

Christmas Message 2008

Bishop Arthur Roche

Bishop of Leeds

'Love (that) makes us truly human'

As we once again approach Christmas and the New Year it is a time to reflect on the year that has passed. There is much talk about the credit crunch. The repercussions of it are being felt at every level within our society. Institutions which for so long seemed to be rock-like in their permanence have fallen away and there is great uncertainty as governments tries to stem the flow. However, another type of crunch has also been in evidence during the past months - a crunch in the moral values within our society, not least in regard to respect for human life. The softening up campaign on assisted suicide that is being played out in the media is the latest issue which points to something far more grave than the credit crunch. It points to a readiness to make judgements on the value of human life. It is an attack on the most vulnerable who are the most deserving of our care. Such an attitude is surely inimical to the building of a just and safe world. As Pope Benedict XVI has recently stated, 'A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it inwardly through compassion is a cruel and inhuman society.' (Spe Salvi, 38).

The Christmas story begs both our society and each individual belonging to it to ask how are we to walk alongside those who are suffering and those who are confronted with the reality of death. Where those who are terminally ill are tempted to be overcome by the burden of illness and feel lost to the point of hopelessness we are called to greater solidarity with them with a love which seeks to help shoulder the burden.

We are richly blessed by the palliative care teams in our hospices and hospitals. Their work helps to ensure that the dignity of the human person is not set aside or disregarded at that time when they are most in need. We should do all that we can to support that work and to encourage its growth and expansion. Our common humanity demands that we constantly seek ways in which to help those who are in such situations to live with terminal illness rather than leave them to a death of despair. In all this we are called to love for it is love that makes us truly human, it is love alone which gives us true dignity, true freedom. After all, is that not what we are celebrating, the love of God for us found in the poverty of that Bethlehem manger?