

Introduction: St Augustine's two cities

Having spent some time identifying signs in the world and in the Church of both evil and good the purpose of this evening's talk is to answer the question 'What next?' or 'And so?' I will be looking at some ways in which the Catholic community, alongside other Christians, can be more visible centres of goodness in the world, of lights shining in darkness. Of course I am aware that even when we do this inadequately we are already doing it simply by 'being Church' by being the place where the Eucharist is celebrated, where the Word of God is proclaimed and taught, the physical place where Jesus is present in the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle. Also much of our charitable and campaigning work does make our parishes beacons of light as well... but Lent is a time for reflection and self-examination; we can always do more



St Augustine

I want to start by looking briefly at the Christian theologian whose guidance in terms of our relationship to the rest of the world is crucial – Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa at the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth. Possibly the most prolific early Church theologian, famous most of all for his spiritual autobiography *The Confessions*. I am going to say a little about the most important thing he wrote towards the end of his life and ministry, called *The City of God*.

Two important things to remember: first, by the year 426 when it was finished, it was just over a century since persecution against Christianity in the Roman Empire had ceased. Very quickly under the Emperor Constantine and his successors Christianity in its various forms (mainstream and Arian) had become prominent in the Empire and eventually the official state religion. Some Christian writers, seeing this as part of God's providence, quickly came to see the Empire and its institutions as instruments of God's will. One of Augustine's aims in his book is to debunk this view.

Secondly, part of God's will or not, the Empire was falling apart. The City of Rome had been sacked in the year 410 by the Goths, and North Africa, where Augustine was bishop, had rapidly taken in refugees from Rome and the rest of Italy. People thought their world was coming to an end, and in a way they were right. One of his concerns was to refute some pagan writers who argued that Rome collapsed because it had embraced Christianity. This was also the view many centuries later of Edward Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Christianity had made the Romans 'soft'.

Augustine in his overview of world history sets out a strong contrast between two cities - one is of the earth (*terrena*) and the other is God's (*Dei*). The earthly city, identified with the Roman Empire in all its glory, is based on violence - virtue is defined as being able to defeat another human being; he calls it a 'den of robbers.' The true God is excluded from worship - rather the State sets up false deities of self-interest and domination: conflict and oppression are endemic to the empire. There never had been a 'golden age'. By contrast the city of God has different values rooted in true worship, and only this can establish true justice in society. The only way for a social order to be governed is on the basis not of defeating enemies and conquering them, but on participation in Christ's sacrifice. So he writes in book 19:

'This is the sacrifice of the Christian: we, being many, are one body in Christ. And this also is the sacrifice which the Church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, known to the faithful, in which she teaches that she herself is offered in the offering she makes to God.'

If you look at the history of the British Empire, still a big part of our cultural heritage, or at the statues of generals and admirals all over London, some disturbing bells start to ring.

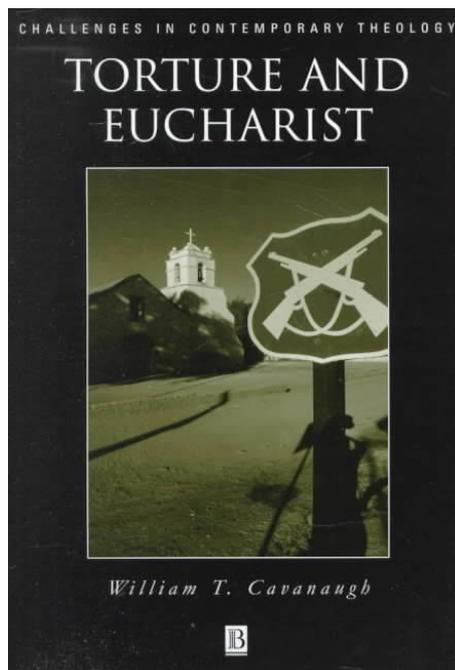
The two cities will always be in opposition to each other.

The Need for Resistance

What is clear is that we are expected to choose where our true loyalties lie, between the two cities. It is a false interpretation of Augustine to argue that the two are balanced, or that Christianity leaves to the State control over physical or material things: rather, the City of God will be triumphant and the Earthly City will crumble away. Augustine is not proposing a cosy partnership - he is putting the Empire in its place. Now we are not living in fifth century North Africa; and the British State and its other institutions are not the same as the late Roman Empire, even with Christian emperors - although there are some points of contact (such as the religious trappings which surround much of the way in which the State operates - the 'established' character of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, the Queen's Coronation, the presence of Anglican bishops in the House of Lords, and so on); but I think Augustine's view, mediated through contemporary models, shows us how we can build our parishes and Catholic institutions into what I would like to call *communities of resistance* - clearer, or even clearer beacons of light in a dark world, in a dark country.

As you may have guessed I am particularly uneasy about the churches having a comfortable, cosy and respectful relationship with the State: rather we need a more developed theology of

resistance. Now for Anglicans this is a particularly difficult problem, since the Queen as Head of State is ‘Supreme Governor’ of their church, to whom all Anglican clergy have to swear an oath of allegiance. For Catholics (and indeed the Free churches) it is, or ought to be, completely different. For some centuries our faith was outlawed, our priests subjected to imprisonment or execution; trouble is that since Emancipation we have sometimes not wanted to appear to be at odds with the State or anyone else. What I am suggesting is that current realities - such as the decline in the practice of Christianity in this country and the examples of evil I tried to point out a fortnight ago - demand that we recover a sense of being in resistance to the State. I want to put forward two models, from partly different situations, which offer us pointers about what we could do as an institution and pointers about the sort of ventures or communities we should support



Santiago: the *Vicaría de Solidaridad*

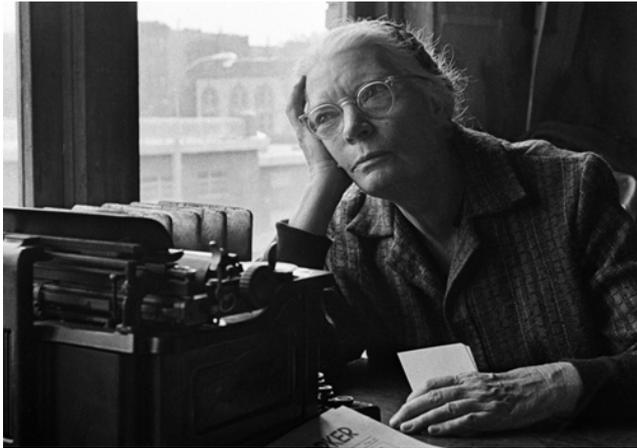
Before this talk began I was playing some recorded music in church. This was the quartet by Schubert known as *Death and the Maiden*. I played it because some years ago the Chilean poet and playwright Ariel Dorfman wrote a play of the same name about an encounter between a female victim of torture in Chile and the man who had tortured her; the play was made into a film, starring a cousin of mine (Stuart Wilson) in which the quartet was played during the film. Shortly after I started running the academic programme for those in formation to be deacons I came across a new book (1999) by an American theologian, Bill Cavanaugh, called *Torture and Eucharist*. All these years later I still think it is one of the most important books on theology I have ever read. It's still in print and I give copies as Christmas presents. Some of what I said earlier about St Augustine shows his influence (although I studied Augustine as a student) – the book brings together a sharp analysis of developing ‘theology of the Church’ (what we call *ecclesiology*) with a deep and horrifying narrative of the use of torture in Chile under the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet which took power in September 1973. One of his priorities is to look at how the Catholic

Church, from a privileged position in Chilean society, reacted to this; he shows that one reason why in the early years this reaction was hesitant and uncertain was that people had a weak ‘theology of Church’ making them ill-prepared for resisting the State.

But, schooled by oppression and violence, the Church gradually develops into a community of resistance – indeed the only one in the country. This was shown, as time went on, by various actions such as the point when the bishops excommunicated anyone involved in torture – by doing it or authorising it.

Another example he gives is of a specific example in the archdiocese of Santiago, Chile’s capital. Part of what Catholic and other agencies did was to try and find out where people were who had been detained without trial by the regime, to support families; this included locations of the bodies of people who had been killed (some of which have still not been found). Also, Pinochet’s regime had implemented very harsh economic reforms, advised by the Chicago economist Milton Friedman, which led to widespread poverty: another thing the churches did was to provide welfare services, soup kitchens, health facilities and so on (this is what the British nurse Sheila Cassidy was involved in, when she was abducted and tortured [she wrote about the experiences]). What the diocese did in Santiago (after the government had closed down an earlier agency) was to put both sets of activities into one official agency of the diocese, acting in the name of the Catholic Church and the archbishop. In any diocese such as structure is often called a *vicariate*, that is something which acts in the name of the bishop (so we have an episcopal vicar here in Southwark, for marriage and family life), or in Spanish *Vicaría*. This body was called the ‘Vicariate of Solidarity’: solidarity is the moral concept in Catholic teaching, fundamental to our view of society and our view of why and how we give to and work for the poor, teaching us that we are responsible for the welfare of other people. As St John Paul II once defined it solidarity... **‘is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all’**. (Encyclical letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* [1987], 38)

So this body co-ordinated all the Church’s resistance to the State – running welfare, advice and education services, and also legal and investigative efforts to find out where the regime was torturing people, supporting their families. It cost the Church a lot of money, but it seems to me to be a very clear and stark example of how the Church can be a community of resistance; and what is striking (and unusual) is that it wasn’t another Catholic charity or NGO – it was part of the diocese, of the Church’s institutional structure. I will return to why I think this is important later on.



Dorothy Day and the *Catholic Workers*

I have on other occasions, both in talks, in a CTS booklet and in the parish newsletter, reminded people of the importance of the Servant of God (this title is given to someone for whom there is an ongoing process of beatification leading to canonisation) Dorothy Day. In case you've missed it she was an American left wing journalist and convert to Catholicism who in 1933 founded two things – first of all a weekly (almost free) newspaper called *The Catholic Worker*, and shortly after a network of communities which brought together the volunteers who produced the paper into communities - known as 'houses of hospitality' - which gave unconditional and extensive support to the poorest people in the city (initially New York, but later others) – shelter, food, clothing, help with health care and so on. This was of course the middle of the Great Depression. She also started a small number of farms, committed to responsible methods of agriculture. The history of her life and the communities is a rich narrative in the history of 20th century Catholicism and the communities spread all over the world: next Sunday, as we do every other month, we will be collecting things from people in this parish for the CW community in London (which was visited two years ago by Cardinal Nichols and the Archbishop of Canterbury).

I don't want to go into details which I have outlined elsewhere; but I do want to highlight some distinctive aspects of the CW approach – making them very different from other things which the Church does – which I think can be helpful for us.

- Day and her associate Peter Maurin, best described as a wandering French peasant / teacher, believed that all that they did needed to be rooted in theological education: not in schools or colleges, but in groups of discussion and learning in the communities, focussed particularly on the branch of moral theology known as Catholic Social teaching – about which in the 30s, as now, many Catholics were particularly ignorant. Making papal encyclicals known to ordinary Catholics was a priority, rooted in deep knowledge of the Scriptures and the teachings of Our Lord. This led Day and others to demonstrate, for example, alongside striking workers.
- It was (more so then than now) rooted in devotional and spiritual life: provision for daily Mass, retreats, etc.

- Part of what this entailed was a complete rejection of war, and the ‘movement’ from the beginning was committed to absolute pacifism. This cost it many supporters during the war, especially after Pearl Harbor. CW people are still involved in many peace demonstrations and are often arrested (as I pointed out last week)
- In line with early Church teaching and those of St Thomas Aquinas CWs also reject the lending or borrowing of money at interest, usury (sometimes these days the word is reserved for transactions involving high or exorbitant rates of interest, but the original condemnation, and that of the CWs, applies to any rates). Day once famously returned a cheque for several thousand dollars because it came from interest for money held.
- They also espoused two philosophical approaches which also marked them out:
 - First is what was and is called *personalism*. This is difficult to define succinctly but it laid much emphasis on personal interaction between people, so that the correct response to someone else’s need is to meet it yourself rather than ask someone else (or the State) to do it. So Day and Maurin taught that every Catholic parish should have a ‘house of hospitality’ to provide relief for the poor. It was the Church’s job because of Jesus’ teaching, and not the State’s’ CW volunteers do not claim State benefits and the communities do not claim charitable status.
 - Linked to this is a general scepticism about the role of the State in itself, based on the teachings of Christian anarchists such as Tolstoy and Bulgakov; some of this is linked to the pacifism I mentioned above, and in the 60s particularly CWs were involved in supporting those who avoided the ‘draft’; and certainly Day didn’t exercise her right to vote.

Now many of us who give general support to the CW wouldn’t necessarily espouse all these positions; however I think that some parts of the model are helpful for all of us. The call to have a ‘house of hospitality’ in every parish is mirrored in Pope Francis’ call for every parish in Europe to take in at least one refugee family (when he spoke to the US congress in 2015 he referred to Day in his speech, alongside Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King - you could see some very uncomfortable shuffling going on.

Possibilities

A few weeks ago an American bishop, Robert McElroy addressing a crowd of nearly 700 faith leaders, grassroots organizers, and community leaders, said this **‘President Trump said he was the candidate of disruption. Now we must all become disrupters. We must disrupt those who would seek to send troops into our communities to deport the undocumented, to destroy our families. We must disrupt those who portray refugees as enemies. We must disrupt those who train us to see Muslim men & women as a source of threat rather than children of God. We must disrupt those who would take away healthcare, who would take food from our children. But we can’t just be disrupters, we have to be rebuilders. We have to rebuild a nation in which all of us are children of one God...We must rebuild a nation that pays \$15 [an hour - proposed minimum wage] and**

provide decent housing and work to all. If work is co-creation with God don't we think it deserves at least \$15 an hour?'

How do we apply aspects of the models I have looked at to suburban Beckenham. We already do, it seems to me, a lot more than some parishes, but at the same time much of what we try to do involves a fairly small proportion of the 1300 or so people who come to Mass each weekend. Some rather vague suggestions;

- On the model of the *vicaría* better coordination of what we do to make it clear that we act in the name, officially, of this parish community
- Consideration of how we root this in the prayer life of our community. We must contract - we need more periods of prayer, more all night vigils, more acts of worship, to aid our process of discernment.
- A lot more teaching programmes - to enable our people to know more about their faith; these need to be at all levels and we need to think about new and better models.
- More work in relation to campaigning for peace - a good question to ask is in relation to how parish groups, particularly uniformed organisations, are involved in events like Remembrance Sunday. How are the acts of worship planned? (I have written elsewhere about this)
- Existing and extended practical support for refugees and asylum seekers.
- Extension of our advice services - taking in to account the needs that EU citizens may have for good advice as the UK leaves the Union and people may lose their right to stay here. Many people are uncertain and anxious: as fellow members of the Body of Christ we have a responsibility to support those who are frightened
- Poverty, unemployment and racism are likely to increase as Britain leaves the EU so again we need to be prepared for this, to provide more support for those who are poor and counteract growing suspicion and hatred arising from the referendum vote.
- As universal health care free at the moment of use becomes threatened in many ways a parish like ours, which has many dedicated healthcare professionals who currently offer advice and support to fellow Catholics in many ways, could extend what we try to do

Probably many other things we can think of!