



In Dark Times: People, Politics and the Common Good

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*A session in two parts:
Reading the Signs of the Times
Our Calling for the Common Good*

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PART ONE

Reading the Signs of the Times

These are dark times, but also - a fascinating and exhilarating time to be alive.

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

In his latest encyclical *Dilexit Nos*¹ (*He Loved Us*), he is imploring people to connect with each other from the heart.

He is calling us from a culture of separation into a culture of encounter. He wants us to share our lives, to build a common good between us.

This is more than rhetoric. He really wants us to change our behaviour. There are really serious and concrete reasons why he is saying this.

My story

But before we move on, let me just give you a very brief sketch of my story, and where I'm coming from.

I grew up in an Anglican clergy household, in London and then in Liverpool.

I was quite a rebel in my teens, I was one of those teens you as head teachers would have been worried about!

I became estranged from the Church. But in my mid-twenties I had a conversion experience, and much to everyone's surprise and mine, was called to convert, and 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 to me. I saw things were going 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 ecumenical partnership between my late father, Bishop David Sheppard and the late Archbishop Derek Worlock in Liverpool a couple of generations ago.

How the Church is called in society

We wanted to learn what it was, from their twenty-two-year joint leadership, 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.

From them we learned that when it comes to the civic vocation of Christian institutions, certain things stand out.

1. Christ-centred, joint servant leadership across differences
2. An "outward facing" posture in relation to the neighbourhood, standing in solidarity with poor people. And, of course
3. Catholic Social Teaching, to discern a coherent response to the signs of the times.

That was how we started, but since that time, *Together for the Common Good* has changed and developed as an organic project with multiple strands to its work and many thousands of people getting involved.

Catholic Social Teaching and Common Good Thinking

As we developed, early on, Catholic Social Teaching stood out as the most coherent theological framework to understand the world.

But we saw that it was getting stuck. Rarely was its wisdom on political economy shared beyond academic circles. We felt that it ought to be known much more widely, especially across other church traditions.

We sense that God is calling us to draw on its wisdom for a particular purpose - to equip people to play their part in spiritual and civic renewal. Rather than teaching Catholic Social Teaching in abstract form, we sought to ground it in political, cultural and social reality. Rather than teaching the whole spectrum of Catholic Social Teaching we focus on the renewal of society.

We came to call this "common good thinking".

The Work of Together for the Common Good

So just briefly, what do we do?

In practical terms we seed and support *Common Good Thinking* at all levels, especially in schools, churches and civic life.

- First, we train **teachers** to deliver our 10-week *Common Good Schools* programme in school and youth ministry settings – currently for 11-16s and next year for the primary age group too. The programme consists of a full suite of digital resources. Young people learn the basic principles of Catholic Social Teaching in the classroom and put them into practice through volunteering and befriending in the community. Teachers tell us it builds confidence, helps young people take responsibility and helps them learn the importance of relationship building. It also helps schools build reciprocal relationships with neighbouring institutions and positions their school as a force for the common good in the neighbourhood.
- Second, we equip **local church leaders** to read the signs of the times and discern their vocation for the common good, helping them become more outward-facing and engaged in the neighbourhood. We do this through online resources, talks and training sessions - and through our podcast, which this year celebrated its first anniversary with 16,400 downloads.
- Third, we bring common good thinking into **civic life** by convening unique gatherings of charity and church leaders to engage big public issues through the framework of Catholic social thought – questions like the economy, dignity of work, social peace, civic participation, identity politics and social action.

Reading the signs of the times

Let's read the signs of the times.

To understand the context we are operating in, it is very important in this time of great confusion that as Catholic institutions we look through the frame of our own tradition.

My take on this has been shaped by my life experience, by many leading thinkers I've had the privilege to know, from what I see in my work across the country, and probably most by the Catholic social thought tradition – sometimes described as “the theology of the Holy Spirit in practice.

As you know this tradition is driven by God's justice and concerned with God's creation, primarily with what is happening to the human being. It has even handedly critiqued all systems that are unjust and that dehumanise, from the unfettered market to the over-centralised, collectivist state. Correctly understood it is a nonpartisan tradition, at once both radical and conservative.

When we're reading the signs of the times, we start with what we see.

Symptoms we see

What we see is that young people can't afford a home, that social trust is breaking down. We see symptoms of what Pope Francis calls a "malign"² culture - extreme inequality, poverty, human trafficking, exploitation, fragmentation, massive public and private debt.

We see the effects of climate warming and the tragedy of displaced people, and the catastrophic damage done to the natural world.

We've seen the subordination of the local by the digital, the atrophy of local forms of human association, the assertion of human rights morph into a politics of identity promoted across society, the collapse of trust in institutions, the disconnect between the managerial class and the population, unprecedented migration, cultural disruption, growing social unrest and political volatility.

And we see people bravely trying to navigate these storms. We see extraordinary examples of resilience and humanity. But we are also seeing a steep rise in symptoms of human distress – in loneliness (higher among the young than the old³), in addiction, self-harm, an explosion of mental health disorders, depression, nihilism – and we see the impact of the tyranny of a social media culture and the false promises of self-actualisation. And much more.

Market

But beneath what we see, the Catholic Social Thought tradition⁴ helps us understand what is going on in terms of political economy. All the way from *Rerum Novarum* to *Centesimus Annus*, to *Laborem Exercens* to *Caritas in Veritate* and to *Laudato Si*, we see the same themes reappearing.

This tradition trains our eyes to the effects of the economy on human beings and nature. The commodification of creation. The “financialisation” of everything. Land, water, homes, human beings.

We see venture capital offering huge sums to farming families for their land – and the state making increasing financial demands on family farms and family businesses.

We see the exploitation of the human being for commercial interest – through the proliferation of gig economy jobs, through digital platforms incentivising sexual exploitation where the human body becomes the product, through the dominance of big pharma, promoting surrogacy, liberalised abortion and now assisted dying as social norms. We see the medicalisation of sadness, with vast

numbers on lifetime medication, the industrialising of human gender medicine, the normalising of cosmetic surgery, organ harvesting.

We see the promotion of migrant labour to depress wages, and yet unprecedented concentrations of wealth. Alongside this we see civic degradation on a vast scale in our post-industrial heartlands and coastal towns and in pockets of our urban centres. Beneath the veneer of western success, we are faced with a disintegration.

State

But equally, we see governments becoming more authoritarian, with more decisions taken outside the democratic process. Post-Covid, around the world we are seeing government overreach, with increasing surveillance, attempts at censorship, limits on free speech to conform to ideological dogma, and governments' growing interest in digital social credit systems to control behaviour.

Catholic social thought is very clear that state intervention is vital to constrain capital, but when state power is overcentralised, it too is dehumanising. As John Paul II points out, *"collectivism does not do away with alienation but rather increases it, adding to it a lack of basic necessities and economic inefficiency."* (CA, 41)⁵

The purpose of subsidiarity is to guarantee a degree of independence and to prevent the subordination of the human spirit. This principle insists that "Decisions should be taken closest to where they will have their effect, and a central authority should only do tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level." It requires distributing power, devolved healthcare systems closer to communities for example.

And of course we see the rise of AI too. Pope Francis has repeatedly warned about the rise of "the technocratic paradigm"⁶ in which technology seems to be unfolding according to its own logic. He insists that *"We would condemn humanity to a future without hope if we took away people's ability to make decisions about themselves and their lives."*⁷

Liberalism

This is a time of accelerated change. We are entering a place we've never been before.

So what's going on? How do we make sense of this? What connects all these disparate symptoms?

Pope Francis has said we are not entering an era of change but a change of era.⁸

Every era is shaped by a particular philosophy. The animating idea of our era is liberalism. This is the sea we swim in. We don't really see it because it's all around us. It has had many positive impacts, not least the age of reason and civil rights. But in recent decades it has morphed into a hyper liberalism.

This philosophy is built upon the idea of "the unencumbered self"⁹ where freedom is understood as freedom from constraint. Freedom from history, from religion, from God - and now, even from human nature itself.

In its extreme form, it sees family as a constraint, and tradition and accountability are seen as obstacles to "progress", even relationship to place is reframed as old fashioned. Ultimately, it "liberates" society from truth and from mutual responsibility.⁹

Two false freedoms - economic and social - same logic

We've ended up with this paradigm of freedom of choice, with a far greater emphasis on rights than responsibilities. There has been a loss of the sense of mutual obligation.

And this liberalism shows up in both economic and social forms - we've got the neoliberal economic model on the right, and the hyper liberal social norms on the left.

But they're driven by the same logic, where limits and borders are framed as regressive.

There's a kind of blind spot going on.

- The right attribute moral unravelling to excessive liberalism, but somehow the neoliberal economic system gets a free pass
- The left attribute poverty to the neoliberal system economic system, but they accept unlimited self-actualisation, which is seen as progressive.

Anthropology

The type of operating system that this philosophy generates is inherently unstable because it is founded upon a false anthropology - a desiccated, soulless conception of the human being which generates a false idea of freedom.

This is quite different from Christian anthropology. Christian anthropology sees us as we are – our identity is as transcendent, relational beings made in the image of God.

There is a denial of the transcendent and an assertion of the material. This denial subverts natural law and generates a toxic system that Paul Kingsnorth and others have called "the machine"¹⁰. Every country that follows this system is seeing the same effects.

With a relativistic and materialist logic – no truth and no beauty – its worldview ultimately brings about its own destruction and, in the meantime, generates all sorts of instability.⁷ As an old era dies, "a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."¹¹ We're living in an interregnum. A period of political realignment.

When we see the so-called "cost of living crisis", this is just the latest in a wider crisis unfolding across the West. We see governments of all parties over the last forty years enabling this liberal consensus. This is the sea we swim in.

The modern pharaohs

This false story of freedom leads to a cult of self – individualism which separates and divides.

There has been too much emphasis on rights and not enough on mutual obligation. It is in fact a kind of slavery – a list of pseudo-freedoms.

It says, "you can have mobility, consumer choice, rights and self-determination!" These false freedoms serve the economic interests of a few, but for everyone else, as they become captured, people trust each other less and less and are more easily manipulated.

This false story is endlessly promoted by the principalities and powers of our time: the over-centralised technocratic state and the corporate giants. We might think of them as our modern pharaohs.

And now - we see a collusion between the modern pharaohs of capital and state - where governments act in the interests of big corporations, insulating them from democratic accountability.

Catholic Social Teaching has long warned about the centralisation of power, because it undermines human relationships, it weakens social bonds and undermines local democracy.

By connecting the symptoms, we see the impact of this system

We're so used to it, we don't notice it - but the symptoms we see, although at first sight seem to be unrelated, are all connected. This hyper liberalism is having profound effects on our life together.

Let's look at the effects.

First, what has been the impact on work and class?

This animating idea has led to neoclassical economics, a particular form of financial system and from this, to globalisation – geopolitical economic processes that serve the interests of supranational corporations and requires the shift of skilled work to low wage economies.

Four decades ago, the idea of moving to find work was regarded as right wing - but now it is rebranded as freedom!

This transactional "freedom" led to deindustrialisation and broke parts of our country. The offshoring of jobs and investment with no meaningful replacement has led to the discarding of places and whole communities, especially the so-called post-industrial working-class communities who are framed as deficient and backward. On top of this we've had the imposition of the knowledge economy and the service economies, effectively shaming manual labour, further exacerbating the class divide.

Effectively, it's been a power grab from the poor to the middle class and to the rich. This has effectively been a politics of abandonment. In human terms its impact has been catastrophic. It was a breach of the common good.

Another way of seeing this power grab relates to Thatcherism. In allowing our investment to pull out of our industrial base forty years ago she basically – even if unintentionally - empowered the Chinese Communist Party.¹² Investors were attracted to their 24 hour a day production, low wages and lack of free and democratic unions. All the capital that we'd inherited over 150 years went to China which then became a massive industrial power. Meanwhile our industrial base was all but destroyed with massive consequences.

This is a key aspect of the story of globalisation continued under Blair, Clinton, Obama, and most western governments ever since.

Second, what about the impact on human beings?

This this type of neoliberal economy not only has an effect in economic terms, it also affects human beings, our behaviours, our relationships. This is a crucial point.

The great theologian Luigi Bruni says that this system, *"gives birth to and fosters its own sense of being human"* that *"it engenders the promise of interpersonal relationships without the wound of the other."*¹³

Now, we all know the risk of relationship - when we open ourselves to the other. But without that, we're not human.

It's not an exaggeration to say that this philosophy generates an anti-human system.

It has changed us. It makes us into the ideal consumer sitting at home ordering from Amazon, separated from each other.

It's an assault on relationship.

The less we trust, the more powerless, the more likely the tendency to violence.

Third, this system has also had a major impact on Christian institutions

We are seeing many of churches affected by the dominant culture – mission drift, crisis of confidence, individualistic leadership styles, more managerial, becoming more contractual than covenantal.

While Pentecostal and non-denominational house churches are growing, we are seeing a steep decline in the mainstream churches as the process of so-called secularisation proceeds. In fact, people are worshipping other gods.

Fourth, let's look at the impact of this system on work and welfare

A central theme of Catholic Social Teaching is the dignity of work and so it is vital to look at the effects of this neoliberal system on work.

Businesses in this system require units of labour to be cheap and mobile. They tend to want to import workers from very low wage economies – tempting them away from their own families to prop up western economies – a system described as “frictionless” by investors which undermines the dignity of work.

The consequences are not restricted to the devastating impact of unemployment and the dependency on welfare. The reshaping of our conception of work is also affecting our relationships.

A labour market, dominated by low skill low security jobs, weakens the confidence of the young in adulthood.

It also undermines family formation. It is also affecting the birth rate.

This instability undermines the conception of work as vocation - with the loss of reward, sense of meaning and purpose that comes with that.

This model of political economy has also reshaped our conception of welfare. We have shifted from a culture of community interdependence to a method of support that is mainly consisting of the transfer of funds or the provision of services. We now have 5.5m people on out of work benefits.

This tradition of Catholic social thought is very cautious about charity becoming a way of keeping the poor at arm's length. The *World Day of the Poor* letters say this again and again. It's very tempting to fall into that posture. It's easier to fundraise for a charity than to build relationships with neighbours who are poor and vulnerable.

We outsource more and more of the welfare we used to do as communities – childcare, care for our civic environment, entertainment, care of the elderly.

It is no surprise then that we see family breakdown and isolation. There are things that we really ought to be doing at community level that the state shouldn't be doing.

Christian institutions are not to be service providers. They are called to be incarnational, building covenantal relationships of reciprocity.

We have to think about what solidarity looks like for a Christian institution. It's about relationship, about being more interdependent with our neighbours. This relationality is a distinctive mark of the Christian charism. This is what Pope Francis is asking us to do.

Fifth, what about the impact of this system on civic solidarity?

Its amoral incentives to fragmentation eat away at shared values and erode our sense of citizenship and responsibility; they dissolve the particularity of place and mutual obligation.

This is why we see the emergence, on both the extreme left and the extreme right, of identitarian politics, distorted forms of victimhood, authoritarian tendencies, the battle of rights and the culture wars.

In this paradigm we are pitted against each other on the basis of identity and opinion. This polarisation keeps us separated and acts as a distraction from the fundamental problem: a dysfunctional political economy that generates poverty in all its forms: economic, relational and spiritual – which results in a de-moralisation. It is very important to understand this distraction.

Blowback from the civic space

This system has been perpetuated by all political parties over a forty-year period. Whether intentional or through naivety or neglect, this liberal hegemony has been provoking increasing discontent.

After decades of no correction to the devastation, the so-called "left behind" had enough of this domination and gross mismanagement of their political economy. They literally had nothing left to lose. In previous eras their actions might have been understood as a peasants' revolt.¹⁴

Think of some of the challenges to globalisation. The truckers in Canada, the farmers in the Netherlands and now the UK, the Gilet Jaunes in France, the angry parents protesting against gender ideology, think of Brexit challenging the dominance of the EU, think of the unlikely Trump-Kennedy unity alliance challenging the big pharma-big media progressive power base.

Such reactions are framed by corporate interests as "populist" and held in contempt by an elite liberal managerial and political class who cannot accept that this is political blowback their own policies have produced.¹⁵

Often motivated by good intentions, the liberal progressive position is in fact not that popular (only 13% fall into this category in this country¹⁶) but its leadership is disproportionately powerful with huge influence in mainstream media which explains why ordinary people are so angry.

Political realignment

This blowback to liberal hegemony - the rejection of the "frictionless" conditions required by globalisation that affect working people's livelihoods - manifests in different ways in different countries. Some of it constructive some of it destructive.

This is feeding massive geopolitical shifts as countries decide they will no longer be told how to live by a liberal West. I haven't time here to go into the destabilising impact globally in terms of war. Enough to say we are in the midst of a great realignment across the world.

But America has a direct influence on the UK, so it is worth saying that there are a great many forces struggling for power there – progressives, conservatives, state collectivists and libertarians. The decisive victory of the alliance around Trump is giving voice to the blowback against globalisation in

a country desperate for change, despite being a highly unconventional political proposition, and even if it comes with great risk.

Progressive objections may lead to yet another blowback and more instability. But the trend of history is that the working class are playing a decisive role in elections, and the public mood is for a return to common sense, the rebuilding of the industrial base and a strong national economy.

In the UK it is no longer a fight between the orthodoxies of the old left and the right. That shift started well over a decade ago. Both parties have pursued liberalism for the last forty years, having abandoned their respective founding missions long before that. There was and is no enthusiasm for Starmer – he was elected largely because of Tory incompetence - and the Labour Party is just as empty of vision. For the most part, our political class is lost.

Meanwhile the majority of the population is radical in the sense that it wants economic justice and decent work; at the same time, it is socially conservative in terms of family, place and faith. In fact, pretty close to the Catholic Social Teaching tradition. This is the sweet spot. The question is and has been for some time, which party will be smart enough to put forward a unifying story along those lines.

A strange period

As I said, one way to understand this is that we're living in an interregnum. A period between eras of profound political realignment.

In a period like this, it is often hard to tell what is going on. Often things are not what they seem. Sometimes things are even the opposite of what they are portrayed to be.

The commodification of the human being is malign. We are seeing a loss of the human space where we can be together, and this makes us vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation.

We should not underestimate the power of forces which undermine the common good, and not be afraid to name them as demonic.

Such forces generate spiritual, cultural and moral confusion.

Impact on the young

This hyper liberalism makes people unhappy and lonely, especially the young. All the teachers I know are dealing with the fallout - serious issues with behaviour and mental health distress.

Our primary relationships ought to be with each other, not with the administrative state, nor with the likes of internet giants like Amazon, Google and YouTube. Nor mediated by digital social media platforms.

Not mediated by business models that profit from a competitive and dehumanising matrix of likes and image manipulation, like Instagram, TikTok and the dreadful Grindr.

Our primary means of seeking advice should come from within a mixed community of real people in a real neighbourhood, not within an echo chamber founded on group identity or a culture of grievance. We are embodied and embedded beings who need relationships to thrive. And it needs to be said that boundaries and constraints are essential for young people to flourish.

Pope Francis stresses that the younger generation are the most vulnerable to the changes taking place. He says the culture of individualism is focused on the avoidance of suffering. This resonates with the research of Jonathan Haidt¹⁷ which shows that overprotecting young people and promoting

a culture of rights and victimhood is making them dramatically less resilient and afraid to relate. It is dangerous.

Further, in his address to the G7 Summit in June, Pope Francis urged world leaders to recognise the threat to humanity of AI, the digital and the virtual.¹⁸ Because not only do they threaten jobs and democracy, they also have the potential to take over real life, eclipsing reality. This is the nature of the new industrial revolution.

Francis is concerned that this malign culture “makes young people feel like losers”¹⁹, causes frustration, introduces illusions about the meaning of life, promotes a transactional paradigm, and the idolatry of physical perfection.

We need to consider how we are equipping young people for an uncertain future.

Why the common good?

In a few moments we’ll pause for discussion.

In reading the signs of the times – taking a steer from Catholic Social Teaching’s understanding of political economy – we’ve begun to identify the underlying causes of the unravelling.

But this tradition also equips us to resist and constrain the dehumanising powers – and, to identify the ways of reweaving, the ways of building the kingdom.

There is an antidote to individualism and collectivism. It involves loving God, loving our neighbours and joining together, taking responsibility, for the common good.

The common good not only offers a better story. It's also very practical. This is what we will explore in part two.

But right now, let’s pause.

If we’re going to identify how to respond, we really do have to grasp what is going on.

DISCUSSION

The impact of the malign culture - what do you see?

- on our young people, on school culture, on leadership, on teaching as a vocation, on relationships between teachers and students, on relationships between teachers and parents, on the relationship between the school and its neighbours, on the church, on Christian distinctiveness...

PART TWO

Our Calling for the Common Good

In part one, by reading the signs of the times using the framework of Catholic Social Teaching, we explored the features of what Pope Francis calls the malign culture, the context we are operating in. There is great uncertainty about the future.

But as the people of God, we are not gloomy. These are great and wonderful days to be alive. Because we know, amidst this crisis, that God is at work. This is a time when we find ourselves in increasing opposition to the world yet called to live abundantly within it.

Now we're going to explore the common good. We'll explore our calling in this regard and what that might look like in practical terms in the life of a church school.

The common good is the antidote to individualism and collectivism. It involves building relationship across differences at all levels. It's a better story.

At Together for the Common Good, we sense that God is calling us to draw on the wisdom of Catholic Social Teaching for a particular purpose - to equip people to play their part in spiritual and civic renewal. And so, we ground Catholic Social Teaching in our political, cultural and social reality.

Rather than teaching the whole spectrum of Catholic Social Teaching (which is the job of the Church) we focus on the renewal of society. We want to make it accessible to all, not just to Catholics, so we call this "common good thinking".

The *Catholic Schools Inspection Framework*²⁰ requires pupils to be actively engaged, and to take on leadership roles, in responding to the demands of Catholic Social Teaching, locally, nationally and globally. At Together for the Common Good, we have something to offer a school wanting to live out Catholic Social Teaching in the local. Our *Common Good Schools* programme is focusing on the local.

Similarly, the programme helps schools fulfil the *SIAMS*²¹ requirements to be reflective of particular context, to "create an active culture of justice and responsibility" and to "enable pupils and adults to flourish" within a theologically rooted Christian vision.

So let's have a look at this story that involves everyone, and which requires responsibility to be taken at the appropriate level - in line with the principle of Subsidiarity, where decisions are taken closest to those they affect.

Building common good at all levels – Subsidiarity

So in this vision for renewal, responsibility for the common good must be taken at all levels - international, national, regional, local, personal where everyone has a part to play where they live and work. Let's look at what this might involve.

First in political terms - at national level, it's about building relationship between labour and capital, between employer and employee, between business and unions. It involves place-based investment, retraining and apprenticeships in the forgotten places; local banking and energy providers that are closer to people and more accountable. It involves a distribution of power and resistance against global governance.

At the appropriate level

- **International** – solidarity through relationships not globalised power
- **National** – balance between state, markets and civil society
- **Regional** - decentralised capital and regional institutions
- **Local** – **tapestry of intermediary institutions (schools fit here)**
- **Family** - building block of society
- **Individual** - personal responsibility - social dimension of evangelization



At regional level, we would see institutional collaboration between employers, investors, religious networks, community networks and educational institutions all working together for the renewal of their region.

And in the local, we need to become awkward customers: borrow more, buy less, build up local institutions and the relationships between them. To generate a local moral economy - a counterweight to the big corporates. This layer of civil society is where human beings find fulfilment. It means building back relationship where it's been stripped out. Less of the auto checkout and more human contact.

We need to be strengthening families, local associations and local businesses and the links between neighbourhood institutions, what Catholic Social Teaching calls intermediary institutions. Which as Pope John Paul II said, *“exercise primary functions and give life to specific networks of solidarity. These develop as real communities of persons and strengthen the social fabric”* (CA #49)²²

He added that *“the social nature of man is not completely fulfilled in the State, but is realized in intermediary groups...which stem from human nature itself and have their own autonomy, always with a view to the common good.”* (CA #13)²³

We'd be looking to build a rich tapestry of clubs, businesses, schools, charities, and religious bodies – working together while each meeting local needs. The school is especially well placed to enable different groups to work together, to act together.

At the personal level, this calling to build common good belongs within an integrated evangelisation in its holistic sense²⁴ – it is about *both* our relational identity in God *and* about how we live. This is how it relates to spiritual renewal.

Repairers of the Breach

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

Like in Isaiah 58:12, we're called to be "Repairers of the Breach." Because there has been a breach - a breach of the common good.

In the face of this dehumanising philosophy, we're not called to be useful, we're called to be prophetic. To challenge structures of sin and to build structures of grace.

We need to restore a memory of the commons which is a critical aspect of our history in the UK. We must work together to create conditions that enable young people to feel they can build a life. As Christians we know that our anthropology is relational. And so our role here - our vocation - is to uphold and defend the human space where we can be together, to resist the dehumanising powers.


The common good

But what is the common good? And what is it not?

The common good is not woolly: not a vague idea where all values are equal, not a "you do you, and I'll do me" kind of liberalism, which as we've seen leads to a battle of rights. The common good emphasises a balance between rights and responsibilities. It is place-based and embodied, not abstract. It is non-partisan, non-tribal, non-party political.

The Common Good

	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Utopian• Party political• Abstract• Tribal• Coercive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Balances different interests• Non-partisan• Place-based• Balances rights and responsibilities• Involves free participation



The common good tradition places trust in ordinary people and rests on the principle of Solidarity: it is strengthened when we join together across our differences. Across old and young, men and women, employer and employee, educated and uneducated, business and unions, faith and secular and so on.

It is undermined when we're isolated, separated, or divided by identity categories. It is incompatible with identity politics ideology – the common good can't be built in a "safe space" insulated from dissent. It requires deliberation, negotiation, diversity of opinion, listening, mutual respect, forbearance, forgiveness, and the possibility of redemption.

It is based on the recognition of natural law, acknowledging people's realities and calls us to work together across our different interests – whether of class, socio-economic background, ethnicity, sex, age, ability, experience, and education. It's realistic about human fallibility yet encourages virtue.

The common good is not utopian: it is not a medicine that's good for you that justifies a top-down imposition. It cannot be imposed or delivered. It arises from people's free participation. It insists on the human agency that comes from true freedom in God, not the false freedoms of "choice" promised by consumerism, nor the totalitarian utopias of collectivist ideologies.

At Together for the Common Good, we define it in a particular way.

Common Good Thinking

"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 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."



This is for everyone. But as the People of God, we are called to a special role, a kind of reweaving in the local – to a building of civic relationships that is covenantal not contractual.

All of this applies to schools, in particular to church schools.

Let me take you down a couple of side roads for a moment.

There's a common misunderstanding around the difference between Catholic Social Teaching as a tradition, and Catholic social action. They are not the same things.

Catholic social teaching is...



Not only...

- Social action
- Freestanding principles
- Global issues
- Charity
- Campaigning

But also...

- ✓ Provides a Catholic worldview
- ✓ A framework for good judgement
- ✓ Is grounded in reality, not utopian
- ✓ Is worked out in local relationships
- ✓ Theology of the Holy Spirit in practice



Catholic Social Teaching is not the same as social action

On the left of this slide, I'm sure you'll recognize things that you might be doing in school already, but Catholic Social Teaching is not only those things. As we saw earlier, it is also a worldview and provides a framework for good judgment.

However, it's too easy to tick the Catholic Social Teaching box thinking we've done it, by campaigning or fundraising for a charity or delivering a social action project. As we've seen earlier, Catholic Social Teaching is far bigger than social action. Having read the signs of the times and understanding our context, we can see that the emphasis now must be on building relationships. This is the significance of *Fratelli Tutti*²⁵ and why Pope Francis talks about the culture of encounter.

Make the culture of encounter shift



✗ From  ✓ To

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| • Outsourcing care | • Taking responsibility (Subsidiarity) |
| • Service provider | • Neighbour |
| • "Us" and "them" | • "Us" |
| • Transactional | • Covenantal |
| • Project-based | • Relationships of reciprocity |
| • Distant | • Solidarity |



Shifting to a culture of encounter

The rhetoric of “culture of encounter” can be a bit abstract but in all his encyclicals, and in his *World Day of the Poor* letters Pope Francis warns us not to “outsource”, not to keep people who are poor at arm’s length – whether through fundraising, activism or welfarism. This doesn’t just apply to charities; it applies to all Catholic institutions. It’s a key aspect of Catholic identity.

Again and again, he is warning against the “us” and “them” dynamic that is often prevalent in social action and charitable activity. Instead, he says we need to adopt a side-by-side posture of neighbour, to take personal responsibility and to build relationships of reciprocity.

What needs to happen to make this possible?

At a time when so many of our young people feel dislocated, our schools must be places where we learn to take responsibility and build local relationships.

In our schools, are we reading the signs of the times accurately?

Are we joining with our neighbours who are poor and demanding investment and decent jobs in our area?

Solidarity

Do our young people know what it looks like to stand in solidarity with the poorest in our communities? Not as service providers, not as rescuers helping victims, but as neighbours and friends who share in each other’s local concerns, joys, hopes and fears?

It might be helpful just to bring to mind here, that Catholic Social Teaching was a response to the Industrial Revolution and *Rerum Novarum*²⁶ was in fact inspired by the solidarity of Cardinal Manning with the dockworkers during the great dock strike of 1889 in East London.²⁷

Solidarity

- With our neighbours
- Accompany people who are poor
- Shared concerns
- Relational
- Covenant
- Telling the truth
- Everything we do is an occasion for communion



Today we face a new industrial revolution, driven by technological change on a scale never seen before. From the precarity of the dockside labour market, we now have the gig economy and AI threatening people's dignity in all kinds of new ways. We are called to stand in solidarity again with people and to prevent the dominance of the powers from subordinating human beings. We don't know what's coming - but Pope Francis's discernment is that the Holy Spirit is saying to us we must be together: the emphasis on the relational is front and centre.

Our calling

In this malign culture, we're called to be non-tribal, to live out our countercultural story. As the new era unfolds it's our job to stay human. We must not be shy about our God-given identity. Each of us is called to a unique vocational responsibility.

We can shape the world by the language we speak and living it out authentically. We must speak the language of covenant not contract, of solidarity not division, of mutuality not individualism, of relationship with each other not the cult of self. We must tell the truth and accompany people.

Can our schools be places where we learn to be intentional about building civic relationships, where we practice reconciliation, learn to be repairers of the breach?

Our schools need to be places where we build structures of grace, where we regard everything we do as an occasion for communion.²⁸

DISCUSSION

- **What could solidarity look like in our neighbourhood?**
- **How could our young people learn to take responsibility and build local relationships?**
- **What can we do to make the culture of encounter shift?**

Jenny Sinclair is founder and director of Together for the Common Good (T4CG), and co-host of the Leaving Egypt Podcast. T4CG is a Christian charity dedicated to spiritual and civic renewal. Working with leaders, churches and schools, T4CG empowers people to make sense of this time of seismic change and discern their unique vocation for the common good. Find out more:

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FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Pope Francis [Dilexit Nos](#)
- ² Pope Francis [World Day of the Poor letter 2023](#)
- ³ [The Campaign to End Loneliness](#) and [Tackling Loneliness evidence review](#)
- ⁴ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/about/catholic-social-thought>
- ⁵ John Paul II [Centesimus Annus](#)
- ⁶ Pope Francis [G7 summit address](#)
- ⁷ Pope Francis [G7 summit address](#)
- ⁸ Pope Francis, [Pastoral Visit to Prato and Florence](#)
- ⁹ Adrian Pabst [How Christian is Post Liberalism](#)
- ¹⁰ Paul Kingsnorth [Being Church in the Age of the Machine](#)
- ¹¹ Antonio Gramsci [Prison Notebooks](#)
- ¹² Maurice Glasman [Blue Labour and the Redemption of Conservatism](#)
- ¹³ Luigino Bruni [The Genesis and Ethos of the Market](#)
- ¹⁴ David Goodhart [The Road to Somewhere](#)
- ¹⁵ John Gray [Interview, 3 March 2023](#)
- ¹⁶ <https://www.britainschoice.uk/segments/progressive-activists/>
- ¹⁷ Jonathan Haidt [The Anxious Generation](#)
- ¹⁸ Pope Francis [G7 summit address](#)
- ¹⁹ Pope Francis [World Day of the Poor letter 2023](#)
- ²⁰ [Catholic Schools Inspectorate](#)
- ²¹ [Inspection Framework for Anglican and Methodist Schools](#)
- ²² John Paul II [Centesimus Annus](#)
- ²³ John Paul II [Centesimus Annus](#)
- ²⁴ Pope Francis [Evangelii Gaudium](#)
- ²⁵ Pope Francis [Fratelli Tutti](#)
- ²⁶ Pope Leo XIII [Rerum Novarum](#)
- ²⁷ Jenny Sinclair, [To Live a Decent Life](#)
- ²⁸ [Instrumentum Laboris, B2.52](#)