



BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND AND WALES

STATEMENT

A Call to a Deeper Social Engagement

19 NOVEMBER 2010

The present economic situation creates immense challenges for everyone in our society. We are very conscious of the hardship and stress felt by many individuals and families at the present time, as well as the difficult task facing the government, the charitable sector and the country at large.

During his visit to the UK the Holy Father spoke of the ethical foundations of democracy: "The inadequacy of pragmatic, short-term solutions to complex social and ethical problems has been illustrated all too clearly by the recent global financial crisis.... Just as "every economic decision has a moral consequence" (Caritas in Veritate, 37), so too in the political field, the ethical dimension of policy has far-reaching consequences that no government can afford to ignore." In his address to the Bishops at Oscott College, Pope Benedict XVI emphasised the need for Christians "to take a lead in calling for solidarity with those in need. The prophetic voice of Christians has an important role in highlighting the needs of the poor and disadvantaged, who can so easily be overlooked in the allocation of limited resources."

We appreciate that extremely difficult decisions are being taken by central and local government, but we urge those responsible not to lose sight of the moral imperative of caring for those most in need, while acting fairly and impartially. Catholic social teaching reminds us that the key to social development lies in placing the good of the human person centre-stage. In that perspective marriage, family life, and the dignity of work are vitally important. The future of society crucially depends on the nature and quality of family life. A society where human dignity will flourish is one where the dignity of work is recognised and valued. We urge government - both central and local - to keep these priorities at the heart of their decision taking.

Besides the severe economic issues facing us, there are also serious social ills. Many yearn for a richer community life, a society characterised by stronger social bonds and a greater acceptance of our mutual responsibilities. Reaching for this is both urgent and necessary. But it demands a conversion of mind and heart which cannot be achieved by government or policy initiative alone. If it is to succeed, this project must be taken beyond party politics to become a common endeavour owned by society as a whole.

Creating a new culture of social responsibility demands that we all learn from the lessons of recent decades and put a genuine commitment to the good of others ahead of self-interest. It means that the Church must avoid becoming inward-looking or distanced from broader social needs. In his recent visit, the Holy Father consistently emphasised the mission of the Church to proclaim afresh the life-giving message of the Gospel. The Church does not exist for her own sake, but for the healing and flourishing of humanity. In coming months we will be seeking to strengthen our work in partnership with other Christians, other religions and with central and local government to help promote a more compassionate, fair and just society.

In particular we will be engaging in a programme to enable the Catholic community to contribute as fully as possible to the new culture of social responsibility called for by Pope Benedict XVI and by the Prime Minister in his farewell speech at the end of the Papal Visit. This will include:

- A conference on 1st February 2011 to underline both the relevance of Catholic social teaching and the practical contribution of the Church to defining and building a new culture of social responsibility
- During 2011, subject to securing sufficient funding, surveys to gather information about emerging social needs within local communities, and the contribution currently being made by the Church
- Action, led by Caritas Social Action Network, to identify ways in which we can better assist local initiatives and promote the further engagement of the Catholic community at every level
- Looking forward to a major conference to draw together the results of this work, the progress made, and the challenges then facing us.