

Conversion or Conversation?

Jack Valero

This week, the Pontifical Council for Culture launches the 'Courtyard of the Gentiles', a new initiative aimed at facilitating dialogue between believers and non-believers. Jack Valero, founder of Catholic Voices, describes the group's recent encounters with the Central London Humanist Group – meetings which shared the aims of the Courtyard of the Gentiles. How can two groups with opposing views engage in a fruitful dialogue?

Is there any point in two sides with opposing views engaging in dialogue when it is clear from the start that nobody is going to change their mind? The question has been on my mind since last October, when members of Catholic Voices held a dialogue with some members of the Central London Humanist Group following a noisy and intemperate debate over the papal visit.



It is a question worth asking, too, about a new initiative launched by the Pontifical Council for Culture this week in Paris. The so-called, 'Courtyard of the Gentiles' initiative brings together in three 'colloquia' believers and atheists to discuss themes of 'religion, enlightenment and common reason'. What is the objective? How can it help?

There are no easy answers to that question. Yet the fact that it is happening at all shows that something is stirring. Here in the UK, we regard the Humanist-Catholic Voices dialogue as one of the fruits of the papal visit.

Catholic Voices is a group of ordinary Catholics trained to put the case for the Church on TV and radio and in live debates, created by myself, Austen Ivereigh and Kathleen Griffin – all experienced in the interface of Church and media. We started the group in early 2010 to prepare for the Pope's visit to Britain

last September. We selected twenty speakers and trained them between March and July. Our approach was positive towards the media, understanding its idiom, respecting its constraints and admiring its aims of holding people and institutions, including the Church, to account.

This attitude is important – indeed, it may be the most important thing about the project. We accept that

the media have the right to ask difficult questions, because they reflect the questions that many people have. Our mottoes are: 'light, not heat' – we try to explain things calmly (shedding light) while not being embattled or angry about the matter in question (avoiding heat); and 'witnessing, not winning' – we go to studios to explain and demonstrate our beliefs, not score points.

The Catholic Voices project worked very well: we featured in about 100 TV and radio programmes or events in September 2010, 70 of which were in the four days that the Pope was in Britain. The media were delighted with this new resource, ordinary Catholics were inspired by the people they saw and happy to hear of the project, and bishops were enthused when they saw how good lay people were at communication when it comes to controversial subjects, if properly trained.

Aside from TV and radio programmes, we also took part in a number of debates. One of these took place on 1 September, two weeks before the Pope's visit, organised by the Protest the Pope coalition at Conway Hall in London and chaired by Guardian Columnist and British Humanist Association president, Polly Toynbee. The motion, 'The Pope's Visit should not be a State Visit', was proposed by Professor AC Grayling and the human rights activist, Peter Tatchell. On behalf of Catholic Voices, coordinator, Austen Ivereigh and Patron, Fr Christopher Jamison opposed. About 500 people – overwhelmingly in favour of the motion – packed the hall for a rowdy, heated and at times angry exchange. The nature of the debate disturbed some of the humanists, who apologised to us afterwards. At a pub after the debate, we met members of the Central London Humanist Association, led by Alan Palmer, and stayed a while talking to them about the debate, discussing the issues. Both sides thought that this was the kind of exchange we should have had, and we agreed to get in touch again after the visit had taken place.

In an article some days later, Paul Sims, editor of *New Humanist*, said the arguments made by Grayling and Tatchell were strong and had not been answered to his satisfaction by Ivereigh and Jamison; but he also felt embarrassed by some of the heckling and shouting from his own ranks.

Later that month, after the papal visit, Sims said much the same about the Protest the Pope march in London to coincide with the Pope's visit to Westminster. The protest had brought together large numbers – 20,000 people according to the organisers; 6,000 according to the police – but these were only a small proportion of the numbers who turned out for the Pope, reckoned at 200,000 in the streets plus a further 80,000 inside Hyde Park.

Sims concluded that the Pope had been made welcome in the UK. 'Many oppose the Church, but many support it,' he said. 'The Papal Visit was an opportunity for both sides to debate reasons for this, but what we have seen are two distinct groups in our society that appear to be talking past one another, while many others (perhaps the majority) look on in confusion.' He then finished with a challenge: 'Could this be time for a rapprochement?'

Soon after, we received an email from Alan Palmer suggesting a meeting of a relatively small group of people where some of the issues could be discussed more dispassionately. We felt this was a very good idea but wanted to avoid it becoming just an 'outbreak of niceness', in which we agree on the lowest common denominator: a respectful dialogue must embrace substantive issues of disagreement. But we also wanted to find a way of doing so that would meet our aims of shedding light, not heat. We wanted to be clearer about what we each believed, and where the substantial points of disagreement lay.

In the event, 22 people turned up: 8 members of Catholic Voices and 14 of the Central London Humanist Group (CLHG), including Alan Palmer and Paul Sims. After some initial introductions, we moved on to short presentations on each of three topics agreed beforehand: Austen Ivereigh explained why the Catholic Church was not in favour of gay couples adopting children; Fr Christopher Jamison made the case for the state paying for faith schools; and I spoke about the Catholic Church's response to AIDS in Africa, explaining how the Church saves many lives despite the fact that it does not distribute condoms. Each presentation was followed by some discussion. After the three topics, Steve Chapman from the CLHG summarised the Catholic position and Austen Ivereigh the humanist view. Ivereigh gave what Sims described as 'a very eloquent description of what Humanism stands for', adding that 'people from both sides came away with more understanding of where the other side was coming from, framed in reasonable terms.'

The meeting had lasted two hours and we adjourned to the pub to talk in smaller groups, something very much appreciated by the participants. 'You are not going to change the world with something like this,' said Sims, 'it's about seeing what the other side has to say, and that's constructive in itself.'

But not everyone agreed. Some Catholic bloggers wondered what the point was, and warned of the dangers of 'watering down' church teaching. But the strongest objections were from the National Secular Society. In a piece entitled 'The Vatican will not be changed by persuasion, it has to be forced', its president, Terry Sanderson, accused the humanists of engaging in a fruitless discussion. 'The Vatican is not

a democracy. It is not open to negotiation and nor are its minions. The Pope has a direct line to God. He knows he's right and the rest of us are wrong. What compromise can be reached with such an institution?" asked Sanderson, who invited the Central London Humanists to 'join the all-out attack by the "aggressive secularists" that the Pope so fears.'

Some weeks later, Sims responded to this in *New Humanist* with a long piece in defence of dialogue entitled, 'Careless talk?' Noting that neither the humanist members represent all humanists nor do Catholic Voices represent the whole of the Catholic Church, he asks the question: 'If you are not representing anybody, you already know what the other side is going to say, and you're probably not going to change their minds, why bother?'

He then answered that question by appealing to the importance of 'civility'. Civility 'is not about agreement, or even negotiation,' says Sims. 'It is about how we can disagree in such a way that we retain the respect of those we disagree with, and build the possibility of common cause on issues beyond our disagreements.' That seemed to sum up the purpose.

A second meeting was held three months later, in a church hall in Pimlico. This time the CLHG chose the topics and led the discussion. We covered 'doubts about the miraculous in the scientific age', 'abortion', and 'you can be good without God'. Each topic was introduced by one of the humanists and general discussion followed. As before, the idea was to sit down and engage with each other on these contentious issues in a cordial manner, without expecting anybody to change their minds. Just listening to each other was very valuable in dispelling prejudices and wrong ideas about the other. More than once someone who started, 'but you believe ...' had to be stopped and asked to witness to their own beliefs, rather than making assumptions about the belief of the other. The exchanges this time were a little more bad-tempered. Many of the humanists were very angry about the apparent inhumanity of the Church's positions, while some of the Catholics were annoyed at what they saw as a parodying of church teaching. Just as before, we finished with someone from each side summarising the position of the other, so that we ended with empathy rather than hostility.

One thing is clear: such dialogues do not 'convert' people from one way of thinking to another. But that is not their point. They are about enabling people who think very differently to work together for the common good.

The 'Courtyard of the Gentiles' is an attempt to allow people to reflect together on the direction of humanity and collaborate on what kind of world we want to see in the future. The idea came directly from a December 2009 address by Pope Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia, in which he spoke of a space where 'people might in some way latch onto God, without knowing him and before gaining access to his mystery, at whose service the inner life of the Church stands.'

Cardinal Ravasi, tasked by the Pope with organising the Courtyard, said dialogue between believers and non-believers should not limit itself to finding a least common denominator of agreement, but should seek to confront the fundamental questions of life: 'questions of anthropology, good and evil, life and afterlife, love, suffering, the meaning of evil – questions that are substantially at the basis of human existence.'

The cardinal also noted that that believers and non-believers have in common a desire to persuade others of the rightness of their worldview. 'Religions by their nature are not only informative; they are also performative, that is, they want to form consciences, they want to show the attractiveness of their message', something that also applies to 'serious atheism,' he said.

The Courtyard initiative was launched after Catholic Voices began its dialogues with the humanists, but we see our own initiative as a small reflection of that larger project – which is why we will be watching what happens in Paris with interest.

During the papal visit we did not just form relationships with humanists; we also connected with clerical sex abuse victims. In discussions after studio debates, or just through informal connections, we found ourselves listening to people's stories and responding. We are looking at a possible 'dialogue' with abuse victims along the same kinds of lines as that we held with humanists.

These dialogues are all part of a wider attempt by Catholic Voices to develop the skills and the language for engaging with the public square.

We are continuing to field speakers whenever Catholic stories arise in the news, and are planning trainings for more speakers in north of England later in the year. We are responding to many requests for information about how to set up a Catholic Voices group in different countries; in Spain, for example, a group is getting itself ready for Pope Benedict's visit to Madrid for World Youth Day in August.

These are all ways of equipping Catholics for debate in the public square, reviving the art of apologetics for the era of 24-hour news, nurturing Catholic public intellectuals and giving Catholics the confidence to shape stories. By giving a voice to ordinary Catholics, we believe we can better communicate our faith and help to develop a new, religiously inclusive humanism. And that can only be helped by civil dialogues with those who do not share our beliefs.

Jack Valero is one of the founders of Catholic Voices.

The forthcoming Catholic Voices: putting the Church's case in an era of 24-hour news by Austen Ivereigh and Kathleen Griffin will be published this summer by Darton, Longman & Todd.