

Quo vadis?

“A view from the Palazzo della Cancelleria” *Cardinal James Stafford*

My Interview with Cardinal Stafford took place in the Palazzo della Cancelleria; one of the ‘exclaves’ transferred to the Vatican as part of the Lateran Pact and which still houses the Papal Chancellery. This splendid building, steeped in history, stands between the Corso Vittoria Emanuele II and the Campo de’ Fiori. The first building to be constructed in the Renaissance style in Rome, one enters the building through a grand 16th century doorway, built on the instruction of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, before passing into a magnificent internal courtyard, constructed from materials originally taken from the ruins of the nearby Theatre of Pompey in Imperial Rome. Some 44 Egyptian granite columns, originally from the porticoes of the theatre’s upper, covered seating, now support the open, arcaded loggias of the Cancelleria’s two lower floors.



Moving into the Apostolic Penitentiary and then into the Cardinal’s offices, the historical significance of the palace was reinforced by a large portrait of Pope Pius XI sitting at his desk and reviewing plans for the reconstruction of buildings of the Vatican at the time of the agreement of the Lateran Pact. That was a momentous time in the history of the Papacy, marking the end of a 59 year long period in which the Popes had, in effect, become the “prisoners of the Vatican”; it was also a strong, positive reminder of the fact that our church has faced and successfully dealt with, serious challenges in the past.

Thus it was a most appropriate setting for the interview which commenced with Cardinal Stafford placing in an historical context, the debate in Europe concerning the relationship between Christianity and modern and post modern culture. From his experience it appeared to him that two schools of thought have developed; the first would interpret the current situation as being one in which there has been an evolution within the church which has been moving towards a cultural and political expression within the modern world; an evolution which is not perceived as being basically hostile towards either the church or to tradition generally. The second school of thought would say that there is a basic hostility between contemporary culture and that which existed prior to the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, both on the continent and in the United Kingdom.

Having set the context, Cardinal Stafford then went on to indicate that his own views had evolved beyond that and he sees the state as an expression of modern, post modern culture which, in effect, is a parody of the church. He traced the origins of our current malaise back to the 12th century when the church first modelled the institutionalisation of faith, hope and love and of the other virtues as it was evangelising the European continent through institutions and particularly through law. As both church and state evolved through the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, and particularly during the times of the Reformation and the Wars of Religions, the state’s increasing competitiveness and desire to replace the church as the basic socialising force continued apace, and in modern times has spread beyond European society to North and South America.

Thus today we have a situation where the state, still in competition with the church, substitutes faith with a sociological and psychological prediction of how the human being works, substitutes hope with the most up to date planning for the future and substitutes charity, or love, with a studied knowledge of the needs of the individual. This parody of the vision which is embodied in the parable of the Good Samaritan is a secular mutation both of what the church is and also what Christ envisioned, striking at and hostile to the very foundations of our faith.

Cardinal Stafford then carried on to describe the proper order for humanity, which he defined as being pre-eminently

revealed in the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the question is raised, “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus’ revolutionary response, as the late Ivan Illich so impressively described it, is a concept of neighbour which transcends tribe, transcends the sameness of ethnic origins, transcends nation. It is a universal category. The revolution that Jesus called for and continues to call us to, is a personal vocation to recognise one’s neighbour in the one before whom one stands and who is in need of our love. It involves a relationship, not a rule. It is a call to be involved voluntarily, in a bodily fashion, just as the Samaritan was before the beaten up Jew, the one whom he was supposed to hate and to be hated by. What has happened over the centuries is that we have tried to institutionalise that, removing the individual beyond the bodily, immediate environment and institutionalising charity in a way that was not envisioned by Christ.

The interview then moved on to look at examples of specific issues where the state has legislated in ways which challenge traditional church values; issues including the development of genetic engineering using human foetuses, the continuing increase in the number of abortions, the formalisation of gay partnerships, and the developing challenge to faith schools. These issues exemplify the state’s legislative activity in furtherance of its ambition to become the basic socialising force in the modern world, frequently resulting in situations in which, to use a vernacular analogy, the card that the state plays trumps the card of faith. >

Faced with such challenges we naturally progressed to consider how both individuals and organisations could respond to the challenges of our times. Cardinal Stafford reminded me of his keynote address to the Catenian Association at Torquay where he posed the question “Do you love out of obedience or do you obey out of love?” His question went to the root of the whole issue of freedom and liberty. Is the Catholic understanding of freedom an obligation of law, a response of choice that arises from an obligation of law? Or rather is it arising from the fact that by virtue of love I consider my neighbour to be the person next to me? That is both the great surprise of freedom and the joy of Christian freedom. He then continued his analysis of the roots of true societal and cultural freedom, including the political domain, tracing its articulation in the Fourth Lateran Council and prior to that its development in the Anglo Saxon mind, heart and imagination; they are concepts which are rooted in the sacramental nature and nuptial understanding of reality which comes to us through the Sarum Rite and before that from the sacramentary of Gregory the Great in the 7th century. Cardinal Stafford then linked the concepts of the past with the challenges of the 21st century as he reminded me of the essentially eucharistic and nuptial nature of our Christian faith and Church. He also emphasized the fact that the contemporary, secular challenge is basically a denial of the Eucharistic origins of Christian freedom in the West. On an individual level the Cardinal was sure that part of our response involved regaining the Catholic understanding of sin as being an offence against a person rather than against the law. The notion of sin simply being an offence against the obligation of law is an understanding which is rooted in the Enlightenment’s understanding; it is rationalist and characteristically Protestant. Our Catholic understanding of sin is as an offence against a person; it is primarily a ruptured relationship rather than an offence against the law. Returning to his theme at the Torquay Conference he reiterated his and our church’s understanding of sin as being basically a lack of correspondence to the Beatitudes - poverty of spirit, meekness, purity of heart, peacefulness

etc. The Beatitudes concern themselves with relationships and the virtues and they inform the Commandments; the Ten Commandments are to be lived out through our response to the Beatitudes and the virtues.

At the heart of our response to the challenges of our age, the Cardinal urges that we recapture that understanding of neighbour which he had previously described as being the ‘proper order for humanity’ with all of the personal implications the implementation of the concept would demand. As an exemplar of what he was describing, he referred to the biographies of the Curé d’Ars. His biographers begin not with his immediate origins but with an account of his paternal grandfather’s experience of hospitality to a stranger in their home in July, 1770. Their home was always open to the poor. They made place every afternoon for the poor who came to them for food and lodging. One day among the poor who came was a strangely attired young man by the name of Benedict Joseph Labré. He was wearing a Trappist novice’s tunic. He only stayed overnight. Prior to his arrival at their home he had been asked to leave the Trappists. He was confused about his life’s direction so he became a pilgrim, a searcher. He was a pilgrim on his way to Rome. Vianney’s grandfather never forgot the beauty of that poor human being who wrote somewhat later a letter of gratitude which the family treasured. In 1783 he died at the age of 35 in Rome. The saintliness of Benedict Joseph Labré was never forgotten. “His name was remembered” by the members of that French family even though he was simply their overnight guest. They eventually discovered that he died a Saint and was eventually canonised by the Church. The influence upon all of the Vianney children and grandchildren even to the generation of Jean Marie Vianney was profound. Mathieu Vianney, the father of Jean Marie, was 17 years old when St Benedict was an overnight guest in his father’s home. In some ways we have to recapture the Vianney’s understanding of neighbour. It is not that we institutionalise the primary approach that we have towards others but rather that we act in love to some “body”. Now that is a huge challenge in the indifferent world we are living in.

The second example quoted goes back to the late 1980’s when the Cardinal was Archbishop of Denver. The Sisters of Mother Theresa of Calcutta came to the city, and set up a hospice in a three storey, downtown house given to them by the diocese. They were caring for people suffering with terrible diseases, frequently the consequence of Aids in the days prior to the invention of medications which would control the disease. The sisters were asked how they would get the men up and down the steps and stairs as their diseases made them less and less capable. They simply replied that the sisters would carry them; when offered a lift they refused – the physical care and carrying was part of the sisters’ understanding and practice of being a good neighbour.

The Cardinal also had specific advice for us as Catenians. He reminded us of the insight of Bishop Casartelli, who helped to found a community of good friends who were originally called chums, a word which has its origins in the word ‘camera’, referring to a room-mate, one who is a personal intimate associate. In his reading of the obituaries in Catena, he finds frequent and at times very moving evidence of how our members have been engaging themselves, on occasion physically with their hands, in assisting their neighbours throughout their lives. His view of our Association is that our charism is exactly that of the good neighbour in the parable of the Good Samaritan; the example is there to follow. He also feels that our “radically acute” reflection on the cultural challenges which we face indicates that we are still in touch with that Catholic imagination which is basically eucharistic and nuptial. He goes on to urge two things, firstly that we continue to penetrate more deeply into that, particularly in relation to the development and catechesis of our younger members. Secondly, he urges that we pray. Describing our Association as having the potential to be “a chain of individuals who form this golden necklace, so to speak, that adorns the bride of Christ” he urges us to create “a chain of prayer and of penance and of reparation, primarily on behalf of those who are so oppressive of our consciences”, as well as for those, “whom we find to be holding very different understandings of what it means to be human, even within the church.”