



Building Caring Communities: Whose task?

Rt Hon John Battle MP

What does the idea of 'community' mean to us today: a group of people who communicate via the internet; a collective who share the same ideas or interests but may never meet; or a local population who know and support each other? John Battle MP argues that parishes could be the starting point for a return to the latter understanding of community, an understanding that is inherent in Catholic Social Teaching.

My constituency, Leeds West, is a pizza-slice wedge reaching out from the city centre through back-to-back terraces and tower blocks, council estates and suburban semis, to the inner ring road. The four council wards that make up Leeds West include some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Leeds. Unemployment is higher than the Leeds average. The average wage in Leeds West of £12,500 is half the Leeds (and national) average. The constituency is home to a huge prison, HMP Armley, and houses West Yorkshire's refugee and asylum seeker resettlement centre. Twenty-five languages are spoken within the range of a mile from my home. Schizophrenia rates are eighteen times the national average in the neighbourhood surrounding the prison. Fewer youngsters go on to further education and university than in any other constituency in England. A tabloid caricatured Leeds West as 'White Van Man Land plus Asians'.

Leeds as a whole is a thriving rich city of over 7% growth dominated by banks, insurance, finance and retail and marketing; Leeds West is a poorer inner city within the city. At my regular Saturday surgery sessions, it is neither crime nor worries about the credit crunch (Leeds West is yet to recover from the impact of the last recession), but the consequences of stressed and breaking relationships – brought on not least by the lack of appropriate, affordable homes to



rent – that are the most serious concerns. Moreover, over one third of my constituents move after only one year – often away from the constituency, as they work to get out. The imperative challenge to political representatives at the local level is to contribute to building a caring city, a caring community.

The word 'community' evokes a warm glow. More often than not our relation to 'community' is nostalgic and backward-looking;

the 'communities' of past times are now regarded as dismantled and in fragments.

I want to argue for a return to the practical project of rebuilding basic, caring communities, as a means of a recovery of both social and basic politics. In doing so, I will look at current approaches to the concept of community, in particular the claim that the future consists of 'virtual communities', and then at the Church's guidance in relation to building community, which suggests that we have a moral responsibility to get involved practically in our own physical neighbourhoods.

Community and modernity

We start out from where we are in the current economic, political, social and climatic crisis of the 21st century. In *Reason for Living and Hoping* (p.19), Adrian B Smith suggests that:

It is our vision of reality that is undergoing a monumental change in our present time, causing us to perceive and understand ourselves in our relationships – to other people, to our planet and to the transcendent – in an entirely new way.

In the closing decades of the last century there was a shift away from an understanding of ‘community’ as a form of social interaction based on a locality or neighbourhood, to a concern with meaning and identity. Anthony Cohen argued that ‘community is to be understood as less a social practice than a symbolic structure.’¹ This shift to community as ‘symbolic structure’ was epitomised in Benedict Anderson’s influential work, *Imagined Communities* (1983), which, though primarily concerned with national identity, insisted that ‘imagined communities’ were shaped by symbolic structures and not underpinned by ‘lived space and immediate forms of social intimacy’. The physical sense of place, of concrete location, was thus displaced. Gerard Delanty claims that modernity drove any sense of community as social practice out, with the result that ‘modernity has taken the politics out of the social and confined the political to the state.’²

Critics of this shift to the symbolic approach³ point out that it has led to a loss of the social dimension of a community, and to a view of community shaped by what separates people rather than by what they have in common. So the move to reinsert the social dimension into the concept of community and to rediscover the sense of location is rekindling sociologists’ interest in ‘community’.

This move has come about, at least in part, because increasing globalisation and market-driven individualism has led to nostalgia for the idea of community as a place of security and belonging in an evermore fearful and insecure world.⁴ Cities have totally lost their connection with community as they have been absorbed into the global society of financial and informational flows; the last vestiges of locality have been uprooted.

However, Richard Sennett observed, paradoxically, that ‘as the shifting institutions of the economy diminish the experience of belonging somewhere specialpeople’s commitments increase to geographical places like nations, cities and localities.’⁵ Sennett refers to this paradox of both increased

globalisation and increased value of place, insisting that ‘the sense of place is based on the need to belong not to “society” in the abstract but to somewhere in particular; in satisfying that need people develop commitment and loyalty’. Sennett believes in the regeneration of the city and recognises that the task is to design social institutions a way that will foster trust and solidarity. But that task must be undertaken in particular places and neighbourhoods.

Moreover, Sennett argued that the neighbourhood was now replacing the workplace as the place for promoting values of trust, commitment and solidarity – values which enable democracy to flourish. He wrote:

One of the unintended consequences of modern capitalism is that it has strengthened the value of place, aroused a longing for community. All the emotional conditions...in the workplace *animate* that desire: the uncertainties of flexibility; the absence of deeply rooted trust and commitment; the superficiality of teamwork; most of all, the spectre of failing to make something of oneself in the world, to ‘get a life’ through one’s work. All these conditions impel people to look for some *other* sense of attachment and depth.⁶ (Emphasis added)

The social critic Manuel Castells also sees this return shift from the workplace to the neighbourhood, but he points out that the new age of globalisation opens up new opportunities in cities and a resistance to community-based activism rather than work-based movements. In *The Information Age*, he describes a paradoxical resurgence of local politics ‘as resistance to the one-sided logic of capitalism, statism and fundamentalism in the global era’. This compliments Richard Sennett’s emphasis on rehumanising the city. But Castells (in *The Internet Galaxy*, 2001), whilst refocusing on the local, also sees the increasing development of ‘virtual communities’ in the internet age. In returning to the local through the prism of the internet, we must take heed not to de-link community from its social existence: Facebook is not ‘face to face’ and ‘side to side’ relationships, Twitter is not real conversation, and MySpace is not common ground.

Community in Catholic Social Teaching

‘Community’ is a key word in Catholic Social Teaching. Pope John Paul II’s letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, refers to the ‘full truth of man’s existence, of his community and social being’. The Church’s

Compendium of Social Doctrine refers to community life as 'a natural characteristic that distinguishes man from the rest of earthly creatures.'⁷ The 1971 Synod of Bishops' seminal statement, *Justice in the World*, declared that: 'Christian love of neighbour and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbour.'⁸

In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI emphasises that:

Love of neighbour, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the Church universal in its entirety. As a community the Church must practise love. Love thus needs to be organised if it is to be an ordered service to the community.⁹

In the 1970s, the theologian Karl Rahner emphasised the need for the Church itself to be engaged in basic local community building if it wanted to survive. He wrote, in *The Shape of the Church to Come*:

Ifbasic communities gradually become indispensable – since otherwise in the present situation and that of the immediate future the institutional church will shrivel up into a Church without people – the episcopal great Church has the task and duty of contributing to their formation and their necessary missionary activity.¹⁰

Rahner also adds that all ecclesial organisation should be largely at the service of these communities, and not treat them as 'the means to serve the ends of an ecclesiastical bureaucracy defending and wanting to reproduce itself.'

In the 1987 Synod on the Laity, for the first time in an official document, the Bishops described the parish as 'a community of communities' – a new realisation that community is the meeting place with God. In Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor's 2009 lecture on 'The Shape of the Church, Past Present and to Come', he asserted that 'we cannot be fulfilled persons without others – we are made for community.'¹¹

The renewal of the parish community is rightly the Cardinal's main concern: 'again and again one must

strive to create from our parishes, not a geographical area or canonical entity, but a living community.' I would contend that, while not a canonical entity, a parish community needs to move out from the Sunday Eucharist into the neighbourhood as community-builders. This includes reintroducing the social and the political with the community, as the *Compendium of Social Doctrine* clearly states:

Participation in community life is not only one of the greatest aspirations of the citizen, called to exercise freely and responsibly his civic role with and for others, but is also one of the pillars of all democratic orders, and one of the major guarantees of the permanence of the democratic system.¹²

In other words, it is participation to renew politics from the ground level upwards. But organising love 'to be of ordered service to the community', as Pope Benedict XVI suggests, not only includes democratic participation, it also includes tackling poverty: 'within the community of believers there can never be room for a poverty that denies any other what is needed for a dignified life.'¹³

The *Compendium* spells out, citing *Centesimus Annus*, that:

a man is alienated if he refuses to transcend himself and to live the experience of self-giving and of the formation of an authentic human community oriented towards his final destiny, which is God. A society is alienated if its forms of social organisation, production, and consumption make it more difficult to offer this gift of self and to establish this solidarity between people.¹⁴

At the same time we are reminded that 'an increased sense of God, and an increased self-awareness are fundamental to any full development of human society.'¹⁵ That need for self-awareness is reinforced by John MacMurray's insight in *Persons in Relation*: 'There are few things that I desire to do which do not depend upon the active cooperation of others. I need you in order to be myself.' In *Conditions of Freedom*, MacMurray again stresses, 'We become persons of community in virtue of our relations to others. Human life is inherently a common life.'

Building community, then, is the task which binds together our self-understanding and capacity for being transformed, and can help us to reintroduce the

dimension of the transcendent in the face of a privatisation of spirituality. Crucially, the centre of attention is to be the usually-excluded poor. So how does this work out in practice; how do we build caring communities?

Building caring communities

To return briefly to my neighbourhood: what we know about human reality in the 21st century is that it is urban. For the first time in human history most of us live in cities – many in the world's megacities of over one million inhabitants. Ensuring cities are humanised means ensuring not only fresh air, clean water, energy, work and care but also tackling poverty and issues of sustainable economic, social and political development. In our time, [tackling poverty](#) and [addressing the challenges of climate change and overconsumption of resources](#) need to be fused together. What's more, in our interconnected world, the global is now local and the local is now global, and therefore the conflicts and tensions of the whole world are manifested in the terraces and tower blocks of our urban neighbourhoods. Reconciling local conflicts, encouraging neighbours to 'live where we are', accepting and welcoming all of our neighbours – all demand the devotion of time to become good neighbours.

The trap that we must avoid is that of treating community-building as an escapist indulgence absolving us from the long haul of transforming institutions – and ourselves. Volunteerism should not act as a displacement for structural intervention and the provision of services by the local state, but a real introduction of localism could reshape provision of services such as caring for the sick, the elderly and children by training and enabling people to serve their neighbours (for example, by providing the meals on wheels service). Now is the moment to move away from failed trickle-down market economics to the re-provision of local needs from the bottom upwards. We have a chance to combine our aims of tackling climate change and eradicating poverty. Local economic development could have a sustainable dimension built in to provide for local energy provision (community combined heat and power schemes), waste and recycling management, and cooperative and social enterprise development generating local training and work. Reasserting the

vital community virtues of 'stability' and 'hospitality' would strengthen the neighbourhood by welcoming the stranger: the returning prisoner, the asylum seeker, the refugee. Dare we believe that 'anyone who lives and works here, belongs here'¹⁶, and dare we join with them to make sense of a 'community of persons' locally?

The Eucharistic community could be a place of development of pastoral agents who go of their way to build up basic caring communities, redefining 'parish visiting' often left to the priest. Notably, the Church, and most other faith communities, retains a presence in poor inner-city neighbourhoods, understanding the need to 'abide with' rather than move out when faced with the tensions, conflicts and crises of people jostling together for space and resources in urban centres. Many faith groups positively contribute to the shaping of the local public realm, in terms of social service provision as well as by tackling challenges to economic and political structures. The role of the Church locally in challenging political authority often combines with its practical action in supporting the building of communities of persons: communities of shared hope, confident enough to challenge the 'powers that be' from the perspective of the authority of the suffering poor.

Fr Albert Nolan warns us that 'any idea that we may be able to love one another without sharing is a romantic illusion.'¹⁷ We all have a secret (or not so secret) list of those to whom we would not like to live next door, and yet those we write off and refuse to accept as our brothers and sisters – including those from developing countries and communities – can help us regenerate our neighbourhoods. Fr Nolan leads us much further into unpacking the meaning of social spirituality. He recognises that we need a new spirituality and stresses that Jesus was not a typical revolutionary:

Jesus did not simply want to replace those presently in power with those who were not yet in power. He was looking at something more radical than that. He took the values of his time, in all their variety and turned them on their heads. He was busy with a social revolution rather than a political one, a social revolution that called for a deep spiritual conversion – a social revolution is one that turns the social relations between people in a society upside down. A political revolution is one that changes the power relations in a society by

overthrowing one government and replacing it with another. Jesus, like most other oppressed Jews in his time, was hoping for a political liberation from Roman oppression, but he saw himself as a prophet whose immediate mission was the introduction of a social and spiritual revolution. The dismantling of the structures of power would follow later.

Jean Vanier¹⁸ reminds us that 'this life is not a flight from the world of pain and of matter but a mission into it to love people as Jesus loves them.' Integrating a life of prayer and responsiveness – personal, political and Eucharistic – suggests that social spirituality could be a participatory rebuilding of our communities from the bottom up, recognising the need for both transformation of the heart and structural change.

Rt Hon John Battle is Member of Parliament for Leeds West.

This article was adapted from a lecture delivered in Westminster Cathedral on 1 April 2009. A version of the lecture will appear in the May/June 2009 edition of the Pastoral Review.

¹ Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 1985

² Gerard Delanty, *Community* 2003 p.10

³ Such as V Amit in *Realising Community, Concepts Social responsibilities and Sentiments* 2002

⁴ Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear* (Los Angeles) and *The Imagination of Disaster* 1999

⁵ *Spaces of Culture* p.15

⁶ Richard Sennett, *Corrosion of Character: the Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, 1998 p.138

⁷ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, para 149.

⁸ *Justice in the World*, World Synod for Catholic Bishops, 1971, para 34

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, para 20

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, 1974, pp. 114-115

¹¹ Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, 'Gaudium et Spes: The Shape of the Church Past, Present and to Come', www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20090302_1.htm

¹² *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, para 190.

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, para 20

¹⁴ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, para 47

¹⁵ *ibid.*, para 375

¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *Metaphysics*, p. 117

¹⁷ Albert Nolan OP, *Jesus Today*, p. 50

¹⁸ Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*