

Catholic charities and the future of the Church in Britain

Oppe leads: who will now follow?

his visit and actions on Lesbos last weekend Pope Francis has made one of the strongest statements yet on the issue of migrants' rights, an issue that is becoming the single most important one of his papacy.

One very fact of his visiting this island, which is now home to thousands of desperate migrants, was always set to be national, provocative and at the same time symbolic, but no-one saw its dramatic and unexpected nature in its closing minutes.

When he boarded his Alitalia flight, he took with him 12 children, including six children – all of his quest to prick the conscience of Europe. "May all of our brothers and sisters on this continent, in the good Samaritan, come to your aid in the spirit of fraternity, solidarity and respect for human dignity," Pope Francis told the hundreds he had to leave behind in the island's migrant reception facility.

When he was in the plane home, when he was asked about Europe's plan to shut down the migrant waves by sending people back to Turkey, the Holy Father unequivocally called on Europe to implement policies that come migrants, give them jobs and integrate them. Nor did he offer crumbs of comfort to those governments and people who, he acknowledged, are afraid, for he was quick to point out that fear does not make the "responsibility of welcome" anyone's.

When the pope was not, of course, alone on his visit and in an important role of reconciliation within the world, he was accompanied by Cardinal Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, as well as by the Archbishop Ieronymos II.

In an emotional speech at the port, the Archbishop thanked the people of Greece and of Europe for keeping their hearts and doors open. "Many ordinary men and women have made available the little they have and shared it with those who have lost everything. God will repay their generosity," he said.

Over time will tell whether the Holy Father's statements will have any meaningful effect on Europe's refugee crisis but there is certainly little doubt that he could have done to draw attention to Europe and the rest of the world to the human crisis that is encapsulated on Lesbos.

hael J. Winterbottom
et@UniverseMG

The Catholic Universe

Editor: Joseph Kelly
Tel: 0161 214 1200

Email:

ph.kelly@thecatholicuniverse.com

The Universe Media Group Limited,
Urban Print Centre, Longbridge Road,
Trafford Park, Manchester, M17 1SN

Subscription rates: £57 UK, €90, £67 GBP
and Europe) £101 worldwide, £40 students and
is (term time). To subscribe, please use the
form in this issue or call 0161 214 1200

Subscription rates: £57 UK, €90, £67 GBP
and Europe) £101 worldwide, £40 students and
is (term time). To subscribe, please use the
form in this issue or call 0161 214 1200

Subscription rates: £57 UK, €90, £67 GBP
and Europe) £101 worldwide, £40 students and
is (term time). To subscribe, please use the
form in this issue or call 0161 214 1200

Subscription rates: £57 UK, €90, £67 GBP
and Europe) £101 worldwide, £40 students and
is (term time). To subscribe, please use the
form in this issue or call 0161 214 1200

Subscription rates: £57 UK, €90, £67 GBP
and Europe) £101 worldwide, £40 students and
is (term time). To subscribe, please use the
form in this issue or call 0161 214 1200

Subscription rates: £57 UK, €90, £67 GBP
and Europe) £101 worldwide, £40 students and
is (term time). To subscribe, please use the
form in this issue or call 0161 214 1200

Subscription rates: £57 UK, €90, £67 GBP
and Europe) £101 worldwide, £40 students and
is (term time). To subscribe, please use the
form in this issue or call 0161 214 1200

Subscription rates: £57 UK, €90, £67 GBP
and Europe) £101 worldwide, £40 students and
is (term time). To subscribe, please use the
form in this issue or call 0161 214 1200

Subscription rates: £57 UK, €90, £67 GBP
and Europe) £101 worldwide, £40 students and
is (term time). To subscribe, please use the
form in this issue or call 0161 214 1200

Subscription rates: £57 UK, €90, £67 GBP
and Europe) £101 worldwide, £40 students and
is (term time). To subscribe, please use the
form in this issue or call 0161 214 1200



Ben Ryan

Catholic Social Teaching is, at present, enjoying something of a period in the limelight. In the world of business and economics such luminaries as Mark Carney, the Governor of the Bank of England, Christine Lagarde, managing director of the IMF and the political economist Will Hutton have all been recent proponents.

It is also very much in vogue in the world of think tanks and political theorists – with the Labour Party grandee Maurice Glasman being just one prominent supporter.

This is good news – it is always pleasing to see CST being applied in new places and a recognition that the Church has provided intellectual resources that remain relevant today should be welcomed. However, there is a constant danger in this of losing sight of the Catholic element. This is not teaching which is designed to be a gift from the Church to political economists and theorists – it is first and primarily teaching for Catholics.

With that in mind over the past year Theos, the Christian think-tank for which I work, with the support of the Plater Trust, has been trying to investigate to what extent Catholics are living out these principles in their own communities.

The result is a report *Catholic Social Thought and Catholic Charities in Britain Today: Need and Opportunity*, which takes an in-depth look at Catholic charitable activity. Working with six partner charities (the Apostleship of the Sea, Caritas Birmingham, Father Hudson's Care, Retrouvaille, the SVP and Worldwide Marriage Encounter) the research explores six themes of CST as they are manifested in these different charitable settings.

The six charities in question, incidentally, have not been chosen because they are necessarily representative of the sector as a whole. Rather, they have been selected because they represent very different charities, of different sizes, areas of interest, geographical location and history.

The Apostleship of the Sea (AoS) works to support seafarers in Britain's ports. It provides chaplaincy and ship visiting services to all of Britain's ports.

Caritas Archdiocese of Birmingham is a network for Catholic social action work in the Birmingham Archdiocese set up by Archbishop Longley in October 2014.

Father Hudson's Care (FHC) functions as the social care agency for the archdiocese of Birmingham. Founded in 1902, today it works in a wide range of social care work, including with adults with disabilities, schools, fostering, the elderly and a range of community based projects.

Retrouvaille is a marriage crisis charity that works to help couples with serious marital difficulties.

The St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) has around 8,000 members who work on a range of social action work, but is best known for visiting individuals and families. It is also the oldest of our charities.

Finally, **Worldwide Marriage Encounter (WWME)** is a marriage charity whose primary focus is on enriching and refreshing the relationships of couples who are engaged, married, or in long-standing relationships. It also does work with couples preparing for marriage.

In more than 60 interviews with people in, and service users of, these charities we tested six principles of CST. We were looking for how they were embodied, how conscious people were of CST, and whether there was any evidence that what charities were doing was actually expanding upon CST in new and exciting ways. The six themes



explored in the research were the option for the poor, solidarity, subsidiarity, personalism, family, and evangelisation.

In an article of this length it is impossible to go through all the findings, so instead what follows is a particular examination of some of the more interesting findings.

Option for the poor

The language of the 'option for the poor' was much in evidence across the different charities. At its most basic the underlying idea is that God and the Church have a particularly calling towards the poor. *Retrum Novarum* defines part of the duty of the Church as having a particular need to support the poor: "When there is a question of protecting the rights of individuals, the poor and helpless have a claim to special consideration. The rich protecting themselves, and stands less in need of help." (*Retrum Novarum* 37).

What was intriguing among our charities was that the idea of poverty was never limited to material need.

Certainly a number of the charities did deal with people in material poverty but such needs were never considered to be the whole story when it came to poverty. Instead, several charities paid significant attention to the idea of *relational poverty*. Relational poverty covers situations like those left lonely or isolated, perhaps as a result of age, disability or language, which accordingly prevents them from fully participating in society. At a time when so many services are becoming so de-personalised, and poverty is reduced to facts and statistics, Catholic charities were at the forefront of broadening the concept of poverty and meeting different, but critically important needs. Similarly, some charities had a real concept of themselves as fighting *spiritual poverty*. Of particular interest was the role of marriage charities in helping people to forgive – in particular, often in rebuilding relationships they had found the hardest challenge was in getting people to recognise something in themselves as being worthy of love and forgiveness. This spiritual poverty was at the heart of their work.

Solidarity

Solidarity is probably the most familiar term from CST and was much used by interviewees in describing their work. This is fairly unsurprising. Solidarity is the idea of all being one family, and working to be alongside others – exactly the sort of idea that we would expect charities to be very consciously embodying.

The theme solidarity also encompasses the idea of 'the common good'. Like solidarity, common good is a term which has come to have a mainstream political profile – even if the understanding behind the idea is fairly simplistic and devoid of much of the subtlety of its CST origins. This trend was also apparent in our

charities, where many interviewees used the term, but few understood much by it except a broad sense of responsibility for the wider community.

There was a much more interesting and thorough-going consideration of the idea of advocacy and being a voice for the voiceless. In each of our charities this was a secondary objective of their work, but one receiving increasing attention. However, there was in several an increasing sense that this was an oversight, and that actually speaking up to change the situation was an important aspect of their work.

At its most basic, the logic is that if by advocacy you can cause a change that will prevent a problem from existing then it is clearly a good thing to do so, a basic version of prevention rather than cure.

There is also a second basic element of solidarity to this, which is that the people with whom these charities are working, by virtue of their position on the margins of society, are often those least able to speak up for themselves and, therefore they need someone else to do it on their behalf.

One story from a staff member at Father Hudson's illustrated that issue particularly well: "One example: we had a severely disabled man who was using the day centre and one day he got a letter from the council saying they were stopping his funding to come to the day service. [There was] no real explanation, no consultation, no replacement provision – they just stopped. And that really distressed his mother as well. We appealed on his behalf, but while we were appealing we let him keep using the services for nothing – because we could and it was the right thing to do. His mother is in her 70s. How can she take on Birmingham council? It would have been very difficult and very distressing for her."

Evangelisation

One of the more striking findings of the research was the valuable role charities play in growing the Church. This finding needs to be treated carefully, it is not suggesting that charities are involved in proselytising. They were not going out and trying to convert non-Christians, but they were actively involved in growing the Church.

The evidence of evangelisation of people who were already Catholics was remarkable. Interviewees at WWME noted how far they had changed as a result of the work. Their spirituality had been renewed, and they saw part of their role as "renewing the Church". A similar sense was present in an interview with a trustee from Father Hudson's who said that "we are growing Catholics...all these community projects based out of parishes, they are really motivated, they are bringing people back into the Church".

At a time of well-publicised difficulties in filling parish churches this provides an important message for the Church. It is easy to see doing good

works as a witness that might lead others to the Church. It is perhaps less appreciated how big an impact it can have on the spiritual engagement of lay people who already profess to be Catholics.

Challenges

Of course, as is to be expected in research of this sort, not all the findings were necessarily positive. Charities were struggling with a number of issues. Some were unique to Catholic charities, not least the issue of what it actually means to be a Catholic charity and how compatible that ethos is with particular challenges surrounding sexuality, divorce and working with secular and non-Christian bodies.

No less significant, if less specifically Catholic, was the result of austerity and funding cuts. Those charities working particularly in traditional social action work such as confronting homelessness, disability, poverty and isolation among the elderly were all extremely concerned at a trend that saw them having to meet more needs than ever, with less and less public financial support. One frustrated interviewee went as far as to say: "There is no doubt that this government is targeting some of the most vulnerable in making their savings."

Conclusion

That final note on austerity ties into a concluding note about the importance of the symbiotic relationship between the Church and Catholic charities. Although austerity has a particular and immediate impact on those charities in receipt of public funds there is a knock-on effect for others too – including in seeing an increased strain on alternative funding providers (notably the Church) and in terms of an increasing need to step in and support people with services previously provided by the state.

One aspect of this symbiosis then, is that charities remain perhaps over-reliant on an increasingly strained Church for volunteers and funds. Another is that reputational damage and bolstering can go both ways. The sex abuse scandal has hurt charities, but the Pope Francis effect has conversely boosted volunteers and encouraged charities.

From the Church's point of view, with declining congregations a growing issue, the role of charities in providing a public face of the Church in British society is one of growing importance. Charities are the crucial tool of the Church in providing an evangelising voice for the Church. This is a relationship that requires further nurturing and consideration as it becomes ever more important for Catholicism in 21st century Britain.

Ben Ryan is a researcher at the religion and society think tank Theos. His new report *Catholic Social Thought and Catholic Charities in Britain Today: Need and Opportunity* is available on www.theosintank.co.uk