



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

ENGLAND AND WALES

Social Teaching Conference - "A Common Endeavour"

Archbishop Nichols' address

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY, 1 FEBRUARY 2011

The visit of our Holy Father Pope Benedict in September touched the whole country with extraordinary grace and joy. I doubt if there is a single one of you in this hall who does not have striking memories of how much it meant to you personally.

The Holy Father's Visit can act as a spur for us to serve Christ better. Grace must bear fruit in our lives, in our prayers and in what we do as Catholics living in Britain.

At the Bishops' Conference meeting in November 2010 we reflected deeply on the wonderful graces which the visit of the Holy Father brought to our Church and our country. And we set out to find ways in which we, as a Catholic community, could respond to the challenge posed by the Holy Father and by the times in which we live.

Today's event marks the launch of a major project for the Catholic community in England and Wales. I am very grateful for your participation.

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."

At the end of our meeting last November we made a statement which I would like to quote from today as it sets out the basis and reason for our gathering here today. We said this:

"The present economic situation creates immense challenges for everyone in our society. We are very conscious of the hardship and stress faced by many individuals and families at the present time. 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.”

That was the Bishops’ statement of intent. Today’s conference is the first major step in this programme. Its purpose is to listen and discern together - to identify and explore emerging needs and the challenges and opportunities for the social engagement of the Church in the coming years. If we are to have a real impact, of course we need a full understanding of the issues posed by today’s economic and social environment. But most crucially we also need a realistic assessment of our own capabilities, of the things that prevent us doing more, and indeed of our own potential to contribute more clearly to the good of our society.

You do not have to look far to see the difficulties and troubles in our society – and this city of Liverpool has probably known as much as any. We are all acutely conscious of the great hardships which are now being faced by very many families. Many of us know this at first hand. There are immediate and pressing needs. But this project we are embarking on together is not about a short term response to particularly difficult economic circumstances.

It is about the long term and how we conduct ourselves to bear lasting fruit. So today is about our teaching and our action.

Our teaching

In the coming months there are great opportunities to engage in the public debate about the future of civil society. In the social doctrine of the Church, particularly as expressed in *Caritas in Veritate*, we have a source of practical guidance and profound wisdom relevant to all who desire to recover a stronger sense of a more humane civil society. There are many people in our society of explicit faith or not who recognise that we need to escape from the dominant culture of consumerist materialism which has so come to pervade our society. The social teaching of the Church, with its wisdom and insight into the nature of humanity and what integral human development actually requires, has a great deal to offer, a route map towards a life of wholeness and integrity for each of us and for all in our society.

Our action

Our Church, as you know, is present throughout the country, and Catholic social action takes place quietly and on a much greater scale than many realise. The present juncture offers a particular opportunity to re-imagine and re-invigorate the work we do. We have at the heart of our theology a word which beautifully describes this practical expression of Christian love - *Caritas*. My hope and prayer for the work we are doing together today and in the coming months is that this idea of *Caritas* will become more visibly the shared inspiration for Catholic social action in England and Wales. For it is a common endeavour at the service of those in need, and always to the glory of the One in whose name we are called to that service.