

**Some Thoughts on the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church and
the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century**

If I begin with a few fragments of my personal history, it is not because vanity insists on padding out the reasons you already know for my being here today, an occasion to which I have much looked forward. The reason why I offer a little more about myself is because it helps to explain the point of take-off for my argument.

I am a retired Conservative politician, a Catholic and a British passport holder. Like millions of other British citizens I am partly Irish, the great grand-son of potato famine migrants, the grandson of Catholic head-teachers in the Manchester slums who began teaching before the 1902 Balfour Act allowed them to be paid from the public purse. My Irish forebears would, I dare say, have been surprised to learn that their off-spring had the task of closing down the British empire. So I am a good working example of the nonsense of thinking that we can deal with the world's problems on the basis of pure-blooded, simple tribal loyalties and identities.

Yet much of my political career has been spent dealing with a world inhabited by those who asserted exactly the opposite. On this island, for example, I have been one of those who had to cope with the consequences of this belief. And yet what does the name Adams tell you about his tribe or the name Molyneux about his for that matter? It was not only in Northern Ireland that I confronted the assumption that the world is divided into rigid castes. Working as a European Commissioner in the blood-stained Balkans, I dealt with the same sort of legacy of tribal hate. It finds its worst expression in nationalist

extremism. Our Church has to be careful about the importance of keeping its distance from this revanchism – in Croatia for example.

Nationalism tore Europe apart in the first half of the last century. So after the Second World War, we framed a political order for ourselves, encouraged by American post-war diplomacy, in which we turned our back on the politics of the 19th century, and tried to shape a political culture in which you can be a patriot without being a nationalist. We recognised that the nation state is the largest entity to which people feel a natural loyalty, and yet we also recognised that nation states need to work together to a unique extent to provide the security and prosperity that their citizens require and expect. Globalisation renders porous the boundaries of nation states. We live in a world where the Catholic Church both because of the nature of its mission, above and beyond political frontiers, and because of its institutional structure, should feel very much at home. The Church understands, to quote from the Compendium of Social Doctrine that human beings “are living members of the whole human family.”

At one level, the Church certainly demonstrates that it is at home – taking its message to favelas in Latin America, to townships in South Africa, and to the sprawling cities of Asia. I have seen the Church at work in all these environments. It is inspiring. But at another level, and perhaps this is an inevitable reflection of the Church’s understanding of human frailty it can give the impression that this is a world that it wants to get off. It is, of course, the only world we’ve got; it is not in my view a worse place than the one I was born into sixty years ago. I grew to adulthood in a world where an uneasy peace was maintained because of the mutual fear on the part of the antagonists of East and West of what would happen if the cold war went suddenly hot. Peace was preserved for most of us

because the alternative was nuclear conflagration. I have lived through decades when millions starved in Asia as well as in Africa, when economic opportunity seemed confined to the few, when their gender condemned women in most countries to at best a second or third class existence of drudgery, ignorance and discrimination. We face some terrible problems today, but we do so from a little higher up the ladder.

What is more, while some regard me as a Pollyanna, I believe those problems are soluble given the resources, the leadership and the will. Are we to respond to those challenges in the most powerful and prosperous nations by retreating behind our own walls and our own security guards like the inhabitants of a rich suburb, lashing out occasionally at the manifestations beyond our gated community of a dark Hobbesian horror show? Or do we go out from our redoubt generously and boldly to try to make things better, refusing to accept the idea that the world is simply a barbaric Darwinian battlefield?

How does the social teaching of the Catholic Church respond to the prospects faced by the citizens of the 21st century? How, in the words of Cardinal Sodano, can we learn to deal with temporal affairs according to God's will? There is a real problem of language here, of the narrative offered by the Church. The lilies of the field neither toil nor spin, so one should not confuse Catholic social teaching with a political manifesto. What would a Catholic macro-economic policy be? It would presumably advocate high employment, social solidarity – in other words generous social welfare, encouragement of enterprise and (I would hope) low inflation. This does not frankly get us very far, and certainly for a British taste, the attempts to translate this social teaching too literally into political programmes (for example on the part of European Christian Democrat parties in the past) produced a mixture of pretty vacuous waffle and rather old-fashioned dirigisme. This

dwelt unhappily alongside the Church's enthusiasm for subsidiarity, a good principle of Catholic action insufficiently practised by governments in most European countries. The concept of subsidiarity, a bad word for the principle that lies at the heart of what the Compendium calls "the realm of civil society", has been one of the Church's most important contributions to modern notions of good governance.

But maybe all this slightly misses the point. Lay Catholics do not presumably want from their Church a blueprint for political action but an intellectual framework that shows the relevance of their religious beliefs to their everyday lives. They want a statement that reflects the spiritual messages of the Church, and which can provide them with assistance in working out for themselves how to cope with the real world's problems and opportunities. It offers them more than a few fingerprints or clues, but does not usually give them precise answers to day-to-day questions. Politics and morality are not the same, though we would all hope that the former is influenced by the latter. But Church and State are and should remain separate.

I was struck the other day by a newspaper report that young people these days live more and more without a watch strapped around their wrists. I have had a watch ever since my first Holy Communion. Except when I have been in hospital I doubt whether there has been a day when I have not worn a watch. I put it on when I get out of the shower in the morning and take it off at night. Without it, I would be slightly panicked. I would know without looking that I was not wearing it. So what do the watchless young do? Check their mobile phones apparently. What more do you need?

Now this change of fashion does not change the nature of Time itself. There are still 60 minutes to the hour and 24 hours to the day. But our relationship to time is clearly changing – how, for instance, we find out what it is. So there is no requirement to alter what is fundamental to one's beliefs, as fundamental in its way as the nature of Time, even while you seek to relate those beliefs to a world that has changed at a phenomenal pace and where change continues to accelerate.

The century that we have just survived saw the end of empire – British, Russian, Ottoman, French, Portuguese, Austro-Hungarian, American. It has seen the triumph of self-determination – Woodrow Wilson trumped Lenin. Though globalisation is no longer as fashionable an idea as it was, this implacable phenomenon is unstoppable. It is a result of peace, technology and the opening of market places under a set of international rules. This increasingly inter-dependent world has lived latterly under the Pax Americana. For their part, European countries have shared sovereignty in a unique if occasionally ramshackle way which now covers most of the continent: the wonder being what we do together not what we argue about or fail to do. We are collectively better off around the world than the majority of us would ever have imagined possible, and most of us live in countries that are more or less democratic – in which there is at least participation in government if not always the rule of law.

Democratisation has consequences for the Church, of course. In democracies, authority is not blindly accepted; it is often regarded with suspicion and it usually has to be earned. Attempts to impose authority provoke hostility and trigger alienation. This rubs off on governance within the Church and also on the role of those who articulate the Church's message, explaining it to the laity. While noting once again that the Church is not a

political institution, this new attitude to hierarchy and civil relations is bound to affect attitudes in every walk of life. The Church should not feel uncomfortable about this or that it is being “targeted”. Authority, humbly exercised, earns trust and affection, a point which the Church knows well.

There is another sense in which the sort of world order, advocated rightly by the Church, has consequences for the Church itself. Transparency in government and a proper regard for human rights are advocated by priests and bishops. We want governments to tell the truth about what they do. We want them to respect the human rights of their citizens. Archbishop Romero is only one of the courageous Catholics who have died for these principles. The situation within the institutional church is not – I repeat – precisely the same as that in a nation state, but some of the same considerations apply. To make a point that is alas more germane in some places than we would like it to be, openness even at the risk of embarrassment is always the best policy.

How should the Church deal with globalisation? Not, for a start, by trying to prevent it or hold it back, even if that was possible. On the whole, globalisation in the last few years has helped to lift many millions out of poverty especially in China and India. The problem is that while many have been helped, too many have been left behind. Over a billion men, women and children still subsist on less than a dollar a day. Too many children die before their fifth birthday. Too many children – especially girls – are not taught to read and write. Too many are killed by epidemic disease. Too many lack clean drinking water.

The Church has been an important part of the lobby in developed countries to devote more aid to the poor, and in particular to make clear and substantial progress towards meeting the UN's Millennium Development Goals. And Catholic aid agencies are active on the ground in the poorest and harshest places in the world seeking to alleviate the conditions there. I was glad that Pope Benedict referred to this work in his encyclical on Love and that he noted that this developmental work was good in itself and should not be regarded as a way of converting the poor through meeting some of their material needs.

This is, I believe, an area where the Church can and should be even more outspoken. As a former political target of development lobbyists, - I was Britain's Development Minister in the 1980s - it seems to me that the subject is so important that one should not be too diplomatic or restrained in the way that the case for greater equity in the world is argued.

It is not only a matter of aid, but of course of trade too. This is a difficult subject to broach in a country where agriculture is such an important part of the economy. But frankly the EU's Common Agricultural Policy is difficult to defend if you believe that the world's economic rules should be fair for all.

Poorer countries are more likely to depend on their agriculture than richer ones. While it is true that we give the very poorest relatively open access to our markets, there is little excuse for protecting our farmers behind a wall of high tariffs. Where would the CAP today fit in to Catholic social teaching? In France, the greatest CAP beneficiary, one per cent of the largest farms receives more than the total amount that goes to the smallest forty per cent. I daresay that the pattern is similar in Britain and Ireland.

This highlights one substantial difference between the globalisation, so well described by JM Keynes, that swept the world in the late 19th century and up to the First World War. Then, we saw the open movement of money, goods, food and people. Today, the rich are keen on the free movement of goods and money but we have largely constrained free movement of food and people. We are protectionist about our food producers and scared of migrants. One result of keeping out food is to increase the number of illegal migrants from poor countries. If they cannot find work in their own countries, for example growing crops, they seek work legally or illegally in ours.

Of course, we should not regard economic growth in rich countries as a bad thing. In a literal sense it makes us more prone to consumerism, quite simply because there is more to consume and we have more money to spend on consumer goods and services. But there is a wealth of evidence that countries that prosper are more generous and tolerant to their minorities and to other groups of outsiders than those that do not. Economic hardship too frequently prompts people to look for scapegoats. They invariably target migrants and smaller ethnic groups.

Growth in itself – becoming better off – is not therefore a bad thing, and we should not assume that because people in a growing economy have more money in their pockets and more leisure, they will inevitably become more selfish, thoughtless and materialistic. A higher standard of living does not necessarily imply a lower quality of life though it can certainly do so. So I hope that the Church, whatever its legitimate criticisms of a barren consumerist culture, will not sound as though it wants to turn the clock back to the days before televisions and washing machines. There is a more valid critique of growth with which the Church should identify itself. I hope it will do so not least because of the

personal outlook of Pope Benedict, who clearly cares about our threatened environment. The Compendium is admirably comprehensive on this subject.

The argument that growth should be sustainable is not just a slogan. At a time when some think we may already have reached the tipping point in relation to global warming and climate change, the Church should help lead and shape the debate on protecting our environment against further degradation. An American senator recently argued that perhaps one way of convincing President Bush of the importance of environmental issues was by pointing out to him that the earth was in a way a faith-based initiative!

There really is an ethical issue here – how we preserve the global commons and hand them on to a new generation in good condition. We are custodians of our planet not its reckless masters, a point that increasingly reflects expedience as well as morality.

I was reading the other day some comments by the Solidarity hero of the Polish revolution, Lech Walesa. Discussing the end of Communism in Europe, he assigned fifty per cent of the credit to his country's Polish Pope. Some might contest the precise percentage awarded to John Paul II, but few surely would deny the central role he played in redrawing the political geography of Europe.

But what of the way we organise our lives, the choices we make for example about marriage and family? In Europe we appear to have moved from baby boom to baby bust in one generation. Fertility rates have dropped from well over the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman in the 1960s to well below. In a number of countries the average age of a mother at the birth of her first child has risen sharply, for example in Italy from 25.7

in 1961 to 30.4 in 2001. This is a global issue not simply one facing “old Europe”. Wherever in the world, from Italy and Spain to East Asia, there is a reasonable level of prosperity, a high level of female literacy and a cheap and safe supply of contraceptives, used without moral stigma, the birth rate falls below the replacement level of 2. The figures in secular Islamic Turkey, Shiite Iran and Catholic Brazil are all forecast to fall below that level in the next 15 years.

Let me mention some of the obvious results in Europe. Average household size is in decline – from 2.9 to 2.4 people since 1971 in Britain and from 3.3 to 2.6 in the same period in Italy. The EU’s population will be falling over the first half of this century – by 22 per cent in Italy, 15 percent in Poland and 8 per cent in Spain. These figures, don’t forget, are the result of the choices that individuals make. We cannot force families to have more children. Nor is the answer to try to drive women back to the traditional role from which they have been escaping. Indeed, there is a good deal of evidence that the developed countries that enjoy the highest birth rates are those where women enjoy the greatest economic freedom.

At the same time that we will be seeing in Europe a twenty per cent decline in the size of our working age population, the median age will be rising dramatically by almost 12 years over the next 50 years. So fewer people in work will have to support more people out of work. This is bound to lead to more women being encouraged to join the labour market, for example in Italy, where at present only four in ten females are in employment.

The causes and the implications of these dramatic demographic shifts need to be debated by our Church as well as by our political leaders. It is inevitable, and not unreasonable,

that many will contrast what has happened to Europe's politics, to the historic boundaries of our continent, with what has happened in so many European families.

Perhaps it is easier for us to see some other family issues in the context of social policy, ignorance and poverty. Does the absence of the provision of good healthcare, regardless of need, and of responsible sex education have at least something to do with the fact that American girls (according to former President Jimmy Carter, a devout Christian) "are five times as likely to have a baby as French girls, seven times as likely to have an abortion and seventy times as likely to have gonorrhoea as girls in the Netherlands." American teenagers are five times as likely to suffer from HIV/AIDS as Germans. I fear that Britain would not come as well as some other European countries out of these comparisons. So the explanation for these grisly figures cannot relate entirely to prosperity, free health care and health education. On the other hand, the social context of personal behaviour must play a greater part in explaining why, according to the UN, four million abortions, most of them illegal, take place in Latin America annually with up to 5,000 women dying from complications resulting from abortions. A pro-life policy should also be a pro-welfare and pro-health education policy, even if those things are not nearly enough.

I have already mentioned economic globalisation, its potentially boundless opportunities and some of its unfairnesses. There is a dark side of globalisation – threats that are magnified and expedited by modern technology and practices. A disease that might once have taken decades or even centuries to span the world can now threaten us all in years or months. Consider HIV/AIDS or Avian influenza. The drug trade, organised crime, trafficking in children and young women are other grim examples of this negative side of globalisation. The proliferation of nuclear weapons, with North Korea and Iran the

present focuses of international concern, should join the list. What might a rational citizen conclude? Surely that our existing institutionalised efforts at international co-operation, based on the United Nations, need to go much further. This is no time to argue that authority to act politically should lie primarily or mainly with nation states. The notion of subsidiarity advocates devolving power to the appropriate level for decision-taking. We need to consider the opposite need, pushing power to take decisions up to the level required if they are to unlock the sort of action that could deal with the problems that threaten us.

Sadly the attempts to reform and strengthen the UN last autumn achieved all too little. But practical experience as well as aspiration underline how important this work is. It may seem counter-intuitive when we look at the mayhem and murder in Colombia, West Africa, Sudan or Iraq, but actually the number of conflicts around the world has fallen in the last 15 years and so has the number of casualties resulting from them. Why? Partly because, believe it or not, we have become better at preventing and ending conflict, and at the heart of those endeavours have been pro-active diplomacy and the UN. For one consequence of this, look at the number of Irish troops involved in peace-keeping around the world.

There is one further issue that I want to raise in which the Church already plays a constructive and helpful role: that is the relationship with the Islamic world. A decade ago, an American political scientist Samuel Huntington wrote first an essay and then a book arguing that, just when some might think we were entering a war-free world, we were actually going to be confronted by a clash of civilizations. At the time, most of the debate engendered by this proposition concentrated on the alleged conflict of values

between Confucian and Western societies; Huntington's argument became an excuse for denying democracy, human rights and the rule of law to East Asians. Today, the argument is most sharply joined in relation to the West (Europe and America) and the Islamic world, bearing in mind of course that some of that Islamic world is (as it has been for much of our history) here in Europe. Terrorism gives the subject a sharp edge.

President Bush defines the enemy in America's "war on terrorism" as "radical Islam". I put on one side for the time being the fact there is not in my judgement a "war" on terrorism, as there were wars between knightly states, between nation states and between industrial societies. What there is, is a continuing use of violence against liberal, open societies for political ends. But I won't dwell on that important point. It is the description of "the enemy" that I want to focus on.

Our knowledge of Islam is weak. We do know, however, that you can distinguish between political, missionary and jihadist Islam. It is the last of those groups that condones and nurtures terrorism. Political Islam may be radical, but it does not necessarily collude with terrorism, and if we are going to argue that the spread of democracy and the institutions associated with it in an open society is the answer to jihadism we will have to deal with this political Islam.

I have already mentioned the hugely important and influential role that the Church can play in promoting dialogue with the Islamic world and advancing the understanding of it. There are perhaps three rather political or sociological issues that the dialogue I am sure will incorporate.

First, Moslems do not have a completely different set of values to those non-Moslems who live in Europe and America. All the polling evidence suggests a remarkable similarity of values. We might also remember that three quarters of the world's Moslems live outside the Middle East and North Africa, many of them in functioning democratic societies in Asia like India, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Second, we must be careful to explain that it is rarely the televised extremists who represent their faith and their societies, though they are often manipulated by repressive and unpopular governments as though they did, something that has clearly happened during the row over the notorious Danish cartoons.

Third, we can use our experience and voice to accommodate Moslems to the Enlightenment values that predominate in our own societies in Europe, which bear the stamp of Voltaire, Locke and John Stuart Mill. Historically the Enlightenment challenged the Catholic Church. Blasphemy and heresy no longer bring down on the heads of the perpetrators civil as well as religious sanctions. So we have long since learned to live in a world which recognises the difference between liberty and licence, but sensibly usually leaves personal judgement and choice to police this distinction. Our civilisation depends above all on our behaviour as individuals on the choices we make.

To go back for a moment to that disagreeable controversy over the cartoons, we believe in freedom of speech but expect (alas, we are often disappointed) that it will be exercised in ways that do not hurt or insult. It is not to resile from our secular Enlightenment values to argue that freedom of speech should accommodate respect for other cultures and religions. But people who belong to other religions or civilisations should understand

those values, even if they do not like them. They should not use their rejection of them to try to impose their extremist view of their own religion on their communities.

I hope this has not been too breathless, superficial or provocative a “tour d’horizon”. The fact that I have ranged so wide reflects the breadth of the Church’s own role and mission in the flawed world of man. As you all know better than I, the message of the Church is delivered to the faithful in a building constructed, inevitably, out of the “crooked timber of humanity”. No one is more challenged by the consequences of humanity’s imperfectability than those with a vocation to save its souls.