

The Church's Option in Hull

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A speech given by the leader of Hull City Council to the Annual Meeting of the Middlesbrough Diocese Society of St Vincent de Paul (the S.V.P.) on 15 March 1987.

Let us not forget that the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head: that Jesus, the Father of the Poor, had less than the foxes with their holes; and always remember that Jesus worked among the lepers, the prostitutes, the sinners, the outcasts. Yes, Jesus caused scandal by his work among those marginalised by society.

Jesus too was called 'the Nazarene': 'Jesus the provincial'; He could just as easily have been Jesus from Middlesbrough, or Jesus from Hull. If Jesus walked the face of the earth today, would He weep again over the city? Over Hull or Middlesbrough? How would He react to such contemporary problems as Aids, the apparent breakdown of family life, the scourge of unemployment, the plight of the homeless, and the tragedy of young drug addicts? Of one thing we can be sure, if he was to visit Hull, he would be on our outer estates of Bransholme, Orchard Park and North Hull—and he would react. But this, of course, begs the question.

Jesus is still with us; by his own promise he is with the Church, and in his own words he is in our fellow men and women. 'Whenever you do it to the least of my brethren you do it to me.'

The latter is an awesome eternal message, which should require little emphasis in an address to the S.V.P. (an organisation which has survived the changes within contemporary Catholicism—primarily because it is rooted in the best christological and apostolic traditions). Your own work is within the devastated cities of the North, whose problems are legion. Unemployment in the Hull Travel to Work area in November, 1986 was 30,358 but, among some groups, and in some areas, reach horrendous levels of 50% or more. The situation on some Middlesbrough estates is worse; many youngsters have never had a job other than a 'scheme', and soon we will have a jobless generation becoming fathers and mothers of another jobless generation, sucked downwards in a spiral of despair.

It is this feeling of hopelessness and neglect; worse still, the waste of the talents of our brothers and sisters in Christ: their aspirations and vocations frustrated, and their lives blighted in a culture of despair and the complexities of D.H.S.S. benefits: it is on this that 'comfortable Britain' and the churches in particular ought to reflect. Children leaving school, knowing their futures are bleak; housing estates in desperate need of repair; maisonettes, flats, system-built housing, pre-war estates—all requiring injections of capital

expenditure—yet Councils cannot spend in full the capital receipt from the 'Right to Buy' legislation. An ageing population produces a demand for specialist housing services, wardenised schemes, and call-out systems to provide security within the context of independence.

There remains the plight of the homeless; in this city alone over 2,000 cases were dealt with last year—some the result of mortgage default, others repercussions of marital breakdown, or overcrowding; but, whatever the cause, all involved people, children and babies with no roofs over their heads. In Hull there are some 16,000 people on the transfer and waiting list: a list which seemingly never is reduced. Crumbling infrastructure, derelict dockland, overgrown railway yards, and empty factories—monuments to past glory and present failure. Doubtless Councillor Michael Carr¹ could evoke in Middlesbrough a similar picture.

We must avoid the sin of despair; there is little presumption abroad in the North of 1987. Hope is one of the great virtues, and there was never more a need for sustained hope than today. But it must be Hope born of Faith and inspired by Charity. Has the Church anything to offer our cities? The liberation theologians write of 'the underside of history', the history of the oppressed—which is fundamentally christocentric. It is the theology of Jesus the liberator, but it is also the theology of Jesus the Friend and Brother of the Poor.² This relatively simple but profound theology has as much to offer the West as Latin America, where it originated.

Recently, the Dominican, Father Anthony Archer³, drawing on his pastoral experience in Newcastle, expressed his concern about the Church in England becoming increasingly middle-class, bookish; more of a denomination akin to the Anglican Church—rather than the Church of the past, with its roots in the urban poor of the inner cities: what he so aptly describes as the passing of the 'simple faithful'. His themes are subject to close analysis in the February 1987 edition of *New Blackfriars*⁴. Bearing in mind this apparent contradiction of the assured presence of Jesus and a Church seemingly becoming detached from its working-class base, let us return to the theme of the Church and the City.

In Hull there have been several initiatives in which the Church has been involved—for instance, the S.V.P. itself has been committed to the City Council's outer area strategy in North Hull. Holy Cross Parish (although in Cottingham and outside the City boundary) has been very supportive of our Third World Twinning with Freetown, Sierra Leone, and of the City's affiliation to Amnesty International. Archbishop Worlock addressed the City's Employment Sub-Committee, and several clergy attended an address by Canon Eric James on the Church of England's report *Faith in the City*. The Sisters of Mercy helped initiate the Soup Run and generously helped house the Hospice project—so our record is fair; but nonetheless we can ask 'Where is the Roman Catholic equivalent of that seminal report of the Anglicans?' Nationally and locally, where are our industrial chaplaincies? Why do we provide chaplaincies for those privileged to attend universities, but

not for Further Education Students, and for the unemployed youth? Have they no needs? Where is our equivalent to the York-based St. William's Foundation, which has organised regional discussions on the future of our cities as a northern follow-up to *Faith in the City*? One does not wish to appear hyper-critical, and there may be many initiatives which this address has overlooked. Politicians know only too well how easy it is to criticise, and in return to become defensive and negative. But self-criticism can be healthy, and these questions are intended to be helpful.

In the post-Vatican II Church, what happened to the Catholic Social Guild? What became of the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists? Where now, for that matter, is the Young Christian Worker movement, in which many of us in the fifties were grounded? More to the point, have these organisations been replaced by any equivalent? It is a truism that in the past Catholic Action was defensive, negative, narrowly-cast, anti-Communist, and protective of our own, and our own institutions. Nevertheless, it is a fact that Catholics were previously encouraged to be active in public affairs; is that the case today? Organisation can wither on the vine and become moribund, but where is the new Young Christian Worker?

In Britain we are fortunate that, unlike the Continent, there are no sectarian parties, and Catholics (as evidenced by our two local Roman Catholic M.Ps.⁵) have found homes in all the major political parties. But it is also true that until very recently—especially here in the North and in Scotland—the bulk of the Catholic working-class (particularly those of Irish origin) gave their overwhelming support to Labour⁶. The success of Militant in Liverpool might have a message for the Church and Labour. Father Archer's thesis can equally apply to a party which claims to speak for ordinary people, but could be in danger of alienating the very people whom they are supposed to serve. There might be an interesting parallel of comparable decline, which others could pursue.

It would be wrong to ignore the many brave initiatives taken by the City Council (such as the Innovation Centre, the Micro Firm, the Business Advice Centre, the Science Park, the Co-operative Development Agency)—all of these designed to create jobs and stimulate the local economy; Sports and Leisure Centres, Pop-Ins and Community Centres—all of which have been built since 1979; the establishment of the Council for Voluntary Service—on which the S.V.P. serves; the Marina (opened in 1983)—which has triggered private development, including a hotel; the City's pedestrianisation plans and the Five-Year Housing Programme. All of these have helped to transform Hull; all are attempts to invest in the future and, despite every setback, to breathe a spirit of Hope. This has to be said; our Northern cities are trying desperately to stem the tide—but is this digression that very defensive mentality referred to earlier?

But there are a number of issues deserving the joint attention of politicians and church people—for example, does our Church play a sufficiently large role in Housing Associations? Who should take the initiative

in setting up a city night shelter? Does the institutional church involve itself with support services for drug addicts and other marginalised groups? Could the Church link into any M.S.C. schemes, community projects, or an equivalent to the Cleveland Business Enterprise Scheme for Youth? Will the Church locally organise anything to coincide with the 'Hands Across Britain' Campaign on 3rd May—intended to raise the nation's conscience on unemployment. Will the Church respond?

On a personal note, to which reference is made simply to make a point, the youngest Catholic Councillor in the local Labour Party (with its traditional links with the Catholic working-class in a city with 52 Labour seats out of 60) is 48. Now ask yourselves the question—do you despise or despair of the political trade? Is there a cynicism about politicians, which perhaps you encourage—but, if it gathers momentum, undermines democracy itself? Perhaps we should re-assess the role of politicians at local and national levels; is not their basic task that of service, public service to their fellow citizens? If so, is this not a noble calling to which young people should be encouraged to aspire—encouraged, not dissuaded or put off? There are close parallels between the work of politicians and the S.V.P. Councillors and M.P.'s have a heavy case-load; we too deal with the individual.

At another level, the charges levelled against politicians are often those made by our critics against the Church and the clergy—that of indifference, of being all talk, of being all the same, of looking after themselves, of hypocrisy. But if even the criticism of politicians was entirely true (which arguably is not the case), the work still has to be undertaken; it still has to be done; and politicians are not elected in perpetuity.

Finally, if the model of the S.V.P. is that of Jesus on his knees in the Upper Room, washing the feet of his followers, then in the late 1980's should we not be looking around the world to ensure that the poor, weak, hungry and thirsty, bereaved, are cared for here and now—but at the same time demanding, declaiming, protesting that the root causes of the malaise are tackled? Catholics ought to bring to political life several strands—the traditions of papal encyclicals and Catholic social theory emphasise co-operatives and similar fashionable small-scale enterprises: a vision of a world that embraces Europeanism and internationalism: a brotherhood which encapsulates peace and identifies with the sufferings of the Third World: an overwhelming concern with fundamental rights. All of these imperatives should be based on a return to the Jesus of the Gospel, who demonstrably was on the side and at the side of the poor.

1 Leader of Middlesbrough Council.

2 Gustavo Gutierrez: *The Power of the Poor in History*, 1983.

3 Leonardo Boff: *Church, Charisma and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, 1985.

4 Anthony Archer: *The Two Catholic Churches: A Study in Oppression*, 1986.

5 *New Blackfriars* February 1987 (special issue: 'Class and Church after Ghetto Catholicism').

6 Kevin McNamara, Labour M.P., North Hull, and Sir Patrick Wall, the then Conservative M.P. for Beverley and Haltemprice (he retired at the last General Election).

7 Patrick J. Doyle: 'Religion, Politics and the Catholic Working Class'. *New Blackfriars*, May, 1983.