

The Revd Dr Ashley Beck – Written Evidence (LBC0066)

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND ASPECTS OF COVID-19

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Introduction

Catholic Social Teaching is a branch of moral theology in the Roman Catholic Church which addresses in particular questions to do with the running of society; the modern tradition of teaching dates from 1891, when Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* addressed the nature of modern industry and, in particular, the conditions of workers. Increasingly since the pontificate of St John XXIII (1958-1963) the tradition has covered international relations, focussing on the quest for reconciliation and peace in the world. The Covid-19 pandemic offers many challenges for the Catholic Church and our moral teachings, not least in the area of healthcare ethics: but this paper concentrates on one defined field: international relations. The paper is offered to this committee as part of the contribution of faith communities to the national debate about responses to this pandemic.

I argue that that the policies on international relations of the Johnson government and the Conservative party, particularly relating to 'Brexit', already at odds with Catholic teaching, have determined a flawed response to the pandemic which has been gravely damaging, possibly costing lives. Linked to this is a disturbing moral relativism and indifference to truth-telling.

Some contrasts

'Politically, the current situation urges us to take a broad view. In international relations (and in the relations among the Members of the European Union) it is a short-sighted and illusory logic that seeks to give answers in terms of "national interests." Without effective cooperation and effective coordination, which addresses the inevitable political, commercial, ideological and relational resistances firmly, viruses do not stop. Of course, these are very serious and burdensome decisions: we need an open vision and choices that do not always satisfy the immediate desires of individual populations. But given the markedly global current dynamic, our responses, to be effective, cannot be limited to what happens within one's own borders'.¹

'Prospect magazine commissioned a linguistic analysis of the angry Brexit debate in the House of Commons on 25 September 2019, during

which Prime Minister Boris Johnson used terms like 'traitors', 'betrayal' and 'surrender' of his opponents. The analysis noted that, on average, the Prime Minister used a word from Harvard University's list of semantically hostile terms every twenty-eight words, roughly every one and a half sentences – an unusual level of aggression. More relevant here is that he used the word 'I' 340 times – far more frequently than normal.' ²

The Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, and other churches and faith communities, have faced in 2020 an unprecedented period, where because of a massive pandemic much of our normal physical worship and pastoral life has changed enormously very quickly. Covid-19 has dominated our lives in the last few months even more than a world war.

In late 1996, a few months before the 1997 General Election a document was published called *The Common Good*, issued by the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales³. One of its memorable slogans was 'Nothing is beyond the scope of faith.' It was an insistence that every aspect of our lives is subject to the enlightenment of scrutiny and of religious faith. Nothing is off limits. Whenever Christians are told that we should not interfere in this or that question, and sometimes Christians themselves say this, we know that this truth has not been grasped.

The Roman Catholic Church, like other Christian communities, has had many priorities during the pandemic: maintaining pastoral support and, where possible, sacramental ministry to those suffering from the virus, together with celebrating the sacraments and other liturgical acts in our churches, many of them live-streamed. Bishops have also cared for priests who have themselves been in isolation, suffered from the virus or who have died. But we continue a teaching ministry, rooted in the gospel, drawing on Sacred Scripture and our theology, particularly the prophetic tradition in the Old Testament and Catholic Social teaching. We try as a Church to grow in our understanding of what God is telling us, and this must include challenging our society and, in particular, the way this crisis has been handled. Social teaching demands that we play our part in calling those responsible to account. Catholics of all people should not be deterred from doing this by calls for national unity.

If nothing is beyond the scope of faith then any assessment of what has happened in the light of our teaching is a vast topic. One very big part of this are ethical decisions about who should receive the right medical care; another, involving analysis of decisions over the last decade and longer as well as the last few months, is the ethics of resource allocation within the National Health Service and of resources within the national economy⁴.

With regard to international relations I contrast on the one hand the teachings of the Catholic Church about international co-operation in general and particularly in the face of this crisis and on the other hand, the attitude and outlook of the UK government which led early on in the crisis here to mistaken decisions – decisions which might have increased the loss of life. The contrast means that we have to see those decisions not simply as incompetent but *morally flawed*.

The Catholic Church and the international Common Good

In a recent article Professor Daniel Sulmasy⁵ outlined four different ways of understanding the concept of 'the Common Good': the utilitarian, the liberal, the authoritarian and the holistic. Here I am concerned with the holistic:

'The fourth understanding of the common good is that it is more than the sum of the parts and more than the necessary goods we share in common. The common good is greater than the good of any individual, but not something that exists above or apart from the individual. On this holistic view of the common good, the good of the individual is, in part, constituted by the good of the whole. And the good of each individual is always, in turn, respected as integral to the common good.'

This understanding of the Common Good has determined for a long time Catholic teaching about international relations. It is reflected in countless letters and documents from the Holy See – one of the most striking was the call by Pope St John XXIII in his great encyclical on peace, *Pacem in Terris*, for a 'world political authority' – with regard to both financial regulation and care for the created order, this call has been repeated by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) and Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015). While the Church supports peoples' self-determination national sovereignty cannot be absolute: the message of history is that countries need to find more effective ways of cooperating in the interests of the Common Good. Therefore the leaders of the Catholic Church have supported international bodies like the UN, the ILO, the EU and others, while sometimes criticising their policies. It is also why many of us argued four years ago that *Brexit* was (and is) an attack on Catholic teachings as well as many of our people⁶.

This 'internationalism' at the heart of the Church's teaching underlies the first quotation earlier in this paper from the Pontifical Academy of Life. This is hardly surprising – our religion breaks down boundaries and repeatedly challenges those who make loyalty to the nation state absolute. Both as the virus continues and when it finishes, it is in the interests of our common humanity that we learn to co-operate and share resources: the virus has made this a more urgent priority.

Similarly Pope Francis in many of his statements since the pandemic begun has stressed the need to turn away from self-interest, whether for individuals, groups within society, or countries⁷. The virtue of solidarity, fundamental to Catholic teaching, helps us realise that we are accountable for what we do to help others, particularly those who are most in need. This is about political will and policy-making; vague feelings of compassion are not enough. The pope has pointed out that the crisis offers us opportunities for being more true to solidarity and making a better world.

The Johnson government and Covid-19

This outlook of Christians is in stark contrast to that of the leaders of this country. The Conservative government elected in December 2019 was characterised overwhelmingly by a determination to expedite the departure of

the UK from the EU without delay. Boris Johnson's ministers have reflected not a variety of viewpoints in relation to this most divisive issue, but only the one which was seen to be victorious.

At the heart of the whole *Brexit* campaign, from the very beginning, has been an assertion of national sovereignty – this is part of its popular appeal. Moreover the *Brexit* campaign has been allied with similar political outlooks and governments around the world. There are many examples but in the context of Covid-19 the most glaring is the Trump administration in the United States. The common ground which can be detected in the early stages of the pandemic included an effort to assure people that the virus was not an immediate threat – but rather something 'out there' – and an inability to learn from the experiences of countries where the virus had taken hold earlier. For this country this was clearest in relation to Italy, where the virus first gained a foothold in Europe⁸. Many commentators have pointed out that the way in which the virus spread *should* have given the UK and the USA a 'head start' by implementing restrictive measures and widespread testing and the correct following up of testing early on⁹. Measures have been introduced too late, and often these governments, or those with influence on them, have wanted to lift restrictions too early. It has been widely recognised at the time of writing that there were mistaken delays, particularly with regard to testing and the provision of protective equipment¹⁰, even though many of the problems remain. One thing the UK could have learnt from Germany was the better provision of testing because the system there is less centralised.¹¹

Johnson's predecessor Teresa May in early May 2020¹², in a rare public intervention since her resignation last year, called for better international co-operation, taken as a criticism of her successor. None of this is accidental. It is generally a mistake to think that people in a crisis behave differently from how they would the rest of the time: so if politicians have a narrow agenda centred on national self-interest, and in pursuit of this have brought about the most important international political change for decades, they will react on the basis of this outlook in the face of an international crisis. It is rather like the traditional (though not uncontested) moral theological concept of a 'fundamental option' – if we have a certain mindset, that will, on the whole, determine our conduct. Consequently government ministers who fail to co-operate with other countries, or to benefit from the good will of other countries, are not simply making a mistake: they are acting according to type. The reactions of the political Right, when they have been in power in the world, have been remarkably similar.

It goes further than we might think. The language of treachery identified in the second quotation at the beginning of this paper about Boris Johnson, linked to what former Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks identifies in his book as a focus on 'I' rather than 'We', has implications for international policies. National selfishness is a form of egotism: 'We' are Europe and the rest of the world; 'I' is simply the United Kingdom (or a part of it). We could also recognise that some aspects of resistance to social distancing and other measures reflect this.

By early May 2020 we could identify in countries led by governments of this kind a tragic catalogue of failure – the US and the UK have some of the highest

mortality figures in the world. At the heart of the attitudes behind this catalogue is a morally flawed attitude towards international co-operation. These people do not believe in it. As far as the UK is concerned this is in line with *Brexit*: indeed the UK failed early on to take advantage of some aspects of Europe-wide co-operation which were open to us in spite of the departure of the country from the union. The 'jingoism' in the government has remained strong, even after mistakes made at the beginning of the crisis. ¹³ It's not an accident.

Truth-telling and Morality

This set of attitudes is also about truth-telling and policies towards journalists who ask difficult questions. In the UK since the beginning of the crisis, and well into it, claims have been made by government which have been inaccurate or false: from the standpoint of Catholic teaching this is a serious and worsening problem. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* is an important source-book for Roman Catholics, drawing together in one volume wide-ranging material. Drawing on papal teaching the document says this about political power:

'The biblical message provides endless inspiration for Christian reflection on political power, recalling that it comes from God and is an integral part of the order he has created. This order is perceived by the human conscience and, in social life, finds its fulfilment in the truth, justice, freedom and solidarity that bring peace.' ¹⁴

Christians cannot accept that politicians have to behave badly, that mendacity is inevitable – such cynicism further devalues the political vocation. We can do better than we are at present: the Church tries to support and enhance the political vocation¹⁵. Truth-telling is actually central to the problem. Many commentators have pointed out that indifference to morality in relation to truth is not just an incidental side-effect: sadly it defines a big part of the political class. So Professor William Davies wrote recently:

'Johnson and his allies have frequently failed to understand what morality means to people, as if it is merely a habit that some of us happen to fall into. Every time Johnson or his allies have been called to apologise for something (be it his past comments, shortage of PPE in hospitals, or the Cummings scandal), the answer has always been the same: "I'm sorry if you feel this is wrong," but never, "I'm sorry for this wrong." It signals an eerie failure of understanding.' ¹⁶

From the standpoint of traditional Christian moral teaching this abandonment of objective moral standards is a really serious problem for our society, not just for religious believers: and we are paying the price. This moral relativism and indifference to the truth, together with negative attitudes towards other countries and a reluctance to co-operate internationally are culpable and avoidable moral flaws. Moreover those responsible should be held to account.

Conclusion: What happens now?

In the Roman Catholic Church when a baby is baptised the child is anointed on the crown of the head, modelled on Christ who is 'priest, prophet and king.'

What this means is that Christians, all the baptised, is called to share in the prophetic ministry of Christ. Prophets are awkward customers. We live in a pluralist society in terms of religious beliefs: Christians cannot impose our beliefs or values on others, but we do have the same right as other groups to make a contribution to public debate, especially in relation to the awesome event of this pandemic.

Following the document from the Academy of Life quoted at the beginning of this paper, the Holy See's Dicastery for Integral Human Development was asked by Pope Francis to set up a commission to look at the aftermath of the pandemic, reflecting the insights of Catholic Social Teaching. The Catholic Church in this country will be contributing to the work of this commission, reflecting our pastoral experience during the crisis *and* a moral evaluation of the conduct of public bodies and the government of this country. Reviewing the pandemic will also demand, as the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, pointed out in a homily at a special Mass of Thanksgiving on VE Day live-streamed from Westminster Cathedral¹⁷, a renewed determination to ensure that everyone in society is properly cared for and loved. All the churches will contribute to the national debate about the future, including international policies aiming at better co-operation and the need to support the poorest countries; options which should be discussed include, even at this late stage, suspending the *Brexit* process or at the very least extending the transition period, to reduce damage to the UK economy, damage which will hurt the poor above all.

VE Day in 2020 was important as it marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the war in Europe; it is near Europe Day (9 May). International co-operation which helped defeat Nazism led to international co-operation which began common European institutions with the Schuman Declaration seventy years ago, an initiative grounded in Catholic teaching about international relationships. The vision behind that declaration is something the leaders of this country have walked away from: and we have seen in this crisis what this means. The EU is not perfect, and Catholic Church leaders have pointed out flaws in its response to the virus¹⁸, but a great deal has also been achieved¹⁹. Policy mistakes in the UK grounded in flawed moral attitudes may well have led to greater loss of life than might otherwise have been the case – that is why for the Catholic Church and other faith communities to assert this, to call politicians to account and to speak truth to power is not playing politics, or being uncharitable. It is simply our duty if we are faithful to the Catholic Church's moral teaching²⁰.

This teaching is not simply for our faith community – and this paper is offered to the committee as part of the Roman Catholic Church's engagement and dialogue with the wider community in this country.

¹ Pontifical Academy of Life, *Global Pandemic and Universal Brotherhood* www.academyforlife.va/content/dam/pav/documenti%20pdf/2020/Nota%20Covid19/Nota%20on%20the%20Covid-19%20emergency_ENG_.pdf

² Jonathan Sacks, *Morality* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 2020), p. 26.

³ <https://cbcew.org.uk/plain/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/11/common-good-1996.pdf>

⁴ Analysis can be found, for example in a series of pieces in the Catholic Social Thought blog based at St Mary's University, <https://catholicsocialthought.org.uk> and that based at Georgetown University <https://catholicsocialthought.georgetown.edu/blogs/catholic-social-thought-matters>

⁵ 'The virus and the common good' *The Tablet* 18 April 2020.

⁶ Pope Francis, referring the Europe Day and the 70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration, reiterated the Church's support for European integration in his *Regina Caeli* address on 10 May 2020, 'My thoughts today go to Europe and Africa. To Europe, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration, of 9 May 1950. It inspired the process of European integration, allowing the reconciliation of the peoples of the continent, after the Second World War, and the long period of stability and peace we enjoy today. The spirit of the Schuman Declaration does not fail to inspire those with responsibilities in the European Union, called to face the social and economic consequences of the pandemic in a spirit of harmony and collaboration'.
<http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2020/5/10/regina-coeli.html>

⁷ There are many examples; see in particular his *Regina Caeli* address on 3 May 2020.
<http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2020/5/3/regina-coeli.html>.

⁸ See on this, for example, Nesrine Malik '10,000 deaths: Don't forget that this was preventable' <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/12/uk-coronavirus-deaths-preventable-government-account>.

⁹ With regard to Italy these words by the journalist Simon Tisdall are instructive: 'Italians may surely be forgiven a sense of relief that their country is no longer Europe's biggest blackspot. With this unwanted title came the unspoken inference that Italy was uniquely unprepared. Some in the UK certainly saw it that way. They thought they were immune. They were betting, as usual, on a bogus British exceptionalism. Britain "did not pay enough attention to what was happening here", commented Beppe Severgnini in *Corriere della Sera*, referring to the two- to three-week period when Italy was ahead of the corona curve. The UK "lost the advantage that fate and Italy gave it... when it was obvious the virus was spreading".'
<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/commentisfree/2020/may/10/covid-19-isolated-and-alone-britain-has-become-the-sick-man-of-europe>. Note also the muddle in March 2020 – and contradictory explanations – about UK access to an EU Ventilator scheme (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/26/no-10-boris-johnson-accused-of-putting-brexit-over-breathing-in-covid-19-ventilator-row>).

¹⁰ The government's international policies are not the only reason for policy failures. Part of the problem is the adoption of free market policies in the National Health Service (see Paul Gately, Ashley Beck and David Albert Jones *Healthcare Allocation and Justice: Applying Catholic Social Teaching* [London: CTS 2011]); this process accelerated ten years ago when the first Cameron government took office and this can be linked to the failures earlier this year (Professor David McCoy 'Coronavirus has exposed the dangerous failures of NHS marketisation' <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/05/coronavirus-nhs-marketisation-pandemic>)

¹¹ See on this Paul Collier 'Capitalism after coronavirus' *New Statesman* 8-14 May 2020

¹² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-52553237>. Some might think that a politician who repeatedly asserted that 'Brexit means Brexit' should take responsibility for this state of affairs.

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/02/the-british-charlatan-style-has-been-sent-packing-by-too-much-reality>

¹⁴ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* 383, drawing on St John XXIII *Pacem in Terris* and St John Paul II *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*

¹⁵ An example of how we try to do this is the Bishops Conference *Faith in Politics* internship programme, www.faithinpolitics.org.uk/

¹⁶ 'The Rise of Rule-breakers', *New Statesman* 10-16 July 2020.

¹⁷ The whole Mass can be watched at <https://www.churchservices.tv/westminster>

¹⁸ Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, President of the umbrella group of Catholic Bishops Conferences in the European Union (COMECE) at <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/12797/luxembourg-cardinal-warns-of-last-chance-for-eu>.

¹⁹ Jeremy Cliffe 'The euro-gloomsters are wrong to use every crisis to predict the imminent demise of the EU', *New Statesman* 8-14 May 2020. See also the details of the Covid-19 rescue plan agreed by the leaders of the EU on 21 July 2020 see <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45109/210720-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf>

²⁰ For details of the MA in Catholic Social Teaching at St Mary's University go to <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/postgraduate-courses-london/catholic-social-teaching>.

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