

CALLED TO BE FRIENDS

Being God's People in Dark Times

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A session to reflect on the World Day of the Poor letter 2023

Official Vatican document [here](#) and recording of the WDP 2023 letter read aloud [here](#)

A set of slides accompanies these notes [here](#)

This was originally designed as a session for Caritas Plymouth.

This is a transcript and an audio recording is available [here](#)

[slide #1]

The World Day of the Poor is a Catholic day of observance that was introduced by Pope Francis seven years ago. And it's meant to get the people of the Church - that's us - to shift, from an arm's length relationship with poverty, to a more relational sense of relationship with people who happen to be poor. And although it is called a "day" it's actually asking for new behaviours, not just for one day a year, but for every day.

By the end, you'll see why this session is called *Called to be Friends: being God's people in dark times*.

THE WORLD DAY OF THE POOR

[slide #2]

So Pope Francis has set the tone in the first year by eating his lunch over conversation with homeless people. He wants us to meet people face to face too. He wants us to share our lives, to build a common good between us. He wants us to shift from an "us and them", to just "us". He is calling us from a culture of separation to a culture of relationship.

Parishes that have observed *The World day of the poor* so far have done so in various different ways. Some in more predictable "handout" actions and in campaigning for more social security benefits, or "service" actions like distributions of clothing, food and toiletries.

But others have found more creative and imaginative ways to be more relational. Like for example, making support available alongside a shared meal and conversation. Others have been more imaginative still, for example offering free treatments with a beautician, a barber, a dentist, hairdresser or chiropodist, for example, alongside a shared meal and companionship.

But still, it could easily get reduced to a campaign, a few platitudes, and everyone just carries on as before. So I'm really grateful to be asked to reflect on this letter. It is challenging, and it warrants our close attention because Pope Francis really does want us to change our behaviour.

The whole point of the *World Day of the Poor* letters is to make us think differently and *act* differently. To change our behaviours to be ready to respond appropriately to the signs of the times.

Over the last ten years Pope Francis has been listening to the Holy Spirit and passing on what he's learning. He is correctly identifying grave cultural problems. And he's calling us to respond.

So just for a minute, look at the slide and imagine that you're sitting there instead of Pope Francis.

So as we move on, before we get into it, I just want to give you a very brief sketch of who I am and where I'm coming from.

TOGETHER FOR THE COMMON GOOD

[slide #3]

I'm the founder director of *Together for the Common Good*. But my journey to this point has been rather circuitous. I started off growing up in an Anglican clergy household. I was quite a rebel in my teens, I left the Church. Then in my mid-twenties I had a conversion experience, and much to everyone's surprise, I was received into the Catholic Church.

Since then I lived a quiet life raising my children. I worked as a graphic designer, but then, in 2011, in my late forties, I felt the nudging of the Holy Spirit. And the first idea for this work I'm doing came then, when I saw things were going very wrong in our culture, and I realised the church was struggling to respond.

Others joined me and we felt we were being called initially to explore the partnership between my late father, David Sheppard and the late Archbishop Derek Worlock in Liverpool a couple of generations ago.

How the Church is called in society

[slide #4]

So we wanted to learn what it was, from their twenty year partnership, that could help the church now, in its contribution to civic and spiritual renewal.

We saw that they'd played a critical role in Liverpool at a time of division, instability, unemployment and low confidence. And to have church leaders, so visibly working together, not only ended a long history of sectarianism, but their solidarity with poor communities made a lasting impact in terms of the fortunes of a troubled city.

We learned from them that when it comes to the civic aspect of the vocation of the church, certain things stand out.

1. First of all, Christ-centred, joint servant leadership - pray together, act together in partnership with other Christians despite strong differences of opinion, but also that
2. the church adopts an "outward facing" posture to the whole neighbourhood, and in particular stands in solidarity with poor people. And, of course
3. Catholic social teaching, which helps us discern a coherent response to the signs of the times.

So since that time, *Together for the Common Good* has learned a lot more. This is a new time: it needs a new approach.

Catholic Social Teaching and Common Good Thinking

[slide #5]

In particular we believe that the common good, as conceived by the Hebrew Bible and in Catholic Social Teaching, can seed and support spiritual and civic renewal. It's a wonderful resource, too well hidden - even in the Catholic Church.

And it offers a coherent framework for good judgement, rooted in the gospel.

The teaching often gets stuck at academic level, and few people read the original documents. It rarely cascades down to the grassroots.

So we're working to make the principles of Catholic Social Teaching more accessible. And we call this "common good thinking." *Together for the Common Good* helps people discern what this means in practice.

The Work of Together for the Common Good

[slide #6]

So just briefly, what do we do? We help people in local churches and dioceses build common good, understand their unique Christian civic vocation, in the places where they live and work. We work across the country and across the churches. We read the signs of the times. And we produce online resources and a podcast. We bring common good thinking into the public domain through lectures and debates. We help young people through our *Common Good Schools* programme, and we accompany and advise leaders and Christian organisations in this time of change. So do explore our website and please sign up to our newsletter. That's enough about me.

THE WORLD DAY OF THE POOR LETTER, 2023

[slide #7]

I would just like to go back to *World Day of the Poor* now, and building on what Fr John said, what we're going to do today is we're really going to dig into this letter, and we're going to engage with the letter in two ways:

- first, to understand what Pope Francis is concerned about - what has gone wrong in the world that is so troubling him
- and second, we're going to explore ways in which he's calling the People of God to respond.

I warn you, I am going to be a bit challenging, as Deborah said. I'm going to talk a bit and we're going to have various times of sharing too. And I hope this will set you up for a great discussion over lunch.

So in this year's letter, Francis is saying

1. this is much more than an anti-poverty campaign. His language stresses the gravity of the situation in the world. But on a beautiful day like this in a lovely part of a country like this, it can be hard to appreciate, but we are called to think look global and act local.
2. And he frames the problem of poverty within a way of naming our culture as "malign" - he talks about "a malign culture", that is dehumanising, unjust - an unjust economy that is doing great damage, especially to poor people.
3. And he's discerned that God is saying that deep behaviour change is needed in the church.
4. And through the story of Tobit, we're understanding that we must help the young identify right from wrong: he says the young are particularly vulnerable at this moment.
5. And he's saying that charity is personal: that we mustn't delegate. Instead welcome people to our own table.
6. He says we must focus on the needs of the poor, not on our own.
7. He says building the kingdom is not about handouts or services. It's about personal relationships with people who are poor.
8. And he believes that the people of God need to be in relationship with the poor because God speaks through the poor. He goes further and he says that meaning is to be found in that relationship.

So what's going on? What is this malign culture that Pope Francis talks about?

To understand the whole purpose of the *World Day of the Poor*, we need to read the signs of the times.

Francis is looking at society through the lens of the poor. And through that he sees inequality, indifference, isolation. Using the story of Tobit, he shows a model in Tobit that calls us to an awareness of right and wrong, to see the ways of wrongdoing in our own time. And he points the way to become a faithful witness today.

And this posture begs questions about our "political economy" - that is, the arrangements that determine wages, the state of our housing, the way money is regarded, the state of the world of work.

Now, these are topics that Catholic Social Teaching has dealt with for decades. Pope John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Pope Paul VI, they've all dealt with it. So this is not new. Francis is following his predecessors, and is criticising a system that privileges quick profit over dignity.

And he's calling for an economy that upholds the human person. He says we must not tolerate a system that degrades the human being, we must have an economy founded on the humane treatment of workers and the dignity of work.

Crisis across the West

So the "cost of living crisis" isn't isolated to the UK. And it isn't just a post pandemic phenomenon. It's just one example of a wider series of crises unfolding across the West. Its causes didn't start ten years ago, they go back much further. So we need to zoom right out and see the bigger picture.

Catholic Social Teaching can help us.

The problem is that if we misunderstand what's going on, we can inadvertently prop up an unjust system. We can run a very real risk of becoming what Lenin called "the useful idiots" if we make the wrong call. I'm sad to say this is happening across the churches.

Many of the assumptions that we carry - our political, social assumptions - they may be out of date. We're in a new time. This is a time of seismic change.

So this year's letter arrives in a wider context. Going back seven years, Pope Francis actually said we're not entering an era of change, but a change of era. He's right.

This is a time of intense political confusion. There are competing ideologies at work. So it's vital to ensure we are anchored in a Christian worldview.

Now, every era is characterised by a particular philosophy, and that philosophy shapes the political economy. These things are always shaped by ideas.

Neoliberalism

So the animating idea of the current era that is breaking down, comes from the philosophy of liberalism.ⁱ This manifests in various forms - and some of it has been very positive - but in the last 45 years, it's kind of gone into overdrive and it's morphed into an ideology known as neoliberalism.

Now further back, its roots are in the Enlightenment but it manifested in 1979 in the form of neoclassical economics which prioritises shareholder interest and the pursuit of profit maximisation over everything else.ⁱⁱ

This is what Pope Francis is aiming at. This involves removing the constraints from finance capital which ushered in four decades of transactional individualism and the system of globalisation across the West. And we can call this - in shorthand - a culture of "contract".

The type of economic model this philosophy generates is inherently unstable. The reason for that is that it's founded on a false anthropology - a desiccated, soulless conception of the human being, and a false idea of freedom, quite different from the Christian anthropology, where human beings are seen as transcendent, relational beings made in the image of God.

Pope Benedict writes about this brilliantly in the document *Caritas in Veritate*ⁱⁱⁱ - his response to the financial crash of 2008, for example.

So when finance capital dominates, it has a tendency to dehumanise and commodify - commodify not only human beings but the natural world. It turns everything into products. It does generate wealth of course, but it tends to exploit, And it requires units of labour (that's us, human beings) to be cheap and mobile. This financialisation is profoundly affecting people's lives.

And in its extreme form, this philosophy conceptualises family as a form of constraint. Tradition, accountability, and mutual obligation are seen as obstacles to progress. A relationship to place is even reframed as old fashioned.

A politics of abandonment

So this insistence on having to move to find work, that we have now, used to be seen as right wing, but is now rebranded as "freedom". This transactional "freedom" brought prosperity for some but it broke parts of our country. Investment moved out of certain areas, and this caused civic and spiritual degradation. It drew the brightest and best away from their places of belonging to the big cities.

It was, in fact a politics of abandonment. It was a breach of the common good.

And governments of all parties over the last four decades have colluded. None of them have had the political vision to challenge the power of finance capital. And after all these decades, no sign of reform, the so-called "left-behind" had enough of this liberal domination and mismanagement. They literally had nothing to lose. Their reaction was framed by big money interests as "populist", but in previous eras, it would have been understood as a peasants' revolt.^{iv}

So this philosophy generates not only economic but social consequences. Liberalism incorporates the idea of the "unencumbered self", which produces a culture of self, emphasising rights over responsibilities.

It's effectively an assault on relationship - that generates conditions that lead to pathologies, such as family breakdown, atomization, fragmentation of communities, spiritual confusion.

And every country in the West that has followed this system is seeing the same effects. The motivation of this spirit is anti-human, which is why the system is unravelling.

And as the old era is dying, we're seeing all kinds of morbid symptoms. We see this unravelling in multiple sectors which might seem disconnected, but in fact, they all stem from the same source.

So we see it in low productivity, low wage, high welfare economies, inequality, massive public and private debt.

We see it in the collapse of trust in institutions, in the disconnect between the managerial class and the governed, in the weakening of democracy, in the subordination of the local by the digital. We see it degraded local infrastructure.

We see it in the atrophy of local forms of human association. We see it in climate warming, we see it in the displacement of communities. We see it in the liberalisation of abortion, euthanasia; we see it in the commercialization of surrogacy, in the promotion of transgender medicine, and in new pathologies needing lifetime medications.

We see it in the normalising of cosmetic surgery, in organ harvesting and sexual exploitation, in human trafficking. We see it in the erosion of social trust, in social fragmentation, we see it in the culture wars, the emergence of political extremes on the right and the left.

A malign culture and the vulnerability of the young

All of these symptoms are linked. This is what Pope Francis means by a malign culture, he really means it. Not least we see it in signs of human distress. The rise in loneliness - which statistically is much higher in the young than the old.

We see it in rises in addiction, self-harm, depression and nihilism. We see it in the tyranny of the social media culture, which sells a false idea of freedom and self-actualization through a competitive and dehumanising matrix of likes and image manipulation.

Francis stresses that the younger generation are the most vulnerable to these changes taking place. And he says this culture is not sensitive to the needs of the poor. Not at all: it reduces them to numbers. And we become desensitised. This culture of indifference - where we walk past people on the street.

He says this culture is also focused on the avoidance of suffering, the exaltation of physical qualities. And he says that virtual reality is taking over real life, eclipsing the precious nature of local culture.

He's very concerned this makes young people feel like losers. It causes frustration, it introduces illusions about the meaning of life, causing this culture of indifference that he often talks about.

This individualism undermines the common good. It promotes this idea of individualistic physical perfection. We need to help young people overcome the dangers of this ideology by helping them feel meaning in the local - in real relationships.

A vicious cycle, generating poverty and instability

So there's a vicious cycle at work here. The dominance of banking profit promotes intensified consumerism and low wages, which then in turn, generates social problems, which then leads to the need for more welfare expenditure, which then requires more state redistribution, which then requires more consumerism. And so it goes round and round.

So we're seeing actually now a collaboration between the "principalities and powers" - of finance, capital and the technocratic state. And when these become too powerful - this is what Catholic Social Teaching tells us again and again - when power is too centralised, this is a problem because it undermines the dignity of the person.

So for shorthand, we can just call this system individualism. As you can see, it's complex: it affects all areas of life. What's going on here fundamentally is that the primacy of God is being subordinated to the primacy of self. That's what's happening.

And so this generates poverty in all its forms: economic, relational and spiritual poverty. And it leads to the breakdown of morality. It also generates this cult of identitarian politics with its culture of self in the form of victimhood; and the battle of rights, which has led to the culture wars.

So in simple terms, this philosophy is hostile to human beings - because we're relational beings, we're not isolated individuals. It's important to remember that this system generates poverty in two ways: economic and social.

The unravelling

And now it is beginning to unravel, because it's fundamentally unstable.

The Ukraine war exposed its inherent instability and destabilised its power base. So we're now seeing a disturbance to global supply chains, that's causing inflation. And we're increasingly seeing non-western countries forming new alliances, rejecting this western hubris.

So the old era is giving way to a new world order, whose character is yet unknown. But we can already see authoritarian, technocratic and less democratic philosophies taking hold. So we need to be ready. And we need to see this, face this era, with a sense of tragic realism.

At the same time we must recognise the critical importance - as Francis says repeatedly - of fraternity, friendship and solidarity between human beings.

Catholic social thought not only helps us see these problems, it also helps us articulate solutions. Its stated purpose is to build a civilization of love. It always looks for a balance of power where the human being is not dominated.

And it requires the powers of money and state to be constrained. For example, through the tax system or through strong countervailing civil society institutions like unions, churches, associations, local businesses, and through the deconcentrating of capital. For example, it would require the shift from six big international banks to many regional banks. It also argues for distributed power, so this means more democratic processes at regional and local level.

And not least, it causes us to act in countercultural ways, as we'll discuss later.

Recap: Dark Times: What's Going On?

[slide #9]

I'm going to ask you now just to turn to the person next to you, anyone you like. It might be someone you don't know. And just for two or three minutes just share how this is landing with you and then we'll come back for about five minutes to share with the whole group.

CHAT WITH YOUR NEIGHBOUR

"What struck you about what you've just heard?"

2-3 minutes in pairs

then 5 minutes (or longer) sharing in whole group

OUR RESPONSE - WHOSE SIDE IS THE CHURCH ON?

[slide #10]

At this point I just want to strike a note about joy. This is a dark time, but it doesn't mean we give up on our joy. Quite the reverse. We're witnesses to true freedom, freedom in Christ. It is vital to stay close to our faith and to share that joy with our neighbours.

At the same time, we do have to face the truth. It's no good just looking for the fluffy bits.

In his provocations, Francis is in a sense, posing the question, "whose side is the Church on?"

Jesus and the political economy of Galilee

Jesus, who lived in Galilee under Roman occupation, resisted the dehumanising effects of that economy by introducing people to God's kingdom. And through his special love for the poor.

Like the prophets, Christ advocates justice in Jewish terms - that is, through righteousness, or *tsedeq*, which leads us, as bearers of God's image, to live in right relationship with each other, and through *mishpat*, the actions we each take to treat people equitably.

Now, Jesus was a manual worker, part of the peasantry.^v The Roman economy privileged the elites who controlled the store houses and kept down the wages of the poor.

But there was no question whose side Jesus was on. His resistance took spiritual as well as civic form. His instinct was to bring people together, in friendship with him, in solidarity with each other, across class, across race, across educational background, to build a relational power.

So just as our Lord was then, we are called to be the embodiment of love in a desecrated world, in friendship with God and with each other. So you could call this an insurgency against individualism. And that's the common good.

The poor are the treasure of the Church

Now, let's just think about the poor who are meant to be the treasure of the Church.

Now, some churches may be able to make these this shift, and some already have. But many, it has to be said, have become captured by a middle class culture and have lost connection with poor communities.

Pope Francis says that when someone is poor, he or she has the sense of the need for others and for God, an instinct for interdependence, that the affluence so easily lose.

God is at work in poor communities. He honours the poor specially. This is why Francis says the church needs to be evangelised by the poor, recognising that much of the church has become estranged from poor communities, and in this way, the whole body becomes impoverished.

Why is the Church estranged from the poor?

So can we ask, why has this estrangement happened? Here's a few reasons I'd just like to float.

One is about language. We often hear language use about poor people in church social action circles that indicates this estrangement. Terms like "marginalised", "outreach", "service delivery", "engagement".

This isn't the language of friendship and mutual respect. From a church-centric position, it might appear so, but from God's worldview, poor people are not marginal. It depends where you stand. It depends on who you know.

The number of people classified as poor in this country is 14 million. That's at least 20% of the population. For example, I believe that in Plymouth 35% of the population are classified as poor. That doesn't feel "marginal" to me.

This managerial language is well intentioned, but it unintentionally "others" the people we aim to help. Other phrases like "community development", "projects", "facilitators" and other professionalised roles - this is all part of a culture of contract.

The great effort to fix things is quite different from the culture of covenant and the personal approach with our neighbours that Pope Francis is asking for.

There's another point, about the food bank paradox^{vi}, which is well known in the food bank sector. Of course, they meet essential need, an increasing, essential need. But they are now a fixture in a low wage economy, propping up employers who pay wages too low to live on.

The more efficient emergency food aid becomes, the less urgent economic reform appears. Food banks are often a source of pride in churches who want to justify their usefulness - and we completely get that they have become essential. But the church has a sacred vocation, to be transformational, not just useful.

At the very least, we should be looking to make food banks places of encounter, rather than just distribution points.

Which tradition of justice are we following?

So you see, it really does matter, not only that we understand what's happened in our economy, but also that when we call for justice, that we understand *how* that justice will be achieved - which tradition of justice are we advocating.

In political philosophy, there are three main visions of justice: maximising human welfare, maximising human freedom, and maximising human virtue. In turn, they focus on economic utility, liberty and rights, and human flourishing and the common good.

Now, this third, ethical, common good tradition is closest to that biblical vision of justice. And this vision is at the centre of Catholic Social Teaching. At this heart of this tradition is the dignity of the person, dignity of work, the flourishing of families, communities, the preferential option for the poor, the distribution of power and capital, a balance between capital and labour.

But our economic system is completely unlike this. It is in fact a combination of the two other approaches to "justice", the welfarist and the libertarian.

So we have

- a neoliberal low wage economy (which requires a fluid jobs market, which benefits big corporations) and that is conjoined with
- a utilitarian approach - where the state mitigates the poverty that the financialized market creates.

This is dysfunctional.

This is the welfarist strategy - and so we have a benefit system requiring vast sums of public subsidy that props up wages too low to live on, benefiting big business. helping to perpetuate a state of affairs.

Welfarism is defeatist and inefficient. It's also inherently unstable.

So raising benefits to meet essential needs is absolutely imperative in the short term. But unfortunately, Christian groups who engage in benefits campaigns without calling for fundamental economic reform are inadvertently helping to perpetuate a state of affairs that is fundamentally unjust. In fact, in the long term, I would go as far as to say that campaigns to end poverty through welfarism repress and marginalised prophetic justice.

So this is why we have to ask the question: "whose side is the church on?"

From abandonment and collusion to covenantal solidarity

There's also a class issue here. Many activists and churches often talk about the poor as if they need to be angry on their behalf because they can't do it for themselves. However in recent democratic events, poor people did express their anger. But they were held in contempt for doing so. And the church did this too, it failed to act in solidarity with them in calling for fundamental economic reform.^{vii}

So it's not surprising that poor people have given up on the Church. It has failed to defend their interests.^{viii} It's a typical view that I hear from poor communities, and I quote: *"The church has alienated working class people by turning into a work food bank. It needs to start acting like a church again. State handouts are soul destroying, people need dignified work so they can maintain some self-respect."*

Many communities with proud civic histories have been abandoned and humiliated. Churches have thus far have voiced no serious critique of a system that has led to widespread civic degradation.

Now, there was a time going back, for example, to the 1889 dock strike in East London - remember Cardinal Manning - when the Church could be relied upon to offer resistance to injustice.

But currently, these communities feel as abandoned by the church as they do by the political class.

And further, when churches are closed, this is received as a message of abandonment. A recent report from Church Action on Poverty showed there have been more church closures in low-income areas than in affluent areas, signalling to poor communities that the Church doesn't care.^{ix}

So when the Church colludes with the culture of contract - money, power and state power - and abandons the places which it has served for centuries, this is a breach of covenant.

Compare this with Jesus who never abandons the poor, who He honours the most. He says, *"I will be with you always"*. His love is covenantal, not contractual.

So the current estrangement between the Church and the poor may seem hopeless. However, if the people of the Church can recognise the legitimacy of the anger, then hope can be found. If there is solidarity - a friendship between the Church and poor communities - then hope for both can be found.

Recap: Our Response - Whose Side is the Church on?

[slide #11]

So this is why I think we have to ask, when we think about our response to poverty, "whose side is the church on?"

I'm going to put you back into pairs again - maybe talk to someone else on the other side for another few minutes.

CHAT WITH YOUR NEIGHBOUR
"Whose side is the church on?"
3 minute chat in pairs

CALLED TO BE FRIENDS - CHANGE OUR BEHAVIOUR

[slide #12]

So let's move on and think about behaviour change. How are we supposed to change our behaviour?

So Pope Francis talks about **the Good Samaritan**, doesn't he. He loves to talk about the Samaritan. Because he didn't walk on the other side. He didn't leave it to others to pick up the pieces. I think in our own time, perhaps this means not leaving it to the council or not leaving it to the state. Not expecting someone else to come in.

The Samaritan made his own response, a personal response. He was able, in his heart, to connect with a man in trouble who was not part of his social circle. Francis says also, it's not only politics and institutions that are the solution to this, he's saying the calling of Christians is to become personally involved.

And he also says that although every poor person has the right to food, shelter, medical care and subsistence when he's deprived of a livelihood through no fault of his own, he also emphasises that **rights must be balanced with responsibilities**. And by that he means that poor people must be involved, not just recipients.

This is often the mistake: that it becomes "us and them". But there has to be a **reciprocity**. So maybe you could start thinking about whatever projects or things you're involved with, how could you build in responsibility for the people you're serving? To resist this dehumanising culture. There are lots of ways that we can do this.

One is by being **non tribal**, in times in times of polarisation. Don't fall for it, when people are asking you to take sides. Especially being friends with people outside our predictable social circles, especially across socio-economic lines, we can still - we need to model disagreeing well. This is so important.

We also need to be realistic and practical. Francis is always talking about **realities are more important than ideas**. He's been saying this for years. He says ideologies can be dangerous, and we can see now how dangerous they can be. They can capture people and capture whole countries.

He also says to see poor people as persons: this goes back to John Paul II's idea of **Personalism**^x, personhood. This is really worth looking at. Each person has a unique story with faults as well as gifts. Not to romanticise the poor - the poor are people just like everyone else.

Recognise also that **charity is not a matter of handouts**. "Charity" means love - sometimes I think something's got lost in translation. It's about personal relationship.

And Francis says it's about seeking out one another - there is something very profound in this - because this is how we find harmony. He says this is how the community can "feel itself".

Because **we are relational beings**, we are only complete when we're together. There's something unnatural about the individualistic model. And Francis says that this coming together re-establishes the just interpersonal relationships that poverty harms.

So when we talk about building the **kingdom of God**, what does that look like? What does it feel like? It feels tenderness, care, love listening, sharing stories, sharing vulnerabilities. **Reciprocity**.

Yes, it might involve handouts, but not on their own. Less about projects and activism, more about **relationship**.

And by the way, **don't think you're too old**. In fact, older people have a better understanding of relationship and friendship than the young: this is a special gift. The old can share.

And **don't feel you have to wait** for a bishop. Don't feel you have to even wait for a parish priest. Or even funding. You can start tomorrow. You can start tomorrow with one to one conversations with people you don't know or reaching out to someone perhaps in your own parish or in your neighbourhood.

Pope Francis puts the spotlight on ordinary next door **neighbourliness**. He's not so keen on the professionalising. This is about the whole people of God, the whole church, taking responsibility. This about listening, engaging, understanding, attending to spiritual as well as material needs, companionship, accompaniment, tenderness.

It's about building a common good between human beings that has been fragmented and atomized by the system that we're living in. It's about **friendship with God and with each other**.

Now, let's think about some more practical ways. You'll come up with lots more ideas yourself when we talk about this later.

Called to be Friends - in practical terms

What about poor people who don't have anyone to bury them? What about providing a **dignified burial** for a poor person?

What about sharing your Sunday dinner? Francis says that makes for a real communion. It makes our fraternity visible. **Sharing your meals**. Share your own table.

What about creating places where people feel welcome, **places of encounter** for all ages and backgrounds. The church in fact is one of the last places where people from different backgrounds can come together. It has huge convening potential and it doesn't cost anything. We've got the space, we've got the people: all you need is people of peace, loving people, patient, friendly. Set up responsibly with health and safety of course - create a place where people feel welcome. Make food banks places of encounter rather than just distribution points.

And Francis says that if you know what it is to be poor, then you will be better equipped. What does that mean? Well, we all have our own brokenness, don't we? We've all been through things. That's an asset. God works through our brokenness, because he wants us to be vulnerable, he wants us to share, to be really human.

And he says we have to **focus on meeting the genuine needs of the poor**, not on our own. I think what he means by that is in the younger generation, they are being groomed to think about the self all the time. Meaning is not to be found there. In fact, that's where nihilism lies. So for young people, it's to help them understand the benefits of focusing on the needs of other people.

There is a mysterious reason why Francis wants us to engage with the poor. It's not just for their benefit. When we think about the apparent church decline, we might consider, maybe, that God is doing something to humble the church so that in its poverty, it can realise its need for others, especially the poor.

We're to encourage, we're to participate in **forms of association**, in the local, that privilege the poor, finding ways to be together, like Jesus we're to live an incarnational theology that tangibly weaves itself into all aspects of our daily experience that walks with our neighbours, that builds friendship.

Recap: Called to be Friends - behaviour change

[slide #13]

Just to give you a quick sense of recapping what we've just talked about here:

- The mysterious wisdom that God shares: the kingdom of God
- Being realistic and practical, share your table, where meaning is to be found
- The balance of rights and responsibilities
- Involve poor people, don't other them by making them into recipients. Think about the Good Samaritan. What does that mean for you?
- Don't delegate. It's not so much about handouts, but about relationships, listening
- Do not turn away from anyone who is poor.
- And we need to join with neighbours in becoming communities of place. Place is important because this is where people are.

CALLED TO BE FRIENDS - REFORM THE SYSTEM

[slide #14]

Now, I also want to talk about reforming the system. This is the second thing that Francis is asking us to do. He is asking for behaviour change and he's asking us to reform the system.

So the common good vision of justice within Catholic social thought has always included a just economy. As I said before, its stated purpose is to be a civilization of love. And this is to be achieved by spiritual as well as social, political and economic means.

And so this means that **the just economy** should be integral to our vision of justice. So our understanding of a holistic evangelization should be part of evangelization. And this tradition of justice does not tinker at the edges. It demands fundamental reform, because it can see what's wrong. And it has the dignity of work as its cornerstone.

The **preferential option for the poor** requires us to argue for policies that support the flourishing of the family, community, place. To reject forms of employment like zero hours contracts, and the low wage culture which makes it impossible to run a family.^{xi}

The **dignity of work** requires measures such as incentives for job creation, place based investment, correcting the abandonment of the last forty years, and vocational training.

The aim is to cultivate thriving communities, because it is in **local relationships** that the human person finds belonging, meaning and purpose. People should be able to stay where they feel they belong, not feel they have to move.

The principle of **subsidiarity** - if you've come across it - it's a really important principle and often misunderstood or not known. The point of it is it's meant to keep the state from distorting from above the organic life of community from below.

The place of flourishing is the organic life of the community, and subsidiarity insists that decisions are taken as close as possible to the people they affect, and that a central authority should only do tasks which cannot be performed at a local level.

So the Church could learn from that. In its hierarchical structures, some decisions do need to be taken higher up, but many decisions can be taken more locally.

And that's a lesson for us in terms of government - when we hear government wanting to centralise more and more things we should say hold on a minute, can this be done more locally? So we should reject measures that further centralise power - whether it's state power or big money power, we should be suspicious of that, and support measures that **uphold the agency of people in the local**.

Now, the coming years and months are likely to be hard. There is currently no sign in the political class that any party has the guts or the vision required to undertake economic reform. No one's prepared to challenge the banks at this point. And as globalisation breaks down, local food and energy production will become more important.

So we do need to build up greater **mutual interdependence at a local level** in practical ways.

There is plenty we can do. There is plenty the church can get involved with in a constructive way.

So how will the churches respond? Will they act in solidarity with the communities?

If the Church is unable to challenge this toxic, neoliberal-utilitarian compact, it will only continue to alienate the "marginalised" communities it says it wants to reach. This is a matter of **solidarity**.

But this is a moment of opportunity, because it could be an inflection point for those churches willing to make a cultural shift to become more relational at the local level, and work in partnership with neighbouring institutions.

Recap: Called to be Friends - system reform

[slide #15]

Just a quick recap of what we've just said.

- The shift from contract to covenant, from welfarism to the dignity of work
- Calling for fundamental reform, investment in abandoned places
- To assert what it means to be human person
- To resist toxic ideologies
- To support the family
- Build coalitions of solidarity across difference and uphold the sacred
- We need a distinctive Christian identity in this era of tragic realism

I'm going to put you back into groups now - maybe threes or fours? You've got a bit longer now, and then we'll come back to a big plenary discussion. I would like to ask you a question.

So take five minutes - either in a pair or threes or fours, and then come back to the whole group and share some practical ideas.

[slide #16]

CHAT WITH YOUR NEIGHBOURS
"What does it mean to be a good friend where you are?"
3 minute chat in 2s, 3s or 4s
then whole group discussion

CONCLUSION

One thing I wanted to say was, please remember that building relationships is *the work*. So often within the social action scene, campaigning and activism are seen to have the energy. But the danger is that this tends to make the relationship building look trivial. Whereas actually, the **relationship building is the work**. I'm hoping that this session has shown you how important that is.

The culture of individualism has unravelled people's sense of belonging and relationship. So, when you're in a conversation, recognise how important that is, that you are doing the most important thing.

And be creative. Be creative.

And pray about it, ask the Lord to guide you, and show you who to work with, and where, and what to do.

Let's just recap on the letter itself. You're well into the content of this letter now:

Recap: World Day of the Poor Letter 2023

[slide #17]

- Much more than an anti-poverty campaign
- We are to counter the "malign", dehumanising culture, unjust economy with a deep behaviour change - by building relationships
- We are to help the young identify right from wrong
- Always remember Charity is personal: do not delegate, share your table - Francis really means share your own table
- We are to focus on needs of the poor, not our own - model this and encourage others to do so
- Building the kingdom is countercultural: relationships not just handouts - and the poor must not just be recipients but involved
- Remember the reciprocity: God speaks through poor people: so never turn away - meaning is found by not turning away.

Jeremiah 29.7

[slide #18]

So let's end with this wonderful passage from Jeremiah which I'm sure you know. It expresses so perfectly what it means to be *Called to be Friends, to be God's people in dark times.*

But seek the peace of the city
where I have sent you into exile
and pray to the Lord on its behalf
for in its peace you will find your peace.

Jeremiah 29.7

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Notes

ⁱ See Adrian Pabst, *How Christian is Post-Liberalism?*

ⁱⁱ See Edward Hadas, *My hate-affair with economics*

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html

^{iv} See Matthew Goodwin and Roger Eatwell, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*

^v See Douglas E Oakman, *The Radical Jesus, the Bible, and the Great Transformation*

^{vi} <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/food-bank-pandemic-poverty-uk>

^{vii} <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/the-economics-of-the-common-good>

^{viii} See Jenny Sinclair, *To Live a Decent Life*

^{ix} <https://www.church-poverty.org.uk/news-release-poor-communities-hit-hardest-by-church-closures-study-finds%E2%99%A2/>

^x <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/469/article/john-paul-ii-and-mystery-human-person>

RESOURCES: TOGETHER FOR THE COMMON GOOD

[slide #19]

Please visit our website at www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk

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