

“Light Shines in Darkness” (John 1:5)

PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE OF SCOTLAND ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Introduction

As Christmas approaches, we, the Bishops of Scotland, wish to share with you some reflections on our present situation and offer reasons for hope, as we live through these difficult times. Firstly, we affirm the centrality of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father who became incarnate of the Holy Spirit and was born of the Virgin Mary. He is our Hope. He is our Salvation. He is our Guide. We echo the words of St Paul “neither death nor life...nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”. It is only through the eyes of this “great hope” that we can look at ourselves and our world and not despair. He passed through death to the glory of the Resurrection. He is our inspiration in this life and our hope of fulfilment in eternity. On 27th March 2020, Pope Francis led an emotional Extraordinary Urbi et Orbi in a wet and empty St Peter’s Square, as Covid-19 swept the world. The Pope turned to prayer and pointed us to the Gospel story of the storm on the lake. Likening the world’s experience of the Pandemic to the apostles’ fear of being drowned in their storm-tossed boat, he said the virus has “exposed our vulnerability”. We were “feeling powerful and able to do everything”. Comforting ourselves with “false certainties” meant we had forgotten our endemic fragility. Now a great fear was washing over us, like the waves over the apostles. While their fear like ours is natural, we are not alone. Jesus is with us in our boat.

The Pope reminded us that God turns all things to good. As disciples living through this Pandemic, even though we are naturally anxious and unsure, we know that God is with us. We trust that His Spirit is active. “Lord, you are calling to us”, prayed the Pope, “calling us to faith - which is not so much believing that you exist, but coming to you and trusting in you.” We are led to ask: what is the Spirit saying to us at this time? As this question is in all our hearts, we Bishops, would like to share some of our own reflections at this difficult time.

Pope Francis, in his Encyclical Fratelli Tutti, wants to “contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity, brotherhood between all men and women”. For this to become reality we need “an openness to the Father of all” and “the love made possible by God’s grace”. The Encyclical calls us to love all who are vulnerable as brothers and sisters. In that light, we reflect firstly on reasons for hope, before considering particular groups whom the Pandemic has shown as vulnerable.

Part One - Reasons for Hope

1. Rediscovering Universal Human Dignity and wellsprings of goodness

Pope Francis has reminded us that every crisis presents opportunities. We have well-founded reasons for hoping that the Pandemic has led society to a rediscovery of the dignity of every human person, especially the most vulnerable, along with a new appreciation of the goodness manifested by so many.

A refreshingly simple human response to the Pandemic emerged across the world. Governments urged their citizens to make difficult and prolonged sacrifices for the sake of the most vulnerable and they willingly responded. In Scotland we were asked to stay at home to save the lives of the elderly and those with underlying health conditions while countless fellow citizens served on the frontline and in key services, putting their lives at risk, all for the sake of vulnerable strangers.

That genuine concern for the vulnerable was obvious and beautiful. Society willingly came to a consensus about protecting the vulnerable, at great personal cost to many, revealing how sacrificial love can shine out from human hearts.

The Covid-19 crisis now offers us a unique opportunity to rebuild society by fostering these values. Care for the vulnerable has shaped every area of Scottish life and we encourage this development. The tragedy wrought by the Pandemic has awakened us to the value of all human life and we welcome this rare opportunity to commit ourselves to protecting and supporting all our people.

Previously, contemporary attitudes had begun to regard the more vulnerable in society as less meriting of life as if "some parts of our human family (could) be readily sacrificed for the sake of others considered worthy of a carefree existence." We became used to a culture in which "persons are no longer seen as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, especially when they are poor and disabled; 'not yet useful, like the unborn, or 'no longer needed', like the elderly." This crisis has retaught us the dignity of every human person and, on this rediscovered principle, our society can be rebuilt. Like the Good Samaritan, we can create a better society by recognising even the most vulnerable as our neighbour.

2. Greater Appreciation of Faith's Unique Contribution to Modern Scotland

Scotland's response to the Pandemic has seen a willingness to sacrifice even for the stranger. Self-sacrifice is at the root of the Gospel and is integral to Catholic Social Teaching. The Christian vision of each person as called to be a child of God has long since made a notable contribution to building fraternity and defending justice in society. Cannot the love and compassion we have shown amid so much suffering and death in recent months now become a way of life, rather than an exception? Cannot the Christian message of love of neighbour now become the vital principle of our culture? In working for such a world, the Church recognises she "has a public role over and above her charitable and educational activities. She works for the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity (as) a Church that serves, that leaves home and goes forth from its places of worship, goes forth from its sacristies, in order to accompany life, to sustain hope, to be the sign of unity... to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation."

During these difficult times the Church never ceased its worship of God, convinced of its spiritual support to our people in pointing them towards the Transcendent and helping

them proclaim their faith in the Resurrection. The Church assisted local communities across Scotland in supporting the weak and the poor, the lonely and the anxious, and accompanying the dying and bereaved. With the resumption of public worship our people were again able to feel part of active communities, while prayer in common helped others to cope with their mental anguish. Faith inspired and mobilised people to do good and comforted many. There has been a growing awareness of the social harm caused when public worship and pastoral ministry are not available. The importance of bringing much needed love, hope and comfort and the social capital delivered by a vibrant faith commitment is now more widely recognised.

Part Two - Towards a Better World

With the arrival of a vaccine and other developments, it is now possible to see beyond the pandemic. Yet its effects will be deep and long-lasting. There is more hardship to come. For example, we have yet to see the worst ravages of unemployment or the damage done to the mental health of many. Now, though, we voice our reasons for hope if we build on what we have learnt from the Pandemic

1. Pastoral and Medical Care of the Sick and Vulnerable

The Church has always adopted a holistic approach to care of the sick, providing medical as well as pastoral and spiritual care to the weak. Today, it is the State who provides excellent medical care while the Church and other faiths provide spiritual and pastoral care. Chaplains ministering to the seriously sick and dying in hospitals ensure that the spiritual and pastoral needs of patients, their families and staff are met. Therefore, chaplains ought always to have access to those seeking their care. Many in our society have reevaluated and recognise anew the unique and positive contribution which Faith Communities bring to many situations within modern Scotland, and not only alone, but also in collaboration with the State Sector and other groups.

The public outcry at reports that suggested our Care Sector, especially our care homes, was at risk, manifested a new sense of appreciation of our elderly brothers and sisters and a determination to ensure adequate support for the elderly at home or in residential care. This bore welcome witness to a keen social conscience that valued our senior citizens. We hope that parity of esteem for the Care Sector and the NHS would be a lasting positive legacy of this crisis.

Similarly, we need to have satisfactory protocols for treating or withholding treatment from patients, especially where resources are strained. The Church reaffirms that in facing such difficult dilemmas patients and their loved ones should always be fully informed and involved in decision-making processes that cherish all lives equally.

2. An economy for the Common Good

As unprecedented as the Pandemic so was the manner in which our Governments sought to provide economic support for workers and employers whose livelihoods were threatened. Resources were extended generously in a way that the majority of the country felt similarly protected and supported. Our society recognised the precious sense of solidarity and peace that can come when efforts are made to look out for the common good of all.

The lockdown forced a revaluation of some low paid and undervalued jobs, where care

workers, shop assistants, delivery drivers and others were hailed as key workers. This should not be forgotten and we trust that society will reassess what is a just remuneration for these key jobs. We are saddened that many have lost their jobs, or face financial uncertainty, with many businesses struggling to exist. We hope that, as the Pandemic subsides, those positive developments acknowledged above will continue to underpin decision-making, especially for the poor, the unemployed and the marginalised.

3. A sense of integral human development

Recent generations have witnessed an ever narrower calculation of human progress in terms of gross domestic product and a measure of happiness ever more exclusively tied to material wealth as a result of relentless work, with leisure time largely consisting of mass consumer entertainment. The Pandemic has challenged this way of living. It has allowed space for cherishing family time and the environment of friendships and nature. The post-Pandemic recovery offers hope for a flourishing of more natural and humane lifestyles.

4. Vaccines

We gladly welcome the news of the approval of the first vaccines for the UK and we hope this will allow an early immunisation programme to protect our population and offer the prospect of some return to normal life.

Contemporary society rightly pays attention to the ethical sourcing of commodities like food and clothing to ensure that the benefits to us do not come at a disproportionate cost. As similar concerns have been raised about vaccines, we reassure our Catholic population that, in accordance with longstanding guidance from the Pontifical Academy for Life, it is ethical to take any of the C19 vaccines purchased by the UK at the present time, either because foetal cell lines have not been used in their development or because their sourcing is sufficiently remote.

While we affirm the ethical acceptability of taking these vaccines, we do not support bio-technological processes that develop products from abortion or research using these cell-lines. We hope that those with objections to such vaccines can be respected and offered alternatives, and we call upon companies to use only ethically sourced material. We encourage wider debate in society on progressively eradicating the misuse of human products in bio-technologies in the future. Similarly, we urge governments to work to ensure C19 vaccines are made available equitably across the world, according to human need and not economic status.

5. Recognising our Neighbours' Daily Suffering

Across all societies, local and global, people have for too long been suffering from isolation and loneliness, poverty and discrimination, abuse and mental anxieties, addictions and many other challenging circumstances, while the world seemed to pass by on the other side. The recent restrictions have highlighted, and sometimes exacerbated, this personal pain but have perhaps opened our eyes to the plight of so many. Government agencies have their part to play, but the Pandemic has brought home to us the personal responsibility we all have to bear and lighten the burdens of our brothers and sisters. We hope that the Pandemic will have made us all more attentive to the suffering that routinely exists in our midst.

Conclusion

We hope these reflections resonate with our fellow-Christians, with people of other faiths and with all people of goodwill. Just as the nations of the world have been required to collaborate to respond effectively to the virus, so too in our own society we must work together for a better future as we rebuild after the Pandemic.

As Christians we are preparing to celebrate Christmas. This feast points us to the “great hope” which underpins and purifies, measures and sustains the many varied hopes that keep us going day by day. This hope delivers us from the compulsion to be self-sufficient and the anguish that can follow when we fail. This hope is a person, whose hand is always stretched out towards us. It is Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us. He loves us so much that, sin aside, he took on our whole human condition, including its fragility.

At Christmas, we worship him as a tiny child in the arms of his Virgin Mother. Many Renaissance paintings of the Nativity portray the stable in a ruinous condition, symbolising the state of the world. The message is that, even in a confused and chaotic world, there is now this Child. The seed of a better future has been sown. Through the power of Christmas it is sown in us too. It is sown as a seed, a love, an energy that promises eternal life with God and that graces us to do what is right and just, here and now, for each other, for the life of our society and especially for the most vulnerable within it.

Let us not be afraid. The Lord is with us and can calm every storm and bring light to the darkness.

With our prayers and blessings for Christmas and the coming year,

Bishop Hugh Gilbert
Archbishop Leo Cushley
Bishop Stephen Robson
Bishop William Nolan

Archbishop Philip Tartaglia
Bishop Joseph Toal
Bishop John Keenan
Bishop Brian McGee