



From Service to Communion

Exploring Humanitas for Our Time

Jenny Sinclair

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Part One:

What is happening to the human person?

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge the expertise in this room. Many of you work or volunteer at the front line. You work with families under pressure. With people who are homeless. With refugees. With offenders. With people coping with disability. With children in distress. With communities experiencing poverty, people suffering loneliness, addiction and violence.

Some of you are leaders of organizations, raising money, managing strategy and budgets, some of you are in leadership roles in education, in the diocese, in civic life. Some of you are visionaries with big ideas. I want to honour everything that you are and what you've brought to today.

And yet, I will say that in certain important ways, some of our approaches may need to change. That's because we are living through what Pope Francis called not only an era of change, but a change of era. And because things are changing, we need to talk honestly about whether our approaches are adequate for this new time.

Pope Leo's [*Magnifica Humanitas*](#) is calling us to devote ourselves to stay human as we navigate the AI revolution. In this short session, rather than get into AI, I've been asked specifically to look at what we can do, particularly in our faith-based social action, to answer Pope Leo's call.

This session will be in two parts.

- First, we'll explore what is happening – beginning with how Catholic tradition views the human being, how that differs from the wider culture, and how that might have affected our organizations and ways of working. Then we'll pause for five minutes, and you'll have a chance for a chat with each other.
- Then in the second part, we're going to look at what needs to change to ensure our work is fit for the new era. We're going to explore the implications for charities and social action, what this might mean for our organizations, our parishes and our communities – and we'll see in practical ways what it means to move from service to communion.

My story

Before I go any further, let me say just briefly why I'm standing here.

For those who don't know me, I spent my formative years in Liverpool, and I live here now. My father was David Sheppard, the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool. For twenty-two years, his partnership with Archbishop Derek Worlock became well known in this city and beyond.

They were known for bringing people together amidst difficult years of unemployment, poverty, division and uncertainty. They stood alongside communities, they convened groups with different interests for the common good: business leaders, trade unions, local authorities, the police, the black community, churches and voluntary organizations. They loved Liverpool. They were known to be *for* the city.

But as a teenager here, I was actually more interested in the music scene. I became estranged from the Church. Then, completely unexpectedly, in my mid-twenties, God found me. And to everyone's surprise, including my own, I became a Catholic. It was many years later, in my late forties, that the Holy Spirit led me to the work that I'm now doing.

Catholic Social Teaching teaches us to see

I'd been a Catholic for over twenty years before anyone told me about Catholic Social Teaching.

Here was a coherent, Gospel-centred framework for understanding the world. Training us to think about what is going on and how things affect the human being. It is a living tradition that helps us see poverty differently, understand economy, political life, technology and power differently. It helps us to see the world as Christ sees it. Once I began to understand it, I thought: why doesn't everybody know about this?

It was this tradition – and the inspiration of the Sheppard Worlock partnership – that led me to start Together for the Common Good.

Catholic Social Teaching does not begin with a political ideology. It's a nonpartisan tradition – in some ways it's conservative, in other ways, it's radical. It's incompatible with identity politics because it centres around the nature of God, and from this, it has a particular understanding of the human person.

Humanitas

That is where *humanitas* begins.

The first thing Scripture tells us about the human being is *not* that we are autonomous. It tells us that we are made in the image of God. And the God in whose image we are made is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is relational. And so we are relational beings, designed for communion.

Relationship is central to the truth of who we are. We belong to families, places and communities. We receive our lives as gift. We are called to contribute. We are designed to be interdependent and embodied. We have responsibilities. We are capable of love and sacrifice. We have a vocation.

What happened to our culture?

But what happened to our culture? Our culture has been telling a very different story. For several decades now, not just here, but across the West, we've been living through a vast social experiment. We have increasingly organised society around the autonomous individual. The self.

My choices. My identity. My preferences. The promotion of personal freedom, and that meant that anything that curtails the self was seen as a constraint – that included the family, place, history, God, boundaries of self-actualization. The same dogma promoted the freedom of capital too, a key element of the neoliberal economic system.

The emphasis on rights became increasingly prominent. Let me say clearly, rights matter. The Church has always defended the dignity of the human person.

But somewhere along the way, the culture changed and something profound was lost. The overemphasis on rights increasingly marginalized the idea of responsibility, and led to an erosion of the ties that bind.

The consequences are now all around us. While a fortunate few succeeded despite these profound changes, many communities struggled. Deindustrialization. Forms of employment became less meaningful and insecure. We've seen an explosion of mental health pathologies. Widespread anxiety. Marriage weakened. The family undermined. Fatherless children. The collapse of trust. A fragmented country, polarized politics. We buy more, we consume more content, we're more digitally connected - and yet people are more lonely - especially the young, and there is a crisis of meaning with people experiencing spiritual confusion.

Pope Leo's encyclical may have been prompted by the AI revolution, but its core focus is on human anthropology. Because he knows this is the most pressing issue of our time.

The culture has been telling the wrong story about what it means to be human. Promoting a false anthropology. A false understanding of the human person as an isolated individual. We've been living against the grain of creation. When you contradict reality, things eventually begin to break.

Those of you working on the front line see the consequences of this every day. You see material poverty. But you also see relational and spiritual poverty. People with no family to rely on. No trustworthy adult. Work without dignity or security. The feeling that you have nothing to contribute, that nobody expects anything of you.

Christian organizations are not immune

Christian organizations operate within this culture. And we are not immune from it. We swim in the same sea and absorb the same assumptions. We operate within funding systems and commissioning structures. The same regulatory frameworks and professional cultures. The same safeguarding requirements. HR systems. The same metrics.

But remember that no system is neutral. Every system contains an anthropology, a way of seeing what a human being is. Every system carries assumptions about what people are.

And so it is time to ask: What understanding of the human person is shaping our organizations? Because it is possible for good people doing good work to become caught inside systems that gradually make us less human.

Despite all the funding and the millions of volunteering hours, poverty has not declined. In fact, for those in deep poverty, things have got worse. Dependency has increased and many communities have become weaker.

I believe that we do stand at a crossroads. There is a need to stop and look and discern our way forward. So I invite you to consider three areas that point to how sometimes we can get caught inside this dehumanizing culture. This is a bit like an examination of conscience.

Examination of Conscience

1. The first is the disconnect between charity and justice

Faith-based social action has become very good at responding to the consequences of poverty. But are we less engaged in understanding the economic and social trends that generate it?

What if, despite all our efforts, the systems and ideas generating poverty in all its forms remain untouched? What if what was intended to be a crisis response ends up becoming the norm? What if wages *are* actually too low to live on? What if the types of jobs available now make it harder to sustain a family? What if deindustrialization stripped local economies of not only work but of identity? What if our systems have enabled fatherless families? What if communities have lost the institutions through which people once exercised power together?

An authentic Christian justice response is not simply to provide services or to campaign for more welfare. Catholic Social Teaching calls for deeper systemic questions about the family, about the structures of political economy and about the dignity of work.

2. The second is inadvertently enabling dependency

We often use, in social action, the language of “empowerment”. But do our practices actually empower, or does the typical service provider dynamic, no matter how kind, sometimes unintentionally turn neighbours into recipients?

Does the professionalized language sometimes used – “Clients” “Service users” “Projects” – also inadvertently create a transactional frame of one way traffic and cultivate a culture of entitlement?

Catholic Social Teaching offers the principle of Subsidiarity which holds that a central authority should not do what can be done more locally. Because, as Pope Benedict said every person is always capable of giving something to others. People thrive not just on what they receive, but on what they can contribute, and on taking responsibility.

Despite being well meaning, sometimes the service provider dynamic can create a sense of “us and them” - and even contribute to class tensions.

The service provider model is known to be a problem - there is an acknowledgement at strategic level that it needs to change. Maria Nyman, Secretary General of Caritas Europa, said to me recently that “we have some way to go from provider to empowering.”

3. The third is weakened Christian distinctiveness

Many Christian social action organizations have gradually become secularised. Maybe a charity's original charism has faded. Maybe we dumb down religious language to access funding, or because of cultural pressures. Sometimes because professionalization has become more important than formation.

We've become very good at strategy. Outcomes. Impact measurement. Policies. Processes. Risk management. All very important. But perhaps less good at integrating rhythms of prayer, less practiced at discernment and less able to listen to the Holy Spirit.

But this is a new era. And in this new era something surprising is happening. People are asking spiritual questions again. Young people are searching for meaning. The aggressive secularism that dominated for decades is losing its grip.

So this is *not* a time to become less Christian. It is time to become more deeply rooted in Christ. Not aggressively. Not as a marketing strategy. Nor in terms of proselytizing. But with humility and confidence. We are to repent – which means to turn back to God - to restore the practices that shape us into a living witness to Christ, who is grace and truth.

A dysfunctional system

So we are caught up – some of us, some of our organisations – in a dysfunctional system. Standing at this crossroads, I think we can see that's true. Good people, valiantly trying to meet overwhelming need. Many workers and volunteers are exhausted. Burnout is not uncommon.

Perhaps part of the problem is that we've created systems in which professionals and volunteers carry responsibilities that were once *distributed*.

As families, neighbours, churches, associations and communities have weakened, services stepped up. Depending on how they are designed, services can unintentionally weaken families and encourage a culture of entitlement.

Pope Francis repeatedly warned that this leads to a culture of indifference in which we all lose, and in which the poor become even more marginalized.

He said, do not keep poor people at arm's length through charitable agencies. Do not outsource love to the state. Because the more that public and charitable services take on, the easier it becomes for the average parishioner to outsource their own responsibilities to professionals and volunteers. This is not the vision of Catholic Social Teaching, which proposes strengthening the family, parish and community life. This is why Francis was always calling for a culture of encounter.

Which brings us back to *humanitas*.

Perhaps the question is not simply: How do we provide better services? Perhaps the deeper question is: **how do our practices shape the kinds of people and communities we are becoming?** Are we strengthening human agency? Are we enabling responsibility or entitlement? Are we creating belonging? Are we building reciprocal relationships? Are we becoming neighbours? Are the people we help becoming more human? And are we also becoming more fully human too?

QUESTION

Be honest: where do you see these tendencies happening in your work?

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Part Two

From service to communion

Now that we understand a bit about what's been happening, how should we respond? How do we move from service to communion?

We've seen that Christian organizations are not immune. They can absorb the very culture that we're called to resist. We can be drawn away from the relational approach to which Christ calls us. We can become transactional, managerial, overly professionalized.

We can lose mutuality. We can do things *for* rather than *with* people. We can convince ourselves that social action is social justice - when they are not the same thing. We can inadvertently turn neighbours into recipients. We can lose track of what being God's people means.

In practical terms then, how do we join with God in what Pope Leo describes as "the great construction site"? He draws on the book of Nehemiah for a brilliant and simple image to restore what has got lost, so that we are ready for the new era.

I want to suggest four things we need to recover: the person, vocation, reciprocity and communion.

1. Recover the person

First, we need to recover an authentic understanding of the human person. This has become acute now that we are in the midst of the AI revolution.

We know that Liverpool City Region wants to be a focus for "AI for Good". To be sure, there are immense opportunities – and technology is not necessarily the enemy. AI does bring benefits, and it may improve Healthcare, productivity, public services.

But - in Catholic terms, the key question is not "What can AI do?" The fundamental questions are: "Who does it serve?" And "What should human beings become?"

Regarding the dignity of work, as machines perform more tasks, we need to decide what can safely be automated and what should remain in the human domain. This has a direct bearing on the approach we take in social action.

Matthew Sanders, who works at the forefront of Catholic AI, has [proposed](#) four marks of human work that we should protect to remain human:

- **Relationship:** where trust, presence and human connection matter.
- **Judgement:** where wisdom, conscience, discernment and moral reasoning are required.
- **Accountability:** where a human takes responsibility for a decision.
- **Meaning:** where work contributes to identity, vocation and belonging.

This echoes what Pope Leo says, “So-called artificial intelligences do not undergo experiences, do not possess a body, do not feel joy or pain, do not mature through relationships and do not know from within what love, work, friendship or responsibility mean.”

It is those things that make us human.

To stay human, remember efficiency is not the goal. This gives us a clue about the priorities for social action in the new era, if it’s to be authentically Christian. Sitting with someone. Caring. Apostolic teaching. Listening. Accompanying someone through grief. Forgiving. Discerning what is right.

These things take time. They are embodied. They involve friction. They require patience.

And that is precisely why they make us human. This is precisely why this needs to happen at parish level.

Susannah Black Roberts [argues](#) that one of the ways we avoid becoming deskilled and becoming passive consumers as AI accelerates is by recovering the practices of doing and making: Cook food. Grow things. Mend things. Sing together. Walk. Build things. Read long books. Learn poems. Care for children. Care for elderly people. Know your neighbours. Pray. Worship. Eat together. Make things that last.

These may sound like ordinary, banal, everyday things. But trust me, for the era we're going into, these are important.

The local church has a distinctive opportunity and responsibility here because it is local, embodied, sacramental and relational. We gather physically. We eat together. We baptise with water. We anoint with oil. We bury the dead. We care for the sick. We forgive sins. We belong to a particular place. In an increasingly disembodied age, that is not an outdated weakness. It is a prophetic strength.

2. Recover vocation

Second, we need to recover vocation. One of the problems about the service-provider dynamic is passivity. Professionals provide. Recipients receive. Organisations deliver. Communities become entitled.

But Catholic Social Teaching holds that every person has gifts. Every person has responsibilities. Every person has something to contribute. Every person has a vocation.

Individualism asks: “What am I entitled to?”

Vocation asks: “What has God entrusted to me?”

These are very different questions.

Archbishop John Sherrington has [called](#) on the lay faithful of this Archdiocese to take responsibility for the common good. To use your gifts. Your skills. Your positions. Your

relationships. Your knowledge of “the local ground.” That applies directly to this room. You are not simply employees of organisations. You are not simply professionals or volunteers delivering services.

Each of you has a vocation. As does every person arriving at the food bank. The refugee. The homeless person. Everyone has something to contribute. A family in crisis has gifts and a sense of purpose even if buried under years of stress. Everyone is called by God. Everyone has a vocation.

Helping people discern their vocation is a vital ministry, and Pope Leo affirms Synodality – walking together and listening one another, listening to the Holy Spirit – as a key practice, as part of our calling to dialogue, negotiation, repair, healing and restoration.

3. Recover reciprocity

Which brings me to Reciprocity. This may be the most practical shift Christian social action needs to make. To shift:

From: “What can we do for you?” To: “What can we do together?”

From beneficiary to participant. From recipient to contributor. From consultation to shared responsibility. From service delivery to relationship. Yes - sometimes people are so vulnerable they just need support for a period of time. But our long term aim should be to shift from one-way giving to reciprocity. Everyone has something to give.

That leads to solidarity, to shared ownership. Shared power.

My friend Angie runs a small homelessness charity in East London. They have a culture where, when you walk in, the divisions are blurred. You can’t immediately tell who is a staff member. Who is a volunteer. Who was homeless. Who has come for help. People cook. Eat. Work. Take responsibility. Become friends together. This works for the mutual benefit of all involved.

In God’s economy, things are different. In God’s economy, the strong need the weak. The Church needs to get beyond being the benevolent giver, which can inadvertently “other” people on the receiving end. The Church must learn to receive as well as give. We could consider what difference it would make to introduce the contributory principle more widely.

We can ask questions like: Where are the opportunities for people to contribute? Where can responsibility be shared? Where can recipients become members? Where can service users become leaders? Where are we holding power that could be distributed?

4. Recover communion

And that brings us to the deepest recovery. Communion.

We know our culture has become fragmented. People have become separated: by opinion, by background, by class, by education, by ethnicity, by faith, by preference. People are estranged. Life has become segmented.

The challenge is clear.

- A parish cannot say: “We care for poor people because three volunteers work at the food bank.”
- A diocese cannot say: “We care for refugees because we fund a project.”
- A Christian cannot say: “I love my neighbour because I donate to charity.”

Volunteering is a role. But Discipleship is how we live. NGOs bring an agenda. But Communities act together. Service providers deliver. But neighbours belong to one another. This is a big shift because we've become so used to the prevailing culture.

But the deepest Christian response is communion: relationship with God and one another. This was the vocation of the early Church and we can draw on that today. And this is why I think we need to recover the neighbourhood as the place of Christian vocation.

It is here we should ask: Where is God already at work? And then: Do we know our neighbours? Who lives here? What are people worried about? Where are the lonely people? Where are the young people? Where are the places people naturally gather? Who are the local employers? Who runs the football club? The school? The café? The small businesses? The community organisations?

God is calling us to work with Him, here, to build Communion. Catholic Social Teaching has always held that local institutions do not exist simply to deliver services. They each have a vocation and need to be in relationship. Each contributing to the common good.

This was something that John Paul II spoke about a lot. Each institution is called to contribute to the common good. This layer of local institutions is what Catholic Social Teaching calls the intermediary layer of society. These are the organisations at human scale - not part of the state, not part of the global market. Human scale. Bodies through which people know each other by name. Families. Parishes. Schools. Charities. Local businesses. Sports clubs. Associations. Trade unions. Cooperatives.

Within that layer of intermediary institutions - when it is strong - people have agency. They belong. They can act together, they can solve problems, care for one another. Think of someone who's been out of work for a long time. If he has the opportunity to volunteer with one of these institutions, that gives him his dignity back.

When people act together, they can even over time begin to generate local economies. Some of you may know John Battle's story, the [Bramley Baths](#) project in Leeds. Not only an inspiring story, but practical – they saved a public swimming baths, they turned it around, created 60 jobs, and now turn over £2.5 million a year. Now that is not just a project delivering charity. It's creating jobs, it's creating a hub of activity.

But when that local layer becomes weak, the individual stands exposed between the market and the state. When you've only got a betting shop and a chicken shop on the high street, life is too harsh. The person becomes too vulnerable to manipulation to have agency, and the experience can be too bureaucratic to be known personally. Neither Amazon nor Chat GPT nor Whitehall can manufacture trust.

Pope Leo says that the communion formed through these relationships generates a collective wisdom that can help us make significant decisions – including about AI. He says that this new, global unaccountable power must be constrained by strengthening intermediary institutions – many of which have broken down.

He calls us to rebuild what has collapsed and to grow together, through negotiation, dialogue and discernment. He uses Nehemiah's image of rebuilding the wall: we all have our own little section of the wall to work on, so we shouldn't feel overwhelmed. We are not all meant to be doing everything. We each have our little part to play. He says we should "get our hands dirty on the construction site of our time."

Liverpool has a track record here. The legacy established in the Sheppard Worlock years modeled an outward facing, collaborative church, bringing local institutions and estranged groups together across differences, to work together for the good of the city.

Christian distinctiveness

And this is where I want to say something about Christian distinctiveness. Sometimes we can feel the need to comply with the prevailing consensus.

But collaboration should not mean losing our centre of gravity. We have seen the consequences of the false anthropology on the culture. In *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo is laying down a marker for the world about human anthropology for the new era. The times call for the gift of Catholic tradition. That means sometimes we will be countercultural.

Catholic Social Teaching has always been intended as a gift for all people of goodwill, not just for Catholics. It is a non-partisan theological tradition, neither right nor left wing. It is a living tradition that guides us on how to read the world. Too often, it gets reduced to a campaign or to a set of abstract principles, but actually, it's a framework that helps us read the world.

It supports the importance of an interventionist state. But not an over centralized state. Its core focus is justice. Yes, but not a welfarism that institutionalizes dependency and worklessness. It holds to equality in the eyes of God. But not to the erasure of difference in the pursuit of equity. It upholds rights held in balance with responsibilities.

It calls us to welcome the stranger, *and* to stand in solidarity with established poor communities. It defends the unborn child *and* calls for subsidiarity in enabling the family into which that child is born to flourish, to find decent work and affordable housing. It opposes assisted suicide *and* upholds the dignity of the elderly and terminally ill to be surrounded by communities in which they are needed and loved.

The Catholic vision is an integrated vision for the common good. A vision of the human person from natural conception to natural death and everything in between. We need to tell a holistic story of life.

These things belong together. We should refuse the political tendencies that divide them. That is not something to fear. The Church is not called to be the handmaid of the state. We are called to be the handmaid of the Lord. The Holy Spirit is there to help us.

What might this mean in practice?

Perhaps the next stage for our social action begins with a set of questions. Some human questions about our work. For example, does our social action: Strengthen relationships? Increase agency? Foster reciprocity? Enable responsibility? Distribute power? Deepen Christian identity? Contribute to communion?

Imagine trustees asking those questions. Imagine funders asking those questions. Imagine CEOs, staff, and volunteers asking those questions. Imagine parishes beginning to ask those questions.

Imagine

- Imagine if Christian funders rewarded relationship rather than simply scale.
- Imagine if food banks increasingly became membership communities where people cooked, worked, learned skills, took decisions and became co-owners linked with farmers and food producers.
- Imagine charities that measured success not only in outputs but also by how many people no longer needed the charity.
- Imagine churches that knew their local businesses and employers and helped create opportunities for local jobs.
- Imagine staff formation in our social action organisations, not only for safeguarding, professional skills and organisational values, but Christian anthropology.
- Imagine a diocese where life issues and social issues are no longer treated as discrete agendas but understood as one coherent witness.
- Imagine the Church helping to reweave the relationships of this city. Not necessarily running and delivering. But connecting. Convening. Enabling. Listening. Forming. Discerning. Helping other people and institutions discover their vocation.

Humanitas

I want to finish where we began: What does it mean to be human?

We are living at a moment when that question has become acute. The old era is giving way and the shape of the new is not yet clear. The culture of individualism has weakened the relationships on which human flourishing depends. Our institutions are exhausted. Our communities are fragmented.

Artificial intelligence is forcing us to ask what human beings are for. Pope Leo says this is a pivotal moment and an opportunity.

As it happens, the Church does have exactly the resources needed for this time. We have an understanding of the human person that is deep enough to meet the crisis we face. Embodied. Relational. Capable of reason and conscience. Thrives on responsibility. Who is gifted with a vocation, made for love, made for communion.

And this vision must now shape our actions: How we use technology. How we understand poverty. How we treat staff. How we work with people in need. How we relate to government. How we listen in neighbourhoods. How we exercise power. How we understand work. How we respond to the unborn child, the refugee, the homeless person, the single dad who doesn't earn enough, the anxious teenager, the lonely young adult, the exhausted mum caring for her disabled child, the elderly person approaching death.

The task before us now is not just to alleviate the consequences of dehumanisation. Nor just to provide more services or run better organisations. It is to recover an authentic Christian anthropology – and to build organizations, practices and relationships that embody it.

We can start today, here – let's begin to get our heads around what this means for each of us. Small steps are good. Remember, you've only got one little section of the wall. Let's move forward together. One organization. One parish. One neighbourhood. One relationship at a time.

Thank you.

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

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