The Radical Vocation of the Catholic Laity[1]

Claire Davis

> Britain in the 1990s has lost its sense of direction and its people are at odds with themselves. It needs to revitalise its economy, modernise its institutions, rewrite the contract between the members of its society and recover self-esteem.[2]

These are the words of political economist and journalist Will Hutton in his now famous diagnosis of the contemporary ills of British society, *The State We're In*. 'All the malfunctions of the economy are related', argues Hutton, 'fused by the government's overweening desire to establish the market principle as the basis of every policy.' (p.14) The character of the British economy has been shaped by the collective aspiration to a gentlemanly life—to have an income for which one does not obviously labour, ideally from land, but otherwise from finance and commerce—speculation on the markets. At all events, industry, the actual work of production, has been regarded by those at the centre of power as an activity from which to keep a distance. This attitude has created a lack of commitment and poor investment on the part of finance in relation to industry which has, according to Hutton, impoverished the economy, preventing real economic growth and stability. In this approach, Britain is unique among her capitalist partners both in the West and now increasingly in Asia.

At the root of this disdain for industry is a denigration of work in general, the belief that if one didn't have to, or wasn't forced to work, one wouldn't. This belief is an important factor in shaping Conservative policy towards labour. Hutton paints the following picture:

> The key free market assumption is that work is a 'disutility' and leisure a''utility', and the wage reflects what is necessary to persuade individual workers to forego the leisure they prize and undertake the work they hate... The rational worker will only give up living on social security to go to work if the wage is high or the social security payment low; and the rational employer will only be

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able to employ him or her if no trade union bids up the economic wage. Work is supposed to be a commodity like any other and obey exactly the same rules. (p.99)

The problem with this picture, as Hutton goes on to demonstrate, is that it is not borne out in practice because employment is affected by a whole range of factors which the free market approach fails to consider. He continues:

> Work is not a 'disutility', even for those whose wages and conditions are poor, for the rhythm of work gives life meaning. The achievement of new tasks, the acquisition of skills and the social intercourse that is part and parcel of the work experience is not something human beings want to avoid; they want and need it. Above all, work offers a sense of place in a hierarchy of social relations, both within the organisation and beyond it, and men and women are, after all, social beings. Inevitably some work is demeaning and poorly paid, but the same need is there. Those who work belong; those who do not are excluded. Work, in short, is a utility. (p.99)

The future for Britain, argues Hutton, lies in what he calls 'stakeholder capitalism'—a capitalism in which the interests of all those who contribute, and not simply those of shareholders, are taken into account and given voice. This demands a new attitude to work and industry—encouraging long term investment, including workers in the decision making process, and harnessing their creative potential. It also involves fostering a non-confrontational approach to industrial relations on the part of workers' representatives, and creating an atmosphere of participation which allows flexibility in times of economic downswing (being prepared to accept lower wages when profits are low for example). In sum:

> A written constitution; the democratisation of civil society; the republicanisation of finance; the recognition that the market economy has to be managed and regulated, both at home and abroad; the upholding of a welfare state that incorporates social citizenship; the construction of a stable international financial order beyond the nation state. These feasible and achievable reforms must be accomplished if the dynamism of capitalism is to be harnessed for the common good. (p.326)

The 'common good' has been the subject of another recent appraisal of British life in the shape of the document issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. In many respects the Bishops echo Hutton's analysis. 'Catholic Social Teaching', they say, 'recognises the fundamental and positive value of business, the

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market, private property and free human creativity in the economic sector. But sometimes market forces cannot deliver what the common good demands, and other remedies have to be sought.' They go on, 'The Catholic doctrine of the common good is incompatible with unlimited free-market, or laissez-faire, capitalism, which insists that the distribution of wealth must occur entirely according to the dictates of market forces.'[3] As an alternative to unbridled capitalism the Bishops, with Hutton, turn to the idea of a 'stakeholder' economy: 'The economy', they argue, 'exists for the human person, not the other way round. Any economic enterprise has a range of "stakeholders": shareholders, suppliers, managers, workers, consumers, the local community, even the natural environment. None of these interests should prevail to the extent that it excludes the interests of the others.' (p.25)

Perhaps most significantly, however, moving away from the free-market vision of work as a 'disutility', and going beyond the alternative picture that Hutton is able to present, the Bishops offer the following account of work as a vocation:

> Work is more than a way of making a living: it is a vocation, a participation in God's creative activity. Work increases the common good. The creation of wealth by productive action is blessed by God and praised by the Church, as both a right and a duty. When properly organised and respectful of the humanity of the worker, it is also a source of fulfilment and satisfaction. At best, workers should love the work they do. The treatment of workers must avoid systematically denying them that supreme measure of satisfaction. We would oppose an unduly negative view of work even from a Christian perspective, which would regard it purely as a burden of drudgery; or even worse, a curse consequent upon the Fall. On the contrary, even before the Fall human work was the primary means whereby humanity was to co-operate with and continue the work of the Creator, by responding to God's invitation to "subdue the earth". (p.21)

But *The Common Good* document is not the first attempt in recent history to articulate a Catholic position within the wider debate considering the general state and future direction of British life and politics. In the 1960s a radical Catholic, socialist voice emerged in Britain in the form of *Slant*—a magazine started by Cambridge undergraduates, which in turn inspired the writing and publication of a range of books all sharing a common vision. The differences are important to note. *Slant* was primarily a lay initiative while the *The Common Good* comes explicitly from the Bishops in their official teaching role. While *Slant* was deeply committed to a socialist vision, the present statement is tempered to the possible inevitability of a

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market economy of some kind. But the most significant difference it seems to me, and the one that I will focus on, concerns the liturgy. In the vision presented by *Slant*, the liturgy plays a central part in the work for the transformation of society, while in the Bishops' document no mention of the liturgy is made.

The role of the liturgy can be understood in the context of a tension in Christian life between two bodies of feeling which Terry Eagleton, one of the founders of *Slant*, identifies as *the idea of the common life*, and *the idea of intensity*. He elaborates: 'As Christians we are committed to the idea of intensity, we live as potential martyrs, and yet we are also claiming to have something to contribute to the problem of how men should commonly live in society.'[4] The struggle for the Christian is to find some way of holding in tension these two visions. This, according to Eagleton, is the role of the liturgy: 'The obvious area in which sacred and secular, the intense and the ordinary, are fused, is in the liturgy itself, where the objects and relationships should keep their ordinary meanings and functions in terms of the human community, and yet are part of a greater intensity of life. We are looking, in other words, for a society which is in this sense sacramental, where the ordinary processes of living can themselves be part of a depth, having a living relation to beliefs and values.' (p.13)

This is where we come up against the free-market denigration of work because, as Eagleton argues, 'The point of a capitalist society is that the ordinary processes of life and production become so progressively meaningless that people are forced to turn for their living elsewhere—to the arts or the pub or personal relationships...In the liturgy we have the prototype of how we might resolve this: we see that our ordinary Christian living must have a wholeness which isn't incompatible with the detailed processes of living—rather that the wholeness forms through our concern with the details.' (p.13) Here is where liturgy and work come together: 'This, in practice, would mean a society where the common life of work was sacramental in the sense that it shaped and affirmed a human community, where the means for entering into the most intense experience the society had to offer were the normal means of life and production, and the common culture which grew from this economic community.' (p.14)

In order to grasp the implications of this suggested unity of liturgy and work, however, it is necessary to understand the present crisis in Britain, and in Western society in general, not simply as an economic crisis, but as a crisis of the imagination. Let us return to *The Common Good*. The Bishops state:

> This crisis concerns loss of individual belief and confusion over personal moral behaviour. But the social dimension is no less in crisis. Surveys and studies of the national mood display a nation ill at ease with itself. Such surveys tell us that the British do not look

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> forward to their society becoming fairer or more peaceful. They no longer expect security, either in employment or in personal relationships. They accept fatefully but without enthusiasm the prospect of their lives being increasingly dominated by impersonal economic forces which leave little room for morality. They seem to be losing faith in the possibility of a better future. (pp.25–6)

In other words, the crisis is not simply that no real opportunities for improvement exist, it is that people can no longer imagine what these opportunities might be. We can understand the situation better by looking at it in the terms of a popular example from game theory, the Prisoner's Dilemma. Will Hutton also uses this example and I quote from him:

> Two prisoners have to decide without communicating how they should respond to their jailer's proposal. Confession to the crime will be rewarded by your going free and the incarceration of the other prisoner;if you both confess then the sentence for both of you will be reduced;while if you both decide not to confess the evidence will only be sufficient to put you in prison for a short period. The optimal strategy is for both prisoners not to confess, in other words to co-operate with each other, but that runs the risk of the other prisoner confessing, in which case you will end up being incarcerated. If you both confess, on the other hand, at least the sentence is reduced. You both confess. (p.250)

Now Hutton uses this illustration to argue that the best strategy for the economy is co-operation over pure competition. Either way, however, someone ends up in jail. A radical vision, on the other hand, and as I shall argue a radical Christian vision, demands that we transcend the limits of the game altogether; find a new form of relationship which is not based on the threat of mutual betrayal. This radical vision is the true meaning of community and it demands revolutionary change. The possibility of such change, however, itself depends on the ability to imagine that things might be otherwise, the ability to envision a reality in discontinuity with the present. Let us call this ability *the imagination of difference.* This work of the imagination exists, as we shall see, in the cultivation of a creative tension between past, present, and future.

Revolutionary change, according to Herbert McCabe, another member of the *Slant* circle, is not simply a break with the past. Rather it is a taking up and a transforming of the past in the terms of a present reality and in relation to a future hope. He explains: 'A real development creates a new kind of continuity within which the old is contained as well as transcended. Every creative advance of a living thing restates the whole of its history as a new kind of unity.'[5] He goes

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on: 'A creative, revolutionary change, then, even though it is not a mere advance along the old lines of continuity, but a discovery of new lines, does not fully realise itself until it can be seen as in a new kind of continuity with the past.' (p.29)

Language, in evolutionary terms, represents just such a revolutionary change. It is both an intensification of previous forms of animal communication, and yet such a radically new form that it alters the entire shape of reality. The important difference, as McCabe elaborates, is, 'that other animals are born with their systems of communication, whereas for children the entry into language is a personal matter, a matter of their own biography.' (p.79) The significance of this difference is that for human beings maturity is contingent, it depends upon the individual's successful entry into the linguistic world, the world of human media, and as we shall see, the world of human meaning.

This may seem an obscure point since at a common sense level everyone speaks some language or other and the ability to do so appears to be a perfectly natural phenomenon. Yet if we examine language as the framework in which meaning is created, shared, and passed on, then the thrust of the argument becomes clearer. Returning to Terry Eagleton, he states:

> Objects don't have meanings "in themselves", separate from man, any more than their meanings rest simply in man himself...meaning, significance, is neither totally intrinsic to the object, nor totally conferred by the human response to it. It is, in some way, a process of fusion of the two: meaning is a product of a dynamic interaction between consciousness and reality, something negotiated from the encounter of mind and world, resting neither in the mind by itself nor the world by itself, but it is that creative synthesis of the two which is the act of perception and imagination. (p.56)

In other words, meaning arises in a process of struggle, encounter and negotiation between human beings and the world, in whose creation we participate. The fact of the human creation of meaning is not, however, evidence that the world is simply an idea. The world is a material reality and we are bodily, material beings whose ability to communicate is based on a common, sensuous life. But it is to say that human meaning is historical, in other words, I cannot understand a person or a thing except by understanding where they come from and their place within the scheme of human meaning. I have no direct access to meaning outside of the medium of human history. For a human being to reach maturity, therefore, they must literally discover who they are,— discover what their place is in the human narrative. That they have such a place is indisputable for each individual exists in

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a unique intersection of relationships and stories never having previously existed and never to be repeated again. Narrative, or story, is the level at which human meaning exists.

History, however, can be told from a variety of perspectives. I can relate some event from the past as though it had no bearing on the present, or I can speak from the present without the weight of any sense of where the present comes from. These two perspectives in turn affect my ability to envision the future. If I look at the present simply from the perspective of the past then I am only able to imagine modes of existence in terms of past categories of experience and I am likely to want to effect a return to the past via the future. On the other hand, if I live in the present with no sense of the historical possibilities that have gone before I can only imagine the future in the terms of the present and therefore as a repetition of what already exists. Neither of these perspectives is adequate because in both cases history isn't going anywhere. In both cases there is no creation of new meaning and as a result history literally stops. Some are living off the meaning of the past, while others are engaged in the endless repetition of the present. Neither, however, allows the imagination of a future which is really different.

Now the interesting thing about the Christian story is that it offers a paradoxical relationship to time—it demands that we remember the future—and this activity of remembering the future is about our historical relationship to Jesus Christ, and through him to God. The incarnation is the story of God entering human history in the person of Jesus, who comes to show us, via human history, the way to the Father, in other words, he reveals the form of human relationship which leads out of alienation to God. The revolutionary change represented by the Judaeo-Christian tradition as a whole is precisely that it offers a demystification of God. As Herbert McCabe explains, 'The other gods, the ones that Israel has beyond everything else to shun, make their demands in terms of special religious cults, but the demand of Yahweh is that men should have a certain kind of relationship with each other in the secular world.' (p.58)

For the Christian, Jesus is a yet further revolutionary change for He reveals in Himself the form of our basic relationship to the world which is love. Love, in this sense, however, has a particular shape, the shape of Jesus Himself, of His life and teaching. In other words, in order to find our basic relationship to the world, in order to discover our selves, we too must love and in loving we must imitate Jesus. Jesus' mission to the world, however, failed. Instead of following him we crucified him. It is important here to understand the crucifixion as an historical event, namely, as contingent—it didn't have to happen, Jesus did not come in order to be crucified but this was the consequence of His rejection. Jesus' death banished Him from history. Belief in the resurrection,

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however, is precisely the belief that this death is not the end but that Christ will come again. Jesus, therefore, is an historical event both in the past and in the future.

It is in this historical context that the mission of the Church becomes clear. This mission is to bring about the second coming of Christ in history by following the path which Jesus revealed, namely by loving in the shape which Jesus loved. This is why the Church is called the Body of Christ, for after the death of Jesus the Church becomes the agent of Christ in history and Christians are those who are called to become members of this Body; to carry out the project of building the kingdom of heaven on earth. The Christian story, therefore, is a story which involves the radical imagination of difference. It makes it possible to imagine the future in discontinuity with the present and in relationship to the past. The work of the present is to incarnate the future.

This work, however, demands that the past and the future be constantly retold in the terms of the present. This is the role of the liturgy. The liturgy is the means by which Christians embody Christ, literally take the shape of Christ. It is not a reflective discourse, however, but a thoroughly material activity which necessitates the participation of the whole person. It is the context in which Christians create the meaning of Christ in the present. Furthermore, as we saw earlier, meaning is a linguistic creation, language here including all human media of communication. In other words, I cannot create the meaning of Christ except by using the human media of communication which are available to me.

Now the very project of building the kingdom of heaven on earth is one which necessitates communication between Christians and non-Christians. In the past, and even in various forms in the present, this necessity has taken the shape of tyranny, coercion, and domination. This shape, however, proceeds not from the imagination of difference but from the uncritical adoption of already existing forms of social structure and authority. We can see such a process with the conversion of Constantine—the Church simply adopts the framework of the Roman Empire. This is an important point and one which Terry Eagleton stresses, namely, that 'the possibilities of relationship within the church are *cultural* possibilities, supplied to us by our kind of society.' (p.86)

We now live in a democratic age. In other words, we live in an age in which the form of relationship which exists in democracy is the embodiment of our fullest understanding of what constitutes the common good, whether or not in practice it is fully realized. Democracy in these terms may be called a discovery. It is a non-arbitrary possibility which arises in the context of the human creation of meaning. Democracy becomes possible through human history and

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represents a development of our collective imagination. If we stand with the argument that the Church, in Her task of incarnating the future in the present, only has the human media available to her which are available in society at large, then we must conclude that the only form of relationship the Church can now adopt is the form of democracy. We have already said, however, that this adoption should not be uncritical or it becomes not an imagination of difference but a repetition of what already exists. This holds true here as well.

The Bishops, in *The Common Good* document, are already engaged in the process of a critical appropriation of democracy. They state:

> The Church's teaching now fully embraces two fundamental features of modern society about which it once had some difficulties: democracy and human rights. In the case of democracy, the Church has been able to make its own contribution to political theory by exploring the limitations of the democratic process, for instance by warning that democracy can never be a self-fulfilling justification for policies that are intrinsically immoral. Democracy is not a self-sufficient moral system. Democracy, if it is to be healthy, requires more than universal suffrage: it requires the presence of a system of common values.
>
> If democracy is not to become a democratic tyranny in which the majority oppresses the minority, it is necessary for the public to have an understanding of the common good and the concepts that underlie it. Otherwise, they will be unlikely to support actions by public authority that are not to the immediate advantage of the majority. Furthermore, public confidence is undermined, and democracy subverted, when the members of public authorities responsible for the common good are not appointed democratically or on objective merit but in order to ensure that the authority in question has a political complexion favourable to the government of the day. (p.10)

These are very important insights about the nature of democracy and its limitations as a political system: Democracy only works if it is based on a common vision which makes it possible for the majority to imaginatively and therefore materially incorporate the marginalized, otherwise democracy becomes simply the tyranny of the many over the few. Now this inclusive vision is precisely what the Church has to offer, yet these reflections are not applied to the Church, but to secular society so-called. This division, however, is unreal for the Christian because there can be no sphere which falls outside the mission of the Church to embody Christ. If the Church recognizes democracy as the ultimate expression of human relationship in the world at present, than the Church cannot itself fail to become democratic, for the movement

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of the Church is not inward but outward. In other words, the aim of the Church is not that everyone should join in the sense that everyone should engage in the Church's cultic activities, but rather that Christians should, by going outward into the world, so love the world that they transform it into the shape of Christ, and thus realize the kingdom of heaven on earth. By refusing democracy, the Church is failing in her mission to transform the world by being in the world because she is failing to form Christians who are able to speak the world's language. She is failing in her duties of motherhood. Brian Wicker, another *Slant* author, elaborates the difficulties inherent in the motherhood of the Church:

> The danger of motherly love is that of possessiveness, and this applies to the Church as our mother as much as elsewhere. It is a mistake to emphasize the protective function of motherhood at the expense of its ultimate purpose, which is a certain independence from her protection. Without this degree of self-subsistence, a kind of spiritual infantilism is liable to develop...The Church, as our mother, rears us in order that we may become one with Christ by being conscious and living members of his mystical body...Our love for the living, risen Christ constitutes the element of adult love which is necessary to balance the motherly love of the Church, and to complete it; for Christ is our contemporary and equal in a sense that the Church, as such, is not.[6]

This is why motherly love is our image for the Church's love, while marriage is our image for the love of Christ—an intimate love between equals. The Church's job is to form us into the shape of Christ so that we can in turn bring Christ into the shape of the world. This passing on of Christian agency is how Christian history moves forward. If, however, Christians do not make the step of going out into the world, but remain perpetually in a state of childhood in relation to the motherhood of the Church then Christian history cannot proceed. At the same time, it is a distortion for individuals who have become agents in the world to return to infancy when they come together in Church. Church and world have a two way relationship. As Eagleton writes: 'What we need to grasp is that the power of the liturgy as a social force, one transforming society, depends on the values and relationships we bring to it as well as on those we take from it...What we are in the Church depends on what we are in the world, as well as vice versa.' (p.87)

The Bishops, however, also point to a possible way forward for the Church. Quoting from the encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, the Bishops write:

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> Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater or higher association what lesser and subordinate organisations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy or absorb them. (p.13)

This is what is known as the principle of subsidiarity. The Bishops continue:

> It will be seen that the principle of subsidiarity is no ally of those who favour the maximisation of State power, or centralisation of the State at the expense of more local institutions. It supports a dispersal of authority as close to the grass roots as good government allows, and it prefers local over central decision-making. Subsidiarity also implies the existence of a range of institutions below the level of the State: some of these bodies are for the making of decisions affecting individuals, some are for influencing the way those decisions are made...Society as envisaged by Catholic Social Teaching should be made up of many layers, which will be in complex relationships with one another but which will be ordered as a whole towards the common good, in accordance with the principle of solidarity. (p.13)

The Church need look no further afield for her way forward towards democracy than Her own teaching self-applied. On this question Church and world have much both to teach and to learn from each other. The world, in its desperate lack of vision, its imaginative crisis, is caught in a cycle of repetition, unable to move. It needs the motherhood of the Church for a renewed sense of the imaginative possibilities, and for the formation which enables individuals and the community as a whole to realize their fundamental relationship to reality, to find their identity. The Church and Christians, on the other hand, need the eros of democracy. They need to accept the responsibility and the risk that comes with adult love in order to exercise their Christian agency. Christians need to assume this responsibility as much in the Church as in the world.

The liturgy is the taking up of what is ordinary—of birth, sex, eating, work, death, violence, of our rising in the morning and our going to bed at night—and without destroying the ordinary meaning making it into the pattern of Christ, incorporating it into the Christian story, through poetry, song, dance, and through all our media of communication. Our expression in these media is the making visible and material, the making incarnate of our relationships with each other.

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In this way the ordinary facts and details of everyday living in community become also the means for living with the greatest intensity. Art conceived as a leisure activity and not as an integral part, and the fruit, of everyday life and labour is disempowered and denuded of meaning. Here liturgy and work come together. For the Christian, the distinction between work and leisure is meaningless. A Christian's work is her entire life in all its detail; everything she does either contributes to the coming of the kingdom or fails to do so. There is no other meaningful distinction. This vision of an entire Christian life is usually referred to as a vocation, and in this sense, every person has a unique vocation which he must discover, as we saw earlier, by uncovering for himself his place in history, in the unique intersection of relationships and stories in which he finds himself. This vocation is an ultimate reference for the individual, in other words, everything else in life is relative to it. A person may be called to do things which are incomprehensible in terms of the categories of society at large. She may accept work which seems beneath her skill, or pursue a path which cannot lead to success according to secular criteria because, nevertheless, this is part of her vocation. Justice in the workplace according to the limits of a benevolent capitalism, although important as an interim goal at the present time is not in itself a sufficient vision of the common good to realize the Christian mission of an historical heaven.

'Work', according to the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, 'is more than a way of making a living: it is a vocation, a participation in God's creative activity.' (p.21) Work, in the terms in which it has been set forth in this paper, is the radical vocation of the Catholic laity. It is a political, artistic, and social vocation and today it is a vocation which calls for a transformation, through the imagination of difference, of the present limits of both Church and world.

1 This paper was originally given as part of a day of reflection on *What Makes a Catholic?* at St.Albert the Great's Parish, Edinburgh, February 1997.

2 Will Hutton, *The State We're In*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1995, p.10.

3 *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching*, London: The Catholic Bishop's Conference of England and Wales,1996, p.18.

4 Terry Eagleton. *The New Left Church*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1966, p.6.

5 Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love and Language*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1968, p.23.

6 Brian Wicker, *Culture and Liturgy*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1963, p.53.

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