

Discovering the Common Good in Practice: The Catholicity of Catholic Charities

- Summary of research into Catholic charities leading to a PhD thesis by Dr Pat Jones.
 - The thesis is available to anyone interested. It can be found at <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/13104/>
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The scope of the research and the thesis

- Six CSAN members took part: the Cardinal Hume Centre, Caritas Salford, Depaul UK, Housing Justice, women@thewell, and CSAN itself.
- The practical research involved 27 interviews with staff and volunteers from the 6 charities plus six focus group meetings, one in each charity. The interviews and focus groups happened in London, the north-east, Manchester and Cardiff.
- Within the research, I also studied the charities' documents and spent some time in various projects.
- Chapters Four, Seven and Eight describe the charities' work and discuss how they understand their Catholicity.
- Chapter Three describes the historical development of Catholic social welfare and the recent context for CSAN charities in England and Wales – very little academic attention has been paid to this history.
- Chapters Five and Six discuss themes related to Catholic social teaching. Chapter Six explores a central idea from Catholic social teaching, the common good.
- I use this principle of CST to interpret what the charities are doing in Chapter Seven.
- Chapter Eight is about what it means to be a Catholic charity.
- Chapters Nine and Ten provide some theological reflection and discuss the implications for those interested in CST and for charities committed in some way to the Catholic social vision.

The research findings and the argument: five themes

One: Catholicity is in our *practices*

The 'Catholic identity' of charities is a sensitive issue. It is often reduced to a matter of institutional alignment, or what could be described as *Catholicism*, or visibly belonging to the institutional Church. I argue instead that what matters most is *Catholicity*, by which I mean that our social mission activities express and enact Catholic social vision.

The institutional relationships are crucial too, as they keep each organisational and its vision tethered to living communities of faith. But I argue that it is the relationship between Catholic social vision and the charities' practice that matters most. In this relationship, the role played by each organisation's unique narrative is crucial.

By 'narrative', I mean its distinctive vision, values, history and culture, expressed in documents and other tools. The narratives embed each charity's particular grasp of Catholic social vision. They also fundamentally shape the practices. This is the Catholicity of the charities.

Two: Re-thinking how we see CST; not just a one-way street

We often talk about CST using phrases like 'inspired by CST' or 'applying CST in practice'. It feels like a one-way street. But there is a puzzle: not many of the people who work in our charities know much about CST (although the small number of people who do know CST well are usually leaders and have a big influence). There is a risk that we see the answer as making sure more people in the charities *learn about* CST.

I argue that instead we need to *re-think how we see CST*. It is an unfolding conversation between the instincts and theological insights of the *whole* Catholic community, with its indistinct boundaries, and the social and political contexts in which it finds itself in different times. CST has gaps and changes as new insights emerge. The papal authors are often highly responsive to what is happening in the world.

I suggest that the work of Catholic charities is another way of expressing and communicating Catholic social vision, an *enacted* rather than written account. And charities like those in the CSAN network can contribute to a deeper unfolding of CST, as well as gaining inspiration from its principles. In other words, we need to create a two-way street between teaching and practice. We need to work out how the experience of the charities refreshes or questions CST principles and expands how they apply to practical social reality.

Three: Interpreting the charities using the idea of the common good

Whether our social mission is about charity or justice?

- It is not surprising that one of the main ideas we use to talk about the work of CSAN members is ‘charity’ itself. It is a word with many meanings in our culture which can be confusing. In the Catholic theological worldview, *caritas* has a specific meaning; it is loving response to a person in need, because we have experienced God’s love. Pope Benedict described it as part of the essential nature of the Church to engage in works of charity, and he praises the work of Catholic charities in *Deus Caritas Est* (DCE). But in DCE he separates out *caritas* from work for justice, which is problematic. He then issued a *Motu Proprio* in 2012 about Catholic charities which also sets out what seems like a restricted view of what Catholic charities should do.¹ In 2009, in another document, *Caritas in Veritate*, he develops a wider vision, in which both *caritas* and work for justice are connected – indeed, he says justice has to come first, but *caritas* goes further.
- This has often been a polarised discussion in the Church, a tension between those who argue that the social task is about charity and those who see work for justice as the greater priority. Pope Francis is showing us another way in both his teaching and his practice. Rather than debating which path is most important, we should give priority to actual engagement, becoming a church that is out on the streets, encountering people who are poor, and working with them for liberation.

A different path

- In the research, I took another path. Our charities are deeply embedded in social welfare systems in a liberal democratic state. We have a proud history of welfare state development in this country, in which Catholic organisations have long played a modest but significant part. Now we live in an era of retrenchment and welfare reform. Poverty indicators are rising more steeply than they have for decades. Countless reports show us that the welfare settlement and the safety net we took for granted is fraying and falling apart. This is our context for social mission.
- I explore the charities’ work using the concept of the common good, because it seemed to me that the task of working out what kind of social welfare should be organised in each society and state is a question about the common good. The idea of the common good is central to CST, but people find it hard to express what it actually means in practice – yet we also have a sense of it. We can usually say something does or does not serve the common good, for example.

¹ A *Motu Proprio* is a document which sets out some instructions or rules by which the Church and all its associated bodies should operate. These become part of the Church’s system of law, called Canon Law.

- In CST, the common good is *the conditions which enable people to take charge of and achieve their own fulfilment*. It has some essential elements: it must involve everyone; it must be about all the dimensions of human well-being; it must be something people create together, in which everyone is an agent, not just a recipient; it is a process, in which we have to reason our way forward; and it has to involve the political structures without which we cannot function, and make these truly work for everyone's good.
- I use these ideas to analyse what the charities are doing and how they act. Their work does involve *caritas*, but it goes much further. The charities discover what the common good means because they work in the places where it is absent, particularly in the lives of people who are homeless or insecurely housed. The charities express or *enact* what the common good actually means in concrete terms.
- The charities don't just 'help people in need'; they are committed to supporting people to take charge of their own lives. They want people to flourish, to discover their own good and that of others, not just to survive. They often walk a slow winding path, towards something better. The people who work in the charities share the load of whatever has burdened people's lives – the absence of the common good – and work with them to negotiate with welfare systems meant to work for people's good. They don't reject the state or its structures but work empathetically and reasonably to make them better.
- One of the least noticed aspects is how their work is not one-way delivery; it becomes reciprocal. All those I interviewed described what they had gained as well as what they had given. They move beyond expected boundaries. 'We work with our whole selves', one frontline worker said.
- This is what it means to build the common good from the bottom up, in an actual political and social context. We don't get to the common good just by discussion and reasoning; it needs action. In other words, practical action is a kind of social reasoning. It says something about what needs to change, and how our society should be.
- The starting point of finding the common good is often a willingness to share the weight of its absence. We don't start from equal positions; the structures of our society are the *conditions* we have to harass and nudge towards seeking what is truly good. We live with the reality that enabling the flourishing of some people may be impossible. The vulnerability and harm they carry tests us as a society.

Four: Charities, inclusiveness and the peripheries

- Pope Francis talks often about the *peripheries*, the places where the Church should be present. The charities are at the peripheries of the Church in two ways. First, they are working in the periphery spaces of our society; with people who live on the street; with young people who no longer have a family home; with women whose lives are affected by prostitution. In a way, they extend the Church's reach into these peripheries, although not in an institutional way, but through solidarity.
- The second way is that many of the charities themselves live on the boundaries of the visible Church. They each express some kind of commitment to Catholic social tradition. Their mission statements speak about Gospel values, or about their founding inspirations, or about CST. They translate those inspirations into inclusive ethical narratives that motivate and become enriched by their staff and volunteers, who come from varied faith and ethical commitments. This is a very significant part of their mission. They don't expect everyone to be Catholic; indeed, legally they cannot. But they create a kind of ethical common ground, with the background horizon of Catholic social vision. Those who are not Catholic or Christian work with just as much commitment and passion as those who do.
- What's important here is how the charities create hospitable spaces in which different faith and ethical or political commitments can work together. One writer, Rebecca Allayari, describes the result as 'moral

selving’; in our charities, people create themselves as more moral people. Another writer, Paul Cloke, describes this as ‘rapprochement’; new connections or a kind of crossing over between secular and religious viewpoints.

- In the theology of Vatican II, this makes sense. Catholic teaching recognises that the Spirit of God is active in the world beyond the confines of Church structures, working through those who seek the good in many different ways. The inclusiveness of the charities is a strength. It is part of their *Catholicity*.

Five: Theological significance

When we look at the charities’ work using the idea of the common good, we get a fuller idea of their theological significance. There is undoubtedly a great deal of *caritas* in their work. But there is also another layer of meaning. I suggest that their work creates, mends and restores social bonds, in the interests of God’s salvific purpose for all, pointing social realities towards the Kingdom of God. They co-operate with God’s work not by extending the visible Church but by strengthening the social bonds of humanity and calling social and political structures towards the good of all.

One theologian calls this ‘the social aspect of salvation’. Their particular strength is their commitment to get involved in what Rowan Williams calls the ‘already’ of people’s lives; all the systems and experiences that have created vulnerability and diminished people’s power to realise their own fulfilment.

This is a quiet kind of prophetic action. The charities listen to the voices of people who have been excluded or who bear the weight of the systems that don’t work and of the intractable problems of our society. The charities stay within the struggle to change things. They try to discern what is good, both for each person and for our communal well-being, our shared security.

It matters to all of us that social solidarity happens, and the work of fashioning a social safety net is only one of the tasks this involves. It is – and always has been – a task of Catholic social mission to work out what that means in each social and political context.

So the charities are not just ‘carriers’ of CST, who ‘apply’ the teaching. They are also agents and inventors of its expansion.

Four key messages from the research for CSAN members.

- Treasure your narratives: the story of how you were founded; the texts which express your vision, mission and values; the culture you create in the organisation; the relationships you have.
- Nourish your particularity: work out what makes you distinctive, from your history and your experience; go deeper into it; resist trying to be like all the other charities.
- Appreciate your Catholicity; make sure everyone of any faith or ethical commitment feels welcome; explore the Catholic social vision as a source of inspiration; make sure everyone can contribute; appreciate and develop the relationships you have with those who live Christian faith, as they will help keep your narrative alive.
- Recognise and amplify your voice: you have something distinctive to say about the way we need to change our society; recognise all the ways your work is a kind of public reasoning about better ways to live together.