

St Edmund's Church, Beckenham 29 January 2020

**INTRODUCTION**

Welcome this evening, and a special welcome to those watching this through our webcam either live or the recording. I have given a number of talks in the parish about Catholic Social Teaching in the last 23 years – it formed a running theme in my Lent series about the nature of evil three years ago, and in 1997 we put on a whole course about the Bishops' document *The Common Good* in the run-up to the General Election of that year. Social Teaching is branch of Catholic moral theology and teaching, drawing on big theoretical principles (such as the dignity of the human person) and applying them to specific social and political issues. It is part of ordinary Catholic moral teaching from the pope and the bishops in union with him, what we call the *Magisterium*, and that means that Catholics are expected to assent to these teachings. At the same time one of the key documents (the *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church*) tells us that is a 'search for truth': it is about theology: it is not some sort of religious gloss on political theory or economics, but it engages in dialogue, as part of the search for truth, with other disciplines and fields. I have specialised in it more over the years through material I have published and because I teach it to those training to be deacons – who are expected to have a specialist knowledge of it – this lead three years ago to my setting up the first and so far only MA degree in the subject in the UK and Ireland<sup>1</sup>. This is taught in addition to 'ordinary' students, including interns supported every year by the Bishops Conference of England and Wales. The context of Catholic Social Teaching is constantly changing: Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have both insisted that social teaching needs to be seen as at the heart of the ordinary life of the Church: it is not the preserve of Justice and Peace groups, Catholic charities of clergy who happen to be interested in it. It is for all Catholics, laypeople and clergy. It also has an important ecumenical dimension as other churches are working and reflecting about social justice, and Anglicans in particular have affirmed the specific value of Catholic Social teaching (particularly the Archbishop of Canterbury and the authors of some very good recent books). I will simply look this evening at one overwhelming issue; I will also suggest ways in which the manner in which we should respond to this issue and look at other concerns addressed by the social teaching tradition. can give us unexpected opportunities.

**BREXIT AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

The date of this lecture was chosen by me, as will not surprise some of you, because of what will happen late on Friday night. I have published and spoken a lot about Europe in relation to social teaching since 2001, and was active both during the referendum campaign and since; I have also for some years been an official representative on the ecumenical think-tank *Faith in Europe*. I have argued forcefully that principally for three reasons the Brexit project is incompatible with Catholic teaching.

The first reason is to do with what the Church has taught, particularly since St John XXIII's last encyclical *Pacem in Terris* in 1963, about international relations. In that letter, and again in St John Paul II's 1987 letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* we see how the Church in the interests of peace and reconciliation strongly supports supra-national bodies which should regulate how countries behave, involving the giving up and pooling of sovereignty. John XXIII called for a 'world government'; sections 35ff. of John Paul II's letter outline how countries are expected to work together in *solidarity*. In relation both to international finance and care for the environment Benedict XVI and Francis have strongly called for a world political authority 'with real teeth'; bodies like the International Labour Organisation, the United Nations, the African Union and the European Union. In speeches and other documents from John Paul, Benedict and Francis there has been strong and explicit support for the project of European unity – among these are the letter John Paul wrote in 1999 about the new female patron saints of Europe and the speech Pope Francis made in May 2016 when we was awarded the Charlemagne prize; indeed the Church has been disappointed that unity has not been rooted enough in shared spiritual and cultural unity values – it shouldn't just be economic. The amount of material is considerable, and *it is authoritative*. This is a million miles from the populist nationalism of people like Trump, Orban, Salvini, the *Front Nationale* and the whole Brexit campaign and the politicians and media outlets which have promoted it. And our teaching won't change at the weekend.

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<sup>1</sup> For details go to <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/postgraduate-courses-london/catholic-social-teaching>

The second reason is to do with Catholic teaching about the nation state. The whole stress on national sovereignty in the Brexit project conjures up the picture of the 'earthly city' so strongly condemned by St Augustine of Hippo in his classic work from the fifth century, the *City of God*. Augustine was arguing against two groups – 'pagan' Romans who, seeing the Roman Empire in the West fall apart, blamed 'soft' Christianity for its military and moral decline; and Christians who since the conversion of Constantine a century before had seen the empire as suddenly an instrument of God's will. For Augustine the empire, the State, the 'earthly city' was flawed, based on violence and greed, a 'robbers' den'. If you look at arguments of pro-Brexit politicians, such a state is being put before us as deserving of our loyalty, above all else. Such loyalty demands total independence and 'control' of our country; what we're being fed is more or less idolatrous – that's why opponents of Brexit have been so vilified. It is well known, and no accident, that many opponents of the EU have seen it as a Catholic plot; the rise in the power of independent nation states in Europe during and after the Reformation sundered European unity and the weakened the Catholic Church.

Finally, at the heart of the victory of the Leave campaign in the referendum, as its proponents freely admit, was the campaign against migrants. This was and is still about racism and hatred, and totally at odds with what the Church teaches about how we should welcome migrants to our shores and support them. After he was elected pope in 2013, the first visit Pope Francis made outside Rome was to the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, where he celebrated Mass for the hundreds of migrants who had lost their lives nearby trying to get to Italy and Europe from North Africa. Many have pointed out that this is one of the defining concerns and issues of his papacy, although in what he says he draws on a long tradition of teaching. He has gone out of his way to remind all of us that welcoming and supporting migrants and refugees is an obligation in terms of Christian charity; moreover the Church has never been interested, while affirming countries' right to regulate migration ethically, in the distinction between economic migrants and refugees fleeing war or persecution. These are simply people who need your help. The Holy Father's family on his father's side were migrants from northern Italy to Argentina (for both economic and political reasons); this has moulded him. It will remain the Catholic Church's task to challenge the bigotry in our society, to call politicians to account and provide practical help for people. Contrast this picture of love with Nigel Farage's hate filled campaign in 2016, the inflammatory poster, the hate crimes shortly after vote, the rising tensions since; all the self-centred language of taking back control. The suspicion which the right wing press and the Conservative party have encouraged for many years shows strangely how insecure, behind the xenophobic screaming, these people's patriotism really is. This issue also goes to the heart of Catholic identity in many places, particularly this country, as we're a church of migrants.

There are many other arguments, but these are the main *theological* considerations why we have to see Brexit as an attack on the Catholic Church – on our teachings and on our people. It has poisoned national life for a very straightforward reason: it is poison, there is nothing about it which is not sinful and wicked. None of this will change after Friday, none of it ceases to be so because of a popular vote. We will need to continue to challenge the whole wretched business, and work for the UK to rejoin the EU; I am not dealing with political issues to do with Brexit, such as support for it in the north of England, nor indeed the future of Ireland. I am simply putting before you once again the theology of it. The nature of the referendum result in 2016 and the present government's recent election victory do not make any difference; in a democracy people are entitled to continue to campaign for what they believe to be right, and had the result gone the other way that is what the Leave people would have done. In this process those of us who are no longer young need to listen to young people, both within the Catholic Church and elsewhere: the gulf between age groups in this issue is a defining and disturbing reality. Incidentally I am not going to comment or speculate about why the churches have not taken a clearer line about this. In this week what I am concerned to do is to look to the future.

## **WHAT HAPPENS NEXT - COMMUNITIES OF RESISTANCE**

In the face of what will happen on Friday we need our communities to be centres of resistance, providing support and advice for people who are worried, and, as the economy continues decline, material support for people experiencing poverty; I have said this before, but this evening is about the theory and theology rather than practical details. Words like 'resistance' are all very well – and sometimes rather threatening – but I think we need to think through what we mean.

In reflecting about this I have been helped by a book and a theologian who has been very influential on Pope Francis – *Triumph through Failure A Theology of the Cross* by the American-Italian Jesuit priest John

Navone<sup>2</sup>. Originally written back in 1984 it was reprinted after it became how much the Holy Father had found it helpful throughout his ministry as a Jesuit priest and then auxiliary bishop and archbishop (and cardinal) in Buenos Aires. *We have failed*: this speaks to Catholic Church at this time, when much of the vision we have enunciated for Britain and the world seems in tatters or ruined or failed. When popes and bishops have welcomed European unity and called for stronger reconciliation and peace, even our own people seem not to have listened, never mind anyone else. Navone says in the ‘afterward’ to his book: **‘As the father of lies, Satan the Adversary reigns where persons and nations live for self-glorification in a state of self-idolatry, persons whose very lives secrete a life-lie.’** (p. 182) It feels a bit like that, doesn’t it? But Fr Navone’s point in the book is that the language of the cross, carrying with it the apparent failure of Jesus in terms of worldly values, enables us to see failure as an opportunity, to move towards resurrection. This doesn’t mean accepting what has happened, far from it; we cannot collude with something inherently sinful. We don’t ‘park’ Brexit and ‘move on’, nor do we paper over the hatred and the divisiveness with an illusory and superficial reconciliation, crying ‘peace, peace where there is no peace’. Rather, we have an opportunity to witness to Christ more deeply.

These are some features which our communities of resistance I think should show, post-Brexit:

1. First we do need to recognise our failure. Everything is not all right. As I said earlier, what the Christian minority in this country and others have been saying about European unity has not been heeded. I represent the bishops, together with our parishioner Michael Elmer, on an ecumenical think-tank called *Faith in Europe*<sup>3</sup>. While we know from surveys that overall a majority of practising Catholics in this country were opposed to Brexit, our colleagues in the group from the Church of England, to their bewilderment (and that of most of their bishops and clergy) have the opposite experience. When we acknowledge failure we have to ask why (just as political parties and others are doing), even though evidence suggests that opinion had actually shifted in the country against Leave, at least until the General Election. A big reason has been a sharp drop in the influence of the churches, and within the churches of the authority of bishops and other leaders – because of terrible mistakes they have made in other areas. Moreover we have not argued the case with conviction, unanimity and confidence. In relation, for example, to statements of popes we have often not registered what has been said or been embarrassed about sharing it; and over immigration, like others, we have been defensive and frightened.
2. As I have said in homilies and elsewhere this recognition of failure should be marked by a call to repentance, just as Jesus called people to in last Sunday’s gospel. We need to repent because of our failure as the Church; but we also need to call others to repentance. The hatred and divisiveness which Brexit has fostered are not inevitable – they are the result of sin. Our task has to be to call everyone to repent of sin; disordered and flawed societies and communities lose their way. Actions have consequences. What sort of country have we made for our children and grandchildren? This call to repentance from us needs to be accompanied by deep prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to give us discernment. Britain is leaving the EU on a Friday, the traditional day of penitence – fasting and abstinence. That’s what we should be doing on Friday. When we ask for discernment we ask God to show us where wickedness and sinfulness lie.
3. In his book about failure Father Navone writes about the importance of ‘re-membering’ within communities which experience failure. If we’re engaged in penitence this will involve remembering the bad things, the signs of poison which I have already mentioned. But there needs also to be celebration of the triumphs of European reconciliation, and our failure to do this over the last fifty years is partly responsible for where we are. From outside the Church (as far as I am aware) the journalist Andrew Rawnsley wrote about some of these in the paper on Sunday<sup>4</sup>: in particular he pinpointed the UK’s

<sup>2</sup> Eugene, Oregon: 1984

<sup>3</sup> <http://faithineurope.org.uk>

<sup>4</sup> *Observer* 26 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/26/there-is-triumph-as-well-as-tragedy-in-the-story-of-britain-and-europe>. This is an extract: ‘.. we should resist allowing the triumph of the inevitabilist argument that the UK’s membership was always doomed to fail. There is another story to tell about this large chapter of Britain’s recent history, and it is a much more positive one. The UK’s membership of the EU was, in ways too numerous to do full justice to here, a good thing. To the EU was added a significant economic and military power with a different tradition and temperament, which became a creative complement and counter-weight to the clout of France and Germany. The single market, a creation driven by Thatcher’s government, allowed the EU to evolve into the most prosperous free trade zone on the planet, to the improvement of the quality of the lives of many millions of its citizens. Membership was a spur to the

contribution to setting up the Single Market and welcoming countries from Eastern Europe into EU membership and good regulation for which we have all benefitted; the UK has also provided a counter-balance to the power of France and Germany. For Catholics there is even more for us to celebrate. International days, in parishes, such as we have had since the referendum, have enabled us to celebrate the growing diversity of our community (in terms of people from all over the world, not simply Europe. But we haven't done this enough, and we did it rather late in the day. I have written elsewhere, and some time ago, about the importance of real celebration of the *six patron saints of Europe*. The Church designated Benedict, Cyril and Methodius, Birgitta of Sweden, Catherine of Siena and Teresa Benedicta of the Cross patron saints of Europe because of what we teach about reconciliation in Europe and because of their heroic lives and teachings. My booklet is no longer in print; I suspect in many parishes hardly anything is done, priests don't know what to say because they haven't been bothered to read up about them or what St Paul VI and St John Paul II said about why they should be Europe's patron saints. Our task has to be to celebrate more deeply our identity as Catholics in Europe and what these saints mean. Pilgrimage sites all over Europe can be part of this.

4. My third reason for identifying the sinfulness of Brexit is the issue of migrants and refugees. As I said the Holy Father has made this issue his own in lots of ways which are inspirational to us all. This doesn't mean that we don't listen to people's fears and anxieties in different places, but it does mean that we will often have to challenge people and their (often mendacious) sources of information (the newspapers they read). While as I have said we need to make what we do a cause for celebration, this also needs to be matched by practical work – collecting the food and other items which we have been doing in this community for well over twenty years, and, I think increasingly, giving advice and offering advocacy for people; the Holy Father has called on every Catholic parish in Europe to offer accommodation for at least one refugee family. What we are already doing needs to be intensified – and we need to try and set a good example to other parishes.
5. But our communities also need more formation and education. Catholic Social teaching is not for the specialist or the academic theologian (there are precious few of them around anyway) but for all Catholics; indeed many non-Catholics are interested in it (some of the best recent books about it are by Anglicans, and the Archbishop of Canterbury is significantly influenced by it). There are new courses like the new MA at St Mary's University, and the two men we have from our parish training to be deacons are doing much more of it than was the case in the past (they're expected to be experts in it); but there is more to be done, especially in parishes; it is being covered well in Catholic schools, but many of our children in this parish, particularly at secondary level, don't go to Catholic schools. Particular issues – the environment, human trafficking, domestic abuse, nuclear weapons, but they all have and will have a particular context because of what will happen on Friday evening; the important thing is to see all these things in this new rather challenging context. All that Brexit is about will strengthen those forces and influences in our society which work against the Church's teaching and witness. While in relation to knowledge of Catholic Social Teaching I think overall the position is better than it was in 1996 when the bishops issued *The Common Good*, but it is still inadequate and the ignorance among clergy is particularly shocking.

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modernisation of Britain by both extending the nation's cultural horizons and raising its expectations. The EU caricatured in the rightwing British media was a sinister scheme to ban bendy bananas... The EU of lived experience impelled Britain to clean up filthy beaches and toxic rivers, and to greatly enhance protections and rights for employees and consumers. The EU is not a flawless regulator, but it is not a bad one either. The fact that you can (generally) trust your food, your medicines, your motor cars and much else owes a great deal to the UK's membership. What did the EU ever do for us? Quite a lot, actually. To my mind, Britain's single most important contribution came after the fall of the Berlin Wall. When others, especially the French, were highly reluctant to embrace the nations that had just been released from vassalage in the Soviet bloc, the British were at the vanguard of the argument that the countries of central and eastern Europe, many of whom had no historical experience of freedom, be locked into democratic norms and human rights by putting them on a fast track to membership of an enlarged EU. Has it worked out perfectly? No. Could it have worked out much more nightmarishly? Absolutely. One of the most significant drivers of the original decision to seek membership was that the United Kingdom had started to feel a bit lost in the world. In the confirmatory referendum of 1975, the Yes campaign deployed the potent slogan: "It's cold outside." Membership of the EU furnished the UK with a unique and uniquely useful identity. Connections with other parts of the world, including but not limited to the United States, enhanced the UK's leverage in the EU. Britain's membership amplified its influence in the rest of the globe. Above and beyond that, there was something precious about the ideal, however imperfectly practised, of the countries of what had been the world's most murderous continent working together across borders for the prosperity and security of their peoples

## **CONCLUSION**

As I said earlier Father Navone's book has been particularly influential on the teachings of Pope Francis. One area where this has been true recently has been the Holy Father's response to the scandal of abuse in the Church and the failure of leadership by bishops and others. He has admitted mistakes he has made himself, and apologised, but he has insisted that the terrible saga offers the Church an opportunity to grow in our discipleship of Jesus, to be better Christians. Now, strongly as I feel about Europe, I am not suggesting for a moment the reality of failure which we face as a Church on Friday is on anything like the same level as the crimes of clergy and others against children, young people and vulnerable adults – that would be grotesque. Nevertheless, because of the Cross every failure, every setback, every fall, can be an opportunity for growth and for deeper witness to Christ; and while I think we should fast on Friday we will have the chance to witness afresh to the truths and insights of Catholic Social Teaching.