

Social Work : Professionalism and Catholic Reluctance

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The attraction inherent in social work and the corresponding reluctance of Catholics to commit themselves wholeheartedly to it has always struck me as a curious paradox.

It is too obvious a fact to elaborate that to a Catholic conscious of his calling as a member of the Mystical Body and as a representative of Christ, the opportunities which social work provides for carrying out his obligations to his fellow men and for exercising charity to the fullest possible degree are exceptionally great. No discussion of social work with individuals is possible without reference to the casework relationship as its very foundation and I should like to clarify what I see as the reason for attaching such tremendous importance to the quality of this relationship, which the social worker succeeds in establishing with the client. It would seem to me that the high place allocated to this aspect of social work practice stems from our conviction that in and through this relationship we can offer to a fellow human being the most valuable gift which we possess; that part of ourselves which is most in keeping with our supernatural calling. It is only the intimacy of a relationship which provides an adequate means for a meaningful communication of our committal to the membership of mankind, to the fact that we are all members of one another, and to the implication of this truth. It is through this committal that we ourselves live more fully and enable others to do so. Herein is the golden opportunity which social work offers to Catholics. The recognition and acceptance of the unique importance which human relationships play in life must lead to the conclusion that there is no other occupation (parenthood excepted) which enables the same extent of valid concentration on this area. Even in such professions where the relationship matters a great deal, as in medicine and teaching, the focus has to be on the particular objectives which these professions exist to promote, i.e. on the treatment of illness and instilling of knowledge, and the quality of the relationship is in a sense an incidental, though a very important one. In social work, on the other hand, because 'the art of living is to be right in personal

relationships',¹ the primary concentration on the relationship is not only fully justified but essential in assisting clients to deal with their problems. Social workers are in a highly privileged position in this respect.

Why is it then that comparatively few Catholics elect to be social workers? I have no statistics at my disposal but from observation and experience of selecting candidates for training and from teaching on a professional social work course, I gain the distinct impression that the appeal of social work to young educated Catholics is less than to other Christians and to humanists. I should like to venture two reasons for this phenomenon.

One of these is the outmoded concept of social work which Catholics hold in common with many others, namely that it is a philanthropic occupation and not a professional activity. The Victorian idea concerning social work has undergone certain modifications as a result of the blatant demands made by the twentieth century reality, e.g., a private fortune and an aristocratic background are no longer considered essential prerequisites for this type of pursuit, but the idea that certain qualities of character, such as kindness and patience, are sufficient to equip a person to be a social worker, is dying out much more slowly and there seems to be a stronger investment in keeping it alive. Catholics are of course not the only people to hold such an opinion. Lady Wootton in her book 'Social Service and Social Pathology', and in a number of various other pronouncements, takes considerable trouble to deny professional status to social work and justifies her viewpoint by saying that 'good manners, ability and willingness to listen' together with efficient record keeping are the principal elements required. Such an opinion has its flaws. As Professor D. V. Donnison writes: 'The demand for good manners and for ability and willingness to listen, either means that any nicely brought up girl can do social work, or that social workers need a thorough and sensitive understanding of human feelings and relationships and considerable training and skill in these matters. Social workers are entitled to ask their critic to think this out a little further and explain herself more clearly'.²

The second reason for the lack of popularity of social work with Catholics seems to rest in a fundamental and deep-seated suspicion that a scientific approach to human behaviour is not fully in keeping with some of the precepts of our religion. Here is a much more serious obstacle which needs a more careful and detailed analysis. I shall attempt

¹Fr W. Lawson, S.J.: *Person to Person*.

²D. V. Donnison in *The Almoner*, July/Aug./Sept., 1959.

such an analysis within the context of a discussion of the nature of social casework and some of the chief principles guiding its activities, and the two main underlying themes will be these: first, that there is no basic incompatibility between a scientific approach to social work and Catholicism, providing we are well informed about both and do not consider them to be synonymous; and secondly, that far from denigrating the charitable spirit of social work, the application to this work of all available relevant knowledge is an essential condition if justice is to be done to the demands which it makes. In fact, not to use the contribution which the various social sciences have to make is to offer a second or a third best to those in need of help, and thus to fail them.

I suggest the following definition of social casework as our terms of reference: 'Professional social work with individuals which is conceived as an integration of relevant knowledge, appropriate attitudes and necessary skills, and which aims at helping clients to resolve, ameliorate or tolerate more comfortably their difficulties in social functioning'. In other words, the focus in social work is on living on earth and not on getting to heaven. This definition, like any other, is incomplete, unless related to the philosophical basis which both gives social work its *raison d'être* and sustains it in its difficulties. Social work cannot exist without having a deep purpose, and as it is so intimately concerned with human beings its purpose must relate to the purpose of human life itself. Before analysing the nature of social work activity, it is therefore necessary to specify the chief assumptions on which it is based, namely:

That every human being has an inherent worth in virtue of being a unique individual and that this basic worth is not conditional on his achievements or behaviour;

That there is an inherent capacity in every person to develop and advance his personality in keeping with his human dignity, however much this is contradicted by his current behaviour;

That there exists a mutual inter-dependence of human beings on each other, and that all people carry in themselves the need both to give and to receive and that they cannot achieve fulfilment without this need being met.

To me, these three assumptions, which provide the philosophical basis for social work, are so identical with what Christianity teaches that every time I introduce them to students as social work concepts and thus, by implication, religiously neutral, I feel something of a hypocrite. And yet it is most important to maintain their separate identity as the philosophical foundation of social work because this enables their

acceptance by all social workers, irrespective of their religion.

I strongly suspect that much of the Catholic confusion and discomfort about social work is derived from a lack of clarity in distinguishing between it and religious activity on the one hand, and it and some form of morally neutral psychological or sociological exercise on the other. Hence, social workers to be good and trustworthy in Catholic eyes must be reinforced by the authority of the priest and must reinforce his authority; otherwise they are devoid of moral principles and to be guarded against as harmful influences. This is putting it very crudely, but it seems to me that something on these lines must underlie such frequent misconceptions by Catholics as that no non-Catholic social worker can be trusted not to force a Catholic client to embark on some course of action contrary to their religion. Such apprehensions are reflections of an abysmal ignorance of the essentials of social work and as such are no more praiseworthy than the complete absence of confidence in the faith and fortitude of Catholic clients which they also convey.

As social work claims the continuity of its activities over the ages, it must also be prepared to meet the following criticism which is not infrequently levelled at it: 'Why is it that in the past people with a strong social conscience who were anxious to offer relief to their less fortunate brethren, could do so, and often did so successfully, without all the present emphasis on learning, professional status, etc.? What has made this change necessary, if it is necessary at all?'. The appropriate answer to this would seem to be twofold.

Firstly, it is inherent in the nature of social work activity that it adjusts itself constantly to the needs of the day and tries to meet them. Social work does not, or should not, have any other interest of its own as it is the servant of society and of its members. Consequently, its permanent task is to adapt itself to whatever crises and problems a given society produces. It is in this connection that the focus of casework on problems of social living is so important as a general guide and as an essential means of maintaining identity by providing a structure within which social work is to operate. As long as in a country material needs are predominant or acute, social workers must inevitably and rightly busy themselves in meeting these; as soon however, as a country has reached a higher standard of material living, a different type of need comes into prominence—that which is concerned with a person's feelings about himself and about his relationships with others. There seems little doubt that whatever economic, industrial, scientific and other

factors lead to an increased level of material prosperity, thus relieving members of a society from their cares in connection with matters of mere survival, they also create certain new problems and release the formerly dormant potential for worry, neurosis, insecurity, loss of purpose in living, etc. I find a good illustration of this point in a recent essay on adolescence by a student of mine. After describing the characteristics of this stage in human development, she goes on to say this: 'All adolescents have in common certain problems which must be resolved: to leave their families and acquire ties and responsibilities to society; to get a career; to cope with their sexual maturity; to accept themselves and to find a satisfactory view of the conception of life and death. In some societies these problems are largely resolved for the adolescent by society: they find him a mate, they dictate his career with much ceremony and little or no ambiguity; they recognise or indeed enforce the transference of his loyalties from family to clan, tribe, society. The role the adolescent is expected to adopt is clearly laid down and the time when he should adopt it is specified. The individual childhood experience may have made this pattern more or less easy to accept, but at least the uncertainty is removed from the picture and adolescence can be a time almost completely stress free. In our society—what happens? The adolescent reaches sexual maturity, but marriage is acceptable only when the individuals are self-supporting financially, and yet in our industrialised society the period of dependency is unnaturally prolonged, result — frustration. The variety of careers is bewildering, there is a definite status hierarchy but the jobs open to the individual have largely been defined by the result of his eleven-plus examination, and for a great many people the choice is restricted to endless unskilled, monotonous occupations, result — frustration; or for the bright few who can choose the higher status jobs the frustration of prolonged training and dependency. Society itself is not sure at what stage the adolescent should give up family ties: families, on the whole, are small and can devote more time, attention and emotion to their adolescents, and will often feel useless and jobless when the adolescent leaves, so there is a confused struggle for independence, and much — frustration. The *mores* adopted by the family may be different from those advocated by the school, and different again from those met with at work, on the T.V., in the cinema. What is the adolescent to do? What standard of behaviour is expected of him? Who is to help him and what role is to be his? Where does he fit into this changing, shifting society of ours? The adults cannot agree, the adolescents must work it out for themselves. Their natures and

society are demanding so much of them but there is no clear path leading to satisfaction'. Analogous difficulties can be easily thought of in relation to marriage, old age and other situations, all of which have this in common, that they highlight the peculiar stresses and difficulties which confront human beings, at least in our part of the world. From this it follows quite logically that contemporary social work must accept the reality of these stresses and attempt to deal with them.

And this brings me to the second reason why social work as it is practised to-day is not entirely the same as it was in the past. Alongside the mounting complications of human existence, there is a constant spread of new knowledge attempting to provide explanations for the current social phenomena. This wealth of information is often bewildering and frightening. It certainly needs sifting and approaching with care, but it is there to be used and a social worker who refuses to look at the available contributions from the various social sciences is failing those in need of help as badly as a doctor who goes on prescribing medicines from the days preceding the discovery of anti-biotics. Much of the resistance to a scientific approach to social work rests in the misconception that there is something incompatible between an intellectual approach to human problems and a feeling one, that the choice for social workers rests between the head and the heart, but not in both combined. I should like to demonstrate that not only are the two not incompatible, but that in fact the absence of one is a very real handicap to the other.

I shall do this by looking at some of the major casework principles, starting with the one which seems to me to play a particularly important part in giving social work an identity of its own, the principle which is commonly called 'individualisation'. Its practice presupposes a firm acceptance of the uniqueness of every man and that consequently no two situations are ever alike, however alike they may look. Such an attitude will enable social workers to approach the situation with an open mind and will allow them to try and understand the problem as it is rather than as they expect it or want it to be. This however is not enough. The willingness to see a situation as it is must be accompanied by the possession of a certain knowledge and equipment which enables one to see accurately by providing a framework of generalisations against which specific situations can be viewed. How can one recognise, for example, a client's attempt at non-verbal communication unless one has some conception of the various ways in which this type of communication can manifest itself? Or how can one have any degree of

certainty about a client's need unless one's assessment is based on some objective criterion? For example, whilst it helps most people to verbalise their anxiety, and most social workers spend much of their time enabling their clients to do this, this premise is not entirely foolproof because, for example, in the case of schizophrenics an excessive expression of feelings is likely to precipitate a breakdown.

Acceptance is another important principle of social work with individuals. It stems from the conviction that regardless of his past and present behaviour, every person has intrinsic dignity and worth in virtue of his humanity. It calls for the need to differentiate between a person and his actions, but however obvious and acceptable this principle is in theory it is the most difficult one to practise, and it is also the one which lends itself most to subtle forms of abuse. Here, understanding of the client and of oneself, which helps to identify one's particular difficulties in practising acceptance, is the sphere in which knowledge can offer important safeguards.

The non-judgmental attitude is the principle which often gives social workers a bad name. It tends to be misunderstood very easily and is confused with an amoral attitude. In fact, the emphasis it conveys of the inappropriateness and futility of social workers setting themselves up as judges of their clients is analogous to the Christian precept that we should not cease from loving the sinner in spite of his sins. The very nature of the social worker's task makes it essential to assess constantly the quality of the clients' behaviour in order to learn what is wrong and what can be done to help. An essential aid to social workers' ability to evaluate behaviour in this way without being condemning is their knowledge about the complex interaction of the many factors which have played a part in producing the situation concerned. I am sure it was this which enabled a young hospital social worker to sit for long periods by the bedside of a man serving a prison sentence for murder and listen to his going over the details of the murder he had committed. This man suffered from severe feelings of guilt and dreaded his discharge from prison which was drawing near because he could not imagine he could ever be acceptable to anyone. This was his first experience of the world outside prison for some years, and the fact that a young woman was able and willing to talk to him and not condemn him for having murdered another young woman seems to have been a turning point in his rehabilitation.

The principle of self-determination is one of the more difficult of the casework principles to apply in individual instances, and the one there-

fore which demonstrates the value of knowledge most clearly. It is obviously not an absolute principle because the social worker's job is to help clients live their lives in communion with other people and not in spite of or against them. An individual's right to determine his course of action has to be seen in the context of other people's rights, and socially irresponsible behaviour cannot be condoned by social workers, not only because it endangers their own integrity, but also because it is not helpful to clients. Closely linked with this point is the further one that for a person to be able to exercise his right of choice appropriately, there must be certain prerequisites, such as reasonable physical and mental health, knowledge of the relevant facts, and a degree of emotional maturity. No ability to exercise this right unaided is expected of young children or the very old and disabled. This is obvious and relatively easy, but it is the less clearcut situations which tend to raise problems for social workers who would be failing in their responsibility if they tried to shelter behind this principle and refused to take a more active part in helping those of their clients to make their choice who need help with this. In knowing when one is justified to do so, in what area, and to what extent, and when one is trespassing on an individual's own conscience, an understanding of the various factors involved is essential.

Finally, those principles which have to do with the management of the casework relationship itself. Here, I should like to quote from Miss E. R. Gloyne's talk at the Summer School at Spode House last year: 'When you are crossing a mountain stream it is embarrassing, and shows you are no good at balancing, to wobble and nearly fall off the stepping stones. But it is very comforting to find a companion's hand reaching out for you to grasp and regain balance again. Only now you have taken the companion's hand and the momentary relief is over, there is another fear. If he or she pulls too hard, you surely will overbalance and fall in. Or, although the next big gap between the stones isn't really more than a normal stride, it looks it; it is frightening and difficult to step across, and your balance hasn't quite come back; the soles of your shoes are intolerably slippery. Your companion may pull you across or attempt to do so, and you foresee the most disastrous results. You can refuse the help, let go the helping hand and struggle alone—perhaps now from a slightly worse position. You can allow yourself to be pulled across willy-nilly at the risks of spashing, slipping and banging yourself and feeling so scared that you say 'never again'. Or, perhaps you are both stuck—your helper so far out she can hardly get back and you stranded

amid-stream. Both of you have to wait and think and both are anxious. How like the early stages of the casework relationship this is!³ I have quoted this particular passage because whilst it demonstrates the reciprocal nature of this type of relationship and the need for humility on the social worker's part, it also makes clear that whether or not the stream is safely crossed depends to a considerable extent on the expertise of the 'guiding companion', on whether or not they know where the current is at its most rapid, which of the stones will give way underfoot, and which will provide a solid support. I am quite sure that the uniqueness and mystery to be found in every relationship is not damaged by its being subjected to the scrutiny of the mind, but on the contrary is enhanced by the process, through having some of the stumbling blocks removed and the gaps bridged.

Does this plea to Catholicism to give social work the trust and respect it deserves, by recognising its dependence on knowledge, mean that social work in future is to be the exclusive prerogative of a relatively small number of university trained workers, and that there will no longer be a place for the interested volunteer or the less intensively trained person? I am sure there is no danger of this happening. Just because social workers are called upon to deal with such a variety of human needs, there is and there always will be, scope for a variety of talents. The shortage of social workers is very great in spite of the fact that so many of the problems with which a social worker could help still go unrecognised. This problem of shortage will remain with us for a long time and this makes the need for a rational distribution of scarce resources most urgent. The presence of different degrees of need and therefore of different ways of meeting them is being increasingly recognised. It was spelled out quite explicitly in the recommendations of the Ministry of Health Working Party on Social Workers in Health and Welfare Departments of Local Authorities in 1959. The Report of the Working Party describes three types of social worker and the areas in which their particular contributions lie. It also stresses the importance of training for every category of social worker.

What is often overlooked is the value in any community of a body of people prepared to be the active conscience of that community and undertake the responsibility for its poor, sick and aged by means of such voluntary activities as hospital visiting, baby sitting, providing companionship to the lonely, etc. Whilst it is true that certain types of social work can only be done by the more highly trained, it is equally true

³'The Living Relationship', printed in *Life of the Spirit*, December, 1962.

that others can only be carried out effectively by the person who is willing and able to step into the role of the good neighbour. Here again, it is my impression that the Catholic community is nowhere near the forefront of such activities. It is true that such Societies as that of St Vincent de Paul exist in many parishes, but it is equally true that one hears rather too frequently such disturbing accounts of their activities as that decisions with regard to the granting of help are based on the Poor Law criterion of whether or not a person is deserving, rather than on whether or not he is in need of the help which is within the power of the Society to give. Such incidents prove the validity of opinions of those who, like the National Council for Old People's Welfare, hold the view that the undertaking of social work as a voluntary activity should not exempt anybody from having to undergo a certain amount of basic training. Human nature is too precious and vulnerable to justify anything less than the best that can be provided at any given time.

I have tried to convey my deep conviction that social work is sufficiently honourable, moral and responsible for it not to be necessary or helpful to conceal its separate identity by viewing it as an extension of something else, e.g., of pastoral care. In conclusion, I should like to underline this conviction even further and suggest that it is therefore incorrect to talk or even think of Catholic social work or Catholic social workers as distinct from Catholics who are social workers or social workers who are Catholics. It does not, of course, follow from this that being a Catholic has no relevance to the practice of social work. Besides the universal relevance of our religion for whatever we undertake, in the case of social work this relevance has special significance. Because the work brings us into such close and intimate contact with other people, what we are affects what we do in a very direct way. Laurens Van der Post put this most effectively in his comment: 'There is an important communication which we tend to overlook in life and that is the communication which comes not from what we say but from what we are'.⁴

⁴B.B.C. broadcast in 1961.