



# CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

ENGLAND & WALES

## CSAN Parliamentary Reception

*Cardinal Vincent Nichols*

TERRACE PAVILION, HOUSE OF COMMONS, LONDON. 5 NOVEMBER 2014

**Good afternoon; firstly let me say thank you for inviting me to speak, once again, at the Caritas Social Action Network Parliamentary Reception. It is wonderful to see so many Catholics here, on 5 November! Risky timing, Helen! But we are here to enjoy each other's company and build on existing relationships with MPs and Peers alike.**

Each year, the CSAN Reception offers a valuable opportunity for the Catholic Church, its agencies and charities, to share our experiences, thoughts and concerns. And this year we are in a particular moment in the political calendar, only 6 months away from the General Election. This makes it all the more important to reflect again on the needs of our society through the lenses provided by Catholic Social Teaching, and the vision of the common good of all, the recognition in practice of the human dignity of all who are living in our communities today.

So we are glad to have this moment, in conversation, to let our voices be heard and to share our expertise and evidence of the challenges in the lives of those in need, whom we support.

Of course, this is a conversation, a dialogue, in which we want to listen to the creative philosophies behind policies and policy proposals, all fashioned by the challenges we know are facing our communities and particularly those most in need. This meeting allows us to make one small contribution to the State's responsibility, and the Church's mission, to help each and every person to human flourishing.

As many of you will know, this year was the 125th anniversary of the ending of the Great London Dock Strike with what has been called the 'Cardinal's Peace'. Cardinal Henry Manning, the Archbishop of Westminster, played a vital part in settling the strike and thereby was part of the inspiration for the founding document of the entire corpus of Catholic Social Teaching; *Rerum Novarum*. This is a legacy which we rightly celebrate, but more than that, it is important that we continue to build upon this legacy.

Cardinal Manning took it upon himself, in 1889, not only to act as the mediator between the strike leaders and dock owners, but to represent the disenfranchised and to speak out against the mistreatment of the working poor. Cardinal Manning once wrote: "The working man without bread has no choice but either to agree or to hunger in his hungry home".

Sadly, these words still have some resonance today even as, together, we strive to mitigate and ultimately eradicate poverty on these shores. Yet there are still a significant number of children growing up in poverty today, living in a family where at least one member of the household works. Many struggle with poverty even though they are in employment. They find themselves in precarious situations not least when working, without choice, under the conditions of an unreformed zero-hours contract, with no reliable hours and therefore no guaranteed income. The practical virtues of planning expenditure, smart purchasing and avoiding debt are difficult to practise in that situation. Others remain on the minimum wage, with no opportunity for wage progression in their working environment.

And despite good news on employment figures, a gap remains for many between achievable incomes and general basic living costs.

We know that most people want to get over the problems in their lives and seek and hold a job – a sustainable livelihood for themselves and their families. They know that work is an expression of their dignity. It provides human contact; it supports their health and spirit as well as their living expenses. And its reward should be a just wage. As Cardinal Manning insisted all those years ago, work is a person's capital and should be treated with the same respect and protection as every other form of capital, be it property or wealth.

I am pleased that we here today are able to address the needs of those who are poor, and I celebrate and thank you for the positive role which you play in people's everyday lives, supporting those who are vulnerable. Pope Francis speaks constantly and graphically about the poor and our ready service of those on the margins of society. He often insists that they are the very flesh of Christ, stressing that it is by his coming in the flesh that God brings and makes present his love for every person. By tending to this 'flesh of Christ' in our brothers and sisters, then, we come closer to the Divine. In service we receive, we grow, we learn, we are matured. We come to those who are left out not as leaders but as learners; not as social entrepreneurs but as servants ready to attend and respond to the actual, in-the-flesh realities before us. A crucial part of serving society, whether through the calling of politics or through the Church, is to face the reality before us. This is where rhetoric ends, where philosophy gives way to reality, where dogmatism gets its hands dirty. For us this is what being a Church of the poor and for the poor really means. Our self-awareness is sharp; our sense of purpose is clear. Perhaps governments could take a lead from this too.

As you all know, in our work we offer the support of food banks in many parishes and charity centres; the provision of family support through, for example, the *Catholic Children's Society* of Westminster's Family Centre in Tower Hamlets, the *Brushstrokes* project in Smethwick, and Nugent Care's *New Beginnings Project* in Liverpool. These, and so many other initiatives, give families the practical help and social consolation needed in difficult periods. It is from this hands-on experience at the heart of our communities that our voice truly springs, with its authenticity and authority, offering insight and experience to public debate on these issues.

Today I thank all who are present, and those they represent, for the extraordinary work which you do every day, transforming the lives of thousands of people across England and Wales. You help to house the homeless. You help to keep families together. You act as a lifeline for those seeking asylum. Together, as a Church, we seek no more than to embody what it means to love one's neighbour and to work towards human flourishing.

What is crucial in our times is the question of what kind of society we want to build. Many are uncertain. Many are fearful. We are not. We know. We are committed to our task. We work towards a society which promotes the innate human dignity of every person, a society that encourages enterprise, that rewards effort, that salutes noble intent, that cares for its most needy, that welcomes the stranger, giving each what is truly needed and encouraging what each wants so much to contribute. This is a society of justice, compassion and energy.

Yesterday I received an email from a puzzled young mum. She said her son had begun to ask questions and his first question was, "Mummy, who made God?" She was turning to me for help. But the answer she herself gave was pretty good. She said, "God has always existed. God comes first and God is made of love and energy." I hope that we can be made, more and more, in the image and likeness of that God.

Thank you.

**Cardinal Vincent Nichols**