



Building the Civilisation of Love

Introduction to Catholic Social Teaching

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Audio is available [here](#) and slides can be downloaded [here](#)

SLIDE #1

INTRODUCTION

It is an honour to be here with you this afternoon.

I've been asked to give you an introduction to the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching from the point of view of *what it's for*. I'm going to invite you to consider that its purpose is actually to build the Civilisation of Love.

Over the next two hours, we'll have plenty of time for discussion, and

- We're going to look at Catholic Social Teaching - what it is, what it's not, and we'll look at its basic principles and components.
- Then we'll consider what it's for and why it's so important at this point in our history, and we'll be reading the signs of the times.
- We'll also be exploring how God is calling each of us to participate in the common good and what this means as we live it out in our everyday lives.

My story

But before we move on, let me just give you a very brief sketch of who I am and where I'm coming from. I grew up in an Anglican clergy household in London and then in Liverpool. My father was David Sheppard, the Bishop of Liverpool, who had a famous relationship with Archbishop Worlock for twenty-two years back in the 1970s to the 1990s.

But I was a rebel in my teens. I was a difficult child. I wasn't happy being the daughter of a bishop and I became estranged from the church. But in my mid-twenties, I had a conversion experience, and much to everyone's surprise and mine, I was called into the Catholic Church, and I converted.

After that, I lived a quiet life, raising my children, working in graphic design and in charities. But then in 2011 - so that's what, 14 years ago - in my late forties - I felt the nudging of the Holy Spirit, and the first idea for the work that I'm now doing came to me.

I was seeing that things were going wrong in our society, in our culture, and I realised the church was struggling to respond. Others joined me, and we felt that we were being called, initially, to explore that partnership between my late father and Archbishop Worlock. What we wanted to learn, from their twenty-two year joint leadership, was what was it about their partnership that made it so resonant? What would be useful for the church now in terms of the church's contribution to spiritual and civic renewal?

We saw that they played a critical role in Liverpool at a time of division, instability, unemployment and low confidence. To have church leaders so visibly working together not only ended a long history of sectarianism, but their solidarity 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 the church, certain things stand out:

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

So that was how we started. But since that time, *Together for the Common Good*, the charity I founded, has developed. This is a new time, and it warrants new approaches. We draw on Catholic Social Teaching to enable people across the churches to play their part for the common good.

We do this through public lectures, consultancy, bespoke training for leaders and a schools programme. We create online resources, and we produce a podcast. *Together for the Common Good* has become like an organic project with multiple strands, and many thousands of people have been involved. More of that later.

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. We felt that it ought to be better known much more widely. For too long it had been a well-kept secret, not only in the Catholic Church, but especially across other church traditions and beyond. It needed to be known better, not only in a global development sense, as we know from CAFOD, but also here at home in this country, in our domestic setting. Not only in terms of charity and social action, but also in terms of how we live it out in a holistic evangelisation.

We sense that God is calling us to draw on this wisdom for a particular purpose at a particular time, to equip people to play their part in spiritual and civic renewal. A time when our country, let's face it, is in trouble. And rather than teaching Catholic Social Teaching in an abstract form as free standing principles, we ground it in political, cultural and social reality. And rather than teaching the whole spectrum of Catholic Social Teaching, we focus on the renewal of society.

SLIDE #2

Prayer

Before we get into our session, shall we pray? This is a prayer we've used at Together for the Common Good at every meeting over the last 12 years.

Glory be to the father, the son and the Holy Spirit +

Come Holy Spirit. We welcome you here in our midst.

Govern our hearts and minds, govern every aspect of our time together.

Be in every thought and word; in every intention and motive.

Lord, we thank you for those who have been an inspiration to us.

Thank you, for calling us through the Gospel and for each other.

Guide us as we work together for the common good.

Bind us together across our traditions - and move our heart's desire closer to the heart of your desire for us.

Lord, give us the grace to do your will, and make our mission a joy.

In the love of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

SLIDE #3

SESSION 1

WHAT IS CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING?

So let's turn to Catholic Social Teaching. You should know that this is interpreted in different ways. Different people teach it in different ways. Mine is not typical. I'm not a theologian, I'm not an academic. My approach has been shaped through my work with grassroots communities, churches and schools. I read a wide range of journalism, I consult with leading political thinkers and philosophers, and my hope is to interpret the tradition in a way that's grounded in the political and cultural reality we live in.

What is it?

So what is Catholic Social Teaching? It's a body of thinking rooted in the gospel. It's intended as a framework for good judgment. It's a gift to all people of good will, not just for Catholics. It's not intended as infallible, but Catholics are obliged to pay attention, not necessarily to agree with it all. It's often called a hidden gem - a bit too well-hidden, if you ask me. Most Catholics are not familiar with it. To be fair, the documents themselves are quite dense - probably too dense for most people.

There are many ways to teach it. But it's a problem when people teach it from different political positions, cherry pick from it, make it what they want. I'm trying very hard to hold a nonpartisan position. Its stated purpose is for a civilization of love.

SLIDE #4

The Encyclicals

What form does it actually take? It takes the form of a whole series of very long, dense letters, which we call encyclicals, which over 130 years have been published by successive popes. But it's not just the pope who writes it: each document is actually the product of a team of scholars and practitioners who work with the pope, drawing on lived experience from across the world.

The very first document, *Rerum Novarum*, was published in 1891 and the reason for it was a concern about the damaging effects of the Industrial Revolution on human welfare. That response was based on scripture, but also on the reality of people's lives, including in that case, in fact, the impact of exploitative practices on poor families in East London. It was Cardinal Manning who fed back to the Vatican what he was seeing on the ground.

Catholic Social Teaching is always grounded in real places. In that way, it offers a theology of place. Now we're not meant to cherry-pick our favourite encyclical: we're meant to engage with the whole body of thinking which grows over time.

Each encyclical is written following deep theological discernment and informed by the lived experience of the church in every nation, and it's deeply grounded in scripture. But it changes. It's a living tradition, it's not meant to be complete or perfect. We can all contribute to it.

It does build on centuries of tradition, the tradition of the Fathers of the Church and on natural law, and whilst it emphatically does not propose a theocracy, nor any kind of religious triumphalism, it does enable the wisdom of the Old and New Testaments to be interpreted into statecraft - that's the job of the laity, not of the Church.

It's visionary, but not utopian. Sometimes it's called the "theology of the Holy Spirit in practice", it helps us understand how political and philosophical ideas and policies can affect the human person, and to recognise when social systems and cultural values are dehumanising.

SLIDE #5

Themes

Its themes are very broad. The whole of human life is covered in these long and detailed documents. It's focused on upholding of the flourishing of the human being and the natural world. It's concerned with human agency, social organisation, true democracy, a healthy political economy, the importance of work, the family, ethics, bioethics, and much more.

SLIDE #6

Components

I like to look at this also in terms of its components. What Catholic Social Teaching does is it identifies the powers - particularly of capital and state - that undermine the integrity of the human person, when they're over centralised. It calls for a just relationship between capital and labour. It is concerned with a true idea of freedom, and therefore it alerts us to false freedoms. It is concerned with truth versus relativism and war and peace and a social peace. It is profoundly concerned with justice - with balance, a just economy, the preferential option for the poor and therefore class, the balance between responsibilities and rights, the culture of life versus the culture of death, our duty

to uphold both the human being in the natural world - integral ecology, holding the tension between the nature and the person.

It has a very broad range of themes, and in recent years, it's become more and more concerned about the dangers of overly centralised power, government overreach, state bureaucracies becoming dehumanising and supranational, powerful, corporate financial interests. Because when they are too powerful, they subordinate communities.

And although it is global in its thinking, Catholic Social Teaching guides us to realise that to enable human flourishing, power must be distributed - not centralised - through strong local institutions. So it's not in favour of global governance, but in strong relationships of solidarity between nations.

SLIDE #7

Theology of the human person

It is based on a very particular anthropology, a Christian anthropology. It recognises what people are really like. It recognises the primacy of God as opposed to the primacy of self - that we are created as relational beings, not as isolated individuals. This is part of a broad understanding - that we understand the Earth and the cosmos to be God's world, His domain, not ours, and that our identity as human beings is in God.

From this we get the *imago dei*, that we're made in the image of God, the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From this anthropology, we get the transcendent dimension of the human person and as in the Trinity, that we are relational beings. This relational aspect we will hear again and again this evening. It is key to the basis of Catholic Social Teaching.

Human beings are in relationship with all of creation and with God. Catholic Social Teaching has a concept called integral ecology, which is set out in *Laudato Si*. The natural world must never be in conflict with itself – CST is always looking for balance. So for example,

- CST rejects the anti-human tendencies that we see in some environmental activism.
- CST is always pro human and pro nature, and the balance between them.
- CST seeks to balance the interests of environmental measures while respecting people's livelihoods, and democratic participation. Not top-down coercive measures but to develop a politics of the common good that balances stewardship of the natural world with the dignity of work. This is why the Green New Deal was so unpopular. This is why the present government's treatment of family farms is so unpopular. This is an example of how building the common good requires hard political negotiation between estranged interests, to do that we bring all the CST principles into play, and we ensure the consent of the different interests.

The attention to the sanctity of each person in this tradition is sometimes referred to as personalism. This was popularised by John Paul II, who said that "the person is the kind of good which cannot be treated as an object of use. The person is a good towards which the only proper and adequate attitude is love."¹ This is our basis: love is at the heart of this tradition.

¹ John Paul II, Love and Responsibility, pg. 41

SLIDE #8

CST: What it's not

Now let's just have a look at what Catholic Social Teaching is not. It's ambitious and visionary, but it's emphatically not utopian. It recognises human life as messier and more beautifully human than any utopia could be. It emphasises the right and the duty of people of faith to take responsibility for their actions.

It incorporates a theology of place. It is not abstract - it focuses on real people in real places and on practical solutions to human problems. Correctly understood, this tradition is nonpartisan, and if it's to retain its integrity, it shouldn't be hitched to one party political position or another. It transcends the old categories of left and right. There's sometimes a lazy tendency to assume that it's all about solidarity, and is basically left wing, which it isn't. Part of it is radical, and part of it is deeply conservative.

It's not anti-capitalist, but it's not pro-state or anti-state either. What it does is criticise all social systems that subordinate the human spirit. And so it requires us to exercise conscience. It offers a set of principles, a framework for good judgment. It calls us to work for justice. It rejects the political quietism of calm acceptance of things as they are.

But it is not proposing a return to some sort of past Christendom - and let's face it, we are in post Christendom now. We live in a pluralist society, and Catholic Social Teaching is clear about the role of the Church in the world. It upholds principles, but it's not prescriptive in policy terms. It does not propose a theocracy. Lay people are responsible for matters of statecraft and not the Church.

It upholds the human person as a relational being not a rights bearing individual, so it does not align with identity politics. It is invitational and never coercive.

SLIDE #9

CST: What it is

So not only is it a set of principles, not only is it concerned about charity, social action, campaigning and global issues, but more importantly it provides a Catholic worldview, a framework for good judgment. It is realised at multiple levels, beginning with me, beginning with you, beginning with our personal responsibility. It is grounded in reality but also prophetic.

SLIDE #10

Different from competing ideologies

So how is it different from other competing ideologies? As you'll be well aware, we're in a very confusing time at the moment. There are so many different competing ideologies struggling for power. Now we don't have time to go into this now, but I want you to recognise how many different belief systems, politically speaking, there are around. Catholic Social Teaching has a way of challenging and critiquing each one of these. This is the state that we're in. At the moment we see confusion, a struggle for power.

SLIDE #11

Key principles

Let's look at some of the key principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

- The common good is a key principle, where we have a determined responsibility to each other. We will look at that in more detail later.
- The human person - we break down this into four sub principles:
 - human dignity
 - human equality - we are equal in the eyes of God, but critically, we are not meant to be the same –we are made to be complementary: it's that kind of equality.
 - respect for life - from natural conception to natural death
 - the dignity of work - work is more than a way of making a living, it's how we express our contribution in the world.
- Social relationships -
 - You've heard of solidarity. That is an important principle, but also
 - Subsidiarity - which is about where responsibility is taken. I shall speak about that later.
 - And the principle of participation - we have a duty and a right to participate
 - Reconciliation - to bring together that which has been divided.
- And stewardship, sometimes called care for creation - this is the care, not only for the natural world, but also for each other and for the gifts that we've been given.
- And then finally, the preferential option for the poor, which we sometimes refer to as everyone is included, no one is left behind.

So that's the framework of the principles. Some people conceptualise them in slightly different ways, but broadly speaking, that is how we conceive of the principles.

SLIDE #12

DISCUSSION

Question: What stands out from what you've heard so far?

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SESSION 2

WHAT IS CST FOR?

We have looked at Catholic social teaching:

- What it is
- The Encyclicals
- Themes
- Components
- Theology of the human being - Imago Dei
- The Human Person and the Integrity of Creation
- What it's not
- We've seen that it's different from competing worldviews
- We've looked at a quick overview of the CST principles.

But what is it for?

SLIDE #14

Justice

So first I want to talk about justice. John Paul II said that Catholic social justice rests on the threefold cornerstones of human dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity. And he said, ours is a transcendent vision of justice, where human beings are in relationship with each other and with God. We all have an idea what that means, but there are different visions of justice, so we can't take it for granted. To understand our own tradition, we need to go back to the source.

Jesus was a common worker in a Roman economy that was keeping down the wages of the poor.² His resistance to that injustice was not to start a campaign or an angry factional group. His resistance was rooted in the rabbinical tradition where the meaning of justice is about right relationship. He introduced a whole new way of living, bringing people together, rich and poor, across ethnicity, age and sex, educational background and class. We could say he was building a common good.

This element of relationship runs right through the themes of biblical justice. For example, the Torah laws on helping someone in debt³ involve detailed relational elements. The lender is obliged to accompany the borrower, providing support and advice, not just cash, and "must exact no interest from them". So, if you like, in "God's economy", lending is more like accompaniment.

If you're having a hard time, I'm to walk in relationship with you, accompany you till you get back on your feet, for as long as it takes. I'm not just to give you a bank transfer and leave you alone in your flat. The Catholic tradition of social justice is anchored in God's economy of mutual obligation and right relationship.

² Oakman, Douglas The Radical Jesus, the Bible, and the Great Transformation

³ Gmaj Center, 'The Mitzvah of Lending', <https://gmajcenter.org/in/mitzva.php>

SLIDE #15

The Common Good

Now, I want to clarify what we mean by the common good - because it's often misunderstood. People project onto it all sorts of things that they want it to mean: “social justice”, “fairness”, “solidarity”, “equality” or some kind of utopia. It's not those things, and the common good is not the same as social action. It needs to be reciprocal. It enables, it empowers, it involves. So the kind of service provider posture of social action or “doing good *to*” is not common good.

The common good is about building a shared life, and this is how we describe it:

“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 the social conditions that mean everyone can participate, but we create those conditions and pursue that goal, working together across our differences, each of us taking responsibility according to our calling and ability.”

It's important to say that the common good recognises the reality of class. We must be honest about the consequences of globalisation and the dominance of a middle class culture that now pertains. Some working class communities in our post-industrial towns, for example, have been abandoned and dishonoured, marginalised. We even now have what some are calling an underclass. Large parts of our country are completely disconnected. This is a breach of the common good – we will come back to this later. Reconciliation is possible, not through class warfare, but by negotiating just relationships.

SLIDE #16

Reading the Signs of the Times

But before we rush to take any action, Catholic social teaching requires us to read the signs of the times. We have a tradition that you may be familiar with, called “See - Judge - Act.”⁴ We are going to follow that rubric. So how do we see? How do we judge, and how do we act? These “how” questions are about social, political and economic choices.

To make the right choices, we must be anchored in our tradition, or we're at risk of mission drift. Currently shaping our world there are two secular visions of justice that dominate. One is a utilitarian model focusing on welfare, and this is conjoined with a libertarian or hyper liberal model which focuses on rights and freedom from constraint - and this generates a false idea of freedom.

This combination of the hyper liberal with the welfarist is what actually underpins our current operating system. It's the sea we swim in. It's so all around us we can hardly see it. Broadly speaking, this whole system can be referred to as neoliberalism and it has been particularly dominant since around 1979. As a method of how to do justice, this combination is utterly different from our own transcendent relational tradition of justice.⁵ This is so important, because when we as Christians forget our own tradition, the risk is we inadvertently prop up those secular choices.

⁴ <https://virtualplater.org.uk/module-b/b-unit-1-contents/5-1-introduction-acting-for-justice/5-1-3-see-judge-act/>

⁵ For more depth, see <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/from-jenny-sinclair/written-in-blood-a-meditation>

Let's go back to See - Judge - Act.

How do we see? What's going on from a Christian justice perspective? The Catholic Social Teaching tradition helps us understand the world. It's based on a Christian anthropology rooted in natural law, where human beings are relational beings who thrive with each other and with God. These transcendent relational fundamentals underpin our model of justice. This is the frame of how we see what's going on. This tradition trains our eyes to look at what's happening to human beings, what's happening to the relationships between those human beings – and to families, to communities, to the natural world, to God's creation.

SEE

So in this time, this very strange time that we're going through, what do we see? We see many examples of loving kindness, community and interdependence of human beings doing their thing. But we also see that this is coming under increasing threat. We see a system generating pockets of intense wealth, but also intense poverty and civic degradation on a vast scale. We see 5.93 million of our fellow citizens on Universal Credit. 14 million people in our country are now classified as poor.

We are seeing a succession of economic crises. We see work becoming increasingly precarious. We see housing becoming unaffordable. We see whole sections of society effectively discarded. We're seeing the dehumanisation and the exploitation of human beings through euthanasia. We see it through the liberalising of abortion, through sexual exploitation.

We're seeing the commodification and financialisation of everything: land, water, homes, human beings. We see the concentration of power and the weakening of local agency, and we see catastrophic damage to the natural world. We're seeing division, isolation, fragmentation and symptoms of human distress and an explosion of mental health crises. We're seeing relationship breakdown, family breakdown, falling levels of trust.

For those who live in pockets of affluence, this damage may be to some extent invisible, but for those in poor communities, it's very clear. What you see depends on where you stand.

JUDGE

So how do we judge what we see, what is actually going on? Our Catholic Social Teaching framework for good judgment, as I said, correctly understood is nonpartisan. It equips us to call out any system, whether capitalist or collectivist or whatever system, if it's dehumanising.

From the analysis of political economy as conceptualised with Catholic Social Teaching, we can judge that our prevailing operating system is broken. We can judge that it causes human degradation, vast inequality and the weakening of families. It weakens virtues like responsibility and mutual obligation. It's overly weighted in favour of rights. It reframes virtues like mutual obligation as outdated. It undermines our justice cornerstones of human dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity. Effectively, it's an assault on relationship.

If we are really seeing clearly, we can judge that this operating system generates what I would call a politics of abandonment. And if we're thinking in terms of members of one body – as in First Corinthians - if one part of the body is being treated badly or is effectively abandoned, it causes a sickness in the whole body politic.⁶

⁶ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/rebuilding-the-broken-body>

This is not just happening in the UK. Every country that has adopted this system has seen the same effects. We can begin to understand this unholy alliance - this utilitarian, welfarist, state market collusion - that attempts to mitigate the multiple forms of poverty it generates. It is not only unjust, it is defeatist. It is an inefficient vicious cycle. It is dysfunctional and inherently unstable. The so called “cost of living crisis” is just one of many crises that this system generates.

So coming from the Catholic Social Teaching tradition, we need to focus on system reform. It doesn't have to be like this. It wasn't always like this. We don't just need to be focused on mitigating the effects of its dysfunction, tinkering around the edges. We must of course, argue for essential needs to be met, that's imperative, but if we don't frame it within a bigger story of system failure and argue a constructive case for economic reform, we can inadvertently become enablers of an unjust system. We can even find ourselves repressing prophetic justice.

But it's not just about the economy.

The logic underpinning this low-wage, high-welfare economic model has moral, social and spiritual consequences too. Despite people's valiant efforts to uphold the sacred and to build relationship, this culture of transactional individualism atomises, separates, generates tribalism and identitarian ideologies: the battle of all against all. Its logic leads governments to overcentralise and to collude with big business to coerce and control, going above and beyond democratic processes, undermining human agency.

So we can judge that we have, as Pope Francis describes it, a “malign” culture. He says it's dehumanising, unjust. It has done great damage, especially to poor parts of the country⁷ - and he says especially to the young, are the most vulnerable to this culture. It is no coincidence that we see steep rises in loneliness - statistically higher, by the way, among the young than the old. And it is no coincidence that we see bizarre belief systems emerging too. It is this hyper liberalism that allows the “you be you, and I'll be me culture - it doesn't matter, we'll just try and get along.” It doesn't work.

We're living through a period of accelerated social, moral and political confusion. From the position of our justice tradition, we can see that this operating system is anti-human, and this is why it's unravelling. This is why it generates so many pathologies.

Upheaval across the West

This is why we see upheaval across the West. Pope Francis was right to say that this is not just an era of change, but a change of era.⁸ We are now in a moment of epochal change with a new geopolitical order unfolding on an hourly basis. It is far too early to say how this will work out.

The dynamics of the new order: a tension between transhumanist technocrat oligarchs on the one hand, and the desire for a pro-human, pro-worker, stable form of life, on the other.

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

⁸ <https://aleteia.org/blogs/aleteia-blog/pope-francis-we-are-not-living-an-era-of-change-but-a-change-of-era/>

ACT

We are in what is described, in political economy terms, we have. Been in an interregnum, and now we are entering a new epoch. As Gramsci said, when the old is dying, and the new is yet to be born, “all manner of morbid symptoms pertain.”⁹

So how we respond in this moment is very important, because amidst all of this, as Christians, we know that God is at work.

Declining church but God is at work

Despite what some people may see as the declining Church, it's actually a change that's going on. It's a profound change. God is still at work. That's our hope: we don't deal in false hope, we deal in real hope, because we know that God is real.

Staying human

We're called to see and to judge, but also to act. Now, remember that Catholic Social Teaching began¹⁰ in 1891 as a response to another moment of seismic change. It can guide us again now. This time, the new industrial revolution that's coming at us like a fast train involves the new transhumanist industries, the digital industries, the virtual. So powerful, so fast, and if not constrained, will end up shaming the local, the neighbourhood and subordinating the human being. Our embodied nature as human beings is under threat.

So we are called to shine a light on the hyper liberal philosophy underpinning these dark systems. But we are also called to promote the way of God's kingdom, which is fundamentally about relationships. We are called to be constructive - that is what we will go into more detail after the break. But for now, let's have a moment for conversation.

SLIDE #17

DISCUSSION

Question: what's the one question your table would like to raise?

SLIDE #18

TEA BREAK

⁹ Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks

¹⁰ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/to-live-a-decent-life>

SLIDE #19

SESSION 3

BUILDING THE CIVILISATION OF LOVE

Welcome back everyone. Let's look at this term – the civilization of love – this is the stated purpose of CST. Like baking a beautiful cake, like some of us have just enjoyed, it involves several key ingredients:

- People matter more than things
- Sharing the revealed truth of God
- Respect for human life - a gift from God
- Daily gestures of sacrifice and care
- Looking out for others
- Building up the common good

It was John Paul II who introduced the idea of the civilization of love – and remember he lived through occupied Poland under Nazi Germany and then was instrumental in defeating communism. He was a towering intellect and a man of immense spiritual stature. He said that the civilisation of love was the foundation of a humane society. He encouraged people to live their lives in love and to use their talents to build up Christ's body.

Pope Benedict XVI continued in this vein, making a sophisticated critique of the neoliberal economy in *Caritas in Veritate* after the financial crash of 2008, and warned of the dangers of hyper liberalism and what he calls the tyranny of relativism. Pope Francis has built on this inheritance with his beautiful language of encounter and fraternity and made it more accessible.

The common good is at the heart of this civilisation of love – this shared life that enables us to uphold what it means to be human. But as we saw earlier there has been a breach of the common good, and that is what has caused so much trouble. And we as God's people, are called to join with Him in His work of repair, to restore and rebuild.

SLIDE #20

The Breach

There is a passage in Isaiah that expresses this well:

“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt.
You shall raise up the foundations of many generations.
You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”

Isaiah 58.12

As Christians, to build the civilisation of love, we are called to stand in the breach. When we spot where someone is suffering, separated or alienated – or indeed a whole community - we need to stand in there and bridge that divide.

SLIDE #21

The Preferential Option for the Poor

This brings us to focus on one of the key principles in Catholic Social Teaching, the preferential option for the poor. Sometimes we call this “everyone is included, no one is left behind”. I mentioned earlier the very high figures of people on various types of out of work benefits, and the numbers of people who are now recognised to be living in poverty. That is a lot of people, a lot of struggling families.

Pope Francis emphasises again and again that if we are not in relationship with people who are poor – whether on low wages or trapped in poverty - we will get the wrong conclusions. This is a difficult message for a middle class church. Much of the Church has become middle class, and the identity politics version of social justice that's now so pervasive, which is built around gender and race, distracts us from the reality of economic class difference. It shifts our attention away from an injustice that actually affects all ethnicities, men and women. It shifts us away from focusing on an economy that is geared to serve the interests of big corporations rather than human beings, families and communities.

If we're really to understand Catholic Social Teaching, we're not to abandon people. We're to build reciprocal, mutually respectful relationships. We're to build local forms of association. What does that look like? It might look like sports clubs, book clubs, fishing clubs, tenants' associations, local professional associations - organisations where people can find agency. These small associations are a basic component within Catholic Social Teaching. We'll come back to this later.

Common good is about building coalitions. Think of how Martin Luther King used to describe his “beloved community”. It involves real coalitions and alliances in real physical places with real people. That is very different from an online community, a special interest group consisting of people all over the world who don't actually have a shared place where they are going to care for together. If we neglect our local forms of association, what will happen is that rich places will thrive, and poor places will just become more and more and more degraded as people live online.

Catholic Social Teaching is not abstract. And when you hear the word “diversity”, remember that in the Catholic Social Teaching tradition, true diversity means not only the narrow characteristics of race, gender, disability and so on. It means a truly inclusive diversity – diversity of educational background, diversity of class, and crucially, diversity of opinion.

We are getting to a point now where people cannot tolerate the opinion of someone who's views are different from theirs. People get into echo chambers, and when they hear something different from their familiar narrative, it is hard to bear, and often people find that hard to tolerate or even shut down the debate.

As Christians, we must stand in the breach. The hyper liberal philosophy that characterises our culture has divided us and we have lost the language of mutual obligation. We've lost the sense of “I am, because *we are*” that is so well expressed in *Ubuntu*. When people live in separate worlds and don't know each other, they care less. Then things get unstable and we get what Pope Francis calls a “culture of indifference” where people literally don't even notice the other.

So, if you are aware of two different groups who really don't like each other, something might stir in your heart. You might feel “how can I build a bridge?” “How can I introduce someone from one group to another?” It becomes dangerous for democracy when people become so estranged. This is why Pope Francis talks again and again about the culture of encounter. That's a nice phrase, but it often gets stuck as rhetoric. What does it mean in practice?

SLIDE #22

Subsidiarity

We will get into that presently, but first, I want to introduce another principle. It's a very important principle and one of the least understood: subsidiarity. In shorthand, when you see this word, think of “responsibility”. It is defined as follows, that decisions should always be taken closest to those they affect, and a central authority should not do things that can be done at a more local level.

Obviously, there are some things that must be done at a higher level, but we should be very careful and discern. For example, when you're raising a child, you don't tie their shoelaces for them if they can do it for themselves, otherwise, you de-skill them. Equally, you don't make them do it before they've learned how to do it. This principle gives us a sense of responsibility at the right level.

This distribution of power requires careful discernment about what decisions should be taken at what level. This is especially important at a time when central governments are becoming more and more authoritarian, more centralised, more legalistic, increasingly taking decisions outside democratic agreements, colluding with big corporations.

SLIDE #23

Levels of responsibility

At this point I want to introduce you to the levels of responsibility in terms of subsidiarity. This is a way of us conceiving in structural terms how CST would build the civilisation of love. We can see a kind of multiple layering:

- At the international level - this would call for solidarity between nation states but not centralised global governance. Relationships between nations and institutional relations between institutions in different countries is all very good, vital to retain character, to retain particularity.
- At the national level - Catholic Social Teaching would call for conditions in which state power is limited and distributed. This tradition is not in favour of small government necessarily. What matters is how power is distributed. In practice, this would require a national industrial strategy - a true kind of “levelling up”, if you like - where capital is constrained and decentralised, incentivised towards the places that most need decent jobs. Rather than allowing investment to go where the greatest profits are to be made, there would be incentives to invest in the poor places, so that every place and community can thrive.

- At regional level – we would see regional banking, not the big international banks. We would see regional energy providers. Services would be accountable to local regional bodies. It would mean collaboration between, for example, educational institutions, colleges, employers, diocese, religious associations, chambers of commerce, all working together across the flourishing of their region, each fulfilling their own distinctive vocational responsibility. This is a concept of Pope John Paul II – where each person and organisation is called to a unique vocational responsibility. For example, are you a business owner? a teacher? an accountant? a nurse? a street cleaner? working in a shop? Catholic Social Teaching asks “what's your individual vocational responsibility?”
- And then at a local level - Catholic Social Teaching requires each local institution to make an examination of conscience. To ask, are they fulfilling that vocation for the common good in their community? For example, does a business pay its employees fairly? Does the CEO know the cleaners by name - are they all invited to the Christmas party? It's relational. Are the jobs stable? Do they enable family formation? Are they fulfilling? Are they dignified? Are they fairly paid?

SLIDE #24

Local Institutions

Crucially within the local level are local institutions. Let's spend a little time on this. Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, which mainly focuses on the dignity of work but also on another key CST component, intermediary institutions.

He talks about the need for, and I quote, “a wide range of intermediate bodies with economic, social and cultural purposes, enjoying real autonomy with regard to the powers pursuing their specific aims in honest collaboration with each other.”

What you want is a thick patchwork, a variety, a colourful patchwork of different kinds of institutions – who are connected with each other. That's what you will see in a thriving town, in a thriving Village.

But in a place that's not thriving, what do you see? A betting shop, a chicken shop and a pawn shop. Everything else is closed. There are no local associations, no nice boutiques, no nice cafes. This is what's happened to places in our former industrial heartlands and some of our more remote coastal towns.

What Pope John Paul II is talking about here are these institutions between the person and the state, how they humanise people. For example, if you've been out of work for a long time, and you're able to volunteer in a local institution, it might be something through the church, might be Legion of Mary, it might be to volunteer at a food bank, or it might be to join a local sports association. Through the relationships that you make in that setting, you get your dignity back, you get your relationships back, you get your skills back.

But if those institutions don't exist or aren't community oriented, you can't do it, the only meaningful contact you have is with the bureaucratic state and you are exposed to the extractive market, selling you things on your phone, feeding you more and more content, turning you into consumer. So you can see how people end up feeling alienated, isolated and lonely.

This is why we need community oriented intermediary bodies, like sports clubs, youth clubs, local businesses, associations, regional banks, mutuals, charities, places of worship, guilds, hospices, unions, universities, community trusts, schools - bodies that are not part of the central state or global business.

This rich diversity of local bodies is what leads to a rich local ecology, and if it's not there, it needs to be built back. That's hard. It's hard work. It's patient, unglamorous work. It starts with people coming together in conversation. This wide variety of local institutions is vital: bodies that bind people together, help people find meaning and purpose.

Pope John Paul II says that every local institution has a calling - a vocational responsibility to play its part for the common good. The local church can play an encouraging and supporting role and enable these human shaped, human sized bodies to act morally and pro-socially, and by facilitating connections between them. Like a kind of social knitting.

Catholic Social Teaching sees this layer, this thick layer of institutions - civil society, if you like – as part of a relational power that is capable of resisting the powers of state and market. It is a humanising power. Now the churches, of course, have a distinct calling at this local level, a calling to play a key role in this reweaving, this upholding of the sacred, supporting the human person, supporting families, bringing neighbours together, standing in the breach. This must begin with discernment, with listening to what God is saying.

Back to our levels of responsibility:

- Further down from the local there is the level of the family - the family is regarded by Catholic Social Teaching as the fundamental building block of society. The society that we live in is not family friendly. We can see this both from the point of view of the Catholic family – which is called to be a witness in the world through its local relationships not to withdraw from it, and also from the point of view of families in society generally. It's difficult to form a strong healthy family these days. Families need a lot of support. They need encouragement. One of the great things the local church can do is to wrap itself around a family who's struggling and provide friendship, company, and support. This kind of support doesn't always involve money, funding, or require strategy. It requires loving kindness and accompaniment.
- And finally, beneath the family, there's the person – that's you and me - the level of the individual, our personal responsibility according to our gifts and capability. There is an important point to remember about subsidiarity - something that Pope Benedict XVI articulated very well. He says subsidiarity is really to remind us that everybody has something to contribute.

Even the most profoundly disabled person who you might think is unable to contribute much, can - through relationship with others. Just by being themselves they change the dynamic between people. This is a fundamental point that is so counter cultural. Countries such as Iceland are saying they're proud to be "Downs free"¹¹ because they abort Downs children before they're born.

¹¹ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/report-iceland-population-people-down-syndrome-disappearing>

Right now we have assisted dying coming at us. This is profoundly anti-human, part of what Pope Francis calls the “culture of death”. We are called to a culture of life, that recognises that we are poorer if we get rid of those who are weak. The strong need the weak to be human. It is reciprocity that makes us human. Everyone is worthy of love and affection. Everyone has something to contribute.

We are all called to play our part as moral actors, through the decisions we take, through our relationships, discerning in conversation with God how we are called to put Catholic Social Teaching into practice in our everyday lives. This is a proper understanding of evangelisation. Evangelisation, in Catholic Social Teaching terms, has a holistic meaning. It's not just about proselytising. It's about how we live. Pope Francis says this is how the church attracts – it is by how we live.

SLIDE #25

Covenant and Place

Now I want to say something about place and about covenant. Covenant is about the long term commitment of the Church to its neighbourhood. To make that real, the Catholic Social Teaching tradition must be integrated into our understanding of discipleship. Currently, it's barely part of the formation; indeed, most Catholics don't know about it. If the more evangelistic wings of the Church integrated Catholic Social Teaching into their formation, they will be better able to read the signs of the times. A holistic evangelisation requires a bridge between our spiritual life and the practical choices of the everyday. A Christian witness that integrates spirituality with the way we live.

But sometimes we - the Church - forget who we are. In our efforts to be modern and efficient and relevant, we sometimes default to an earthly paradigm, to managerial and technocratic practices. We need to listen to what Jesus said to Nicodemus, “I've spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?” If we ask Jesus into our lives, then through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we'll begin to discern between the realms of heaven and earth.

We need to get things the right way up. God was subordinated at the turn of the Enlightenment, and we're now seeing the consequences. We need to be confident about putting things back the right way up. God is our primary agent. The world needs the Church to resist these dehumanising powers, but currently the Church isn't fit for purpose. It is weak in this way – it needs to understand more about what's going on. As members of the Church, we need to join with God in the building of the kingdom in the places where we live.

Place is important, because this is where people are. This is not abstract, it's real. The paradox is that we encounter the heavenly realm in the grounded embodied-ness of the neighbourhood, because God is at work through people. God is already at work in our neighbourhoods, whether or not we're paying attention, whether or not we're joining in. In the abandonment of our poorest neighbourhoods, there has been a disconnect. The Church has often been out of touch with what God is doing. God calls us to join in, beginning by listening to our brothers and sisters in the local.

SLIDE #26

A Relational Church

We are called to become a relational church. To a reweaving, to a remaking of social life. This means having a covenantal as opposed to contractual or transactional relationship with our neighbours. Covenant has an expansive meaning, and it can have a transformational effect on our relationships, on our churches and communities. We know from Scripture that covenant is about God's unconditional promise to us in Christ. It is lasting and durable. It is not a fly-by-night. It doesn't depend on funding. It's not like "oh sorry, the funding has run out, so we've got to stop." It's about always being there.

As Pope Francis says in his latest encyclical, *Dilexit Nos*, which means *He Loved Us*, he says it's all about real connection, heart to heart, about sharing vulnerability, telling the truth. And in *Fratelli Tutti* or *Brothers and sisters together* - the encyclical before that, he emphasises the importance of local relationships and loving friendship. In fact, he talks about civic friendship as an intentional act. And in *Evangelii Gaudium*, his first encyclical, *the Joy of the Gospel*, he says he wants us to become more relational, to resist tribalism, resist individualism. He wants us to "smell like the sheep."

He says to stop keeping people at arm's length. We must get involved. Pope Francis doesn't like it when we get into a kind of technocratic arm's length dynamic with people trapped in poverty. In his World Day of the Poor Letters, which are published every year, he says we have got to stop outsourcing. He says no more proxies, stop delegating, don't just fundraise or be activists or campaign on social media. He says this is personal.

Relationship building in Catholic Social Teaching is not just a "nice to have", it is fundamental. It could be described as a counter cultural insurgency against individualism. Rather than a political campaign, it's about tenderness and loving kindness. It's about spending time together with each other. This is how we will stay human.

Catholic Social Teaching and our Calling

I hope you can see that Catholic Social Teaching, although it's a powerful intellectual framework which calls us to engage very deeply and prayerfully, is not an "add-on" to our faith. It's a profoundly integrated part of it. This theology of the Holy Spirit is a profound mystery and it needs to be grounded in place.

SLIDE #27

DISCUSSION

Question: What struck you?

SLIDE #28

SESSION 4: PRACTICES

What does it take to play our part in building the civilisation of love at parish level?

The country is in trouble, the culture is fragmented, in need of care and attention.

But small actions can make a big difference.

We can begin with practices that help to shape us become relational in all that we do.

Are we facing inward, to our own community, or outward to the neighbourhood?

In fact, we need to do both at the same time.

Let's look at practices in church first.

SLIDE #29

Practices – in church

Inside church - think about what we might be able to do, to make life in the church more common good, more communal, more relational. For example, in terms of liturgy, what are some of the creative ways we could cultivate a more communal experience?

- Culture of expectation
- Allow experiments
- Communal spirituality in liturgy
- Communal practices of prayer
- Small discipleship groups
- Conversations in the Spirit

How could we make it easier for people who aren't used to church to join in? And how could we invite them into the discernment of designing what that looks like together? Could we choose communal practices of prayer, pilgrimage, Lectio. Could we organise prayerful activities outside as well as inside church? Could Adoration become a more communal experience? Maybe we could invite a local musician to come, maybe we put cushions around to make it into something people share together, rather than a solitary experience.

Small discipleship groups are very important, small study groups, prayer groups, and accompaniment. Just so you know, during COVID, churches with these small cell groups fared much better than churches that didn't – this is because they had real relationships of trust between people.

I would highly recommend the synodality method of *the Conversation in the Spirit*¹² to foster a more collegiate dynamic between people. It is very simple and beautiful. You can use it to either discern what God is saying to us through scripture, or for decision making. Each person gets exactly the same amount of time to speak. Everyone listens, there is a moment of silence and a second round. People listen and also speak in the third round. It's a profoundly affecting process. I would suggest that as a way of building trust and relationships between people in the congregations.

¹² <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Spiritual-Conversation-S4S-T4CG-Advent-Retreat.pdf>

SLIDE #30

Outward-facing practices

What might we do to connect with our neighbours so that we can act together in genuine solidarity?

- Joining God in the neighbourhood
- Looking for signs of the Kingdom
- One to one conversations
- Knowing the neighbourhood
- Acting together for justice (according to a Christian understanding of justice)
- Connect with other human beings
- Everything is an occasion for communion

How will we discover what the concerns are? How should we respond to injustice in our area?

It helps that we understand the big picture about what has gone wrong with our culture – to read the signs of the times. We learned earlier what has happened to our culture, our economy and why: – the diagnosis is important or we will make the wrong response.

We may not be able to change it from the top down, but we can begin by working bottom up.

It matters how we relate to our neighbours.

We know we can join with God and be part of the antidote.

We can begin by getting to know our neighbourhood – we can walk in pairs. As we walk and pray, we will notice things. We could walk the same route every day and say hello to people as we walk. We will notice signs of the kingdom.

We could do a parish mapping, draw a map, draw in the church, then all the institutions around it, and ask “are we in relationship with them or not?” and “What is the nature of the relationship?” “Are there institutions that we don't know? If so, who knows them?”

The objective is to be in listening mode with the attentiveness of the Holy Spirit so that we find out what is going on.

The practice of the one-to-one conversation, that is usually associated with community organising – is a key practice. Some of you may already be doing this in your work with Citizens.

We will also uncover injustices that need our solidarity – for example the price of housing, issues with Airbnb's, second home owners and so on making it impossible for young families to stay and raise a family in a decent home.

But the 121 is not just for a campaign. It should be a core practice, used simply for the honour of hearing someone's story. People are so lonely even in the midst of 500 friends on FaceBook, or in the midst of a busy working week: the beauty of having someone listen to your story can be transformational, and mutually so.

We should see this as a vital practice in its own right, not just for a campaign. We should be thinking about this as a practice as a default way of being church in the neighbourhood. We are called to be a people who listen, a relational church.

Very basic practices become important - like making eye contact at the checkout, talking to people at the bus stop, putting down the smartphone, making a genuine, definite, proactive, intentional effort to say hello to people.

And for every interaction, every event we hold, we need to think how it can be an occasion for communion.

SLIDE #31

DISCUSSION

Question: What is God calling us to do here?

SLIDE #32

Seeking the peace of the city

To build the civilisation of love, there is a particular passage that captures what we are wanting to do here. Let's pause on this for a moment.

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

SLIDE #33

Recap: what have we covered today?

- Catholic social teaching - for spiritual and civic renewal
- What is CST? Encyclicals. Themes, Components. Imago Dei. Human Person. Integrity of Creation.
- CST: What it's not. What it is.
- Competing worldviews. CST principles.
- What it's for. Justice. Common Good.
- Reading the signs of the times. See-Judge-Act. Staying human.
- Stated purpose: building a civilisation of love.
- The breach. Preferential option for the poor. Subsidiarity. Levels of Responsibility.
- Local institutions. Covenant and Place.
- Becoming a Relational Church. CST and our calling.
- Practices: internal and outward-facing.
- Seeking the peace of the city.

I think you deserve a round of applause – we have covered a lot - this has been a whistle-stop tour. There is much more to discover. My hope is that this brief introduction to the tradition of Catholic social thought will help you see why it is such an important resource as we work for civic and spiritual renewal.

Thank you.

[ENDS]

SLIDE #34

Together for the Common Good

- Dedicated to spiritual and civic renewal
- Drawing on Catholic Social Teaching
- Resources for churches, leaders & schools

SLIDE #35

Building the civilisation of love

Jenny Sinclair is Founder and Director of Together for the Common Good (T4CG), a Christian charity dedicated to spiritual and civic renewal. Drawing on Catholic Social Thought, T4CG resources Christian leaders and churches across all denominations, as well as schools and charities, to read the signs of the times and play their part for the common good. She writes and speaks about the vocation of the church in society, and is co-host of *Leaving Egypt*, a transatlantic podcast exploring what it means to be God's people in times of unravelling.

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