

Catholic Social Teaching as a Catalyst for Societal Renewal

Jenny Sinclair

Short presentation for the Centesimus Annus Foundation

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Listen to a recording [here](#)

The Centesimus Annus Foundation was set up in memory of Centesimus Annus, a document published by St John Paul II in 1991 to teach the principles and practices of the Church's Social Doctrine. The purpose of the Foundation is to "foster the growth of a thoughtful and cohesive community that can influence the social and economic realities of the world." The UK branch of the Foundation held a specially convened workshop, "Living, Implementing, and Teaching Catholic Social Thought" for the visiting President of the Foundation to showcase activity in this field in the UK. This presentation about the work of Together for the Common Good was one of eight presentations at the workshop.

Together for the Common Good is a UK charity dedicated to civic and spiritual renewal. We draw on Catholic Social Thought to help the church reimagine her vocation to be a blessing on society at a time of profound change and instability. We do this in practical ways by resourcing local churches, leaders, Christian organisations, young people and schools, by producing resources, creating platforms for thought leadership and through public conversations.

Let me tell you how this started. This is a story about the English church. I grew up in an Anglican clergy family. My father was a bishop. I was a rebel and was estranged from the Church. My father, David Sheppard, became the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool and his 22 year partnership with the catholic Archbishop Worlock became a ground-breaking, interconfessional civic friendship that blessed a troubled city.

It was their partnership that led to St John Paul II visiting the UK in 1982. the first visit to the UK by a reigning pope since the Reformation. This all happened while I was still estranged from the Christian faith. Then in my mid twenties quite unexpectedly, I had a conversion experience and I was received into the Catholic Church. For the next 23 years I lived a quiet life, developed a prayer life, raising my children and working in unremarkable jobs.

Then in my late forties - in 2011 - I experienced a calling of the Holy Spirit on my life. I was prompted to sense the early signs of the new era, of the social, economic and cultural unravelling. I saw communities abandoned, the undermining of democracy, the risk of social unrest. I had questions about the state of the Church in the UK and its capacity to make an effective Christian response - it had lost confidence and needed help.

At the same time I saw the potential of the People of God as catalysts for spiritual and civic renewal. People joined me and Together for the Common Good emerged. We focused on the vocation of the Church in our country - we asked what is God's mission for our Church - how is it called to act?

We examined the inheritance of the Church in England and lessons to be learned.

I discovered the tradition of Catholic social thought - no one in my Catholic journey until then had ever mentioned it - in particular I saw that *Rerum Novarum*, *Centesimus Annus* and *Laborum Excercens* helped us see what had gone wrong in our political economy in the post war period.

But I could see how it offered a pathway to restore and redeem society and uphold the sacred in an increasing secularised context of crisis and accelerated change.

In the emptiness of vision among the political class, against the backdrop of and multiple pathologies of human distress and a demoralised population, we worked with others to examine our present situation very carefully - some of them are here today, and some were engaged long before I was drawn into this work.

Right from the beginning we recognised that what was needed, was to generate a 'common good' language, rooted in the Catholic social tradition, around which people can unite - by contrast with the divisive discourses of 'Market', 'welfare', 'human rights' agendas and that this could not be generated in theory but only in practice, in relationship with others at all levels and across many sectors. We recognised the need to build an alliance, especially of Christians, to engage with this common good vocabulary.

We've also recognised that evangelisation is incomplete without an understanding of context rooted in Catholic social thought - this generates a more holistic and more credible evangelisation.

Our view is that these things are important for the church in England at this time:

- to be outward facing, to rebuild solidarity with poor communities
- to make the framework of Catholic Social Thought more accessible and to correct mission drift, to promote Justice in its authentic Catholic form
- to be a relational church - at all levels - personal, family, local, regional, national and international - from the character of the local church to matters of statecraft

- to build a strong alliance across the churches with our brothers and sisters in Christ and with others of goodwill - despite doctrinal differences - often we find agreement in areas of political economy.
- to be an alliance committed to upholding the sacred, to uphold the human space, to restore the language of mutual obligation and reciprocity
- to assert a constructive alternative worldview to challenge the current state of affairs and the dehumanising tendencies of global corporate interests enabled by technocratic states

And so our work focuses on engaging Christian leaders through [public lectures and webinars](#), in grounded terms of political economy - such as work, economy, civic participation, the family, migration, people and planet, housing, the new ideologies, social peace, what it means to be human and much more.

We invite leading thinkers to address these topics before invited audiences of Christian leaders across doctrine and opinion, to help leaders learn through deliberation, grow their confidence and build relationships between them.

We advise leaders, Catholic and Christian across churches, para church organisations and charities who are asking questions about mission, poverty, community cohesion, the political moment, the implications for ministry. Through workshops, [sessions and talks](#) we help organisations remember their tradition and correct mission drift.

We accompany leaders in private conversations. We teach in a relational way - through conversation, journeying with people, intentionally spending time with young leaders. It's messier and less programmatic, but more effective.

We also produce a podcast [Leaving Egypt](#) - addressing what it means to be God's people in times of unravelling - our listeners are leaders from across the churches, from the UK and North America and beyond. We explore the causes of our cultural and social upheaval as well as stories of how the Holy Spirit is at work at the grassroots. We weave in the insights of Catholic Social Thought for our audience, many of whom have never heard of it before.

We accompany local church leaders to help them discern their vocation for the common good in the neighbourhood, encouraging them to create a sense of family and civic relationships with neighbouring institutions.

We create resources to be used on the ground, for example we are currently developing a journey for congregations to explore God's economy in Scripture, bringing together the insights of an Orthodox Jewish scholar with Catholic social thought in order to stir the heart around issues of justice and economic reform. We produce a website full of resources, stories, essays, we share our talks, recordings, videos.

We work with young people - our ten-week [programme for schools](#) consists of lessons, assemblies and community engagement for 11-16 year olds. We train teachers to deliver,

helping them position the school as a force for the common good in the neighbourhood, helping the young people see the importance of responsibility, relationships and reciprocity.

And so for the last thirteen years Together for the Common Good has been a creative, spirit-led project with a number of integrated strands each resourcing the other. It is always changing. Thousands of people have been involved yet we are small, independent and agile enough to experiment in ways that perhaps the institutional church can't.

We punch above our weight thanks to many associates working alongside our small core team. We always work in partnership. We are part of a coalition of like-minded organisations and leaders, operating as a creative minority. I guess Together for the Common Good can be described as a catalyst, stirring up energy around the living tradition of Catholic social thought, agitating for the tradition both within and outside the Catholic Church.

This is just one story from the English church - there are many others. Something good is happening here - we are all workers in the same vineyard, each with our own emphasis, working together for the common good.

Jenny Sinclair

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Together for the Common Good is a Christian charity dedicated to civic and spiritual renewal. All of our activities, including our events, our *Leaving Egypt* podcast, our sessions for church leaders, our resources, our Common Good Schools programme, draw on Catholic social thought and encourage people to build local relationships, take responsibility and value community. Registered Charity No.1172113. www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk