Thinking faith
THE ONLINE JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH JESUITS

Building civil society

Austen Ivereigh

Concluding our study of *Caritas in Veritate*, Austen Ivereigh looks at Pope Benedict's discussion of the role of gift and gratuitousness in our society. Why are contractual relationships, on which economics and bureaucracy are based, not enough to fulfil our human needs? And what can a strong civil society, based on covenant, achieve for its citizens by emphasising relationships based on trust rather than exchange?

One of the most striking arguments of *Caritas in Veritate* is also the hardest for us to grasp. The Pope rejects what he calls 'the exclusively binary model of market-plus-State' as being 'corrosive of society', in contrast to 'economic forms based on solidarity, which find their natural home in civil society without being restricted to it'. These, he says, 'build up society'. And he goes on: 'The market of gratuitousness does not exist, and attitudes of gratuitousness cannot be established by law. Yet both the market and politics need individuals who are open to reciprocal gift' (*Caritas in Veritate* [henceforth *CV*] 39).


Photo by Aidan Jones at flickr.com

What is this 'exclusive binary model of market-plus-State'? It is a view of society which sees human beings as involved in two spheres of activity – on the one hand economic, on the other legal/bureaucratic – and reduces them to these. It's never a distant feeling for people in modern societies, that we are treated as objects, commodities, factors in production, producers or consumers, rather than human beings.

We feel we are something more – and we are. What the 'exclusive binary' ignores is another kind of relationship, one based on gift or gratuitousness. The market cannot, in and of itself, create these relationships, because the market is a mechanism of productivity and exchange; what binds people is *contract*. The same is true of relationships which are not primarily economic, but bureaucratic.

There is nothing wrong with contracts: they are necessary protections. But because they are designed to protect people, they are necessarily limited, and focused on self-preservation. And they are, by definition, provisional. Break the contract, or fulfil it, and the relationship is over. A society worth living in cannot depend on contractual relationships.

The 'natural home' of the other kind of relationship – one based on gift – is civil society. If the basis of political and economic society is the contract, civil society is based on *covenant*, maintained, writes Jonathan Sacks, 'by an internalised sense of identity, kinship, loyalty, obligation, responsibility and reciprocity.'[1] Unlike legal and economic relationships, civil society relationships are *covenantal*, not *contractual*; or, in the Pope's language, they are based on gratuitousness.

Civil society is the bedrock of democracy, the glue that holds society together. It is neither public (state) nor private (economic) but made up of what are often called 'voluntary organisations' – churches, schools, charities, fraternal organisations, residents' associations, ethnic groups, trade union branches, and so on. The dynamic behind these organisations is not profit; nor are they paid for by the taxpayer. Civil society is bound together by the power of association, the bonds formed by values and common interests.

What are these bonds? In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict explores them at greater length than any of his

predecessors. The 'logic of gift' is both the source of unity in the human community and the element which humanises politics and the economy:

> Because it is a gift received by everyone, charity in truth is a force that builds community, it brings all people together without imposing barriers or limits.... [T]he logic of gift does not exclude justice, not does it merely sit alongside it as a second element added from without ... [E]conomic, social and political development, if it is to be authentically human, needs to make room for the principle of gratuitousness as an expression of fraternity.' (*CV*, 34)

In strong civil society institutions, relationships revolve around something other than buying and selling, or services: what transacts within them are not goods but reciprocity of trust, gift and beliefs. What brings people together is not money, or a contractual obligation. People will speak of a common purpose, a shared commitment, a 'belonging' which, they might say, comes from their faith. These are not private relationships, as among family and close friends, but public relationships founded on something other than contract. It is in these relationships that we become *persons*, in the traditional Catholic sense of that word, meaning not an isolated individual but one with others: not just consumers or voters, but people who work together in pursuit of a common vision, bound together, at their best, by ties of gratuitousness.

The problem that Pope Benedict highlights is that we even have difficulty in conceiving of civil society as a third sector, comparable to the state and the market. The state and the market should serve and support civil society. But so powerful have both become that the reverse is true. A major concern of Catholic social teaching (CST) is to build the power, the capacity to act, of the 'mediating institutions' that make up civil society, so it can better resist the power of the state and market, and hold them to account. That's not because CST opposes the state and the market: they are necessary, and good in themselves. But without a strong civil society to shape them and hold them to other values, they will run amok, serving themselves. When this happens, human beings become commodified.

This is a consistent element in CST. Looking back at one hundred years of papal teaching, Pope John Paul II in 1991 noted how,

> According to *Rerum Novarum* and the whole social doctrine of the Church, the social nature of man is not completely fulfilled in the State, but is realized in various intermediary groups, beginning with the family and including economic, social, political and cultural groups which stem from human nature itself and have their own autonomy, always with a view to the common good (*Centesimus Annus,* 13).

What has weakened democracy in modern European history, according to CST, has been the diminishment of civil society, as both the state and the market have grown in power and influence. Pope Leo XIII and Pius XI, in the two first classic social encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragessimo Anno*, observe this trend with concern, seeing in the weakening of what CST describes as 'intermediate' or 'mediating' institutions the erosion of a healthy society.

The market has its place, but it must be kept in its place, lest relationships become commodified. The state, too, has its place, but it must know its place, lest relationships become bureaucratised.

The countervailing principle is that of subsidiarity, or the principle of civil society. It is 'an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do'. The more this principle of subsidiarity is followed, 'the more excellent will be the authority and efficacy of society, and the happier and more prosperous will be the condition of the commonwealth' (*Quadragessimo Anno,* 80).

CST calls for a 'society of work, enterprise and participation' which 'is not directed against the market,' as *Centesimus Annus* (35) puts it, 'but demands that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and the state to assure that the basic needs of the whole society are satisfied'. A strong civil sector is the basis of a healthy society and a healthy economy; economic contracts and state bureaucracies cannot hold a society together in peace, nor increase its solidarity. Only civil society can do this, because it rests on the logic of gift rather than the logic of the market and the State. In *Caritas in Veritate,* Pope Benedict warns of what happens when state and market shape civil society, rather than the other way round.

> When both the logic of the market and the logic of the State come to an agreement that each will continue to

> exercise a monopoly over its respective area of influence, in the long term much is lost: solidarity in relations between citizens, participation an adherence, actions of gratuitousness, all of which stand in contrast with *giving in order to acquire* (the logic of exchange) and *giving through duty* (the logic of public obligation, imposed by State law). (*CV* 39)

Because civil society is constantly under threat from both state and market, 'the economic forms of solidarity' need to be just as constantly rebuilt and strengthened. This is true in times of economic growth as much as in times of recession. Where capital flows, businesses are created and fold; people are employed, fired, employed again elsewhere; areas stagnate, recover and expand. People respond to these trends by uprooting themselves and moving, following the direction of opportunity, or fleeing dead ends. In an age of globalised capital, the forces disaggregating society, whether in times of growth or recession, are very powerful indeed.

Pope Benedict sees in the current global crisis the collapse of solidarity and mutual trust, which are essential to the proper functioning of the economy. 'Without internal forms of solidarity and mutual trust, the market cannot completely fulfil its proper economic function. And today it is this trust which has ceased to exist, and the loss of trust is a grave loss.' (*CV* 35)

In calling for the market also to adopt relationships of trust and gratuity, Pope Benedict opens up a new theme in CST – that businesses themselves can become more like civil society institutions. The term he uses for this is the 'economy of communion', which is borrowed from Focolare's businesses which attempt to operate in a more human-oriented market, depending more greatly on trust. Without trust, as the financial crisis has exposed, the market destroys itself.

One can hope for more businesses like these. But there is something that every parish, school, and charity can do to build the power of civil society: forge relationships of trust, and act together to hold the state and the market to account.

In modern Britain, the decline in the power and influence of civil society is one of the most pressing issues of our time, one that appears at the top of people's lists of concerns. Fear of violence on the streets is the most obvious sign of this. Trust and relationships are what make a place safe. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation survey in 2008 showed this: time and again people identified a lack of public spiritedness and social responsibility, the way 'neighbours no longer knew or looked out for one another' and people were left 'lonely and fearful'.[2]

One of the central tasks of modern community organising as practised by London Citizens – the capital's largest alliance of 150 civil-society institutions, including at least forty Catholic parishes, schools, charities and religious orders – is the building of relationships within and between institutions. Only by investing time and energy in this relationship-building can trust and solidarity be rebuilt. The organising must firstly be around people, rather than issues. The task has to begin in the parish itself. It is not enough to rely on common values, or a shared faith. Until we *know* each other, hearing each other's stories, we are not organised enough to act together.

Recently, a new parish council of about 25 people in a central London Catholic parish was appointed. The parish priest asked if I would organise some 'one-to-one' training, and encourage them to do one-to-ones with each other. One-to-one meetings are the staple of civil society-building. They are meetings without an agenda, but with a definite purpose: to find out what makes people tick, what they care about, where they get their passion. People tell their stories, why they came to be who they are; they reveal their concerns and passions, their anger and their ideals. What happens as a result – meetings, actions, campaigns – is the fruit; but one-to-ones are the roots. There is no community organising without them. They are the means of reweaving the social fabric, building the blocks of civil society.

The effect of these one to ones on the parish council was dramatic. From being a group of people assembled for a task, they became a community of leaders able and willing to act together on shared passions and concerns.

Here is an example of what can result from this, a perfect illustration of the power of subsidiarity, the principle of civil society, in operation.

It's the story of what happened after Jimmy Mizen was killed in May 2008. His parents live in the south-east London borough of Lewisham and are Eucharistic ministers in their parish of Our Lady of Lourdes in Lee.

South London Citizens was already meeting to discuss street violence. Some months earlier, the liturgical composer Bernadette Farrell, its lead organiser, had held meetings with local leaders from member institutions of South London Citizens in Lewisham, including Our Lady of Lourdes. Bernadette brought together a team as a result of the one-to-ones she had done in all these institutions and the team spent the summer doing more one-to-ones – with shopkeepers, local leaders, bus drivers and police.

Mr and Mrs Mizen attended a meeting of the team in September 2008. 'It was the first time since Jimmy's death that I felt hope,' Barry later said. 'We were captured by that meeting', said his wife Margaret.

Bernadette recalls what happened. 'We shared our experience of safety in the local area. We discussed the problem areas and we set priorities – everybody in groups listed half a dozen priority areas they wanted to work on. We then voted on the top two. The top two were to work with shopkeepers locally, and to work with young people in the schools. We decided we would start with the shops.'

The decision was related to what had happened to Jimmy. A leader at Our Lady's spoke of the need of 'safe havens' – places where young people would know they could flee from trouble and be safe. 'We put these two ideas together. We went out in teams and had one-to-ones with shopkeepers to listen to what the problems were,' recalls Bernadette. 'The shopkeepers were delighted that people were taking the trouble to talk to them. We heard about drug-dealing and break-ins – one shop had had ten break-ins, another three. We said, "did you report it?" They said, "What's the point?" We said: "This is the point. If you don't report it, there aren't the statistics which enable the police to act."'

From these visits came the idea of a pledge that the shopkeepers would sign and put up in their window: to report any crime, however small. By October all the shops in Burnt Ash Hill, where the attack had taken place, had pledged 100% reporting of crime. Immediately the crime figures started to rise and the police began to respond.

The second stage was the 'CitySafe havens' idea. In April 2009, thirty shopkeepers on Burnt Ash Hill signed a charter to become CitySafe havens. The scheme was officially opened by the Mayor of Lewisham on 10 May 2009, the anniversary of Jimmy's birthday. 'Early evidence suggests that the scheme has had an impact,' reports *The Times*. 'One boy, concerned about gang violence, dashed into a takeaway shop and waited until the danger has passed. Another girl took refuge in a bakery when she felt she was being followed. Shopkeepers reported both incidents.'[3]

The scheme has spread across London. In November 2009 the mayor of London declared his headquarters, City Hall, to be the 200th Safe Haven. 'Every organisation that joins this scheme is truly helping to make London safer,' Boris Johnson said.

The relationships formed have since been turned to other, broader issues. The South London Citizens team in Lewisham has built a strong relationship with its mayor and the whole council. They have persuaded the Council to adopt the London Living Wage for their employees, and to pass a motion in favour of the Strangers into Citizens campaign. They have become a political player in Lewisham. And what has happened in Lewisham has been repeated in other boroughs across London.

What unites the practices and skills taught by London Citizens is that they enable people to develop the habit of relating publicly to each other, to build relationships of trust across the divides – social, religious, and ethnic – of the modern city. It is here that our common action can begin, here that we can strengthen civil society and accumulate the 'social capital' praised by Pope Benedict XVI (*CV* 32). From that invigorated civil society the state and the market can be infused by the spirit of gift, and human beings restored to their God-given dignity – precisely the vision of *Caritas in Veritate*.

Austen Ivereigh is an organiser with London Citizens. This article is adapted from a chapter in his forthcoming Faithful Citizens: a guide to Catholic social teaching and community organising *(Darton, Longman & Todd 2010).*

[1] J. Sacks, 'Education, values and religion', Univ St Andrews 1996.
[2] 'What are today's social evils?' – Beth Watts and Charlie Lloyd, available at www.socialevils.org.uk.
[3] 'Could safe havens prevent teenage stabbings?' The Times (18 November 2009)