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Deus Caritas Est and Active Citizenship

Address to:

Who is my neighbour? A Conference on the Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XVI
Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)

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1. Introduction

Robert K. Greenleaf, who is associated with the concept and practice of ‘servant leadership’, helps us to ponder on a key issue in relation to voluntary action by citizens in any society: where does our sense of mission come from? – what is the process by which a deep sense of values and of purpose gets into the collective psyche of enough people so that they act to make a difference to the lives of others? In an important essay entitled ‘The Servant as Religious Leader’ Greenleaf asks a key question

Could a new, persuasively articulated, prophetic vision generate the faith required for those who have the potential to lead to take the risks, develop the strength and make a new determined effort to lead?¹

In recent decades there has been much discussion about ‘social capital’ which has been described as “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups”.² In secular pluralist societies such as we now inhabit where do we get the right ‘norms, values and understandings’ for flourishing human living in the twenty-first century? In short, how do we know in our changing and confused times anymore who is my ‘neighbour’ and how we ought to respond to ‘neighbours’?

2. The Contribution of Deus Caritas Est

The Encyclical Letter, Deus Caritas Est, makes a seminal contribution when seeking to answer such basic questions. The Pope wishes “to call forth in the world renewed energy and commitment in the human response to God’s love.”³ In persuasively articulating a vision of Christian love and setting forth the practice of love by the Church as a ‘Community of Love’, Pope Benedict provides a prophetic resource for all Christians. It is to Christians that the Pope speaks: those who have had an encounter with Jesus “which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”. The Pope says “more than anything, they must be persons moved by Christ’s love, persons whose hearts Christ has conquered with his love, awakening within them a love of neighbour.”⁴

As Deus Caritas Est elucidates, the concept of ‘neighbour’ was transformed by Jesus: “Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbour. The concept of ‘neighbour’ is now universalised, yet it remains concrete”⁵ Christian love, as the Encyclical explains, may be viewed “as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God”⁶

3. A strong active citizenship: Sophie Scholl and the White Rose

In order to explore this Christian encounter with Jesus and his revolutionary understanding of ‘who is my neighbour?’ one needs to tell the stories of many Christian witnesses, some of which are noted in the Encyclical. These witnesses demonstrated the self-sacrificial call of Christian love. I think, for example, of Sophie and Hans Scholl, young students in Hitler’s Germany, who helped organise the White Rose protest movement in 1942-43 against the Nazi obscenities and who were executed by guillotine on 22 February 1943. Sophie was just 21 years of age. When her mother said to her just before her execution “Sophie, ...remember Jesus” Sophie replied “Yes, but you too” and then, as her sister records, she left – free, fearless and calm. She was still smiling.

Where did these young people get their values in the face of Nazi propaganda? Where did they get their moral and physical courage to speak out for their neighbours and for the Jewish people? Her sister, Inge, explains how Hans, Sophie and other White Rose members dealt with those times “when the uncertainties and the anxiety surged over them and engulfed their courage.” She writes

Then there was no help but to descend deep within themselves, where a voice assured them that they were doing the right thing, that they would have to continue, even if they were all alone in the world. I believe that at such times the students were able to converse freely with God, with that Being whom they gropingly sought in their youth, whom they tried to find at the end point of all study, action and work. At this time Christ became for them in a strange way the elder brother who was always there, closer even than death. He was their path which allowed of no return, the truth which gave answer to so many questions, and life itself, the whole of splendid life.⁷

The Pope at one place in the Encyclical refers to young people participating in voluntary activities as a 'school of life' which seems to me very apt: when we encounter the challenge of the 'neighbour's need' requiring an immediate response of justice and love, our character is shown in perhaps a small frame of an instant whether we walk by on the other side or respond. My point is that character is formed by deep moral and spiritual preparation. As Sophie Scholl wrote in one place in her diary

"For each of us, no matter in what age we live, have to be prepared at a moment's notice to be called to account by God. After all, do I know whether I'll be alive tomorrow morning?"

4. **The Christian witness and action in politics and society**

The Encyclical Letter deals in a most helpful fashion with the responsibility of the Christian in the public sphere as it provides an analysis of the relationships between justice and charity. Pope Benedict reiterates that the "just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics... Justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics" He demonstrates the vital contribution that faith makes to the political sphere: it "liberates reason from its blind spots", it helps to form consciences in political life bringing insight into the requirements of justice and forms our ethics beyond self-interest. As the Pope points out 'practical reason' as it operates in public life "can never be completely free of the danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests".

The Christian Church, as Pope Benedict states "cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper"⁸

Take two current examples of malaise in the Irish situation (1) the grossly unjust two-tier health system as recently exemplified in public by the Susie Long tragedy and (b) the obvious corruption which has become embedded in our political system as exemplified in the various reports by tribunals. In the first example human beings are not being treated equally or valued in the same way as are better off people while in the second we do not seem able to make a simple distinction between right and wrong behaviour in public life. We have allowed our people to become cynical and we have accepted that a cynical electorate will act as a self-centred electorate: 'It's ok so long as I look after No. 1'. Where are the clear Christian voices which will sacrifice some of the often too cosy relationships of Church and State to address such key moral issues?

5. **The Role of Civil Society and the Character of the State**

Oliver Goldsmith wrote in The Traveller

How small, of all that human hearts endure,
That part which laws or kings can cause or cure!

As the Pope observes ‘Love – caritas – will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love.’ Then the Pope provides what is, in effect, a ‘charter’ for voluntary action by citizens and Christians which is worth quoting at length:

There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbour is indispensable. The State which would provide everything, absorbing everything into itself, would ultimately become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person – every person – needs: namely, loving personal concern. We do not need a State which regulates us and controls everything but a State which, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, generously acknowledges and supports initiatives arising from the different social forces and combines spontaneity with closeness to those in need.⁹

Christians, as citizens, have a duty to work for a just ordering of society; as the Encyclical observes,

They cannot relinquish their participation ‘in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good’¹⁰

The Pope endorses social solidarity evident in collective action within civil society: ‘The solidarity shown by civil society...significantly surpasses that shown by individuals’ and in particular appreciates young people who engage in volunteer action: ‘‘For young people, this widespread involvement constitutes a school of life which offers them a formation in solidarity and in readiness to offer others not simply material aid but their very selves’’¹¹

The condition of Irish civil society in the first decade of the twenty-first century is, I believe, a cause for very serious concern. I think we should dwell long and hard on the comments in a Background Working Paper published by the Taskforce on Active Citizenship entitled Statistical Evidence on Active Citizenship in Ireland

Two significant problems are identified. First, a large majority of the population is not engaged actively in any community organisation or form of regular volunteering. Similarly, only a minority of persons engage in at least one type of civic-political engagement. Second, the pattern of engagement is very unevenly spread across the population with particular groups being much less involved than others.

This study points out that over 2 million adult citizens are inactive in their communities and a greater number, 2-3 million, are not involved in any regular volunteering. Most Irish citizens are simply disengaged from the public realm and civil society. We have disillusionment, disenchantment and substantial disengagement.

One leading researcher on the role of voluntary organisations, Thomas H. Jeavons, points out that the State revolves around power, the market around profit and voluntary organisations around values. Voluntary organisations, and in particular faith-based voluntary organisations, play a vital role in transmitting and shaping values: their primary tools are rhetorical, intellectual and moral. The values voluntary organisations hold and their ability to enact these values through their work of advocacy and service are the key to their legitimacy. The relative decline of faith-based voluntary organisations within our very State-dependent voluntary sector in Ireland is, therefore, a cause of serious concern.¹²

6. A Common Mission for all Christian Churches

I particularly welcome Pope Benedict's reassertion of Pope John Paul II's statement that the Catholic Church and the charitable agencies of other Christian churches should be ready to co-operate as

we all have the same fundamental motivation and look towards the same goal: a true humanism, which acknowledges that man is made in the image of God...the building of a better world requires Christians to speak with a united voice in working to inculcate 'respect for the rights and needs of everyone, especially the poor, the lowly and the defenceless'.¹³

As a Methodist I am reminded of John Wesley's famous sermon on the 'Catholic Spirit' where he spoke of that love that is due to all humankind – the royal law 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'

...although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite...they may forward one another in love and good works.¹⁴

7. Conclusion

My suggestion for an adequate Irish response to Deus Caritas Est would be to seek from all our Christian churches what Greenleaf called a 'new persuasively articulated prophetic vision' which will reawaken the faith and spiritual energy necessary if Irish society is to flourish in a healthy fashion in this century. I suggest a considered statement similar in kind to the Statement by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales entitled The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching published in 1996 but one which all the main Churches would co-operate in producing and which could be disseminated for small group study and discussion throughout the island. It seems to me that there is now scope for a vast consensus on social teaching derived from the Gospel in all our mainline Christian churches. Such a time as now surely requires a prophetic statement. As Cardinal Hume said in the Preface to The Common Good

Discipleship involves seeking God in this world, as well as preparing to meet Him in the next. The Gospel imperative to love our neighbour entails not only that we should help those in need, but also address the causes of destitution and poverty. The deepening of the spiritual life must go hand in hand with practical concern for our neighbour, and thus with social action.

We need an agreed Christian vision which will provide a set of consistent and complementary principles, values and goals and which would help us to subject every public policy to be judged by the effect it has on human dignity and the common good.

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¹ See Robert K. Greenleaf 'The Servant as Religious Leader' in The Power of Servant-Leadership Essays by Robert K. Greenleaf ed. Larry C. Spears (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, CA, 1999) p118; see also Robert K. Greenleaf Servant Leadership A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness (Paulist Press, New York, 1977)

² See The Well-Being of Nations (OECD Report, 2001) p41

³ Deus Caritas Est God is Love Encyclical Letter of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI (Veritas, Dublin, 2006) p8 (hereafter DCE)

⁴ DCE, p7, p50

⁵ DCE, p25

⁶ DCE, p14

⁷ Inge Scholl The White Rose Munich 1942-43 (Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, NH, 1983) p42; on the White Rose movement see also At the Heart of the White Rose Letters and Diaries of Hans and Sophie Scholl ed. Inge Jens (Harper & Row, New York, 1987) and A. Dumbach and J. Newborn Sophie Scholl and the White Rose (One World, Oxford, 2006)

⁸ DCE, pp38-40

⁹ DCE, p42

¹⁰ DCE, p42

¹¹ DCE, p44-5

¹² See Thomas H. Jeavons 'When the Management is the Message: Relating Values to Management Practice in Non Profit Organisations' Non Profit Management and Leadership Vol 2 No.4, 1992; and 'Stewardship Revisited: Secular and Sacred Views of Governance and Management' Non Profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly Vol 23 No. 2, 1994; and 'Non Profit Organisations as Instruments for Expressing Values: Reflections on their Roles and Functions' Paper to Trinity College Centre for Non Profit Management Summer School, 21 June 2007; see also Freda Donoghue 'Exploring the Non Profit Landscape in Ireland: First Findings from the Mapping Project in Differing Images The Irish Non Profit Sector and Comparative Perspectives ed. G. Donnelly Cox and C. Breathnach (The Liffey Press, Dublin, 2007)

¹³ DCE, p45

¹⁴ Rev John Wesley Sermon XXXIV 'Catholic Spirit' in Sermons on Several Occasions (Epworth Press, London, Fifteenth Impression, 1985) pp443-5