

Archbishop Nichols' Interview

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DERMOT MURNAGHAN:

David Cameron has called it his mission, an idea that will reach out to all, but for many there is still much confusion about just what the Big Society is and how it fits in with our existing social framework. Well when I met the head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, the Archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nichols I asked him for his view on the Conservative's big idea and watching that interview will be our Twitter experts, Simon Barrow the co-director of the religious think tank Ekklesia and Ruth Gledhill, the Times Religious Correspondent and Phillip Blond, director of the think tank ResPublica. They will be providing their reactions via Twitter, you can read them on the side panels, that's if you are watching in HD and you can also follow if you're not on our website, skynews.com and of course please join in using the hashtag #murnaghan.

Well Archbishop, very good to talk to you, can I start by saying that as we enter Holy Week, think back to the Pope's visit for us and can I ask you, has that sparked a wave of interest, a wave of enthusiasm about Catholicism or was it just the British love of a big event and that's all passed now?

ARCHBISHOP VINCENT NICHOLS:

Well it certainly is not passed for me and I don't believe it is passed for Catholics. We received a great boost from that visit, both within our own faith and with an appreciation of in fact how much faith in this society is appreciated. So I don't think it has passed and I think some of the issues that the Pope raised are very real. For example that magnificent occasion in Westminster Hall which for me was the most startling part of the visit, when the Holy Father addressed the political family and the civic leaders and he said there is a place for religion in this society, I would like to see genuine dialogue between the faiths and between the faith and the secular institutions in our society for the well-being of all. I have a sense that that message hit a very important mark and that some of that is indeed happening.

DERMOT MURNAGHAN:

Now citizens, civil life, this is the language that we're also hearing from the high halls of government at the moment, particularly when it comes to the big society. Now churches, people of faith have a huge role to play in that big society, that is if you can define what it is that the government is talking about. Now you in the past last week said that you had some confusion about what is actually meant in terms of Mr Cameron's, the Prime Minister's definition of a big society.

ARCHBISHOP VINCENT NICHOLS:

Well you know, when the Prime Minister addressed the Pope just as he was leaving this country at Birmingham Airport he used some very interesting phrases. He said a priority for the coalition government was to generate a culture of greater social responsibility and he said that the faith communities were important architects in doing this. Now it think that's the phraseology that I understand, that we need to have a culture, a normal way of going about our lives which includes greater mutual responsibility, one for another. In other words, not saying oh there's a problem, somebody else will sort it, it's nothing to do with me. Now I think that's the real impetus behind the big society but there are different strands in the big society. There is the whole question of volunteering and getting people as it were off the couch to work with their neighbours to address some of the local issues, that's fine. There are issues to do with institutions in the middle of society like football clubs, societies, churches, local co-operatives, all of those things, they need support, charities, need support and then the third thing is to do with how enterprise is organised, the ways in which the big beasts in the enterprise world put stuff back into their local communities. Now all of those three are all part of the big society and the difficulty at this moment is we are having to pursue those proper aims in an atmosphere of very severe cuts. So you say how can our local charities which are very willing, very well organised, how can they survive if a vast part of their grant is cut off?

DERMOT MURNAGHAN:

You mentioned the two elements there, cuts and the big society. There are those that say the big society is actually a cover for the cuts and organisations, churches like your own are being asked to step in and fill those gaps. If that were the case, if it were simply replacing state spending with that coming from the Catholic Church, from Catholic charities, would you say we don't want to participate in this?

ARCHBISHOP VINCENT NICHOLS:

Well we had a major conference last week with participants from politics, from local authorities and a large number from Catholic charities and the question was put directly to them, do you think that the big society is a cynical cover for cuts? The vast majority said no, we don't. So there is a well of goodwill especially in the Catholic circles to say here is something that is more important than politics, that is about the quality of life that we can generate together and we're up for it but the principle by which opportunities are given at local level for charities to do more must come with help. They must sustain that level of help to charities if they are going to act responsibly in these difficult circumstances.

DERMOT MURNAGHAN:

In those messages about civic society, civic engagement that are coming from government and talking about building up I suppose the muscularity of that side of things, do you see any disconnect then also in the other message that we heard last week from the Prime Minister on immigration, saying in effect to some parts of British society that are already here, you haven't really made any effort to integrate and that is a problem. Do you think that debate is one worth having and one that you want to engage in?

ARCHBISHOP VINCENT NICHOLS:

Yes, it is, it's a very important debate but it has got to be framed properly so I would say of course government has the duty to control immigration and to look at its social impact but it is also very important not to have immigration as a single lump, it's not. Those arriving in this country come for all sorts of different reasons. Now in the Catholic church we would have as top as the priorities those who are

refugees and those who are asylum seekers and the Catholic community in the last ten years has really beefed up its effort in response to the needs of those people arriving in this country, so we do a lot of work with refugees, helping them to find accommodation, making sure they've got some basic rights, trying to encourage them to learn English and to find the ways into British society. So that section is something, a welcome to those in real need is a tradition in this country that we shouldn't lose and which the church certainly supports. On the wider question of immigration and social integration, I think there is a lot more to be done by faith groups. When you arrive you need somebody to welcome you, what happens largely is that's left down to the churches and the faith groups to try and extend a practical welcome to people who arrive in this country. I go to any Catholic church in this city and there are people from 50, 60 nationalities but they have a point of contact, they have something in common and they learn to become citizens of this country.

DERMOT MURNAGHAN:

Tell me about relations with the Church of England, with the Anglican church, because you were at a meeting I know last week with Rowan Williams, all seems to be going terribly well but your – the Catholic church has got the signs up saying your congregations and your clergy are welcome in the Catholic church, we'll make it very easy for you to transfer if you don't feel there is a place for you in the way the Anglican church is going.

ARCHBISHOP VINCENT NICHOLS:

Well the strength of the relationship between our two churches is there. That's not to say there aren't difficulties and sensitive points but the important thing is we talk about them and we try and address them together so certainly, for those in the Anglican church who feel in conscience that they want to be in full communion as we say with the Roman Catholic church because of their understanding of the role of the Pope, then this Holy Father has made it a bit easier for them to come. Nobody is being pushed, nobody is being enticed, what we are trying to do is respect the conscience decision of those who have come to that conclusion. Now at the same time, I would be very encouraging of those in

the Anglican communion of a Catholic stance who feel at home and know that is their place, I would encourage them to stay there and to live the Anglican faith in the Catholic tradition, there has always been that part of the Anglican church that is an important part of it and I have no interest in seeing a weakened Church of England. We are partners in bringing the gospel of Christ to this country.

DERMOT MURNAGHAN:

So it's not a recruitment drive.

ARCHBISHOP VINCENT NICHOLS:

It is not, it is certainly not a recruitment drive and it isn't turning out to be one either. What we're doing is offering a welcome to those who in conscience know now that they should move and that they, of their own initiative, should seek to be one with the visible unity of the Pope and the Catholic Church.

DERMOT MURNAGHAN:

What does the Archbishop of Canterbury said to you about this, is he relaxed about it?

ARCHBISHOP VINCENT NICHOLS:

He is, he recognises as a profound thinker and a man of God that when there is an imperative of conscience you should follow it. Now let's not get this out of proportion, numbers are quite small, I think there are 950 former members of the Church of England who are becoming Catholics over Easter, that's small numbers. There are about 50 or so clergy, priests from the Church of England coming into the Catholic church. These are not big numbers but there is an openness between us that we can do this, we can talk together about it and we can look together at the longer term consequences as well.

DERMOT MURNAGHAN:

And you mentioned those 50 members of clergy coming over from the Church of England, some of them will be married, some will have families, is that in danger

of sparking that debate within the Catholic church about priests who of course cannot be married and must remain celibate?

ARCHBISHOP VINCENT NICHOLS:

Well it certainly presents us with some practical problems about housing and sustenance and how do we give enough financial support to priests who have families to support and we have made some provisions for those. But you know, I think having married priests within the Catholic church which we've had now since the middle 90s in small numbers because each one needs the personal individual permission of the Pope to be ordained, it actually brings a little sense of realism about married life, combining married life and being a priest. It's not easy and I wouldn't want anybody to think that Catholic priests go through their lives thinking oh, if only I could be married, everything would be fine. We know that marriage is not a solution to problems, it's a challenge and faithfulness in marriage is a real challenge as we see in our society. It's worth it and we support it but we recognise it is not the easiest of lives to live.

DERMOT MURNAGHAN:

One institution that seems to be thriving in this country at the moment is the monarchy, of course a Royal Wedding coming up on the 29th. Have you passed on your best wishes to Clarence House, to William and Kate?

ARCHBISHOP VINCENT NICHOLS:

I have and we have composed a prayer which will be said in all the Catholic churches in the run up to the wedding and I am very privileged to have an invitation to be in the Abbey for the wedding itself. I am looking forward to it very much indeed.

DERMOT MURNAGHAN:

Well enjoy it. Archbishop Vincent Nichols, thank you very much.

ARCHBISHOP VINCENT NICHOLS:

My pleasure.