

# The Challenge We Face

## Reading the signs of the times

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### 1. Introduction

Hello everyone, it's great to be here on this special mission day. Let me give a quick overview of what we're going to be doing.

We're going to approach this in a game of two halves. After lunch we'll explore our response. But this morning, we're going to examine the challenge we face. We'll explore what's going on, and we'll be drawing on our tradition of Catholic social teaching to read the signs of the times. Along the way we'll be thinking about mission, about justice, the capacity of the church, and the importance of building common good in the local at a time of division and instability.

And then we'll go into *Conversations in the Spirit*<sup>1</sup> to share what has touched us, and what challenges we are seeing in the places where we live.

So let's get started - I'm going to talk for just over half an hour - with a couple of minutes breather for a brief chat about halfway.

As we go along, I'd invite you to do two things: first, to notice what resonates, and second, to notice what comes to mind in terms of your experience where you live

### 2. My story

Before we go any further, I probably need to tell you a little about my own journey to this point. I grew up in an Anglican clergy household. My parents were Grace Sheppard, my mother and David Sheppard my father who was Bishop of Liverpool. He had a 22 year partnership with Archbishop Worlock in Liverpool around forty years ago. They engaged in the life of the city, standing in solidarity with poor communities, building relationships in a time of instability and division.

But I wasn't really part of that. I was a rebel in my teens, and I left the church. Then much to my surprise, and to everybody else's, in my mid 20s, I had a conversion experience and was called into the Catholic Church.

For twenty odd years, I lived a quiet life raising my children and working as a graphic designer. But then in my late 40s, in 2011, I had a nudging of the Spirit in my life, and everything changed. I was being prompted to see that things were going very wrong with our culture. And that the church was struggling to respond. It was then that the first idea for Together for the Common Good came to me, and I followed a trail. It wasn't easy, it still isn't.

But I know what it means to listen and trust in God's mission. This work has become my vocation.<sup>2</sup>

### **Pentecost**

Just for a minute, let's think about that moment in the upper room. Not all of us have the gift of speaking in tongues. I don't, though some of you here probably do - but the Holy Spirit works through each of us in different ways.

You may feel moved by something you hear today. Something might make your heart leap, or you may feel tears rising. You may feel agitated, you may feel prompted to want to do something, or an image or a word may come to mind. That's often how it starts.

### **Called and gifted**

When I first sensed God's call on my life, I didn't really understand what was going on. I just felt drawn to talk to certain people at first and I felt a trail was being laid for me. I wasn't specially gifted, I'd had no theological or leadership training. But I trusted that the Holy Spirit was guiding me. Our gifts may or may not be about professional accomplishment - you know, the hat we wear in terms of our function.

Yet each will need to bring all our faculties to the role that God gives us. But remember Peter was a fisherman, he wasn't from the professional classes and had no qualification to "found a church."

And often, God calls us not despite our brokenness, but because of it.

So let your heart be open today: this is a moment to take off your hat and open your heart. To be part of God's mission, no special expertise is required, apart from being you.

### **T4CG beginnings**

So back to about 13 years ago, I was being prompted. I began to sense the early signs of the change of era, the signs of social, economic and cultural unravelling that are now becoming clear to everyone. I was seeing poor communities abandoned, the gap between ordinary people and elites widening, the risk of social unrest. I felt agitated about the state of the Church and its capacity to make an effective Christian response - it had lost confidence and needed help.

I felt God was nagging me actually. To re-examine the partnership between my father and Archbishop Worlock, to find out what the church today could learn from their experience for this new time. I say nagging because at first I was like - this really isn't what I want to be doing, Lord! - but it just started happening and people joined me and Together for the Common Good emerged. We focused on the vocation of the Church and examined the inheritance of the Church in England and lessons to be learned. I saw the potential of the People of God as catalysts for spiritual and civic renewal.

## Discovering Catholic Social Thought

Along the way, in 2012, I discovered the tradition of Catholic Social Thought<sup>3</sup>. It's a cliché to say it's the Church's best kept secret, but really - even though I had converted in 1988 no one had ever mentioned it! As I'm sure you know - this body of thinking is concerned with everything about the human person - the family, the dignity of work, the economy, social peace, bioethics, migration, nature, war, and much more.

At its heart is a notion of justice that invites us to look at what is happening to people, to relationships, communities, in concrete terms - right here, where we are. It identifies three sources of power: the earthly powers of money and state, and the relational, transcendent power of human beings in relationship with each other and with God.

Although the churches were struggling, I saw that Catholic social thought had potential to build up the confidence of the Christian imagination. But it was not well understood - it was either stuck in the academy, or oversimplified, or co-opted into partisan politics.

So at Together for the Common Good, we have been trying to make it better understood. We are dedicated to civic and spiritual renewal and we focus on those aspects of Catholic social teaching that relate to that. We resource people through events, podcast, resources, website, a schools programme, through advising and building strategic relationships across the Christian traditions and beyond.

## 3. The Common Good

One of the key principles is the common good. The classic definition refers to "the set of social conditions which allow people to flourish." But it is not utopian, it cannot by definition be imposed, it is never coercive.

It is not something that *results* from government policy, although it can help. Some think you just have to insert the right policy and out pops the Common Good. There's more to it than that.

The common good is what happens between human beings *in relationship*.

It is about human agency. It is messier and more beautifully human than any utopia could be.

And so we define it like this:

*"The Common Good is 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 by working together across our differences, each of us taking responsibility, according to our calling and ability."*

So not only is the common good relational, it's practical, it requires our involvement.

It can be gentle, and at other times it can be challenging. To build a common good, it can require deliberation and sometimes hard negotiation.

The Common Good involves recognition, not just of a settled pluralism of identities and interests and diversity of opinion, but also recognition that people have traditions and experiences, histories that are related to class, race, families and place.

There is currently a lot of focus on identity but without attending to difference in terms of class, education, economic circumstances, we get a distorted picture.

Our country, our cities, even our neighbourhoods, have become so fragmented that our perception of what is going on often depends on who we know. But as Christians we are called to bridge divides and refuse the temptation to be tribal. We can intentionally broaden our friendships.

The Common Good is about the balancing of interests without excluding anyone, to prevent the dominance of one group over others. It is about building a shared life in which everyone participates and takes responsibility.

## 4. Justice

So today we're going to be thinking about building the common good as a way of responding to the challenges we face. To do this we'll need to be thinking about justice. But we need to be careful that we think about justice in a way that is consistent with Catholic social teaching.

Our tradition of justice is different from other philosophies of justice - it is not libertarian, neither is it welfarist nor utilitarian. Ours is a relational form of justice, rooted in the ancient rabbinical tradition where its meaning is about right relationship - with God and with each other.

Just to illustrate. Did you know the meaning of *lending money* in Hebrew – *keseftalve* – is close to “accompaniment”?

Lending as accompaniment. How different is that from the way we understand how to address money, poverty and debt today, where “help” looks like cash being transferred to someone's bank account and leaves them alone in their flat, on their own. A utilitarian, welfarist model of justice that relies on systems that minimise human connection.

In God's economy, if I'm having a hard time, you're to walk in relationship with me – accompany me until I get back on my feet – for as long as it takes. It may involve money, or helping me get a job. Not just giving me cash and leaving me alone. The Catholic social justice tradition is anchored in God's economy of mutual obligation and *right relationship*.

At a time of increasing global instability, understanding this relational posture is critical. Local, embedded, embodied, grounded relationships are going to be more and more important.

## 5. The treasure of the Church

And those relationships should start with our neighbours who are poor. The preferential option for the poor is not optional. People who are poor are meant to be the treasure of the Church.<sup>4</sup> Not an afterthought. Pope Francis says it is especially important that we live in solidarity through genuine relationships.

He goes further, he says the Church needs to be evangelised by the poor.<sup>5</sup> What does he mean? He says someone who is poor has a sense of their need for others and for God that the affluent and the busy so easily lose. This is the great mystery at the heart of God's special love for the poor.

He goes further. He says we must stop outsourcing and take responsibility. He says solutions are not to be found in activism or welfarism.<sup>6</sup> This is not an argument against the welfare state but it is a critique of how it works.

## 6. Building a common good

This is a lesson in the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, where decisions should be taken closest to those they affect. Francis says it's personal. We are not to use the state or charitable agencies as a way to keep poor people at arm's length. He's actually explicit – he says we are to share our table<sup>7</sup>.

So this is challenging, isn't it, for those engaged with the "social action" service provider posture as we currently know it. Francis is calling us to relationship because the divisive benefactor-recipient dynamic alienates the very people the church wishes to help.

Christians are to wean themselves off the idolatry of "saviour complex." Poor people are no longer to be regarded as recipients, but as neighbours and friends. He is keener on us being good neighbours than being activists.

We are called to build a common good together. Our individualistic lives estrange us from each other, make it harder for us to hear God, and this makes it less likely that we will have an accurate reading of what is going on in our own country.

So becoming a common good community requires us taking responsibility together with others in the place where we live. Building a common good for example between neighbours who have been estranged, between old and young, and so on.

If we can make this shift, we will be better able to join in God's mission.

## 7. Mission

But what do we even mean by "mission"? First - it's not the Church that has a mission but the God of mission who has a church. Too often, we get this the wrong way round. We need to hear God's priorities rather than seek to shore up our own.

God wants to transform the world. The *Missio Dei* or Mission of God necessarily must involve the whole people of God. Properly understood Mission bears the character of the trinitarian relational life of the Godhead. Every one of us – across all our differences – is called into God's great creative participation.

So what is God's mission for our time? Pope Francis says the "*discernment of the times*"<sup>8</sup> is in order to fulfil God's mission - which as Pope Paul VI said is "*to proclaim and establish among all peoples, the Kingdom of God.*"<sup>9</sup>

So today, we might ask each other what does the Kingdom look like?

Is it about healing, relationships restored, people loving each other, forgiving each other? A reweaving? A sense of family, friendship, perhaps its characterised by patience and gentleness, where there is listening, forgiveness, redemption, mutuality, accompaniment, laughter, people spending time together and with God?

Where have you noticed this happening in the place where you live? Let's ask God to show us what He means by the Kingdom.

## 8. Changing church

But can the Church fulfil God's mission? Sometimes the prospects don't look too good, do they? While parts of the body of Christ are growing globally, many of the institutional churches in the West are in a state of collapse. The Church is undergoing profound change.

What is not working is what I'd call the "consumerist" model of church. You know - where you go to church, you get something and you go home again. Where people sit in the same pews year after year and don't know each other.

I knew a woman who was in terrible debt for two years. She told me she went to mass every week and didn't tell a soul. And nobody asked. An individualistic model of church which failed to understand its vocation.

Churches seeing growth - and I've seen them - are relational, they offer a sense of family, they're attentive to the Holy Spirit, living in friendship alongside their neighbours, they accompany people in the struggles and celebrations of everyday life, and they make it easy to step over the threshold. Especially for people in poor communities who often feel that church is a middle class organisation.

Mission has too often been ecclesial-centric rather than facing outward to the neighbourhood; the Church has not always fulfilled her calling to give herself away for the sake of the world but has sometimes instead sought to shore up her own influence and power. Other times the Church has gone the other way, been influenced by worldviews that undermine Christianity, sought to please secular society too much, in the process losing her identity.

This period is distressing for some. But God is at work. This is a great and wonderful time to be alive: sure, a time of testing - testing us all, clergy and laity, a testing what it means to be God's people.

In many ways the church is facing challenges that are mirrored in society. And that is what we'll look at in a moment.

But first - just for 2-3 minutes, I'd like to invite you to turn to your neighbour and discuss the following question. Give each other one minute each. I'll tell you when to swap.

**QUICK CHAT: What stood out for you? A word, a sentence, an image?**

## 9. SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Welcome back everyone. So we've looked at how the Holy Spirit calls us, we looked at the common good, at why our justice tradition is relational, why poor people should be the treasure of the church not an afterthought, how the church is changing - and we looked at God's mission.

So now, we are going to look at the signs of the times. We do this by looking at the reality of our situation, but also by looking for the movements of the Spirit, by listening to God, to each other, and by listening in the neighbourhood.

So to start with, we're going to look at what's going on. Bear with me, we need to know what has gone wrong before we can discern our response.

### a. Catholic social teaching

So the framework of Catholic social thought causes us to ask questions about our political economy - that is, the arrangements that affect our daily lives, like wages, the way money is regarded, the state of the world of work and so on. It requires us to critique any system is dehumanising, whether it is a system that privileges profit over dignity, or whether it centralises power through the impersonal state. We are to work for an economy founded on the humane treatment of workers and the dignity of work. This tradition calls out systems that degrade the human being and calls for reform, not by imposition or revolution, by the democratic process. Not by centralising power to the state, but by distributed power.

So what do we see? What are the most obvious symptoms? We see that young people can't afford a home, that birth rates are declining, that social trust is breaking down. What else do you see where you are? We need to look locally this is very important. But also we need to zoom right out and see the bigger picture.

In a time of seismic change many of the assumptions we might carry - political, social - may be out of date. This is a time of intense political confusion - there are competing ideologies at work. The wisdom of Catholic social teaching helps us understand what is going on. It is all too easy to run the risk of becoming what Lenin called "the useful idiots" if we make the wrong call, and in so doing, inadvertently prop up an unjust system.

### b. Change of era

Just over 8 years ago, Pope Francis said we are not entering an era of change but a change of era.<sup>10</sup>

Every era is characterised by a particular philosophy and that philosophy shapes the "political economy" - these things are always shaped by ideas.

The animating idea of the current era that is breaking down, comes from the philosophy of liberalism<sup>11</sup> whose roots are in the Enlightenment. Some of that legacy has been very positive but in the last 45 years or so it morphed into an ideology known as neoliberalism.

A Catholic social teaching reading reveals this system to be founded upon a false anthropology - a desiccated, soulless conception of the human being, which in turn generates the idea of "the unencumbered self" and a false idea of freedom, freedom from constraint. In its extreme form, this philosophy conceptualises family as a constraint, and tradition, accountability and mutual obligation are seen as obstacles to progress, relationship to place is reframed as old fashioned.

How different is this from a Christian anthropology where human beings are seen as transcendent, relational beings, made in the image of God.

This so called "neoliberal" philosophy shows up in economics and in social and moral forms. Its flawed anthropology explains why the systems it generates turn out to be inherently unstable.

### **c. Neoliberal economics**

The neoliberal economic model generates prioritises shareholder interest and the pursuit of profit maximisation over everything else. These goals ushered in the system of globalisation. The "cost of living crisis" is simply the name of the latest example of a wider crisis unfolding across the West.

Catholic social teaching shows us that when finance capital dominates it has a tendency to dehumanise and commodify human beings and the natural world. It does generate wealth of course, but unless it is constrained, it tends to exploit.

It requires units of labour (that's us, human beings) to be cheap and mobile.

The insistence on having to move to find work 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 the best away from their places of belonging to the big cities. This financialisation affects people's lives.

### **d. Politics**

This was in fact a politics of abandonment. It was a breach of the common good. Successive governments from both left and right have over the last forty years perpetuated this system. None have had the political vision to challenge the power of finance capital. There is no sign that this will change in the forthcoming election.

After decades of no sign of reform of this economic system, 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.

### **e. Social Consequences**

But this philosophy generates not only economic but social consequences. Its culture of self places rights above responsibilities, which is effectively *an assault on relationship* - for example we are encouraged to outsource more and more the things we used to do as communities - child care, care of the elderly - generating conditions that lead to pathologies such as family breakdown, atomisation, the fragmentation of communities, spiritual confusion.

Every country that has followed this system is seeing the same effects. The motivation of this spirit is anti-human which is why the system is now unravelling.

We can see this happening in multiple sectors which often are regarded as disconnected but in fact stem from the same source. Perhaps you see signs of this around you where you live.

### **f. Malign culture**

We see it in low productivity, low wage high welfare economies, in extreme inequality, in 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, the subordination of the

local by digital culture, in degraded local infrastructure, in sclerotic health systems, in the atrophy of local forms of human association.

We see it in climate warming and the displacing of communities, we see it in the liberalising of abortion and euthanasia, in the commercialisation of surrogacy, the promotion of conditions needing lifetime medications, in the normalising of cosmetic surgery, in organ harvesting, sexual exploitation, human trafficking. We see it in the erosion of social trust, in social fragmentation, in culture wars, in the emergence of political extremes on the right and the left.

And not least, we see it in symptoms of human distress - like rises in loneliness (in fact more prevalent among the young than the old), in rises in addiction, self-harm, depression and nihilism, in the tyranny of social media culture which sells a false idea of freedom and self-actualisation through a competitive and dehumanising matrix of likes and image manipulation.

This is what Francis means by "malign culture". He says this culture is indifferent to the realities of the poor. He says it is focused on the avoidance of suffering, the exaltation of physical qualities, that virtual reality is taking over real life, eclipsing real local culture. He stresses that the younger generation are the most vulnerable, makes them think they are losers, causing frustration and suicide, introducing illusions about the meaning of life.

#### **g. Toxic cycle**

There is a toxic cycle at work producing poverty in both economic and social terms.

And so now we have a low wage, high welfare economy, with increasingly precarious and meaningless jobs rewarded with wages too low to live on, subsidised by the public purse making up the difference. The consequences include massive debt, both public and private. We are drawing skilled low paid workers away from their own countries and families to prop up our economy, while a shocking 5.2m people are abandoned on out of work benefits. In social terms, this dysfunction generates social problems requiring more welfare expenditure, which in turn requires more state intervention which, because it is overcentralised and non relational, generates more pathologies - and on and on.

#### **h. Collusion of the powers**

At the heart of this is an increasing complicity between finance capital and the centralised technocratic state, where governments collude to insulate the interests of big corporations from democracy, undermining human agency and the common good. We can conceive of this corrupt alliance as the "principalities and powers" of our day.

#### **i. Spiritual consequences**

These powers both subordinate the transcendent to the material. The primacy of God is subordinated to man. This is where the system has moral consequences. It leads to the breakdown of morality. The human being seems more powerful than God, generating a cult of self - this is why we see the emergence, on both the extreme left and the extreme right, of identitarian politics, with its distorted forms of victimhood, and the battle of rights which we see in the culture wars.

This denial of God subverts natural law and generates an anti-human system that generates poverty in all its forms: economic poverty, relational poverty and spiritual poverty. Our posture needs to be pro-human, to uphold human connection.

It is hard for us in the West to get a perspective on this but African Christians provide a valuable insight. Recently on our *Leaving Egypt podcast*<sup>12</sup>, Harvey Kwiyani, a missionary from Malawi here in the UK, describes what he sees as a "functional atheism" in the West, where even Christians do not expect God to be at work. Unlike many Africans who have still retained a natural awareness, we have lost that fundamental assumption about the reality of God's existence.

It's helpful here to appreciate the sacramental reality of the two realms, the earthly and the heavenly. Each realm has its own worldview and we have to choose the right one. As Moses said to the Israelites leaving Egypt, we should choose freedom in God, not the false freedoms of the machine.<sup>13</sup> The machine deceives and unravels. Meanwhile God builds relationships.

Now the era of globalisation is coming undone. The Russia-Ukraine war exposed its inherent instability and destabilised its Atlanticist power base. Disturbance to global supply chains caused inflation, and increasingly non-western countries are rejecting western hubris and forming new alliances. The old era is giving way to a new world order, whose character is unknown. In this unfamiliar territory, we can already see authoritarian, technocratic and less democratic tendencies taking hold, even in our own country.

## 10. Building common good

We may have to face the oncoming era with a sense of tragic realism.

But also, amidst overwhelming challenge, we can see why Pope Francis is calling for a culture of encounter.<sup>14</sup> It is not just rhetoric - he is calling the People of God to bring us back to the ways of the early church in the book of Acts. To a radical behaviour change, to become a relational, listening church, equipped to resist the principalities and powers by joining with God in his mission to transform the world.

To protect society, local relationships are going to become more and more important. Catholic social teaching recommends not only one to one's but strengthening the family and local institutions (such as unions, churches, associations and local business). It also calls for constraints on capital (for example by turning six big, centralised banks into many regional banks) and distributing power: like renewing democratic processes at regional and local levels, shortening food and energy supply chains, introducing new forms of local accountability). But this day is not about national politics, it's about what we can do in the local, in the places where we live.

Geopolitically, God's mission comes at this critical moment for a very good reason: it's not to save the church for its own sake. It's to make the church fit for purpose to heal the world.

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So the question everybody wants to ask is how should we respond, when we're in a place we've never been before?<sup>15</sup> Before we discern our response we must first read the signs of the times, we must become familiar with what is actually going on.

We've done some of that from the big picture perspective, and now we are going to do at a more granular level, by sharing what we are hearing and what is going on in places where we live. Using the Conversations in the Spirit will enable us to share from a listening posture.

So we're now going to move to our break out groups to share what is resonating for you, what comes to mind in grounded terms - where do you see the unravelling where you are? What are the challenges you see in your own communities, in your pastoral area?

## BREAKOUT GROUPS - CONVERSATIONS IN THE SPIRIT:

What challenges do we discern in our own communities, our pastoral area?

Jenny Sinclair

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*Together for the Common Good is dedicated to spiritual and civic renewal. Drawing on Catholic social thought, T4CG helps people across the churches make sense of this time of seismic change and discern their unique vocation for the common good. [www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk](http://www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk)*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN\\_Step\\_6\\_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN_Step_6_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/about/our-founder-director>

<sup>3</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/about/catholic-social-thought>

<sup>4</sup> Attributed to St. Lawrence of Rome (c. 225–258) <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/st-lawrence-and-the-treasures-of-the-church>

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, [World Day of the Poor Letter, 2021](#)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/20220613-messaggio-vi-giornatamondiale-poveri-2022.html> (#7)

<sup>7</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/resources/world-day-of-the-poor-2023>

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis for the opening of the Synod, 2021: <https://rb.gy/ekerw>

<sup>9</sup> Lumen Gentium, 1964: <https://rb.gy/hmtbp>

<sup>10</sup> <https://aleteia.org/blogs/aleteia-blog/pope-francis-we-are-not-living-an-era-of-change-but-a-change-of-era/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/how-christian-is-postliberalism>

<sup>12</sup> <https://leavingegyptpodcast.substack.com/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://unherd.com/thepost/paul-kingsnorth-how-to-resist-the-machine/>

<sup>14</sup> Fratelli Tutti, 2020: <https://rb.gy/x37dg>

<sup>15</sup> <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/the-story-in-which-we-find-ourselves>