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DECEMBER 2003

How Catholic welfare agencies might re-envision their role

By Bruce Duncan

Catholic welfare agencies have had to adjust to monumental changes sweeping not just through the Church but also our culture and institutions in recent decades. Whereas once the Church boasted of its timelessness and ability to withstand change, the Second Vatican Council began a new chapter in 1965 by committing itself to engaging much more closely with contemporary problems and cultures.

The full significance of the shifts in Catholic thinking is still only becoming more apparent four decades later. Most fundamentally, the Church has a new understanding of its role in the world. Instead of seeing itself as simply called to gather all peoples into its saving embrace, the Church now rather envisages its role more humbly as servant of the Kingdom or Reign of God inaugurated by Christ. This has meant rethinking its mission, including that of the welfare sector.

Where have we come from?

To understand what our agencies are dealing with when trying to clarify their mission and relationship to the Church, it is helpful to recall the theological and institutional frameworks which first spawned and nurtured many of our agencies, and to compare these with our current situation.

Tracing the changes in the Church's understanding of its role before and after the Second Vatican Council, Fr Peter C. Phan of the Catholic University of America has outlined a very useful picture. In the earlier understanding, the Church saw its missionary role as

1. geared to the salvation of souls
2. mainly directed to 'pagans' – non-Christians - overseas
3. undertaken by priests, brothers,

sisters and chosen lay people, mainly from Europe or the USA, but also from Australia and New Zealand, especially in Asia and the Pacific

4. with laity at home providing the support of finances and prayer, and

5. aiming to 'plant' the Church in the mission territory.

Such an approach is increasingly untenable today, given the revival in non-Christian religions, anti-western feeling in many countries, and increasing secularisation in the West.

The emphasis in the older approach was on saving the souls of the unbaptised who would otherwise be 'lost'; then to establish the Church, with its institutions, services and Sacraments to guide and nurture the faith of the new Christians; the other elements – of proclamation, mission and the significance of the Reign of God – fell into the background. In the Catholic tradition more than in the Protestant, proclamation was secondary to Sacraments. Mission was seen not as the task of the whole Church, but of specialists within it. And as Phan writes: 'the reign of God, especially its prophetic and eschatological dimensions' was 'practically forgotten, since it was now identified with the Church' in its contemporary form.

The upheavals in both the developing world and the West by the early 1960s forced a profound shift in how the Church saw its role. The central focus shifted to the Reign of God that Jesus proclaimed, already present in mysterious ways but also beckoning humankind to another future that God alone will inaugurate, but which becomes the measure of our striving and yearning.

The mission of the Church then is to

be a sign and an instrument of the Reign of God. As Phan continues, 'therefore the Church cannot be simply identified with the reign of God as such, in spite of the many links that unite the two.' Proclamation follows next in this configuration, but by witness, service and dialogue, in a much more mutual and complex way than by a literal, wordy declaration of the Gospel message.

'Last comes the Church with its role as servant, not mistress, of mission. Like John the Baptist in front of Jesus, it has to say: the reign of God must increase, and I must decrease.' This does not mean the Church is unnecessary. It is the historical vehicle in which the living memory of Jesus is treasured and revered as a transforming presence, and where Christians are nurtured in faith and encouraged to embody the values of the Gospel in order to transform their societies and the world.

The Church remains a privileged vehicle of the Holy Spirit, but God's Spirit is not restricted to it. As Pope John Paul II in 1990 wrote: 'The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, culture and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history' (*Redemptoris Missio*, 28). In this way, Phan comments, Christian mission becomes a 'search for and recognition of the presence and activities of the Holy Spirit among the peoples to be evangelized, and in this humble and attentive process of listening, the evangelisers become the evangelized...'

Recognition of the workings of the Spirit can help lower barriers between



denominations, and even between religions, inviting us to share our religious experiences and traditions, and especially to advance 'a dialogue of action', collaborating in the great struggles for human dignity, development and liberation.

The shift in emphases is very evident, and very welcome, though it is not always clear what the implications will be in practice. We are at the beginning of a new era in the Christian, and indeed human, story.

Where does welfare fit into the picture?

All the Christian traditions, as also the non-Christian religions, manifest a concern for human wellbeing, and have tried to develop institutions to sustain and promote the range of concerns our agencies are so familiar with.

Our Christian agencies have developed out of attempts to co-ordinate responses to Christ's depiction of the Last Judgment scene in Matthew's Gospel, where God judges us exclusively in terms of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison. We Christians believe that Christ lay down his life as an astonishing confirmation of the Father's passionate concern for the wellbeing of all peoples. Christ's is the human face of a God who is anything but indifferent about human suffering and yearnings.

These are the same values God expects us all to live by, the values embodied in the promise of the Reign of God, where we believe all pain, loss and suffering will finally be mysteriously transformed into the full flourishing of our beings, in great intimacy with God. This is the hope that carries us as we try to walk with others in their times of difficulty and distress.

This impulse was powerfully present from the first days of the early Christian community, as it strove to care for the widows and orphans, the hungry and the poor, as was tradi-

tional of course in the Jewish practices they shared.

Today the links of the agencies with the Church are changing, and it is often difficult to maintain the proximity and support of parishes and the Catholic and wider community that we knew in the past.

Our agencies face some difficult challenges. Should we attempt to maintain or develop closer links with parishes and the Catholic community? How important is it to try to sustain the initial religious impulses that first developed the agencies? How does one preserve a sense of identity over time, with changeover of staff, increasingly from many religious traditions? How can we maintain our sense of mission while being warmly inclusive of colleagues who are unfamiliar with the Catholic tradition?

Agencies come and go in response to changing needs, and our dream is to work ourselves out of a job. Unfortunately that rarely happens. Nevertheless, despite sometimes disappointment or drudgery, the work of our agencies is a privileged one and, dare we hope, dear to God.

Advantages of the new context

There are also major advantages in the new theological context. The first is not just a reduction in inter-denominational rivalry, but the slow blossoming of greater understanding and cooperation among the Christian traditions. Without overlooking the differences between denominations or devaluing their unique contributions, how can we continue down the path of a widening hospitality and small 'c' catholicity, and deepen our awareness of the love and compassion of God at work among us?

Secondly, Christ's promise of the Reign of God can act like a giant magnet drawing us forward in history to enshrine more fully those Gospel values in our lives and culture. The ideals of peace, justice, compassion

and equity are not simply abstractions, but deep yearnings and measures of our own humanity. We can augment the work of earlier generations by doing our share to make these values more real in our nation, especially for the most vulnerable. In this task, we can always do better.

Thirdly, by seeing the Church as a servant of the Reign of God, our focus shifts to recognise more readily that God's Spirit is at work in hearts and minds in mysterious ways, beyond our institutional badging and structures, necessary as they are. Good people of common sense have long known this, of course. But it allows Catholics to let the Church assume a more modest role, as truly a servant, and to focus more clearly on the Reign of God as God's final word about what is most important in life: our commitment to the human wellbeing of others.

In a remarkable paradox, people of all religions, or none at all, can revere and nurture these virtues of compassion and solidarity. One can readily imagine the Holy Spirit taking great delight in every act of kindness and generosity, even by those without belief in God at all. Such a thought can encourage us to redouble our invitations to collaborate with, in the beautiful phrase made popular by Pope John XXIII in the early 1960s, 'all people of good will'.

It was of course the message of an angel announcing Christ's birth to the shepherds. 'Peace on earth to people of good will'. Amen to that. But a peace, as the Hebrew word implies, that is the fruit of a shared struggle

- against poverty, hunger and disease,
- against oppression and injustice,
- against war and violence,
- against smugness and complacency
- against ignorance and prejudice.

Yes to that peace, to all people of good will. ☆

• Bruce Duncan CSsR is a consultant at Catholic Social Services Victoria.

Peter C. Phan, 'Proclamation of the Reign of God as Mission of the Church: What for, to Whom, by Whom, with Whom, and How?', delivered at the 2001 Conference and Annual Meeting of the United States Catholic Mission Association in Memphis, Tennessee, 26-28 October 2001.