

Address by the Most Reverend Vincent Nichols Archbishop of Westminster to the Faith in Health Conference. Liverpool Hope University on Thursday 24 June 2010.

The Spiritual Care Needs of Older People

The theme of this conference on Faith in Health – ‘beginnings and endings – caring for the whole person’ – is timely and important. In the last few years there has been a welcome drive in the National Health Service toward personal care and a real focus on the personalisation agenda. There have also been a number of key reports on care of the elderly: most significantly by the Kings Fund and by Help the Aged. In this time together I hope that we will be able to open up the idea of ‘transitions’ by examining a dimension of personal care that is often overlooked. So often we find spiritual needs being treated simply as a by-product of medical conditions, when in fact the evidence shows that recovery is actually hastened when people are attended to holistically.

Over the next three days we will be looking in detail at the different issues of transition and change for the care community, focussing on the quality of care and how best to meet spiritual needs. I’ve been asked to provide some reflections on the spiritual care needs of the elderly. As you would expect, I will be doing this from the perspective of a bishop. But I’m also conscious that this Conference is not just for Catholics, and I hope that both what I have to say and this event as a whole will reflect that. The relationship between the spiritual dimension of a person’s life and the religious practice of that person is a fascinating and important one. Indeed, from the perspective of religious belief, the two cannot be separated. But this address and this conference are focussed on spiritual care. This means that I will not be addressing the issues surrounding NHS Chaplaincies, which, of course, are primarily focussed on religious care.

This I hope to make clear, I trust, that we do not address issues of spiritual care from some perspective of self-interest, as if we were defending a position. Rather the crucial importance of the spiritual dimension is that it is a fundamental truth about every human being. It is out of respect for that truth that we invite you all to approach this topic. Indeed, recognising that each of us has a spiritual dimension is the ultimate defence against reductionism: a philosophy which leaves people so vulnerable to political, social, and financial manipulation. This is why I believe that, in some very important ways, a task of the Church is to carry and proclaim the memory of what it means to be human.

But let’s begin with the demographics. The latest projections¹ show that in 20 years more than a fifth of the population will be over 65 and more than a tenth of the population will be over 75. In an older population many medical conditions will be more common. Two thirds of those over 75 report a longstanding illness or disability. The Alzheimer’s Society estimates that three quarters of people in long-term care have a form of dementia. It will also be a more lonely society: already today, three fifths of women over 65 are living alone. These are not developments with which our society feels comfortable. We can see how threatened many people feel by an ageing population by the terms in which it is described in the media: ‘demographic time bomb’ or ‘economic threat’.

¹ Office for National Statistics, 8 June 2010

Fortunately there is another side to this picture. Volunteers with just one charity, the St Vincent de Paul Society, made over 75,000 visits to the elderly last year. Since 1996 the numbers in care homes have actually fallen by 100,000, so that now more than 95% of elderly people are able to continue to live in their own homes or with relatives. This fall speaks profoundly of the dedication of families and carers, both voluntary and paid. It is worrying that numbers are now beginning to rise again for the first time in fifteen years, in part because state subsidised home help has been among the first public services to suffer from spending constraints.

A utilitarian view of the world can encourage us to see some people in a very negative way, especially when the focus is on the extra burdens they impose upon others. Their care needs, both physical and spiritual, are seen not as something owing in justice, but as consuming our time and money at a moment when we feel able to spare neither. Conversely, our society has a disproportionate sense of the value of youth: we see this throughout popular culture and in the overpowering pressure to appear young through the use of cosmetics, diets, exercise, surgery. If energy, youth, time and money are indeed all that matter then it is only to be expected that older people will be treated as little valued burdens, and that we will worship human life in its prime. It is only when we stand back and consider the true worth and dignity of human life in itself, including its intrinsic spiritual dimension, that we realise the radical equality of all people at every age and in every condition. It is only then that we can have a healthy understanding of the inter-dependent and symbiotic relationship between age and youth.

As I said at the outset, there has recently been significant reflection on care for the elderly, on what it means, and on the quality of care provided. But the debate on ageing and our perceptions of ageing has not been nearly so vigorous. The experience of the Catholic Church is of combining practical engagement with a tradition of reflection upon the meaning and calling of the human person. That tradition in its most developed form can be found in Pope Benedict's social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, in which the Pope revisited the teachings on integral human development to apply them to our own society, and where he speaks of 'inter-generational justice'². This is indeed the premise of our Conference here in Liverpool, underpinning our theme today about the spiritual needs of older people: the supreme human dignity of every individual at every stage of life and in their life-long relationships.

This is why authentic spiritual care has the effect of nourishing above all a sense of dignity in the elderly and in those who interact with them. But unlike most other forms of care its success cannot easily be measured. It does not fit well into the 'tick-box' mentality. It is in this sense like compassionate care, which is not effectively enhanced by the use of external targets. A couple of years ago there was much talk of a 'compassion index' that would rate medical practitioners based on the levels of care and empathy they provided. The truth is that compassion cannot be 'professionalised' or monitored or indexed, you might have behaviour that fits the definition, but it won't necessarily be motivated by 'compassion'. As the President of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers observed in Lourdes last month:

'We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than a technically correct cure. They are in need of humanity; they need care for their hearts.'³

² *Caritas in Veritate*, Para. 48

³ Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, 23rd World Congress of the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations, Lourdes, 6-9 May 2010.

But what does this mean for spiritual care of the elderly? We not only receive our genes from our parents and grandparents. We receive the world they have helped to create for us through their decisions, actions, beliefs and dreams. Our beginnings are a result of their freedoms and the decisions they have taken. Likewise, their endings are shaped by us. Such freedoms and decisions are ultimately about the moral reality of each of us, of every human being. Through these choices, with this freedom we construct the world in which we live and die. When we see this, we begin to understand that the exercise of our freedom always takes place within a context a 'tradition' or 'traditions'. It is always exercised and shaped within the movement between past and future, the movement between the generations.

Throughout our lives there is intergenerational interplay which is both gift and obligation. It is in this interplay that a life takes place and its meaning unfolds. I would suggest that this gift and obligation operate reciprocally between generations. This gives a significant moral shape to our freedom. This intergenerational interplay is not a luxury, but something upon which the whole integrity, strength and future of our culture depends. I do not believe that the elderly will get the care they rightly deserve unless we change our social understanding of generational interconnectedness. Youth and age are not just biological states. They are social and human realities. How we respond to them depends on the judgments, prejudices, anxieties, and understandings that we bring.

Over the years I have given a lot of time and energy to questions around education. One of the most stimulating and provocative essays in this field is by the Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt. At the end of an essay on 'The Crisis in Education', Arendt says, 'Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token to save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And, education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.'⁴

It is easy for us to see that both the repair and renewal of the world depend upon the young. But if we come with that perspective of seeking the interconnectedness of lives, then there must be some sense in which it also depends upon the elderly. This is not such an obvious argument to make. But I think Arendt gives us some insights which we can use. At the heart of her argument about the crisis in education is that it is a crisis in authority. Not just the authority of the teacher vis a vis the pupil, but the authority of the past, of tradition, of the knowledge and the wisdom that adults have about how to live in the world. In other words, not just about skills but about wisdom. Wisdom teaches us how to live and how to renew the world that we are in the business of making. Arendt does not say so explicitly, but in learning how to live, how to negotiate all the difficulties and to respond to the opportunities that remain largely unforeseen, we need not only knowledge but wisdom, a wisdom which is exercised in virtue. For virtue is how we use our freedom well to create the good. Where do we learn this if not from those generations that precede us? We learn it both from their achievements and from their mistakes, for each leaves a legacy. In many ways we already recognise this when we commemorate the great sacrifices of the past as with the various anniversaries of many battles and natural disasters. These are personal stories as much as national ones. Yet the people who

⁴ *Between Past and Future, The Crisis in Education*, p.193, Penguin Classics 2006

offered their lives on the field of battle and in the national effort to support them at home were not only fighting for their own lives and values, but for the future: for their children and their grandchildren.

Although writing in the 1950s, Arendt's criticism seems to me still to have force. She argues that that part of the crisis in education arises because we treat the world of the child as a completely autonomous world. Far from this being an emancipation it is an impoverishment. Separated from that of adults: parents, grandparents, older generations, we interrupt the intergenerational flow so that the conditions for absorbing the wisdom about how to live is obstructed. What appears as respect for childhood is actually an abandonment of responsibility that leaves the child alone and often at the mercy of other forces. There is much more in Arendt's essay but I think you can begin to see how we can use some of these insights in our own reflections.

There is a reciprocity between youth and age from which we might learn. There is a very real sense in which the future carries the memory of the elderly. It does not let them fall into oblivion. That, too, is part of the way in which the future is secured, for the memory of their witness always remains alive. In this way, they remain always generative for the generations that succeed them. I wonder if this is not an important insight for us. The desperate fear is that one day age might rob us of our memory, of our sense of self, and of all that has gone into the making of our lives. But is there not a sense in which our memory is also carried for us? Carried in the family we have cared for; carried in the friends we have supported; in the works that we have done; in the society we have helped to sustain and build; in the Church to which we have given our lives? If this is so, then surely the deepest and yet simplest thing that any society can do is to carry that memory when we can no longer do that for ourselves. It is done through all those acts of care by which we show that we have not forgotten the gift and the life. I think this is perfectly illustrated in the DVD recently produced by Caritas (the umbrella organisation for Catholic charities in England and Wales), *It's Still Me – Lord*. Carrying the gift of memory is what *It's Still Me Lord* is really all about.

The film is intended as a training resource for staff and volunteers in many different care settings, with a special emphasis on those working with dementia patients. As we increasingly focus on person-centred approaches to the care and support of people with dementia, and recognise their dignity and rights, we need to ensure that their spiritual needs as well as the practice of their faith are both acknowledged and met.

One of the reasons this DVD is so striking is that it shows how addressing the spiritual care needs of older people can help to restore the dignity of which they can so often feel robbed by pain, helplessness, loneliness and suffering. There are many ways of responding to such experiences, but among them prayer is most important. This is because prayer itself is the most dignified action of which any human being is capable. It is literally that attempt to raise the mind and heart to God, to raise our eyes beyond ourselves, to accept our humanity with all its limitations and yet to grasp that our fragile life is not radically meaningless but held in the embrace of a loving God. Prayer is, then, to crucial way in which to find a sense of security and peace when the world can seem very confused, as inevitably it will for a large number of elderly people.

There is an especially memorable scene in the film which demonstrates this well. It is of an elderly lady in the advanced stages of dementia, completely unaware and detached from the people and objects around her, literally living in a world of her own, who is suddenly brought back to life through joining in the words of a hymn familiar to her since

childhood. What is so arresting about this is the look of complete astonishment on her face after the hymn had ended: astonishment at the discovery that she has retained her capacity to participate in the world around her on equal and dignified terms.

A second resource that should be mentioned here is the document *A Practical Guide to the Spiritual Care of the Dying Person* that will be formally launched tomorrow morning. The purpose of this guide is to assist front-line staff in identifying spiritual need in their patients and to feel confident in their ability to respond to it. In this difficult area our guide recognises the simple truth that there is such a thing as spiritual need, and that spiritual pain is not just a manifestation of a medical symptom. The difficulty at such a moment of uncertainty is how to find the words to connect with people for whom the language of faith is alien. We hope this document will be of practical help to staff in the National Health Service who are caring for those who are dying.

A Practical Guide to the Spiritual Care of the Dying Person also covers ethical issues at the end of life and contains a philosophical reflection on the mystery of dying. Materials on spiritual care aimed at healthcare professionals are in surprisingly short supply. The NHS itself does not yet have a standard definition of spiritual care or a formal training programme for those called upon to deliver it. We hope that our guide will go some way toward improving this situation.

But what about the future? We are entering an era of austerity, where standards of living will fall, taxes will rise, and public spending will be cut. Pressure will increase on families, communities, and volunteers, as well as on the social services provided by the state. There are two ways our society could react to this pressure. Either it could continue down the utilitarian path, where people are valued only for their economic productivity, and where older people, because they are not economic units, and because they often have relatively low incomes, have correspondingly little value. As we become more focussed on economics, on thinking about where the cuts may fall and on how they may affect our personal situations, there is a risk that this purely financial estimate of the worth of an individual will become ever more firmly entrenched.

The alternative path is to pursue the Common Good, to recognise, as Pope Benedict reminds us in *Caritas in Veritate* that:

'Economic activity cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of commercial logic. This needs to be directed towards the pursuit of the common good...'⁵

Following the Common Good means resisting the temptation to give protection to the economically productive parts of our economy at the expense of the support given to the poor and vulnerable members of our society. It is not simply a question of justifying spending decisions based on long or medium term savings. It means adopting a totally different standard for our judgements and decisions. It means seeing every person as a whole, not capable of being reduced, like the branches of medicine, to one particular category of problem or opportunity. Serving the common good involves respecting the human person as an integral whole. Thus it is that spiritual care, or consistently paying attention to the spiritual care needs of older people, is the antithesis of the utilitarian and reductivist approach to human individuals which considers people only in terms of economic activity or as anonymous deposits of 'human capital'. In this way, the attention

⁵ *Caritas in Veritate*, Para. 36

we, as a society, give to the spiritual care of the elderly is a significant indicator of the degree to which we see beyond utilitarianism and the impersonal forces of market capitalism. It is, indeed, a sign for our times.

To sum up, what I have argued today is that the sense of the deep value of intergenerational relationships of care and responsibility is something that the Church possesses very naturally. It is this that the Church wishes to bring to the fragmentation and anatomisation of the public space. We can see this inter-generational perspective constantly informing our whole sense of tradition. Tradition is the way in which one generation holds the treasures of faith and the fruits of experience in trust for the next. This is not an oppressive or sterile prioritising of the past at the expense of the future. Rather, it is precisely the giving of one generation to the next the very possibility of the future, through accepting the gift of memory and handing it on. And this is particularly true of the precious gift of faith, that living and effective memory of our salvation. The Church then knows its duty of reminding us that there are responsibilities which we can and should accept if we wish to come to a fullness of life.

Imagine a society which understands that it carries the memory of its citizens in this way. Surely, it would be a society in which both young and old would feel valued, respected and secure. It would be a society that does not feel itself burdened by the cost of care; rather, it would be one that understood the importance of carrying the memory. Such a society is one that flourishes because investment: material, economic, human and spiritual, serves what is human. Whatever hardship we may have to face as a nation, if our values are true and we have a solidly grounded respect for all generations, then we will always have a future.

Ends
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