



CHOOSING THE COMMON GOOD



Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

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I am glad to introduce this Statement by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. Its title: *Choosing the Common Good* has echoes of an earlier document we issued in 1996. Since then much has changed in our society. But some of the underlying principles and values by which we seek to construct a just and civil society have not.

In this brief document we seek to present some of the key themes of Catholic Social Teaching, not least in the light of some of its recent developments and of the changed conditions in contemporary Britain.

Some of that development is due to the teaching of Pope Benedict XVI and the series of teaching documents which he has published. The most recent of these was his Encyclical Letter on integral human development, with the title 'Charity in Truth' (*Caritas in Veritate*). This document was well received, notably by those who were struggling with the consequences of the financial crisis occurring at the time of its publication. The implications of that crisis are still very much with us. The relevance of the document remains.

Two events are anticipated in the publication of this Statement.

- The first is a forthcoming General Election. We offer this Statement as a contribution to the wider debate on the important themes of the moment. It forms a backdrop to the more particular issues which may well dominate the election itself. But it proposes that without a wider debate about a shared vision for our society, the electioneering may well be confined to bitter arguments over issues of particular policy. We need a more wide-ranging debate about the values and vision which can underpin all our joint effort today.

In this Statement, some attention is given to particular applications of the general principles. These are necessarily selective and not comprehensive. At the time of the announcement of a General Election we shall publish a shorter document, inviting voters to consider and pursue more particular points of policy.

- The second event anticipated here is the forthcoming visit of Pope Benedict XVI to these countries in the autumn. We hope that this document will introduce some of the patterns of Catholic thought to those who are unfamiliar with them and indicate the ways in which that thought can be a significant contribution to our common endeavours.

I am glad to commend this Statement to you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vincent Nichols". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols
President of the Bishops' Conference of
England and Wales

The period before a General Election is a time to reflect on what sort of society we live in and how we would like it to be

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BRITAIN TODAY

The period before a General Election is a time to reflect on what sort of society we live in and how we would like it to be. It gives us the opportunity to renew our energies and our work for a better future. What do we really hope for in our society today? What encourages us? What alarms us?

At a first glance, bad news seems to be everywhere. Accounts of neglect, of cruelty and of over-stretched services are in the news almost every day. Stories of personal tragedy can give rise to a sense of outrage but also to feelings of helplessness.

Fortunately there is another side. There are also many stories of great generosity which raise our spirits and renew our sense of hope. Some come to the fore at times of natural disaster, as they did at the time of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004, and again in response to the recent catastrophic Haitian earthquake. In both cases, and in others nearer home, the people of Britain have shown an astonishing capacity for compassion, solidarity and generosity towards people who are facing hardship and misfortune regardless of race, religion or nationality.

Where does this sort of energy, compassion and generosity come from? Surely it lies beyond politics in the common humanity we recognise and share, in our sense of justice and basic decency. It also lies in the social and moral values we endorse individually and collectively. Nationally, in our local communities and within the circle of family and friends, we may know that we would in fact find help in responses to crises and emergencies we might face ourselves. The difficulty is to make the virtues we discover in these moments part of the normal life of our society. Many will say this is impossible. They will say it is naive to think society can change when it has invested so much in the pursuit of individual self-interest, often prizing personal choice ahead of duty to others. This is not true. Change is possible. But it cannot be left to politicians alone to bring about. It needs all of us.

Have we allowed ourselves to be seduced by the myth that social problems are for the government to deal with? Politics are important but there are always limits to what any government can achieve. No government can solve every problem, nor make us more generous or responsive to need. The growth of regulations, targets and league tables, which are tools designed to make public services accountable, are no substitute for actions done as a free gift because the needs of a neighbour have to be met.

Acts of willing generosity to help others are not taken because the rules and regulations say so, or because money can be made out of them. Both regulation by law and market forces have a role in modern society. But what has been increasingly overlooked is this third form of motivation, the offer of time, energy and possessions out of the spirit of good citizenship and genuine neighbourliness. If we are to have a society worth living in, this third form of motivation is crucial. Local institutions expressing good citizenship and neighbourliness, which are not beholden to the government, form a vital part of civil society. Without solidarity and the friendships that express it, many of those living alone - now Britain's most common form of household - become still more lonely and isolated.

Many factors lie behind the decline in this spirit of solidarity of one with another, without which society starts to break down and life becomes intolerable. An excessive emphasis on each person simply pursuing their own interests is no doubt one such factor. This flows from a limited understanding of ourselves as human beings. Far from being self-contained individuals, we are, in truth, always mutually dependent. We are made for one another. This is verified by the sense of fulfilment and satisfaction we experience when we act in generosity and solidarity with those in need. We are not isolated individuals who happen to live side by side, but people really dependent on one another, whose fulfilment lies in the quality of our relationships.

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The networks between people, which hold a community together, are sometimes referred to as its 'social capital', by analogy with financial capital. An area which is economically rich can still be dysfunctional if it lacks this quality. Social capital is increased by use; it is depleted by neglect. It can be, and must be replenished, but this requires our society to rediscover the centrality of personal responsibility and the gift of service to others.

THE COMMON GOOD

The Catholic Church has a large body of teaching, its 'social doctrine', which presents a rounded understanding of the human person and of the importance of solidarity. Both of these are contained in the concept of the common good.

The common good refers to what belongs to everyone by virtue of their common humanity. The simple definition of the common good is 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily'. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, § 1906*) Promoting the common good cannot be pursued by treating each individual separately and looking for the highest 'total benefit', in some kind of utilitarian addition. Because we are interdependent, the common good is more like a multiplication sum, where if any one number is zero then the total is always zero. If anyone is left out and deprived of what is essential, then the common good has been betrayed.

The common good is about how to live well together. It is the whole network of social conditions which enable human individuals and groups to flourish and live a full, genuinely human life. At the heart of the common good, solidarity acknowledges that all are responsible for all, not only as individuals but collectively at every level. The principle of the common good expands our understanding of who we are and opens up new sources of motivation. The fulfilment which the common good seeks to serve is the flourishing of humanity, expressed in the phrase 'integral human

development'. Such development requires that people are rescued from every form of poverty, from hunger to illiteracy; it requires the opportunities for education, creating a vision of true partnership and solidarity between peoples; it calls for active participation in economic and political processes and it recognises that every human person is a spiritual being with instincts for love and truth and aspirations for happiness. Development must always include this spiritual growth, with openness to God.

Indeed this notion of development, understood in Christian terms, is the heart of the Christian social message. Every person is called to develop and fulfil themselves, for life itself is a vocation, a summons, which finds its final fulfilment only in the mystery of God. We are not created for futility. Integral human development is our vocation, and it points to the capacity in each person for responsible freedom, a freedom to be formed by truth and used for the service of truth and love.

Many have come to see that the social teaching of the Catholic Church provides a useful vocabulary for discussing the state of society and the revitalising of politics and of society in general. It clearly has significant practical consequences for the way we live today.

RESTORING TRUST

Recognising our duty to the common good of all is also crucial if we are to address a deep and pervasive problem that rightly worries many: the need to build up trust in society – between individuals, between the citizen and the state, and in our institutions. Trust has been severely eroded. However, if we go on down a path where we cannot believe anything good of anybody, we will ultimately create a world of individuals fighting for their own good at the expense of every other person. Society cannot change for the better without restoring trust. Few need reminding of how major institutions have failed to live up to their calling. Members of Parliament have been pilloried for their use of expenses and allowances. Bankers have earned astonishing bonuses

Society cannot change for the better without restoring trust

The crisis in the financial sector was in essence a collapse of trust in economic institutions

and brought the world economy close to collapse. The Catholic Church in our countries, too, has had to learn in recent years some harsh lessons in safeguarding trust. We understand the damage inflicted when trust is betrayed. But from our personal experience, we all know that while we complain about the institution, for the most part we value enormously the individuals who meet our needs with patience, compassion, skill and often great generosity. The challenge for society is to build up our structures and institutions so that they command the same respect and trust as the individuals who represent them best. We know it can be done, but it requires a new sense of service to others at the heart of our institutions.

When politics is at the service of the common good then it is lifted above self-interest and dignified as a truly honourable profession. A new Parliament is a good opportunity for a new beginning, in which trust between the public and politicians can begin to be restored. It can only be earned when the conduct of politicians and all others in public life is plainly motivated by a sense of service to others. Some, indeed, have never wavered in this commitment. Furthermore, everyone involved in politics and public life must accept that personal character and moral standards are as relevant to public life as they are to private life.

The crisis in the financial sector was in essence a collapse of trust in economic institutions. The causes are many and complex, but at root have an inescapable moral dimension: not only the willingness of so many institutions to lend and deal recklessly in the pursuit of short term profit, but also the eager desire of so many to borrow beyond their means. Now we must recognise that market forces are not sovereign. Nor will new and sweeping regulation of itself solve these deep-seated problems. The financial sector is crucially important but it has to operate at the service of society not of itself. The bond of trust between these institutions and the rest of society can only be repaired by demonstrable action, including on levels of remuneration, which give people

confidence that they are being served rather than exploited. At the same time, we must also accept that systemic flaws in the economy cannot be repaired unless it is recognised that they stem from, and contribute to, equivalent flaws in our wider society. We are all in some way complicit in the current predicament, and the restoration of trust in the economic arena perhaps requires us all to change.

The restoration of trust in institutions, whether in politics or in business, places a particular responsibility on those in leadership roles. They set the tone and help shape the culture of the institutions they lead. Over time leaders wield immense influence, and carry a heavy responsibility, especially now, to help bring about a real transformation by their vision and example. As Pope Benedict XVI has said: 'development is impossible without upright men and women, without financiers and politicians whose consciences are finely attuned to the requirements of the common good'. (*Caritas in Veritate* 71).

To act in this way requires more than not breaking rules. It demands the cultivation of moral character, the development of habits of behaviour which reflect a real respect for others and a desire to do good. It requires, in fact, the practice of virtue.

VIRTUE

The practice of virtue helps to shape us as people. By the pursuit of virtue we act well not because of external constraint but because it has become natural for us to do so. The virtues form us as moral agents, so that we do what is right and honourable for no other reason than that it is right and honourable, irrespective of reward and regardless of what we are legally obliged to do. Virtuous action springs from a sense of one's own dignity and that of others, and from self-respect as a citizen. It is doing good even when no-one is looking.

Virtue is doing good even when no-one is looking

Our society will rediscover its capacity to trust by the recovery of the practice of virtue, and through an ethically founded reform of many of our social and economic institutions

In place of virtue we have seen an expansion of regulation. A society that is held together just by compliance to rules is inherently fragile, open to further abuses which will be met by a further expansion of regulation. This cannot be enough. The virtues are not about what one is allowed to do but who one is formed to be. They strengthen us to become moral agents, the source of our own actions. The classical virtues form us as people who are prudent, just, temperate and courageous. The Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity root our human growth in the gifts of God and form us for our ultimate happiness: friendship with God.

The virtue of prudence, or right reason in action, is the opposite of rashness and carelessness. It enables us to discern the good in any circumstance and the right way to achieve it. It is rational and intelligent, including emotional intelligence which knows how to weigh the meaning and importance of our feelings.

The virtue of courage ensures firmness, and the readiness to stand by what we believe in times of difficulty. It is the opposite of opportunism and of evasiveness. It is the practice of fortitude in the face of difficulty and produces heroism in every field. Courage is an important element in artistic creativity and it helps those who battle against sickness, injustice or depression.

Justice is the virtue by which we strive to give what is due to others by respecting their rights and fulfilling our duties towards them. It expands our notion of 'self' by strengthening the ties between us all. Justice towards God is the 'virtue of religion' which frees us from the tyranny of false gods who would claim our worship.

The virtue of temperance helps to moderate our appetites and our use of the world's created goods. It is the opposite of consumerism and the uninhibited pursuit of pleasure. It is about learning to desire well. Indeed, it is an essential part of a happy life.

These virtues, and the exploration of them, belong to all humanity. They are held in trust for all not least in the Christian traditions of thought and moral teaching.

Our society will rediscover its capacity to trust by the recovery of the practice of virtue, and through an ethically founded reform of many of our social and economic institutions. This will itself begin to restore the economy to a path that is both sustainable and just. In this way trust will be re-established. We believe that this is what the vast majority of ordinary British people instinctively want. They want to belong to a world in which people care for one another. They are alienated by a selfish society. At a profound level they care more for social capital as we have defined it than for financial capital, for quality of life than for the value of property. Yet the structures and values built into the way society works often frustrate them. Ways need to be found to liberate the generosity of the people not only when an extreme emergency arises, but routinely.

We can approach this task with real hope because its key motivation is the desire for love and truth. These are constantly arising in our hearts. They are instincts which never completely abandon us for they are a calling placed within each one of us by God. They urge us forward to serve each other in our common life.

SOME CONSEQUENCES

The core principles we present here – the common good, the idea of integral human development and the pursuit of virtue - do not comprise a detailed political programme. There will rightly be legitimate differences and debate among those who share these fundamental values and goals about how best they are to be pursued, and the continuing negotiation of such differences is the proper business of party politics and democratic participation. But at the same time, in any concrete situation, these principles can bring a particular dimension to bear, and illuminate aspects of political debate

It is essential that the dignity of every human life is upheld because our life is not our property to dispose of but a gift to treasure

Serving the common good requires that the needs of the elderly are not discounted, and that we work to ensure health and social care is better co-ordinated so that older people get the care they need when they need it

on particular issues. We turn now to just some of these issues, by no means an exhaustive list, where we believe the Church's social teaching sheds a distinctive light.

LIFE ITSELF

The principle of the common good requires that the essential dignity of every human life is upheld because our life is not our property to dispose of but a gift to treasure. When this principle is abandoned, then a zero has been introduced into the calculation of the common good. The abortion of the unborn, and euthanasia even when voluntary, are a fundamental denial of this principle, because both are concerned with exclusion from the human community, both are contrary to the common good. Both issues make clear that defence of the immeasurable value of human life is part of a 'seamless robe', which requires all such threats to be taken seriously and opposed. Opposition to abortion requires a commitment to the alleviation of child poverty and high infant mortality; opposition to euthanasia demands concerted effort to remedy the social and economic conditions which lead to neglect, isolation, ill-health, and in poorer parts of the world low life expectancy among the elderly. The reverse is also true: a commitment to the alleviation of child poverty should logically be accompanied by opposition to abortion, for what form of poverty is greater than being deprived of life itself? There are strong links between life ethics and social ethics.

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY – THE CARE OF THE ELDERLY

In this country at the present time there is rightly a growing debate about the care of the elderly, the persistence of poverty and seemingly entrenched inequality. With an ageing population, and with many older people on low incomes, the risks are real. Serving the common good requires that their needs are not discounted, and that we work to ensure health and social care is better co-ordinated so that older people get the care they need when they need it. Although much has been done, recent reports have highlighted the persistence of long term inequality across the life-cycle and

into the next generation. Catholic social teaching on the dignity of the human person entails a profound belief in the equality of all, and the duty therefore on society to promote equality of opportunity, to oppose unjust discrimination and combat disadvantage. Sadly, it is increasingly clear from the recent report of the National Equality Panel, that achieving real equality of opportunity is 'very hard when there are such wide differences between the resources which people and their families have to help them fulfil their diverse potentials'. From the perspective of Catholic social teaching the report also asks exactly the right question when it comes to considering options for future difficult taxation and spending decisions facing any government: 'How the public finances are rebalanced will probably be the most important influence on how economic inequalities evolve: will the costs of recovery be borne by those who gained least before the crisis, or by those in the strongest position to do so?'

MIGRATION AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Politicians who respect the unique human dignity of each person will not reduce the issue of immigration simply to a matter of numbers, without distinguishing between its different forms – those who seek asylum, those from the east and west of the European Union, those from outside the European Union, those who come to study and those who are members of settled migrant communities in the United Kingdom. While government has a responsibility to manage migration effectively, it is imperative that all policies on immigration, and the procedures, structures and processes that implement those policies, should start from the recognition of this human dignity and the inalienable rights that follow from it.

Politicians have a serious responsibility for the common good not only in what policies they pursue but also in the way they campaign. They are right to appeal to the best and most decent instincts of the electorate rather than to whip up fears, prejudices and anxieties. We appeal to all in the political debate today never to address a sensitive issue such

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as this in a way that threatens harmonious relations between our communities and causes ill-will.

THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY AND ECOLOGY

The community to which the principle of the common good applies extends globally and includes future generations. This requires that we all face up to our responsibilities for international aid and development, and against the factors which perpetuate poverty and hardship.

Environmental deterioration through extreme weather conditions, drought, flood and rising sea levels are an increasing source of suffering in vulnerable regions, often already very poor. Responsibility to future generations requires that no-one takes more than a fair share of the planet's resources, and that all work to protect the environment from permanent damage, for instance through climate change.

The principle of the common good not only embraces the whole human race now living but those who are to come, and the ecology of the planet itself. We all need urgently to recover a sense of the integrity and sacredness of the whole of God's creation, of which we are not the masters but the stewards. Unless vigorous action is taken to defend it, then the next generations shall have nothing but a world devastated by our short-sightedness. We deceive ourselves if we believe that we can achieve a fulfilled life by exercising our choice to buy and consume regardless of the consequences. That is not good for the planet and it is not good for us.

The book of nature is one and indivisible. Duties to the environment are linked to duties towards the human person and towards one another.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

The future of society passes by way of the family. Families, for better or worse, are the first school of life and love, where the capacity to relate to others, to develop moral character, is founded. The tragic personal, social and economic costs of increased family breakdown are unmistakable.

Whilst we recognise and applaud the many parents who despite family breakdown provide a loving and stable home for their children, we have also as a society to accept that the promotion and encouragement of family stability must be a high priority if this trend, so damaging to the common good, is to be reversed. Families require financial as well as relational stability, access to affordable housing, and fair conditions of employment that respect family responsibilities. Families have a right to a life of their own, and governments do well when they interfere as little as possible while supporting parents in the exercise of their responsibilities. But at the heart of necessary policy initiatives to support the stability of couple relationships, it is essential to support marriage.

Marriage brings considerable and measurable benefits to individuals, children, family life and society. It deserves protection. A strong future for marriage is both achievable and desirable. A more realistic view of married life should be encouraged and couples should be prepared with the skills to maintain and develop their commitment. There should be more resources for relationship support. Society has a vested interest in supporting marriage as the surest basis for family life. Politicians of all parties should recognise and support marriage as a key building-block of a stable society.

THE ROLE OF FAITH COMMUNITIES

The Christian Churches have long contributed to the promotion of the common good, as a gift and an effort that is an essential part of the Christian vision. Through the commitment and generosity of their members, other faith communities also demonstrate this contribution to the common good. This role of faith should be clearly recognised.

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(Proverbs 29:18)

Care must be taken not to put obstacles in the way of religious belief and practice which reduce it to devotional acts. Faith communities have a distinctive and active role in building up a society which fosters the flourishing of all. They are one of the main pillars of support for the common good.

The right to religious freedom means the right to live by faith, within the reasonableness of the common good, and to act by faith in the public forum. This arises from the fact that the human person is, by nature, a spiritual being, with a longing for love, for truth, for beauty, for happiness. When this spiritual sphere is neglected or constrained, then we live in an atmosphere of closed windows, depriving ourselves of the light, space and air that the spiritual quest brings. A reduction in the scope and role in our lives of the spiritual and the religious does little to serve the common good, of which they are essential parts and to which they contribute significantly.

Partnerships between Government and faith communities should be mutually respectful and permit these communities to act with integrity in the provision of public services for the common good. This has long been the case in the provision of education and the benefits brought by that partnership are substantial and clear. Faith communities also have their part to play in the formulation of public policy and have a right to make a proper contribution to the life of our democracy.

LOVE IN TRUTH

‘Where there is no vision, the people perish’. (Proverbs 29:18)
We hope that all who are elected to the new Parliament, whether members of the government or in opposition, will dedicate themselves afresh to a new vision of human flourishing by choosing always to work for the common good.

In his latest Encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI urges confidence in the future: ‘The complexity and gravity of the present economic situation rightly cause us concern, but we must adopt a realistic attitude as we take up with confidence and hope the new responsibilities to which we are called by the prospect of a world in need of profound cultural renewal, a world that needs to rediscover fundamental values on which to build a better future. The current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and to reject negative ones. The crisis thus becomes an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future.’ (*Caritas in Veritate* 21).

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Choosing the Common Good presents some of the underlying principles and values by which we seek to construct a just and civil society.

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