

## The Catholic debt to the Salvos

Bruce Duncan

A talk to the Salvation Army Moral & Social Issues Conference (Southern Territory)  
15 June 2013 Geelong

Thank you so much for the invitation to meet and talk with you this evening. The Salvation Army has made a mighty contribution to the wellbeing of disadvantaged people for over a century and a half, a contribution out of all proportion to your numbers, and I consider it a real privilege to share your company tonight as you reflect on your mission at a time of rapid change and increasing demands on your services.

Major Brad Halse gave me some of the documents you have been considering, including your Positional Statements and Guidelines covering a wide range of social and moral issues, many of them difficult and complex, but showing a deep humanity in understanding the predicaments people face, and respect for them in their troubles.

I was particularly drawn to the statement by the International Moral and Social Issues Council 2012, called 'Living Faith in the Economy: Biblical Principles for Living'. It highlighted one of the most troubling issues today about the economic crisis and the distortion of values in our culture resulting in greed, vast inequalities in wealth and wellbeing, widespread exploitation of workers, and degradation of the environment. It called for values to be founded on the dignity of persons as living images of God.

A key line for me was this: "The Bible indissolubly links spiritual sensitivity, worship, and justice." Indissolubly links. And another sentence: "Life lived according to the values of the gospel will incarnate the reality of that love", God's love. In my view, these sentences are extremely significant, not only touching on a special charism of the Salvation Army, but highlighting the key conditions for mission today.

### Financial crisis

These documents note our current secular cultural shift and the difficulty we face communicating faith in the message of Jesus and a lively sense of God's presence in our lives and world.

Let me focus on the significance of the financial crisis. As many leading economists have said, the global economic crisis is basically a moral crisis, whereby greed and love of money have displaced moral considerations and the pursuit of human wellbeing.



Kiwanis Rings for Salvation Army by Akron Kiwanis, flickr cc

The Nobel laureate, Joseph Stiglitz, published in 2012 *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers our Future*, calling for a renewal in economics:

Something has happened to our sense of values, when the end of making more money justifies the means... Much of what has gone on can only be described by the words 'moral deprivation'. Something wrong happened to the moral compass of so many of the people working in the financial sector and elsewhere (pxvii).

Jeffrey Sachs, previous coordinator of the Millennium Development Goals program, said that "Globalisation unleashed vast corporate power and undermined whole regions... The key question today is global and urgent: how can capitalism... deliver the three overarching goals...: economic prosperity, social justice, and environmental sustainability?" He warned against the new 'corporatocracy' reshaping the world in the interests of major transnational companies (*The Price of Civilization: Economics and Ethics after the Fall* (London: The Bodley Head, 2011, xii).

Many other economists have been saying much the same thing, that the financial crisis is basically a moral crisis, a crisis of values, where making money, often vast amounts, is considered more important than society equity and human wellbeing.

One might ask why the churches were not able to hold this gold rush in speculative finance in check before it all came to grief. Presumably the answer lies in part in the shift in popular culture to a more secular mode, driven especially by commercialism in media.

## Linking faith and justice



Redcliffe Salvation Army by Leonard John Matthews, flickr cc

But I would suggest, at least for the Catholic Church, a failure to highlight the essential link between faith and concern for justice. Given the extensive formal Church social teaching, including by Pope Benedict, and the wide range of church organisations working for justice, this is very puzzling.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. At the World Youth Day in Sydney in 2008, at the large public events involving Pope Benedict himself, there was practically no attempt to link the essentials of faith with concern for justice and peace issues. Many of the smaller events, many offered by the social justice networks, highlighted social justice, but these were marginal events. The emphasis of the major events was more simply on a religious experience. To my mind, it was a great opportunity lost to highlight the link between faith and justice. If people have not made that link in their minds, it is no wonder that they would see little earthly value in religion.

On the positive side of the global financial crisis, the illusion of limitless growth and financial abundance has burst, and thinking people everywhere realise that this is a very decisive moment in human history when we have to get things right morally. There is a growing crisis of meaning in various places, and many are looking for a renewed framework for meaning, focused on human wellbeing, but with a new openness to religious belief.

It is important for us to be involved in this larger conversation about values and meaning, since that is what we are basically all about. But we need to find the right language, and to engage in collaboration not just with Christians, but with people of other religions, and even agnostics and atheists.

What we have to offer is not just a **framework of meaning** articulated in the Scriptures and developed in our traditions and histories, but the belief in God's passion for justice adds an astonishing power of **motivation** for such action. Belief offers us a rich fabric of meaning and deep motivation for social engagement.

## The uniqueness of the Salvation Army

Reading up on the history and work of the Salvation Army, several things struck me.

The first was the way the Army has managed to combine a powerful sense of God in your personal lives and work, with a firm commitment to searching out the poor and distressed to help improve material living conditions as your testimony to God's concern for them.

The second thing that struck me was how much, as a Catholic priest and a member of a religious order, I identified with your values and aspirations. It seemed to me that the Army developed very like the religious orders in the Church, with a charismatic leader responding to particular needs at various times. The organisational structure of the Salvation Army, with a stress on obedience to the Scriptures and one's mission, is familiar to me of course. But there are also distinctive aspects: your high visibility, the military metaphor underlying your structure, your inclusiveness, your commitment to living simply, and gender equity.



Cardinal Manning by dgbgdb, flickr cc

## The Catholic debt to General Booth

I would also like to acknowledge that General Booth played a role in shaping modern Catholic social thinking, through his influence on the English Cardinal Henry Edward Manning, who greatly admired the work of the Salvation Army. Manning had been an Anglican priest very active in social concerns and reform. After his wife died, he became a Catholic but brought the Anglican and Methodist traditions of social activism with him, and tried to rouse English Catholics in the cause of social reform.

In his life of Manning, Vincent McClelland recounts that the Cardinal wanted one of his bishops, Herbert Vaughan of Salford, to see the work of the Salvation Army and sent him on a tour of its houses in London. Vaughan returned convinced that proselytism was behind the work of the Army, and told Manning so. But Manning disagreed with him. McClelland wrote:

“Vaughan then indicated that he was not interested in philanthropy for its own sake; he was interested in souls, not bodies; he did not love the world for its own sake.” Manning replied sharply: “God so loved the World that he sent his only begotten Son”, adding with pointed sarcasm: ‘but that is only a detail.’

Manning firmly rejected views commonly held that society was not responsible for the condition of the poor; that the poor should be resigned to their poverty as the will of God who would make it up to them in

the next life; or that the poor could help themselves by working harder. (McClelland, *Cardinal Manning: His Public Life and Influence, 1865-1892* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p.19-20).

Manning was especially critical of the failure of Catholics in his day to agitate for social reforms. “Surely we are in the Sacristy”, he wrote, since many Catholics seem to be “unconscious that Lazarus lies at their gate full of sores.” (p. 21)

Manning explicitly modelled his own League of the Cross on the organisation of the Salvation Army. Bramwell Booth frequently visited Manning and wrote that “more than once we spoke of the most intimate spiritual experiences”. Bramwell added that Manning “joined heartily in several attempts to raise funds for us. He saw the worth of those whom Society esteemed as worthless, and he liked the Army because it saw the same thing, and said so, and went to work to help them.”

Manning enthusiastically supported the Salvation Army’s Social Purity Crusade to protect young girls from sexual exploitation, and which resulted in the British Parliament in 1885 lifting the age of consent from 13 to 16 years of age. Manning also strongly endorsed General Booth’s book, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, saying his “heart was completely in the book” (McClelland, p. 207-08).

Manning deplored business thinking to maximise profits by exploiting workers. He wrote of Booth’s book that in England the community was being considered as “a counting house, a place where the one question is profit and loss”. He continued that the “true political economy takes into account the value of human life, and I am glad to see in this scheme of General Booth’s one more useful contribution to the solution of the great question of the day.” (“Cardinal Manning on General Booth’s Plan”, *New Zealand Tablet*, 23 January 1891).

Manning was held in high esteem in Rome, including for his personal involvement in the last-minute negotiations to settle the London Dock Strike of 1890 on terms favourable to the workers. Manning’s social concern and influence helped prepare the way for the first modern social encyclical by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, *Rerum Novarum, The Condition of the Working Class*, which remains the foundation document for contemporary Catholic social activism. Manning did not write the encyclical, but he translated it into English and spread its message, which had a lasting impact on Australia as well.

I suspect it would surprise many Catholics today to learn how closely Manning was to the social reformers of his day, drawing especially from the work of Anglican and Methodist traditions, and the Salvation Army.

## Collaboration in MCD University

I regret that the churches have not engaged more closely in exploring each other’s social traditions, but in our more ecumenical times, I am hoping that we will learn from each other, while recognising the integrity and uniqueness of different traditions. In MCD University of Divinity, I believe we have remarkable opportunities to develop this scholarship and mutual understanding of our traditions about social reform.

To help make our social traditions better known among the various church groups, the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy is in the process of organising a conference for the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of November and will invite a speaker from each of the main Christian traditions to identify the uniqueness of their tradition and outline what resources they can bring to engaging more closely with key social issues today. Fr Frank Brennan has agreed to set the stage on the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup>, exploring the social and cultural context which challenges us currently.

## Faith and Justice

Let me make some comments on the response of Bishop Vaughan, since I think he illustrates what has at times been a problem for the Catholic Church. It stems from a failure fully to understand who God is and what God asks of us.

This is a bold and may seem a presumptuous claim to make, I know, but the Scriptures are very clear that God is intensely concerned about human wellbeing, and expects us to share this concern. As your documents so cogently stress, every one is made in the image of God, with that immense dignity deserving of our profound respect. Indeed, God identifies intensely with the “poor”, the Biblical code word for all in trouble or distress.

If, like Bishop Vaughan, we see religion and ritual altogether separate from wider social concern, then we risk drifting off into spiritual unreality. One has only to read the prophets repeatedly castigating religious worship if it ignored the hungry and poor. You will recall Amos in astonishing words has God vehemently attacking worship that ignores the poor: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an every-flowing stream” (Amos 5: 21, 24). And Hosea wrote: “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.” (6: 6).

Jesus himself stresses that whatever we do to the poor, the sick, the prisoners, we do to Him. He takes it very personally. And of course the Scriptures in so many places reiterate God’s passionate concern for human wellbeing.

Yet as history shows, it can be easy to let our religious consciousness drift away from social concern. I wish in some way we could bring into every commemoration of the Last Supper in the Eucharist that Jesus began by washing the disciples’ feet in love and service. We too readily forget that for Jesus, foot-washing and Eucharist are integral parts of our worship.

Recently I wrote a small book, *Social Justice, Fuller Life in a Fairer World*, showing how strongly the Scriptures insist that faith in the God of Jesus is inseparable from work for justice. I was writing for a mainly Catholic audience, and traced this stress on social concern as part of our religious consciousness through more recent Church documents.

The publishers asked me to write some cameos of key figures, so I did a few pages on each of Archbishop Oscar Romero; Frederick Ozanam, founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society; Dom Helder Camara; the development economist and pioneer on environmental issues, Barbara Jackson; the Australian Rosemary Goldie; Joseph Cardijn, the founder of the Young Christian Workers Movement; and the Aboriginal activist, Mum Shirl.

It hit me later that they were all basically saying the same thing: be alert to what is happening around us; and take responsibility. These happen to be the key words of Cardijn, **consciousness and responsibility**, which were taken to heart at the Second Vatican Council, particularly in the expression, “reading the signs of the times”.

I am not downplaying the importance of personal prayer and contemplation in our lives, but as Pope John Paul II once said, we need to pray with eyes open, that is, to be conscious of what is happening in our world and take fitting responsibility where we can. Prayer must not be an escape from responsibility, but an energising by the Holy Spirit to help us fulfil our responsibilities.

Despite our marvellous school system, we Catholics are challenged by the widespread disaffection of the young, reflected in the decline in church-going and the fall in the number of people joining religious orders and as diocesan priests. Part of the reason for this, at least to my mind, is the problem we have of linking doctrinal content with social issues; in many places, we are heavy on doctrine but light on justice, and fail to

see that it is a nonsense to relegate justice issues to a secondary level, without seeing that concern for justice springs from the very heart of God.

So concerned were we about this at our Yarra Institute that we commissioned a study to examine how some teachers and people in social justice organisations were tackling this issue. The report by Dr Joan Daw was published very recently, as *Young People, Faith and Social Justice*. We were trying to identify best practice in linking faith and justice. We did not arrive at an instant formula for success, but the interviews revealed some of the difficulties involved, and how teachers and justice organisations were responding to these. If you have been working with young people, you will recognise many of the same issues.

I am heartened by our new Pope Francis with his call for Catholics to “go into the streets” to meet people where they are – easier to do in Latin America I think than here. He wants the Catholic Church to be a “church of the poor, with the poor”.

I suspect General Booth would be delighted to hear these messages from Pope Francis, and I hope that the voices of both will resonate in the hearts and minds of believers today, as we continue with our limited resources to respond to those in need as true brothers and sisters.