

Quo vadis?

“A view from an activist”

Lord Dan Brennan

Tucked away in the corner of the Grays Inn site, Matrix Chambers is not an easy location to find, but it was a particularly appropriate environment and location, for the third of our Centenary interviewees. The Oxford English dictionary defines a matrix as “an environment in which a thing is developed”. Matrix Chambers is a product of the new Millennium, with core values which commit both to a public service ethos and to contributing time and resources to a range of community initiatives in addition to their normal professional services. A founding member of this set, Lord Dan Brennan is renowned as one of the leading Queen’s Counsel in the UK at the Personal Injuries Bar and, since his elevation to the House of Lords in 2000, as an active advocate for Christian and Catholic principles in the House of Lords.



Our discussion started with an historical analysis of the development of Catholic laity in the United Kingdom. We are a product of the prohibitions which followed the Reformation; in different epochs and to varying degrees limited by ‘a siege mentality’ as a consequence of that process of emancipation; it is only in comparatively recent times that Catholic laity has been called on to play a significant part in public life as a community. This renewal of ‘Catholic Community’, particularly developed under the spiritual leadership of Cardinal Hume, brings with it new responsibilities and obligations as we start thinking and talking about the concept of the ‘Catholic citizen’. In terms of public life, our time has come. Should we fail to bear Christian witness we will become second rate citizens and third rate Catholics. Pope John Paul II’s post-synodal, apostolic exhortation “Christifideles Laici” was not a statement of accepted thought, rather it was a call to action.

To place the demands of the modern world in context, we moved on to look at the church’s response to challenge since the Reformation. An important element of that response has always been the reaction of the laity, particularly as evidenced in the

lives of the saints in Europe as well as many of our English Martyrs. They faced serious, physical repression of religion, as do many of our fellow Christians in the Holy Land, Iraq and India in the modern world. Whilst the threat they face is frequently one of physical aggression, what we face in the secular, developed world is better described as a challenge. It is a challenge rather than a threat because it can be overcome by the use of reason, persuasion and the great English virtue of tolerant debate.

However, using Chesterton’s expression, every important issue is “clouded with cant on both sides”. Nowadays there is little real dialogue. People are talking past each other, using catch-alls as substitutes for real thinking. We live in a fragmented society with no common philosophy to bind us together. We face a situation in which civil discourse is disappearing, different forms of communication and persuasion have developed and we need to adapt to these new methods. In such a society the voice of the Catholic laity must be heard. Lord Brennan went on to urge that we should become involved in public communication – “a Catholic website for the Catholic laity, Catholic information bulletins with bullet point summaries to address critical issues

and distributed at the back of churches on Sunday – that is the sort of thing that Catholics want and need.” The needs of the laity in this area have also to be addressed by Catholic organisations within their specific constituencies; Catenianism in one way, the Catholic Union in another, through general public debate, through information on websites, whatever might be appropriate. Moreover, each of our organisations should provide leadership, innovatively grasp ideas, ensuring both that we are flexible in our responses and also that we do not let the organisation dominate the objective.

We moved on then to look at ways in which the laity could be prepared to face the challenges of the modern world. Whilst Lord Brennan saw two levels of approach to this issue, the first in terms of general policy and the second in terms of practical implementation, he judged that general policy is the more urgent element of the issue. He moved on to identify, though not in an order of priority, three broad aspects of Christian witness in our country: firstly Catholics and employment in the community; secondly central Catholic belief; and thirdly our obligation to help others, the poor, whomsoever that might be. >

In relation to the first aspect of witness, we are about to enter a period of seriously high unemployment which will affect a generation which has never either seen or experienced it. The church, through the Bishops' Conference, very sensibly is running a consultation about the representation of Catholic social teaching which is aimed at a high level of morality and ethics above the present crisis. As an ancillary to that programme, should we not be seen by the rest of the community to be recognising this recession and acting, as Catholic laity, to help those who are affected by it? There is a need for Catholic business men and women, bankers, and professionals, to voice their opinion about where we, as a society, have gone wrong, where we should be going and what we are doing about it at a practical, parish level. Many of the future young unemployed are Catholics, intelligent young people just leaving university without a job and it is critically important that we do not produce a resentful and disenchanted group who feel that their religion has let them down at their moment of need. Helping the unemployed in our parishes, in whatever way, and showing solidarity with them would be a classic example of Christian witness in response to a contemporary reality which requires Catholic action.

Turning to his second aspect of witness, Catholic belief, we moved on to highlight the developing threat to faith based schools. Lord Brennan expressed apprehension that without our Catholic schools we will have great difficulty in maintaining the coherence of our communities of faith. Schools nurture a sense of community. In addition to their function as educational establishments, they also have a formative role in our Catholic communities, laying the basis for Catholic belief and preparing for life in the wider community.

In that wider community, there are many issues of concern for Christians which are now topics of public debate; abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, embryology. That public debate is one in which we should be involved, using reason and persuasion to publicly state what we are for, rather than what we are against. What we argue for in these areas are matters of major public interest, for example, looking after the aged or stopping abortion from becoming an excuse for the dissolute. Such activity moves us on to the third aspect of witness, our responsibility to look after our neighbours. Our church teaches that we have an obligation to Christian witness throughout our lives. If we look around the society we live in, it is morally homeless. Extend that view to the whole world and we are hit by the numbers of people dying, unnecessarily, from hunger. As Christians we have a commitment to look outside ourselves every day and to do something about addressing these challenges of our times.

In the penultimate section of our discussion we focussed on factors which affect our Christian response in the modern world. We noted the importance of remembering that whilst religion is intensely personal, Christian witness is usually communitarian and is very well advanced, nurtured and protected by acting with people of the same beliefs. This is particularly important in our age which is characterised by individualism; where politics is seen to serve the individual and the concepts of the common good for a just society takes second place. We identified the definition and function of conscience as one of the key debates of our age, not as a simplistic assertion or an excuse for not agreeing with others, but rather as a faculty of "moral approval or disapproval of conduct and character based on reason, experience and religious values."

The expression and exercise of conscience by Catholics in public life on questions, about which a majority of society may not share our beliefs, raises profound questions. In recent times we have faced the issues relating to same sex partnerships, to non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation which so affected our adoption agencies and to human fertilisation issues in recent legislation. There is little doubt that the principle and practice of Catholic conscience will be fundamentally tested at times, perhaps soon to come, on the future of faith schools. Depending on the nature of any future legislation that might be proposed there are certain basic moral issues, such as faith education, on which the Catholic conscience must be in accord with religious belief, and human rights. It is critical that in our present circumstances, the role and the expression of conscience should be reflected in the public debate.

Finally we looked at the challenges confronting Catholic organisations in the new millennium. Firstly, all of our organisations need to reflect the society of today, addressing current needs rather than simply continuing 'as we have always done'. Tradition must not be confused with intrinsic value. The process of change can be slow, is often painful, but is necessary for survival. It is also of value to organisations in that process of change to create opportunities for debate with others who are not members of the organisation. Most importantly, we must remember that the future of all of our organisations lies in the hands of the young and therefore it is incumbent on organisations to listen to their voice. Whether we agree with them or not, we have a duty to let them speak and challenge. Any effective organisation will meld the past and the future into something good. The view of the young should not necessarily prevail, but we ignore "tomorrow's leaders - tomorrow's church" at our peril.