



# BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND & WALES

## CARITAS NETWORK CONFERENCE

Address by Archbishop Vincent Nichols

9 June 2011, St Marys University College, Twickenham.

**It is a pleasure to be with you for your annual conference which takes place at an important juncture from the point of view both of the development of our society and the life of the Church in England and Wales. Many of you have been kind and generous enough to take part in one or more of the Spring events organised by the Bishops' Conference and Caritas Social Action Network, CSAN.**

This afternoon gives me the opportunity to do two things. One is to note one or two of the ways in which we might as a Catholic community seek to further contribute to the task of deepening social engagement in coming months, in the light of what we have now learned. And then, secondly, it is also an opportunity for me to explain the thinking behind the Bishops' Conference's recent decision, again made in the light of the events we have held, regarding the development of Caritas in England and Wales. I'm keen to engage with you in a conversation about both topics, and to listen to your thoughts particularly on the development of Caritas, and so I will be brief so as to leave a good time for questions and discussion.

First, then, let us take stock of the external environment in the light of our three events so far in deepening social engagement, and what has been said since, particularly by the Prime Minister in an important speech on 23 May about his vision for the Big Society. I was struck by the result of the poll which Edward Stourton conducted at our conference on 6 April in London when he asked all those present whether or not they thought the "Big Society" was a cover for cuts. The overwhelming majority said no. They felt there was a genuine moral agenda here. Furthermore a number of the MPs who were present – in particular some from the Labour Party – also made clear that the moral motivation behind what David Cameron has advocated is something they supported.

In embarking on our own project in November as Bishops we said that "many yearn for a richer community life, a society characterised by stronger social bonds and a greater acceptance of our mutual responsibilities. Reaching for this is both urgent and necessary. But then we added that "it demands a conversion of mind and heart that cannot be achieved by government or policy initiative alone. If it is to succeed, this project must be taken beyond party politics to become a common endeavour owned by society as a whole".

I make no apology for repeating that. Because it seems to me to encapsulate both the opportunity and the risk in the approach of any government to this agenda. The opportunity is for a genuine engagement which attracts a broad coalition of support, and succeeds in promoting a society of greater solidarity, and releasing energy for local initiative and enterprise. The risk is that it is conceived in too mechanistic a way, and argued about solely in terms of what the state should or should not do, when in fact it is all the intermediate institutions which give society so much of its shape and identity, and which draw individuals into a deeper sense of connectedness with others.

In his most recent speech David Cameron spoke about the need to 'harness' the space between the state and the market, and singled out "tradition, community, family, faith" as the ground. But the way change happens matters a lot. The growth of subsidiarity cannot be achieved simply by the withdrawal of the state. It requires intelligent capacity building to reduce dependency, and the creation of conditions for the sustained flourishing of local initiative.

A key area of work rightly highlighted by the Prime Minister and highlighted at our own events is the need to promote family stability. The overwhelming evidence of the correlation between family instability and the outcomes for children in education, health and employment speaks for itself. It was good to see in his latest remarks a specific reference to marriage as a social institution which deserves and needs support. I know that many of our agencies within Caritas Social Action Network have a great deal of experience in working with vulnerable families, and it will be good for us as a community to reflect together and contribute what we can from our own experience both pastorally and practically. As has often been said, the future of society passes by way of the family.

In recent days there has been a media focus on the quality of social care provision. In the longer term this whole area is bound to come more to the fore. By 2020 over 20% of the population will be over 65, with nearly half this group over 75. How we care for older and vulnerable people is a major challenge for all of us. Catholic care homes often have a special ethos, and Caritas has recently been developing in particular the work on the spiritual needs of people with dementia. I was struck by Joanna Killon's comments at our conference on 6 April about the high levels of loneliness among older people living alone, and the potential within the Catholic community for us to deepen our social engagement precisely through the ministry of visiting, through cherishing and supporting the work of the SVP, the Catenians and others. No doubt there are other examples of how our contribution could grow. Central to it, of course, is the role we have in advocating for the needs of vulnerable people and to uphold the dignity of all, especially through the example of the quality of care given by Catholic charities.

The Prime Minister also spoke of the ways in which he intends to encourage and enhance personal generosity, among them making gift aid easier to access and matching volunteers' time with money in work to improve communities. Here too there is a resonance of purpose and opportunities for us to examine.

The dignity of the person and the common good, of course, are at the heart of our work, and this is the defining characteristic of Catholic charities and, in particular here today, Caritas.

This brings me to the second part of what I wish to explore with you, the development of Caritas.

The possible development of the Caritas network was mooted early in the series of conferences this year – and indeed was being considered by CSAN Trustees and staff already. It was recognised that whilst the Caritas network had undoubted strengths in the professional and caring work of the charities and professional agencies of the dioceses, the voices from the 'grass-roots' were largely unheard, and that support for developing or initiating social action to meet local needs was patchy. Other networks do wonderful work in parishes – Justice & Peace, SVP, UCM – but quite rightly, they focus on particular fields of mission, working out of their own charism and ethos. It seems to be the right time to consider developing a coherent Caritas network, at parish, diocesan and national levels, focused on social action to promote mutual support and relationships, and to strengthen national advocacy and a single voice.

At the Liverpool conference in February the subject of social action and its development was seen as both challenge and opportunity.

We were challenged around the ideas of better and more effective partnerships, and on issues around Church structures and communication.

We saw opportunities around developing a cohesive national structure drawing from a Caritas network and around the development of CSAN's campaigning and advocacy role. Bringing grass-roots to the fore and providing a voice for those who would not otherwise be heard was important.

So, following that conference and the results of the first audit, the theological seminar, and the April 'public conversation', the Bishops had a specific discussion on the development of Caritas social action at our spring meeting last month.

Bishop Brain rooted the discussion in the history which led to the formation of CSAN, the heritage of our vision and ethos. He pointed out that the Caritas model offers both subsidiarity and solidarity. In broad terms, individual dioceses may collaborate with their national Caritas, yet are free to provide the services required by the local church. Such a model allows at every level, in its social action programmes and outreach, the mission of the universal Church.

Helen O'Brien then offered us an explanation of the structures and inter-relatedness of Caritas Internationalis, the Caritas Europa region, and then of Caritas England and Wales which includes both CAFOD, our international arm, and CSAN, working in social action here at home. And then we considered the Vision and Relationship Map for Caritas social action in England and Wales which showed both how the overlapping relationships may work and how this network could offer mutual support and benefit. Interestingly we could also discern the effective and useful clear differences between the purpose and functions of each part of this 3 circle Venn diagram. It will be easier if you are able to look at this in the display in the market-place and discuss it with the CSAN staff or Trustees.

There will be several discussions in this Conference over the 2 days on the vision of Caritas and how this forms both our practice and our witness. I will mention here the important Caritas Internationalis Assembly held last week in Rome, which celebrated 60 years of the Caritas Confederation, and saw His Holiness and senior Cardinals, welcoming Caritas to the heart of the Holy See, and basing their remarks largely on the precepts of Deus Caritas Est. They commended the energy and effectiveness of the work for the poor and marginalised in the 165 countries throughout the world where Caritas is present, and looked forward to supporting this vital work of the universal Church. It was evident that they wished the Caritas Confederation to be an integral expression of the life of the Church. Indeed, as Pope Benedict himself said: "Caritas Internationalis differs from other social agencies in that it is ecclesial; it shares in the mission of the Church." (27 May 2011) As was also emphasised, to carry out this task fully "it is necessary to live in Jesus Christ, who is 'the Way, the Truth and the Life', and to be enlivened by the Holy Spirit." (Cardinal Bertone 22 May 2011)

Here in England and Wales we, in Caritas and other Catholic charities, faithfully critique our practice against Christ's call to compassion, to solidarity and to the common good. We also keep before our eyes the key encyclical Deus Caritas Est, which Cardinal Sarah of Cor Unum at the Assembly in Rome described as a fundamental document for us. Published in 2005, it presents our doctrine on charity in action. When we ask ourselves what is distinctive about what we do as a charity founded in Catholic values, here are found the leitmotifs, the signs, of what Christian charity means. In our reflections on what it means to be Caritas, for those who are part of Caritas in some way already, and for those who may embrace that mission, this is both reflection and framework.

The themes of that Encyclical are familiar to us: of professional competence being important but not enough; of the need for compassion and heartfelt concern in those working with the poor and vulnerable; of the call to be the 'heart which sees', which calls for us to respond immediately and without judgement and without calculating whose responsibility it may be; in the invitation to the Bishops to draw the work of the Church's charitable organisations ever closer to their hearts; in the determination to meet with those who are suffering because I am Catholic, not because they are: 'today as in the past, the Church as God's family must be a place where help is given and received, and at the same time, a place where people are also prepared to serve those outside her confines who are in need of help.' (DCE 32) And that clear statement 'Those who practise charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others.' (DCE31c)

Together with all our volunteers and supporters, we are a witness to God's love. And we accept that 'It is the responsibility of the Church's charitable organisations to reinforce this awareness in their members, so that by their activity – as well as their words, their silence, their example – they may be credible witnesses to Christ.' (DCE 31c)

In our deliberations in the Bishops' Conference we recognised the Caritas vision and heritage, and in the light of that we considered a first discussion document around the essence of being Caritas. It set out some key issues of identity and ethos which will be debated over the coming months as part of the research process to be undertaken by CSAN which we have already commissioned. You have it in your delegate pack and you will undoubtedly have a chance to comment at some point, but here are the main chapter heads:

**Being Caritas**

**Why we work in Caritas**

**Who we are**

**How we do things**

**What we do**

**How we reflect**

The intention is to use this as a basis for developing a Bishops' charter ready for our next meeting in November.

The Bishops together considered all of this carefully and decided to continue the 'Deepening Social Engagement' programme into further steps including the development of the Caritas network. I quote here from the conference statement.

'We are determined to work together to develop the shared identity and common witness of Catholic social action in England and Wales with the aim of deepening the Church's social engagement at the service of the Gospel. We seek to bring about a better coordination of social action in England and Wales and to further promote a sharing of good practice. We have therefore decided to explore how best to bring together this work under the auspices of Caritas, whilst fully respecting the proper autonomy of local dioceses, groups and agencies involved in Catholic social action.

We ask Caritas Social Action Network, as our agency, to consult widely in coming months, with dioceses, CAFOD, and with others, to formulate practical recommendations for our next meeting in November 2011. This will lead to a Bishops' Charter together with recommendations for the development of Caritas social action at diocesan level, and for the national agency itself. A necessary dimension to this process will be the more detailed professional audit of social action already underway. This is a strategic step which will take some time to come to fruition, and it will properly require detailed consultation in all dioceses. (Spring 2011 Plenary, Social Action)

It is important for us to understand that the fundamental aim for this development is the desire to serve those in need more effectively. In the context of the April conference, I said – and it bears repeating –

'I was very struck by the generous and positive approach of those who came to our conferences. No-one was minimising the challenges, but there was also a palpable sense of energy and engagement, an awareness that new approaches are arising with a scope for creativity and innovation to serve those in need more effectively and thereby help transform our society'

Riding on this energy, and in response to the Bishops' Statement, CSAN will be following a specific programme of work – consultation, listening and research – to make this happen.

The development of the Caritas network may seem a daunting and complex task. But we can take heart from the example of Caritas Internationalis, as described by its President Cardinal Maradiaga.

‘Since 1951, over 150 new members from all over the globe have joined our network, our confederation, our communion. In our midst we count very small and very large Caritas organisations, laity-inspired movements and church-based members, organisations dealing mainly with disasters and organisations entering into the work of integral human development in their own countries and across borders, organisations run by professionals and organisations run by volunteers. This diversity in our midst is richness and the fruit of the creative spirit of Caritas. There is indeed not one model for a true Caritas, there is nevertheless a call to all the different organisations and communities to be Caritas in Veritate, caritas in the truth. (Cardinal Maradiaga, CI Assembly 2011)

I believe that you here today are passionate in your work with the poor and vulnerable; that you wish to develop your practice; that you are open to helping develop the church structures and networks better to meet the needs and respond to the gifts of the poor and marginalised. As part of diaconia, the service of charity, one of the three inseparable tasks of the Church, [the other two being the proclamation of the Word of God (kerygma-martyria), and the celebration of the sacraments (leiturgia)], all working in Catholic charities are intrinsic to the mission of the Church and also part of a vision of a common humanity where each person is valuable and valued.

A worthwhile task indeed.

**+Vincent Nichols**  
**Archbishop of Westminster**  
**President**

**Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales**