, and your calling.
- And despite the challenges we will face - and I'm not going to give you false hope - there is I believe a road to renewal, so we'll consider how we might navigate that journey by becoming more relational, respectful and reciprocal, in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

So before we look at what's going on, can I tell you just a little about myself?

I have been a Catholic for over half my life. I was a bit of a rebel in my teens and I did not enjoy being a bishop's daughter. I spent most of that time in Liverpool's music scene and I became estranged from the Church until my mid twenties. Then much to my surprise I had a conversion experience and I became a Catholic. I raised a family and lived a quiet life.

But then in 2011 I experienced a prompting of the Spirit. I asked God to show me what I should do. A group gathered around me and Together for the Common Good was born. We're small but we punch above our weight working with many organisations and partners. We draw on Catholic Social Teaching, we hold public conversations, we train people in churches and schools, and church leaders, to build the common good, and we help people discover their "civic vocation" to restore their relationship with people and place.

I've had no leadership training. Learned on the job. God has given me a vocation. I have the privilege of listening and learning across the churches. But this doesn't dilute my engagement with the Catholic tradition. Quite the contrary, it reveals a clearer sense of its distinctive contribution and that every one of us has a part to play in the renewal of our country.

2. THE UNRAVELLING - WHAT'S GOING ON?

So, the unravelling. What's going on?

Seven years ago Pope Francis said, "We are living not through an era of change, but a change of era." If we are to respond effectively, we need to understand the nature of that new era.

So Catholic social teaching (CST) can help us read the signs of the times. And correctly understood, it's non-partisan, and can help us understand what's going on in a way that is aligned with our faith, and avoid the risk of mission drift and avoid the corrosive influence of secular ideologies.

So the era of individualism - which manifested on both the left and the right - has been hostile to human beings and now it's unravelling. The unravelling happening now is marked by breakdowns in trust, political polarisation between post modernism and conservatism, social fragmentation, inequality and symptoms of distress - like rises in loneliness (in fact more prevalent among the young than the old), addiction, self-harm, depression and nihilism.

Now most of these signs accelerated in the pandemic but they were not caused by it: they are part of a decades-long trend. This individualism has driven the commodification of human beings, an over-reliance on technocratic solutions and the dominance of a narrow set of cultural values. And in the last fifteen years we've seen a period of intensified crisis. Remember the 2008 banking crash? The divisions over Brexit? Now globalisation is coming undone, having benefited the mobile, but it was catastrophic for far too many communities. And the Ukraine war is causing major geopolitical disturbance to supply chains, causing inflation, and leading to the "cost of living crisis" this autumn.

CST helps us see that these forces were unleashed by a hyper liberal philosophy that views human beings as isolated individuals rather than social beings. That's a false anthropology. It's had catastrophic effects on our institutional and social relationships and 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.

Meanwhile our domestic politics are in a protracted period of realignment. In fact, what we would call an interregnum - a time between settlements. This is why it looks so chaotic. It is no longer a matter of the old left and right: all the parties are incoherent and have lost their way, failing to connect with the population. The population are a long way from Twitter, from Westminster and political activism. Over four decades, parties of all types pursued a neoliberal economic model which has left those communities behind, and so we see a loss of trust in the whole political class. Indeed, the politics of pretty much every country that adopted this form of hyper-liberalism is facing a similar situation.

We are in the middle of a very deep spiritual malaise, driven by these forces corroding our civic life for over forty years. But there are roots going back deeper at least two centuries, to the Enlightenment, which 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.

But I'm sorry to break the bad news to you. Like an Old Testament prophet I have to tell you that before things get better, they are going to get worse.

And this situation cannot be tackled solely by conventional means.

Now, one of the tools that CST gives us is a way of conceptualising power in relation to human beings. In simple terms it identifies three kinds of power: the two earthly powers of money and the state, which if not constrained have a tendency to dominate and dehumanise. And the third is a relational power, which has a transcendent nature, because it relates to human beings in relationship.

Now the churches should be at the heart of creating, generating that transcendent, relational power, in order to resist the dominance of money power and state power, so as to uphold the human space. And we can do that by building local relationships where we live. By building common good.

You might think this is somehow a soft option. But it's not. This is how we build a counter cultural insurgency against individualism.

A renewal of relationships will eventually lead to a new settlement, to a new [politics of grace](#).

People are right to expect the Church to be more assertive in this area, to offer some resistance, to uphold the human person in the face of dehumanising forces. To defend the sacred.

3. BUT WHAT'S GOD DOING WITH THE CHURCH?

The churches have been affected too. They are vulnerable and some are in deep decline.

There are profound changes going on. Where's everybody gone? Parts of the church are dying, and Covid accelerated this trend.

But I'm not one of those who is panicking.

I am convinced that the Holy Spirit is at work in the Church, bringing energy and new things. But we do need to let some things go - to be undertaker as well as midwife. And we can only do this by being attentive to the Spirit. This receptivity has been missing from the formation of large parts of the Church.

Christianity is a religion of paradox: that God would be human, that life comes from death, that achievement comes through failure, that to gain one must have to lose, and that the least are the greatest. What is paradoxical about the mysteries of the faith is that reason cannot fully penetrate their meaning, so that what seems contradictory to reason is actually profoundly true in terms of faith.

But too often we interpret the world through a secular lens and we forget our identity in God.

We might ask ourselves whose worldview we are looking through. We're not called to be conformed to the world, but we *are* called to live in it, walking the way of Jesus. This is the way that calls us to fight for the integrity of the human person, to resist those powers that dominate and dehumanise. And wherever we see controlling behaviour, whether through physical brutality, coercion of thought or speech, or the commodification of human beings or nature, we are to resist.

Darkness does exist, but love is more powerful.

In the West we've become too complacent, living in a kind of dream. Believing that progress would always go our way. Our hard won traditions though, have been taken for granted, now even rejected. Meanwhile our societies have been unravelling and fragmenting.

But reality is crashing back in: there is a lesson to be learned from the courage of our fellow Christians in Ukraine. A Pentecostal pastor from Kyiv said recently:

"The whole world is having its test now. We are now seeing the true values that we live by, not those we talk or brag about, but how we actually live."

So in such unstable times, how we actually live really matters. The reality of that terrible war calls us not only to support Ukraine in whatever way we can, but also to treasure what is precious. It calls us to speak the truth, to cherish our way of life. To recognise with gratitude that, though imperfect, our country is a wonderful place where we can be free.

This moment calls us to remember who we are: that we are made in the image of God; that we thrive in relationships of loving friendship. And that real physical presence, faithful accompaniment of our fellow human beings, really matters. It matters especially at a time when we are being groomed to desire a disembodied virtual future of digital control. Building common good between neighbours in real places is more important than ever.

But something much deeper is needed.

We might ask "who is the Church?" Well, it's us. The whole people of God. We are the Church.

But the experience of most Christians is still in the consumerist model – going to church, getting something and going home again. All too often, the Christian life is not taking place within a fellowship of mutual love and support.

Here's an example. A woman told me she had been struggling with terrible debt for two years. She'd gone to Mass every week but hadn't told a soul. Why didn't that parish have a culture where she was known, where she could be real, loved and supported? And, think about it, are our parishes ready to welcome an ex-offender and his family?

So I believe that God is making these profound changes in the Church to purify and equip us to counter this individualism that's been so hostile to human beings. We're called to become communities of place, to live in loving friendship with our neighbours.

4. SO LET'S THINK ABOUT MISSION.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR US? HOW DO WE GUARD AGAINST MISSION DRIFT?

Well the SVP mission is "to seek and find those in need, to help them in a spirit of justice and tackle the causes of poverty where we can."

This was modelled for us by Jesus himself, who showed us the way that human beings flourish, that is by loving our neighbours as ourselves.

But actually this mission is subordinate to the mission of God. The Church, and Christian organisations, like the SVP, are called to join in with God's mission. It's not the SVP that has a mission, but the God of mission who has a role for the SVP.

Mission in fact is rooted in the radical inclusive relational life of the Godhead, the mission of God, which calls every human person - across all classes, all cultures, all ethnicities - into His great creative participation. He invites all His people into a community of communion: the relational life of the Godhead - in order to transform the world.

So we've got to be attentive, adopt a posture of listening to where God is at work, asking Him always "Lord, keep us true to You, lead us. Show us Your mission to transform the world."

So when we talk about "tackling the causes of poverty" we must recognise the frame that we are operating in is much, much bigger than that of "social justice issues".

Yes, we should call for a more just political economy. But it's not all about money. The Vincentian spirit also offers a sense of belonging to everyone, a sense of family that transcends the two-dimensional nature of materialism.

We, as the people of God, have a special role to articulate the Kingdom.

Being Christian and Catholic right now is challenging. It is tempting to allow our mission to drift, to fit in with the world. But we're not meant to be conformed to the world. We're meant to witness to a different way.

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 the Church should just be like as a private club. And postmodernist ideology wants us to adopt false ideas about human beings. And some well-intentioned people in the Church have been seduced into these worldviews.

But we should be confident in our Catholic identity. Sometimes we forget who we are. We need to get things the right way up again and revisit what we know to be true - that as human beings our identity is in God.

And for the SVP, the antidote to mission drift is to become more anchored in your charism, not less. As I understand it, within the Vincentian Rule, you've got five non-negotiables:

1. to stand in close relationship with God, both in private prayer and in group discipleship, dwelling in Scripture;
2. to ensure that your engagement with people is genuinely personal;
3. through the way you live together in fellowship;
4. in your commitment to serve people who are poor;
5. and in your unique sense of vocation.

These five elements ensure, as Scripture always teaches, that righteousness (in other words, being close to God and listening to Him) comes *before* justice. It's very important *not* to start with justice or activism.

I'd like to tell you a little story¹ to explain why that is.

I know of a church in West Englewood, in Chicago. Poor neighbourhood. No jobs. People suffering from poor nutrition. It was hard to buy healthy food. So this congregation and their pastor asked God what they could do to change this.

In time they listened, and they met people doing a gardening project. They partnered, and ended up producing more food than they could use. They started a cafe. They sold some of the produce to other suppliers. They established a co op.

Then the national chain of 'Wholefoods' saw what was happening and decided to open a major branch in Englewood. Many jobs were created. There was an abundant supply of healthy food. Other businesses followed: more jobs were created. The neighbourhood thrived.

Pastor Jonathan says many people visit him and say, "We want to do this at our church." He replies 'I always ask them if they have talked to the folks in their community first. It can be replicated, but it needs to come from those affected.' He stresses that it can't be helicoptered in.

People often ask why his church made "food justice" a priority. But he resists this kind of framing. He says 'the key is to become a community-oriented church, not a "justice-oriented" church.' He says that 'when you begin with justice as your foundation, then "issues" are your focus. But when you begin with community as your foundation, then people are your focus. When you focus on people, you eventually deal with the justice issues that those people experience, but it's not the whole totality of your ministry. There are times when justice is not the best choice. Sometimes love is the best choice.'

I think Pastor Jonathan is telling us something very important about mission. It doesn't start with "issues" but with *listening* in the local to what God is already doing, and working out how we can join in.

So what are some of the key ways to navigate this time of deep change?

¹ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/there-are-no-god-forsaken-places>

5. RELATIONAL

First, we need to become more relational, at every level.

At the personal level, listen to our neighbours, spend time with people, not be in a rush. Make eye contact at the checkout. Notice when someone seems sad, and be sensitive to what they need.

Human connection.

And in your Conferences², you can strengthen relationships with neighbouring groups and institutions, get to know them better, invite them for a meal, offer to pray for them, look for opportunities to partner for the benefit of the local community. Play a role in restoring trust, building a common good between groups in the community who've become divided. There will be increasing need to be able to act in solidarity together as the "cost of living crisis" kicks in.

And at parish level, the congregation can develop a culture of encounter, perhaps through the [one-to-one conversation](#) so that people are recognised and heard, and their stories known. Then, this culture can be extended outward into the neighbourhood, where members of the congregation develop a habit of listening to their neighbours and discerning the ways of the Spirit in the neighbourhood.

And in terms of the engagement with government, local and national, it's building relationships with councillors and MPs that will be important. Whatever government we end up with, the Levelling Up agenda ought to continue. Christian organisations ought to get behind it and demand that it is properly funded. Jobs and investment are critical, for the abandoned places especially.

So in all these relational ways, the church can witness to the Kingdom, and resist that hyper liberal philosophy that has been so damaging. It's not about a campaign. It's about tenderness. It's about spending time with our neighbours. Building common good is the antidote to individualism.

6. RESPECTFUL

Now I want to say something about respect. And I want to clarify what I mean by the common good: common good does not mean 'social justice', 'fairness', 'solidarity', or 'equality', and it's emphatically not utopian. 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 those 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 agency. It's about upholding the human space. About balancing people's interests without excluding anybody. It's respectful of people. It's the recognition of a settled pluralism of identities and interests.

And so common good recognises the reality of class. We've got to be honest about the consequences of globalisation and the dominance of middle class interests across our culture.

² <https://www.svp.org.uk/fellowship>

Some working class communities - post-industrial and coastal towns for example - have been abandoned and dishonoured, marginalised. That 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's currently a lot of focus on identity but without a class analysis we get the wrong conclusions.

The mutual hostility across identity groups - the battle of rights around sex, gender, ethnicity, age, urban-rural, religious belief, ideology, Brexit-Remain, positions on lockdown and so on - are all the inevitable products of this hyper liberalism. The culture wars threaten the common good.

Mutual respect and diversity of opinion are vital to deliberate and get to a shared sense of truth.

So 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 care less about each other, and 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.

7. RECIPROCAL

I would like to say something about reciprocity.

I imagine that many of your Conferences already think this way, but I think the Church in general really needs to think about its solidarity with poor people.

We discussed how the political and cultural context - the globalisation - caused such a dramatic change in the economy. And in many areas people are in difficult circumstances through no fault of their own. Labour was cheaper abroad and so the manufacturing jobs went. They don't *feel* left behind; these places *have* actually been abandoned.

But solidarity isn't achieved by our engagement as "service provider".

This is a new era. We can no longer be the patrician church or charity 'giving to the poor', or running social action projects if there is no reciprocity. Working class communities have much to teach the church and the dynamic of service-client is often perceived as a separation between 'them' and 'us'.

Pope Francis thinks the Church in its brokenness needs poor people for what they can give. And poor people, like everyone else, have aspirations and don't wish to remain poor.

So in this field of "social action" we must learn not just to give, but to receive. It needs to be a two-way street, engaging the whole of our lives: being real with our neighbours, being honest and vulnerable.

Notice how you engage. Notwithstanding the necessary health and safety and professional boundaries, it may be worth asking how you regard the people you "serve" - is it as clients, or as neighbours or friends?

Perhaps at Conference level, you could consider how your approach can become more reciprocal.

And as for parishes, how well equipped are they to handle such relationships? Let's be honest, a lot of churches are afraid of getting involved with people or families who are dysfunctional. But perhaps the SVP has expertise it could share with parishes to build that confidence.

Perhaps you can find ways of welcoming people who feel church is not for them. Many churches now across the denominations are trying new approaches. New approaches to worship, new approaches to gatherings. Different times, different formats. People may feel more comfortable around the food pantry than in church.

So we need to find creative ways of living that shared life, creating that sense of family. People need to be needed. It is very dangerous to have a society where people are not needed.

What is needed is solidarity, respect and reciprocity.

8. RENEWAL - ACCOMPANIMENT AND LISTENING TO THE SPIRIT

So let's talk about renewal.

Sometimes, when we talk about "poverty" we rush straight to the campaign: "end poverty now!" As if all it takes is pressurising the government to add a bit more onto Universal Credit and that will "end poverty". But as we all know, the causes of poverty are complex. Of course extra money is important, but it doesn't necessarily touch the underlying causes. Which may be poorly paid work, but often also human brokenness, unhappy families, loss, mental health instability, bad decisions, bad luck.

And "the poor" are not an obvious group either. These days, anyone can fall into hard times. People hide it out of shame. It could be any of our neighbours. It's hard to cope with these things on your own.

As Christians, we must never make the mistake of seeing poor people as mere recipients of our generosity. There is more going on here.

Pope Francis says the church itself needs to be evangelised by the poor, "because" he says "they know the suffering Christ through their own sufferings." Those of us who are not poor are "called to be friends, to listen, to understand. To welcome the mysterious wisdom that God wants to communicate through them."

So as the churches fall into steep decline, it's noticeable that activity - around the foodbank, the pantry, the lunch club, the soup kitchen, the debt counselling centre - is growing. But often, this work defaults to service delivery mode. We hear a lot about "food justice".

But as I listen across the churches, I hear many stories of the Spirit fermenting in these situations. We can tune in to that, if only we would listen.

Francis says the Church itself will only be renewed when poor people are at the centre of its journey. The thing is, that this renewal may not look like "church".

As I understand this, it goes to the heart of the Vincentian charism. You're called to be the hands and feet of Jesus. And when you're sitting with someone in need, you can both be transformed. This is an encounter of love, providing a sense of belonging and family, being with someone in their most vulnerable moments, accompanying them in their struggle. This is a privilege and a blessing. This is the Kingdom.

Human beings need friendship, tenderness and love. Accompaniment. Not to be abandoned.

This is how individualism is defeated. This is the work of restoration and renewal.

So describing your work as "social action" feels completely inadequate. There is so much more going on here if only we would notice. These are the places where the Holy Spirit is moving. Where the seeds of renewal are to be found.

What would happen if you were intentionally listening for the movement of the Spirit in these locations? You could ask "Where is God at work here? Where is the energy? Who, in all their brokenness here, is sensing the unmistakable gentleness of the Spirit? How can I accompany that person as that happens?"

The truth is that civic renewal cannot happen without spiritual renewal.

God is doing something profound amongst us. We just need to pay attention.

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

Lord, I just want to thank you for calling all Your servants here into Your work of renewal. Bless them now as they spend these days in discernment together with You, Lord. Guide and energise them with your Holy Spirit as they live through this time of profound change. Protect them from the ways of the world and lead them in Your ways, Lord. Bless each one of them and all their families and through them, may Your love touch all the people they meet.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Jenny Sinclair

Jenny Sinclair is founder director of Together for the Common Good

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