

Good life in hard times

By Archbishop Vincent Nichols at LSE on Wednesday 2 March 2011

Thank you for the invitation to deliver this lecture this evening. I am glad to do so and I look forward to our conversation afterwards. The title of this lecture, “Good life in hard times”, might, I suppose, be taken by those with an economist’s cast of mind as a tacit bow to Marx. If religion is the opium of the masses it ought to be a counter-cyclical business – interest in the hereafter should grow as the ‘here and now’ gets harder. But the truth is that we are at one of those critical junctures in society when not only the word “Big” but also truly big questions are in play in public debate, including the place of religion in the public forum.

The immediate party political fray surrounding public expenditure is only partly about rival prescriptions of how best to secure fairness and recovery from the recession. Beneath lie more fundamental differences about the role of the state and what the common good really demands. Across the political divide, and more widely in society, there seems to be a genuine desire to go beyond mere slogans and to explore how to create a more engaged and thriving civil society. And then there is the so-called “well-being” agenda. What makes us happy?

Looking back now on a decade of continuous economic growth we know that human contentment did not rise as expected with GDP. It’s about time we started to ask why, even if we might quickly admit that it doesn’t make much sense for government to promote happiness as a policy aim. Equally important - and still too often ignored - are the profound moral questions that have come to the fore in the diagnosis of the financial crisis and its aftermath, as we think through the role and limitations of markets in serving society and promoting the common good.

All these issues in their different ways raise questions about values, and the moral and spiritual resources on which we might draw to help us answer the question about what is the ‘good life’. I believe that religious faith, and in particular the tradition of Catholic social teaching, has something immensely rich to contribute at various levels, the personal of course, but also in relation to the role of the state, of the market and wider civil society. Later on in the lecture I want to offer some thoughts drawn from the fruit of that tradition.

But I want to start somewhere else.

There is in Britain today a wariness and latent concern about religion – that it is a problem to be contained and not a gift to be shared. So I wish to try to dispel some myths about the place of religion and religious freedom. I want to argue that promoting religious freedom increases our capacity to do good in the public square, within due limits. Why the caveat “within due limits”? Because I do not wish to defend everything done in the name of religion any more than I would expect a humanist to defend everything done in the name of humanity. But I do want to take head on four arguments against promoting religious freedom. They are: (i) that it is inherently divisive; (ii) that it encourages fundamentalist extremism; (iii) that it pollutes and deludes, and (iv) that it undermines respect for fundamental human rights. And having done that I want then to put three positive arguments: (i) the

richer understanding of what it is to be fully human that religious freedom expresses; (ii) the powerfully positive contribution which religion can make to building a stronger civil society, and finally (iii) how a rich understanding of religious freedom can help secure a viable pluralism in a secular society. And that will then lead me on to say something about the particular contribution from the tradition of Catholic social teaching, which is available to all – and for free - in both good and hard times.

So what are these four arguments against the promotion of religious freedom?

(i) First of all there is the claim that religion is inherently divisive and does more harm than good. This location itself is resonant with this point. Some of Catholic martyrs of the Reformation were put to death here in Lincoln's Inn Fields and during the Gordon riots the Sardinian Chapel, more or less on this site, was looted and burned to the ground. In contrast, before coming to London in my present role, I was for 8 years the Archbishop of Birmingham, which has, I think, the largest presence together of Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus in the country. As religious leaders we met regularly and worked together. That experience led to a real growth in dialogue and respect. A vivid illustration of that came when there was widespread controversy, and some violence, over remarks of Pope Benedict in a speech he gave in Regensburg with a quotation about Islam and the use of violence. The central mosque in Birmingham was, at that moment, holding a coordinating meeting of the 167 mosques of the Birmingham area. It immediately brokered an agreement that no mosque would comment on the controversy because they wanted to respect the Pope's freedom to say what he wanted to say. Here a faith was taking forward a proper agenda in provocative circumstances.

Then, when the Pope came to this country last September, one of the meetings he held was with leaders of faith – not just religious leaders but people in leadership roles in different walks of life who were people of faith, and of different faiths. It was the first such meeting to take place in a Papal Visit anywhere in the world, and it powerfully reinforced the message that people of faith share a common commitment to the service of society arising from that faith, with tolerance and respect.

Now it is true that religion has been and can be a source of conflict and division, as indeed can atheism and any other belief system even liberal relativism. But all the great faiths share in their teachings, in one form or other, the Golden Rule: do to others as you would be done by. They share not only a deep respect for the other person but they also extend that respect to the environment and to whole of creation as the work of a divine creator. Yes we can all point to the failings. When Ghandi was asked what he thought of Christian civilisation he replied "I think it would be a very good idea." Britain today is a remarkable test-case. We are living in a crucible in a global experiment of religious co-existence. In this country, we have the opportunity, through the greater acceptance of the positive role of religion, to exemplify and perhaps export a new model of tolerant religious pluralism.

(ii) Then we have the second argument, linked to the question of divisiveness, namely that promoting religious freedom encourages fundamentalist extremism and encourages extremists to use religion as their cloak. The fear of divisiveness is powerfully reinforced by images of religious extremism. This is a completely understandable fear. We simply have to admit that in some stages of our own history, and in parts of the world today, religion is associated with intolerance and violence, often practiced by religious adherents in direct violation of their own avowed religious precepts. It would be naive and

disingenuous to deny it. But having said that, it is a mistake to think that religion *per se* entails fundamentalism. There is the strange view that any religious faith involves a kind of lobotomy, and that anyone who really takes their faith seriously is to that degree immune to appeals to reasoned argument. This is wholly false. Faith and reason are not incompatible, and indeed they need each other. The point was eloquently made by the Pope in his speech at Westminster Hall in September last year. He said:

“This “corrective” role of religion vis-à-vis reason is not always welcomed, though, partly because distorted forms of religion, such as sectarianism and fundamentalism, can be seen to create serious social problems themselves. And in their turn, these distortions of religion arise when insufficient attention is given to the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion. It is a two-way process. Without the corrective supplied by religion, though, reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology, or applied in a partial way that fails to take full account of the dignity of the human person. Such misuse of reason, after all, was what gave rise to the slave trade in the first place and to many other social evils, not least the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century. This is why I would suggest that the world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization.”

(iii) The third argument is that religion pollutes the rational mind. It should not be imposed on others. Therefore promoting religious freedom is a bit like advocating smoking in public places. The argument then goes: if you cannot manage to give up your religion please do it in private.

I’m often struck by how, in polemics about religion, people of faith are seeking to ‘impose’ their views whereas their secularist opponents are much more reasonably only seeking to ‘propose’ theirs. This sleight of hand barely conceals a deep prejudice about what religion really is about.

The truth is that to be human is to be a meaning-seeking creature. Indeed the motto of this institution, the LSE, emphasises this very point: ‘Rerum cognoscere causas’, ‘To know the causes of things’. Even the simplest reading of such a motto must recognise that it goes beyond the material and efficient causes. It has to include formal and final causes too. We are indeed ‘meaning-seeking creatures’. We find ourselves having to give an account - if only to ourselves - of what really matters to us in life and what the purpose of life truly is. Whether we have a religious faith or not, we are each of us still a missionary for something. In fact, it is how we behave, far more than what we say, which conveys what it is we value most. And none of us can leave our deepest beliefs – or many modes of behaviour - at home when we go to work. Nor should that be asked of us. These beliefs shape and inform who we are and how we think. So promoting religious freedom, allowing space for faith in the public square, is simply recognising this human reality, a reality common to every person.

But there is also more to this argument than asking for the tolerance of something which cannot be suppressed. In fact, the recognition and appreciation of the moral and spiritual motivation which inspires so much charitable, voluntary and educational endeavour serves only to enhance and enrich society as a whole.

At the same time beliefs and endeavours must be subject to proper public scrutiny – the ‘due limits’ I mentioned earlier.

Any real imposition of religion would be a theocracy which is indeed incompatible with religious freedom. But the mature and enlightened secular square should echo to the sound of many faiths, in dialogue with one another and with secular protagonists to the enrichment of all. The secular public square should not be faith-blind but faith-sensitive, welcoming and testing reasoned argument. Religious voices should not expect special privilege because they are religious, but nor should they be excluded either. And whilst public authorities will rightly seek to justify their actions by reference to reasons which all can accept, in contributing to public debate religious and faith voices should be free to speak from their traditions as well as to adduce public reasons in their support. Encouraging their willing and full participation enriches democracy and at the same time facilitates the necessary dialogue between the world of secular rationality and the world of faith of which the Pope spoke of in Westminster Hall.

(iv) So far, then, we have considered three charges against promoting religious freedom – that it is inherently divisive, that it promotes extremism and that it pollutes the public square. The last argument I want to consider is that promoting freedom of religion risks undermining respect for fundamental human rights. Today the argument is often put in relation to rights such as gay rights, or the rights of women, or the concern about theocracy I mentioned earlier. This charge has arisen in recent years in disputes about the activities of religious charities and organisations where respective rights are apparently in conflict.

Now as many of you will know, Article 9 of the European Declaration of Human Rights is a qualified right. Paragraph 2 states that “ Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.” What matters is the common acceptance of a framework for the adjudication of such disputes whether through parliament or the courts.

But what about upholding the fundamental rights of all? Given the recent stories about persecution of homosexual people in Africa, for instance, this is, I recognize, much more than an academic question. Yet may I illustrate some easy misunderstanding.

The teaching of the Catholic Church includes this powerful statement, made in 1986: *“It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church's pastors wherever it occurs. It reveals a kind of disregard for others which endangers the most fundamental principles of a healthy society. The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law.”*

The human dignity that we all share as human beings is not defined by, nor derived from, our gender or sexual orientation. The dignity we share is by virtue of our common humanity. And this shared humanity is what lies at the heart of both religious freedom and respect for fundamental rights. In fact, far from being a threat to fundamental human rights, the rich appreciation of human dignity which religious

freedom elicits and sustains is a source of moral and spiritual energy in the defence and upholding of these rights.

So having put and commented on four arguments against promoting religious freedom, I want now to turn the argument around and focus on three positive arguments why religious freedom increases our capacity to do good in the public forum.

But before I do that, we must address the presumption underlying the four arguments against religious freedom we have just considered. The presumption is this: that all religions are the same, and that a secularist stance itself is not a religion or an ideology. While up to this point my comments have been cast in fairly general terms, I now want to speak out of the Catholic tradition which has a sophisticated tradition of reflection on the relationship of faith and reason, on the nature of religious freedom and the construction of a culture, political and civil, which allows authentic human flourishing and recognises the legitimate place of positive secularity. I fully recognise that problems of a different kind arise for other religious perspectives in which there is no place for the secular.

So with that in mind, what are the three positive arguments why religious freedom increases our capacity for good in the public forum? First and foremost is the richer understanding of what it is to be fully human that religious freedom elicits; second, the positive contribution which religion can make to building a stronger civil society; and thirdly how a rich understanding of religious freedom can help secure a viable pluralism in a secular society.

(i) Let us look then at the first argument, that religious freedom expresses a richer understanding of what it is to be fully human. At the heart of the political debate of our time is just this question of what it means to be human. Many contemporary commentators have rightly criticised the model of “homo economicus”, that is the idea that we are all self-centred utility maximisers seeking the satisfaction of our preferences, however defined. As a model of what describes the richness of our lives and interactions, this may seem a significantly deficient description. Yet it might be uncomfortably closer to us as an indicator of how we behave. The facts, or statistics, are clear: there is a lack of correlation, above a certain point, between income and human happiness or contentment. Nevertheless there remains a pervasive assumption within our culture that we are little more than separate individuals who happen to share the same space, who ultimately owe nothing to society and have no necessary bonds with others – as it has been called, the “unencumbered” self. The only thing we have in common is the ‘market’ – or as it was quaintly put: ‘Tesco ergo sum’. This leaves us with the challenging question about how we actually link the individual with society.

Now I believe that attending to and promoting religious freedom, understood in its richest sense, invites us to inhabit a subversive and different story. This begins with the acceptance that we do not come into life as separate individuals but as fundamentally relational. It acknowledges that to be fully human is constituted by our deepening relationships with others, and I would add, with God. Indeed, the very word ‘religion’ reminds us that we are reverently bound to another, and therefore owe the duty of justice to that other: and the virtue of justice, which includes religion, also applies to our being bound to God. It is not just that we are born into relationships of dependence, or even that without our relationships we could not grow or develop. It is that only through our relationships – of love, friendship,

the enlargement of our social ties - that we can be fulfilled. To be fully human is to be more than an individual - it is to be a person-in-relationship, self- transcendent, creative and emergent. These are the very bonds that enable us to understand and fulfil our freedom to be ourselves. It is 'homo religiosus' who is truly happy, truly human because this person has recognised the deepest reality of their nature.

This is the understanding of person that the project of human rights actually seeks to promote today: an individual, certainly, but one whose personhood depends on connections with others. Such a person flourishes in his or her relationality, not living alone in his or her castle, but mixing freely in society, a human being composed never of oneself alone but always through connections with others as well.

Furthermore, what religious freedom –understood in its broadest sense of valuing freedom of thought, religion and belief – reinforces is an understanding of “human dignity” as a capacity to “transcend one’s own materiality and to seek truth”. This brings with it a much richer vision of what it is to be human, a theme which I will come back to shortly in discussing Catholic social teaching.

(ii) I want now to turn now to the second argument in favour of promoting religious freedom. This is that religion actually and demonstrably contributes to social goods – to neighbourliness, volunteering and philanthropy. The recent magisterial empirical study of the impact of religion in the USA by Robert Putnam, “American Grace”, has some fascinating insights about this.

The conclusions do not entirely support my thesis for he assembles evidence that religious Americans are somewhat less tolerant of dissent than secular Americans. But on the question of the civic virtues – of generosity, altruism, volunteering and good neighbourliness - there is, as he puts it, a very clear and remarkable “religious edge”. This is not simply that religious people are more likely to give to or volunteer for religious causes. Rather it is that they are consistently more generous in relation to giving and volunteering for secular causes as well.

He then asks ‘why?’ Through studies of people who have either gained or lost a religious faith he finds evidence to support the idea that there is a causal link. But the really interesting thing is that the link does not appear to be with religious belief in itself. Rather the link is with regular church attendance. Friends in general have an impact on civic involvement, but he says

“...friends at Church – that is, religiously focused social networks – are an entirely different matter. Having close friends at Church, discussing religion frequently with your family and friends, and taking part in small groups at church are extremely powerful predictors of the entire range of generosity, good neighbourliness and civic engagement ...”.(p.472)

He goes on to note that

“....Devout people who sit alone in the pews are not much more neighbourly than people who don’t go to church at all... the statistics suggest that even an atheist who happened to become involved in the social life of the congregation (perhaps through a spouse) is much more likely to volunteer in a soup kitchen than the most fervent believer who prays alone. It is religious belonging that matters for good neighbourliness not religious believing...” (p.472)

Now I am not a sociologist and it would be fascinating to know whether similar results held true in our much less overtly religious society. There is certainly much evidence of the contribution made by faith communities and churches to social engagement. And intuitively there is a rationale for the effects Putnam describes as explanatory factors which could well apply here too. He found, for instance, that religiously engaged people are more likely to be engaged in civic life beyond their religious circles. He added also this comment:

"....we suspect that religiously based ties are morally freighted in a way that most secular ties are not, so that pleas for good works seem more appropriate and weightier than comparable requests from a co-worker or someone you know from the gym".(p.477)

In reflecting on this I could not help but recall the very powerful contribution in this country made by the churches and faith communities to the Jubilee Debt campaign in the run up to the Millennium and in the Make Poverty History campaign which followed, to give but one well-known example.

How essential is religious contribution to the long term development and renewal of civil society? For advocates of the so called secularisation thesis, the fact that religion shows no signs of disappearing has now combined with a new appreciation of the human inspiration that religion and faith bring, as a well-spring of moral and spiritual resources. This is well expressed in a now oft quoted recent conclusion of the great proponent of enlightenment secularism, Jurgen Habermas, who speaks about the "motivational weakness" of secular liberal societies. Indeed he was quoted by Gordon Brown in his recent Lambeth Palace speech, and I use the same quotation myself, taken from Habermas' work '*An Awareness of what is Missing: faith and reason in a post secular age*'. I quote:

*"Among the modern societies, only those that are able to introduce into the secular domain the essential contents of their religious traditions which point beyond the merely human realm will also be able to rescue the substance of the human."(from '*An Awareness of what is Missing: faith and reason in a post secular age*')*

It follows, I think that the religious contribution to the renewal of civil society is perhaps more significant than we might think. Although it is now tangled up with a political argument about expenditure cuts, how we achieve this renewal is a good moral question at the heart of the idea of the "Big Society". And Catholic social teaching has something worthwhile to say about that too.

(iii) Before turning to that teaching, I want to present my third and last argument in favour of promoting religious freedom. This is how a rich understanding of religious freedom can help secure a viable pluralism in a secular society.

It is striking that the European Court of Human Rights has emphasised in its judgements that freedom of religion goes beyond safeguarding the individual conscience. In a leading case the Court said:

"It (freedom of religion) is also a precious asset for atheists, agnostics, sceptics and the unconcerned. The pluralism indissociable from a democratic society, which has been dearly won over the centuries, depends on it." (Moscow branch of the Salvation Army v Russia (2007) 44 EHRR 46, para57)

For the court, this pluralism is – and I quote:

“built on the genuine recognition of, and respect for, diversity and the dynamics of cultural traditions, ethnic and cultural identities, religious beliefs, artistic, literary and social economic ideas and concepts”.
(*Moscow branch, para 61*)

Now it might seem that what the Court is advocating is simply a neutral space in which each can express what they believe, and therefore that religious freedom is underpinned by a kind of relativism. But this is far from the case. What in fact is being pointed to is that the human dignity of each and every person is the foundation of the right to religious freedom, and at the same time respect for the human dignity of others places constraints on how we each must exercise our own religious freedom. If we look at the recent debates about identity and multi-culturalism, if we think about the fears evoked by religious extremism, what those fears often amount to is that if we give free reign to these impulses then the rights of others may be put at risk. But in fact what guarantees the freedom of all, and which at its best religious freedom itself promotes and defends, is respect for human dignity.

If we reflect on the extraordinary scenes played out over the last few weeks in the countries of the Middle East we can see this. In Tunisia the slogan was “Dignity, bread and Freedom”. And I was struck by this account from an Egyptian journalist, Nawara Najem, of how it was that the crowds suddenly decided to risk being shot and refuse to be intimidated. She said

“Why did the people not fear death? No one knows. It was not only religion. It was not only poverty. It was not only despair. Perhaps the answer is human dignity. No force, however tyrannical, is able to deprive human beings of this.” (*The Guardian, 20 Feb 2011*)

In our society today there is unease about identity and culture, and the extent to which there is a need for assimilation and integration of minority communities. What focussing on human dignity does is to shift the perspective away from all our differences - the fact that we each have multiple identities in terms of our ethnic origin, our faith, our language, our place of birth, and so on - and instead concentrate our attention on the unique value each person has simply in virtue of our common humanity. The problem, however, and it is I believe a growing one, is unless we have the resources and language to return constantly to this perspective we can so easily collude in the exclusion or in denying the rights of particular groups of people. We need to recover and hold on to a richer understanding of what human dignity means, what it means to be a person, and what it implies for the way we organise society.

And this brings me to the final part of what I want to say. So far in this lecture I have sought to defend the idea that promoting religious freedom increases our capacity to do good in the public forum within due limits. I have argued this from the Catholic perspective which has a rich understanding of the diverse contributions which those of different faiths make in a pluralist secular society such as ours. Now I want to offer you some of the perspectives that come particularly from the Catholic tradition itself. This will then lead me to say something about the implications for state, the market and civil society if this understanding of human dignity is to be served – if we are indeed to find the Good life in hard times.

The Christian understanding of human dignity is that we are each created in the image and likeness of God, with this innate capacity for self-transcendence. We are each in the process of becoming. By our nature we seek love and truth as something to be attained. The orientation to truth is key: each person has a God given capacity to search for the truth and to live by it, and the gift of freedom allows us to exercise our conscience in both discerning and living in the truth.

Human life in fact makes no sense without this desire to seek what is true and to live in freedom. Our identity and dignity as free beings then is founded in our relationship to God and therefore it makes sense to say that we are all members of a single human family, each with a unique identity and a unique calling. We are social beings, whose identity is in part constituted by the relationships we have with others. We none of us can find our true fulfilment entirely apart from other people.

It follows from this understanding that there is a clear purpose to society, to the market and the state. Each in its own way exists to be at the service of the human person at every level, to allow people either as groups or individuals to reach their fulfilment more fully or more easily. This is a simple but rather radical claim. All political authority has a subsidiary function – it should be at the service of the common good of all, first of all the citizens of the state but also then with a wider perspective which includes ultimately the whole human family.

Now the idea that there is a clear purpose to society is not obvious. We have become used to a highly impoverished way of thinking which minimises our connectedness and emphasises our private lives, and leaves society as the space in which we get on with our own thing, and allow others to do the same. There is, too, perhaps the legacy of a reaction against totalitarian views which subordinate the good of the person to some supposed ideal of the good of society. What Catholic social teaching insists on is that the flourishing of all, respecting their dignity, is this overall purpose. Each person matters and no one is to be excluded. There is job to be done, and we each have a part to play in doing it.

The language used to describe this purpose – the language of the ‘common good’ – is used so widely, with such different meanings, that its distinctive meaning is not easy to capture. But there is a useful image from mathematics. In a utilitarian calculus, maximising the common good would be like an addition sum. In Catholic social teaching it is more like multiplication. You will understand that, in a multiplication, if there is a zero, then the total is also and always zero. So too if, in society’s efforts at progress, anyone’s good is completely excluded – a zero – then the total is also zero and the true common good cannot be realised. The emphasis on the human dignity of all immediately takes us towards a particular concern for the weakest members of society – the old, the very young, the disabled, the ill – and to ask how well their needs are being met. Catholic social teaching also insists that the commitment to the service of the good of others – the common good – is not something we can outsource to the state to do for us. Cultivating a disposition of care for others is an integral part of living a good life.

So it is clear that the tradition of Catholic social teaching has something to say about the project of revitalising civil society. The debate opened up by David Cameron under the uneasy title of the ‘Big Society’ is indeed a big one, for it invites us to ask what the purpose of society actually is, and that in turn depends on an understanding of what it is to be human. This is an important and necessary debate

for our society to have, and it is a different debate from the other necessary debate about public expenditure.

Catholic social teaching is not a political programme, still less a party political one. It sets out a clear moral mandate for the role of the state at the service of the common good, and it offers the principle of subsidiarity as a guide to warn against the arrogations of power to higher levels than is necessary to serve human dignity of all. What our teaching does, however, is to pose questions. What moral criteria are being used in practice when decisions are being made to reduce public expenditure? What are leaders appealing to in people when they invite social change and transformation?

The other area I want to touch on very briefly before closing is the place of the market. Again there is a pervasive assumption, which seems once again to be abroad in the financial sector, that the free market mechanism is subject to its own internal logic which somehow sits outside the moral calculus we want to apply to the rest of society, as if it were a scientific experiment subject to rigid laws. The truth is that what we are talking about are human decisions, and human decisions are always taken in moral space. Good business leaders have always known this, and have always sought to articulate a purpose and instil a culture within their organisations which places the operation of their firms in private sector clearly at the service of society.

What we saw in the financial crisis was bad business practice compounded by a culture celebrating profit as an end in itself. Last year I was engaged in a fascinating dialogue with some of the leaders in the financial sector in which it was clear that they were seeking a change of culture. I applaud the leadership some have given, but also lament that the financial sector seems collectively still to have failed to wake up to the moral responsibility they have, as we all do, to serve society. Until a different culture has taken hold, I cannot see how a real and necessary change can take place.

This evening I have ranged far and wide. It was important I think at a time when religious freedom is so often questioned, to set out the case. I wanted also to point up areas in which the Church through her social teaching can contribute to the project in which we all share, of enabling a good life in hard times. But in closing I want to just go a little deeper into what the contribution of the Church might be.

The Catholic tradition's commitment to human dignity does not depend on any political philosophy or contingent social benefit. It derives from its understanding of the event of the Incarnation and from the nature of the good itself. The Incarnation, God taking human form in Jesus Christ, reveals what it is to be human and the meaning of human life, its potential for corruption but also its intrinsic nobility, value and purpose. No matter how deep the corruption of human beings and the society they create, Christianity can never abandon the human project or despair of it because in Christ God has definitively and irrevocably chosen to be with us. This is no idealism, romanticism or utopian optimism. Christianity has a crucified saviour and that means it can never diminish or avoid the actual evil that human beings create as well as their potential for it. Yet, precisely because of its realism, Christianity is a source of creative hope and energy for the healing of the world.

The theologian Bernard Lonergan, speaking of the reality of decline and disruption that marks the energies of progress within any society, and is a symptom of the alienation from ourselves and our own good says this:

“A religion that promotes self-transcendence to the point not merely of justice but of self-sacrificing love will indeed have a redemptive role in human society ...”

And that, in the end, is the true gift revealed and offered by Jesus Christ and his Church in which I and so many others have such confident faith today.

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2 March 2011.