

Cardinal Vincent Nichols in conversation with The Woolf Institute's Dr Ed Kessler

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I'm with Cardinal Vincent Nichols at Westminster; Cardinal Nichols, thank you very much for joining us. I wonder if you could reflect on the impact of this coronavirus on religion and belief, and particularly from a Roman Catholic perspective.

Well, I think its impact is indiscriminate so the impact of the pandemic cuts right across every aspect of society and inevitably hits the poorest the hardest. From the point of view of the Catholic Church around the world, it's obviously impacted on the outward observance of our faith in those things that we do and how we come together - as with every faith. In a funny sort of way, it has also helped to strengthen the more domestic understanding of the Church. Something that, for example, the Chief Rabbi has spoken very eloquently about – the strength of an understanding that the home is a holy place, a place of God. Now, I was brought up like that and so we're finding a new balance between the Church as lived and experienced in the home and the liturgies and the great ceremonies of the Church which take place in community. Some of that has been illustrated, as you mentioned earlier, by that rather remarkable moment of prayer that Pope Francis held in a deserted St Peter's Square in the rain – beautifully photographed as only the Italians can do – but immensely touching in the symbolism. Here is this person who acts as the gathering point - the point of authenticity for the whole Catholic

community around the world - seen in isolation, yet not alone. Millions and millions of people were watching that. So we have this great paradox, and we're seeing it a bit more clearly, of religion as something, deeply in the heart, deeply in the innermost part of the human person. And that's growing because we've been pushed back into ourselves through social isolation, yet we can also see how much it wants to flower.

I walk outside the street here, and every day there are fresh flowers placed at the closed doors of Westminster Cathedral. They're an act of love, just as a church building is an act of love. We always try to do our best, give our best to God in the building. The people love their churches and long to go back to bring together that deeply personal aspect of faith and its public expression. And in a funny sort of way, the poorer the people are, the more they feel this.

So there's a sense of yearning for the church to open its doors again. There's also a sense of isolation. It's making us aware of our vulnerability, isn't it? It's that connection with something that we're totally unused to. We're not used to being vulnerable; we're not used to being threatened by death in this way - at least in the West. Is there something going on there that's making so many people log in and take an interest who would not attend Mass? Some are probably not even Catholic or even Christian. So it's really touching a button. What would you say that button is?

Well, you know, I think Pope Francis talked about that on that wet evening in the empty square. I remember him talking about vulnerability and how we suddenly find ourselves in the same boat, as he puts it, so we can no longer afford to be rowing against each other. We have to find ways of vigorously pulling together.

Nobody is outside of this. And I think that search for expressions of solidarity we've seen right across society.

We're learning, I think, that that solidarity springs and is nurtured in a belief in a greater purpose in our lives - in a greater unity between us as a human family in the reality of God, who is the giver of life and who will draw us to its fulfilment. If you think of a barren limestone landscape in which, somewhat miraculously, flowers bloom, then you know there's a deep down underground stream from which they're drawing water. Every now and then on a limestone landscape, that stream bursts out and there's a wonderful waterfall and then it disappears again. We're in one of those moments when we suddenly see the goodness and we search for its source. Its source, I do believe, is in belief in God, in belief in life as a gift, a gift that He shared – a gift that is given that we may be of service to each other and a gift which is ultimately purposeful.

OK, I hear that and that's a wonderful image that you've drawn - very powerful words. But how do we ensure it continues?

Well, it's quite difficult to put in very simple phrases. If I had time, I would have explained some of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, which over a hundred years have been developed in order to lay some principles and directives for a more constructive way of shared living – enterprise, business and all the rest of it. But I think to put it very briefly and maybe as an opener for people in this chronicle, it would be to say we have to be very careful about reverting to all the familiar categories of "us" and "them". If anything, we've learned our commonality. And the worst thing that could happen would be to revert to oppositional ways of life. And I would say that first to politicians, and we can already see hints that the issues around this crisis will quickly be made into party

political issues to gain some advantage over an opposition. Now, oppositional politics is fine as a method, but not as a spirit. We have to find ways, both in politics, business and in our community lives, of resisting the temptation to separate into "us" and "them" and finding and holding to the common ground that we've experienced, that we've sensed and that we now must build on.

And what might that be Cardinal Nichols? In other words, give us a tangible example that people listening to this can go away with and think "Oh, I'm going to do that now..."?

There's a concept at the heart of Catholic Social Teaching, which is of the Common Good. Now, people think about that as the best we can do for the majority. That's not the meaning of the Common Good. The Common Good is an aim in a society, an aim in a family, an aim in a local community, an aim in a school that means nobody is excluded.

In order to understand the Common Good, we have to look at it from the very edge of society. Pope Francis is fond of talking about the peripheries. It's from the peripheries that we see things most clearly. So, for example, if we look at our economic system from the point of view of somebody who is unemployed, then we begin to see a different challenge than if we look at it from a boardroom perspective where the maximisation of profit might return as the key factor. The Common Good demands a different perspective on everyday things. If, as a family, we've got difficult neighbours and we just want to shut them out, forget about them; well, that's going to result in fractiousness. Somehow we have to say, "what does my family life look like from next door? And what does this look like from the edge looking in?" That's a very practical thing that everybody can do. And as I say, it's at the heart of re-envisaging how we live together.

In a way what you've described is almost a genuine dialogue - to understand somebody else as you wish to be understood. It's a two-way process.

I had a conversation recently with the fairly newly appointed chairman of BP, and he said what he wanted more than anything else was dialogue. And I said, "well, of course, many people in the ecological movement will see you as the enemy - will see you as the prince of darkness". And he said, "I know, but I want to talk. I need to talk. It's bad business to depend for our energy on the traditional sources. We won't last as a business. I have to keep not only my business interests in mind but align them with the best interests of our delicate created world." So he said, "Come on, can we talk, please? Can we look at these things together?" Not in an oppositional way.

I'd like to move on to communication. Something, of course, that's an attribute of the Roman Catholic Church is that it's a global body. And I'm wondering whether this pandemic is actually having an impact on that communication - that connection that you have with one another, because everybody's isolated right now. As you said yourself, you're there at Westminster and somebody just down the road in Westminster Abbey might as well be in Australia. So there's this distancing that we all have - a sort of equalisation of it all. And I'm just wondering from the Church's perspective whether that's going to have an impact on relationships - on communication - that will continue after we return to some kind of normality, whatever that might be.

Well, I do think it will. I had a number of these 'Zoom' meetings yesterday. One was with colleagues who share the presidency of the European Council of Bishops' Conferences. Now, normally we travel. Last time it was two days in

Bratislava - and it was freezing cold. And we got through our work, but it was not a particularly happy time. We did it in two-and-a-half hours yesterday by 'Zoom' and I think it was satisfactory - because we know each other.

And similarly, I recently had a conversation between the Chief Rabbi and the Archbishop of Canterbury. And it was a wonderful conversation. Now, we know each other, but these technologies give us the chance of a far quicker, more fluid, and more responsive communication with each other - as well as saving a lot of time and energy. So I think we're all determined that these advantages will become part of our everyday lives.

One final question, Cardinal Nichols, which is to bring it from the global to the local. When the church doors do open, which won't be too long, I'm sure, they won't be able to fill up in a way that they might have done - numbers will have to be limited. And therefore, the Mass itself and Communion are bound to be impacted. How do you envisage it beginning, at the local level, when your doors are open again?

Well, we're in conversation with the government in these days. What I would like to see is the first opening of churches for what we call individual prayer. And that is not a summons, not a timetable, not a communal practice, but just *access*. People can go in, sit down, feel safe, begin to pray individually - individual prayer. That'll give us a chance to test some of the things we have to put in place, like social distancing, particular hygiene routines, supervision through stewards and all of that in the very first stages. As we build our confidence, I think hopefully we'll be able to move to public events - public worship. Numbers will be limited.

How we match those who want to go [to church] with the spaces that we have... There are two or three very imaginative schemes at large at the moment - at least around here. One of the big London churches with a big community is saying we'll celebrate Mass 10 times on a Sunday and we can fit all our parishioners in that 10 times, and we'll go through Ticketmaster and they can book the places. It makes me smile. Others say, you know, our church is often full three times on a Sunday. We can't duplicate Mass 10 times. So maybe we'll give people, according to the alphabet, the first letter of their name, we'll give them a Sunday a month. For many people, to begin with, they may be coming to Mass once a month. And we'll continue the streaming of the celebration - the Mass - as well. So it's going to be gradual because, above all, we have to do this safely and be guided by the science. We have to be, as it were, reassuring people, because I think many people at the moment live with a lot of fear. We have to reassure people that the church is not *just* a place that they might want to go to, it's also a place that it's safe to come to. Then their desires replace their fears.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols, thank you very much.

Pleasure. Thank you.