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Lancaster University Chaplaincy Centre

One day 40 years ago, this month, I found myself as a new boy on the OXFAM Council of Management. We were all sitting round waiting for the chairman to arrive. He was a wonderful Quaker called Lesley Kirkley. He came in and before taking his place, stood and read this from a slip of paper:

“Private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute and unconditioned right.

No one is justified in keeping for one`s exclusive use what one does not really need when others lack necessities. In a word, according to the traditional doctrine as found in the Fathers of the Church and the great theologians, the right to property must never be exercised to the detriment of the common good.”

He put the piece of paper down, looked at everyone gathered there and said “If this is true, we don’t need Oxfam”. (It could have been CAFOD or Christian Aid or whatever.) A silence went through the room and someone said “Where did that come from?” and he said, “Oh sorry, it came from the Pope’s recent encyclical.” And I remember inwardly blushing because I was meant to be the Catholic rep there and somehow Lesley Kirkley got a copy of *Populorum Progressio* and I didn’t even know it had been written! But I’ll never forget his understanding of that paragraph from *Populorum Progressio*: “If that is true we don’t need Oxfam.”

I think we're here today because there is one central thing in all our lives, and that is to seek, to clarify and to live the will of God for us. In other words, *obedience* in its real sense which means being good persistent listeners: it means to hear well. And I suggest to you that we can understand the journey we're on as a sort of conversation in us and among us, between what we think of as *text* and what we think of as *context*. By text one would mean what is spoken to us through the Word of God in scripture or in the authentic teachings of the church, or what comes to us through liturgy; the way God speaks to and feeds us through *text* in that wider sense. But on its own, it gets nowhere because it is always spoken into what we think of as *context*, which, at a personal level, is the reality of your own lives, and who you are, and in a wider sense, the context in which we're living in the social world we're part of.

If I share anything with you this morning, it would be to suggest that we keep up that conversation, of allowing the Word of God in text and especially in a way in the liturgy, to speak to, and be in conversation with your understanding of the world we're living in - what the church likes to call "reading the signs of the time." It's that conversation that becomes creative.

Conversation is not just one talking to another, that's chatter or gossip or whatever. Con-versation, the actual word means a process of conversion, through dialogue, and that's how our faith and our love mature themselves and we grow into the faith and love of God which we're all called to.

Now to be honest, our present awareness of our context in the planet was not there forty years ago when *Populorum Progressio* was written. The encyclical is urgent that industry and technology be used to shape the environment for authentic human development. That is how the pope, and all of us, saw things then. But in the last ten years or so, we have come into a revolution of consciousness, perhaps the biggest shift in human awareness that has ever happened. It's a bigger shift, for instance, than discovering ourselves on a planet which isn't the centre of the whole cosmos. That big shift happened in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It's a bigger shift than happened at the time of Darwin when we discovered that human beings are part of an evolving process. These were enormous shifts in human understanding of what it is to be who we are and what we are part of. But I think this present shift is probably the biggest shift that's ever happened.

I like to think of it as a shift from thinking of all the rest of creation, the rest of nature and the rest of the planet as the insignificant backdrop to the drama, while the significant drama is being played out on the forestage, amongst human beings. That is true of most of our Church language and most of scripture

If somebody earlier had used the word *redemption* or *salvation* of anything more than that of human beings, I wouldn't have known what they were talking about. And we assumed of-course that the backdrop had plenty of supplies for anything we wanted. We could draw from it anything we needed because it was infinite in supply and any of our activity wasn't going to affect it in any way - so we could switch on a tap and draw out oil and coal and anything we wanted, and it would all somehow be supplied ad infinitum.

Well in the last decade or so that consciousness has completely turned about, as you know, and we are still on a learning curve to take in this new awareness that the backdrop, as it were, is part of the human drama, and the human drama is part of the backdrop. What we thought was infinite is very finite. What we thought was robust and if damaged, would always repair itself - well Gaia is not quite as capable of self-correction as we thought it was. We are living in a much more fragile setting of which we are part of the setting and the setting is part of us. So it's a completely new way of understanding the *context* we are part of. And it is part of our journey in faith and maturing in love to allow the words spoken to us through liturgy and scripture and so on, to speak to this new awareness, but also allow the new awareness to give us new insight into liturgy and the Word of God.

As we celebrate this year, this month, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Paul VI publishing *Populorum Progressio*, we do so in this new consciousness of creation theology. CAFOD's three S's – simply, sustainably, in solidarity – are, I believe, a word of God to us. Those of you in CAFOD or J & P groups may, just may, have found that discussing these things gets out of hand because one thing leads to another and everything connects. So in our Liverpool area we have tried taking each 'S' at three levels.

	Live simply	Sustainably	In solidarity
Domestic economics			
Social, political			
Theological, spiritual			

Using a diagram like this gives people nine boxes for notes! Down the left hand side there are three divisions. By 'domestic economics', I mean those things in family life and our own personal decisions, shopping, travelling etc 'Political and social' refers to the call to be engaged in local politics, national politics, action in the public forum. 'Theological, spiritual' will speak for itself when we come to it.

Let me share two things at the first level about 'domestic economics'. One is for those of you who haven't heard it, the catch phrase "To use your loaf." It stands for: try to shop local, try to buy organic, try to be concerned about animal friendly and try to shop Fairtrade. L-O-A-F is straightforward, but each one is open to discussion and debate. I was given a tray of tomatoes yesterday and they came from Spain, and a few months ago I would have thought 'buy local'. But it's been pointed out that in our country if you have heated greenhouses to grow tomatoes so that people can buy local, you will be using more energy than it costs to bring them from Spain without being heated!

We need to keep the questions alive. In our case, where I am, 'buy local' doesn't just mean trying to buy locally produced food. It also means using our local shops rather than supporting the empires like Tesco which are further away anyhow.

The 'organic' is a big question nowadays. We all thought it was quite straightforward, but the evidence is that with the growing population in the world, and the amount of space for agriculture and so on, it's not going to be possible to feed the world population on organically grown food. So there's another question we live with.

The second thing I'd like to share on that first level, is that a lot of people say: "What on earth is the point of me – little me, doing my little bit? If China's going the way China's going, India is going the way India is going, and the USA probably won't change much, what on earth's the point?" Like many things, the *question* is the problem and not the answer. Karl Jung was asked toward the end of his life "What few things have you learnt in your life?" and he said: "The greatest one is that most peoples' questions can't be answered in the terms they're put" - so any debate is going to reshift the question. And the question about "Is my little bit going to help or am I just feeding a self image of being a goody-goody?" - the question is a problem.

Amongst Catholics, and certainly amongst English Catholics, we have a fixation about motives. A contemporary of mine, when he was a novice monk, got very worried about his motives and why he was there, and his father said "Well m'boy, just in my experience, I should forget about your motives and try to clarify your intentions, and then get on with it." It is a very wise remark. We shouldn't worry about *why* we do these things, but we should be clear about *what we are focused on*. It's what Jesus means, I think, by his lovely use of the words 'leaven and salt', and 'lamp on the lampstand' - they become creative beyond themselves, without spending all their time wondering whether they are going to be effective.

The only thing leaven has to do is to be good leaven, the only thing salt has to do is to be good salt, and not worry about whether it's salting what it is salting – do you see what I mean? If what we are asked to do is good, then do it. And don't worry. The way it bears fruit is up to God, not up to us.

At the second 'political social' level, just one or two remarks. I don't know if any of you heard the Reith Lectures or any of them by Jeffrey Sachs. I thought he was naive about a lot of things but such a master mind of comprehension. He had, at one point, a fascinating account of how an initial awareness of things, journeys through various stages before really creative responses can be made. He gave an example of the hole in the ozone layer, which was discovered by accident by a couple of scientists who were doing something else. He traced through how the immediate response from other scientists is 'no no no' etc. Then there is a pause and then some start saying, well 'perhaps after all.....' Then the business world start saying 'well we can't take that seriously otherwise everything is going to collapse'. Then some start saying 'well hang on just a moment, there will be new business openings if we do take that seriously'. And then the politicians have to keep an eye on public opinion and one or two may see the point but can't act until there is a ground swell of public opinion (always true in democratic societies). He traced through those stages as an example of a global question which, actually, was addressed. I imagine you could do that with the whole issue of the slave trade: the need for abolition was seen by certain people, initially, rejected out of hand by others as being impossible. Others start saying 'it would be nice of course but the entire economy would collapse. And then, bit by bit, (it, in that case, took seventeen years,) finally it happens for reasons other than which you started with. It calls for great endurance to

persevere, but never forget that politicians (this is not a cynical remark) cannot act beyond knowing there is a certain public groundswell of opinion for what's on the agenda.

Now if you go down to the third level, I would like to take them in the opposite order. Start with solidarity and sustainability and then live simply. I really want to say that if we live with these things as the context in which we are living today, and allow them in prayer and in our worship and our understanding of God, to speak to and be spoken to by scripture, liturgy and so on, you will find that you deepen your understanding of who God is and who you are. It becomes a journey in faith and in love.

Some years ago now one of my two brothers, he and his wife, were in Tanzania. He was helping to set up their fourth national hospital in Tanzania. In order that the hospital could do its work it had not to attract all the primary medical work and therefore they started by going into the towns and villages making sure that the various clinics could operate properly. One day, he was in the company of some wonderful Tanzanian midwives, women of very great experience and wisdom. He explained to them that he had a friend back in London who was the secretary of the Natural Birthright Trust and he would like to approach them to see if there was any way they could help these Tanzanian midwives. So he held a up pair of forceps and said "Would these help?" And he held up a pair of scissors and said "Would these help?" So they all went off in to their palaver to discuss the matter and eventually their spokesperson said "No, we think they are too complicated." "Well what would help?" They said: "Well we use string and razorblades" So I said to my brother "You are not going to tell me that you wrote back to...?" He said "Yes I did, partly because I

enjoyed the picture of their next board meeting: item no. eleven on the agenda: 'so many balls of string and so many razor blades for midwives in Tanzania!'" At a much more serious level, he said "Until those people in that board know that the Tanzanian midwives exist *at all*, and in a strange way, the other way round as well, there is actually no future for our world." And I thought what a wonderful slightly humorous but serious parable for what learning to live in solidarity is. And it goes in *both* directions.

Today there is a great fascination, as you know, with spirituality and a great deal of what is called spirituality, in fact, is spiritual therapy - to bring me to a point of feeling good in my self. I can't tell you how *alien* that is to Christian theology and true spirituality, because in our Christian understanding, any real journey into maturity is not going to draw us *into* ourselves, it is going to draw us *out of* ourselves, to discover that we are part of the whole, in solidarity with the world at large. It's going to lead to self-forgetfulness and not self-concern. Jesus was very clear about that.

You find in the lives of many saints, that, as they journey or as we journey truly in this conversation between where we are and what God is saying to us, what opens up is a profound sense, a profound knowing, that we are part of the *whole*. In the contemplative tradition this is called the unitive way. It's not a flight from the world, it's a flight, as it were, into discovering ourselves as part of the whole in solidarity with the whole. And at the same time it redefines who God is. God turns out not to be a spectator-God, watching and worrying how creation's getting on. He turns out not to be one who's inviting us to flee from matter or

from our world into a spiritual domain. But God, in fact, pre-exists us in the whole of this world and is calling us into that sense of solidarity.

This is surely the significance of that occasion when the lawyer says to Jesus “Who is my neighbour?” The lawyer has a picture that certain people belong to him and he belongs to them, and then outside those boundaries people become ‘them’. Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan is telling the lawyer ‘you are asking the wrong question.’ If you learn to be a neighbour, if you allow the transformation to happen in you, then you will know that every person belongs to you and you to them. And nowadays, because of this big transformation we are going through, we are discovering ourselves to be part of the whole planet, the whole universe. As Teilhard de Chardin said “That which I call my body is not part of the universe I possess totally, it’s the whole of the universe that I possess partially.” (if anybody can understand that, will they please let me know)

Just a few words now about sustainability. Charles Elliot, who some of you who are older may remember in Christian Aid, made a series of documentary films on South Africa. In an interview he was asked “What is the most profound enduring memory you took away from living with African people?” He said: “The most enduring memory I have was living amongst people for whom it was absolutely in their whole deep psyche that to live in the present is to inherit what our predecessors have handed on to us, and that our call, at a deep level, is to hand on to our children and their children that which we ourselves have received.” In other words, ‘sustainability’ in a beautifully stated way. To be who they are is, therefore, an historical consciousness of who they are. And one of our dangers in the west is that we’ve

lost a sense of history. We don't feel that we've inherited something which we're the trustees of to hand over. We simply live now for now, and that's very dangerous for any culture. Sustainability is inviting us to go deeper and ponder much more.

Our Christian understanding of God, and of creation, is essentially that of an unfolding story. It is not a static philosophy of life or a static code of morality, or faith system. It is an unfolding story in which, at a certain point, God himself decided to become principal actor. I think the 'sustainability' is to do with all the issues we have been talking about, but is also, at a deep level, part of the story that God is telling in our planet. Do we want to be part of that or work against it? That also asks the question 'who is God?' I think all these things, if you live with them, are going to re-ask the question: 'who is God?' If you read the Book of Revelation you come out with rather a different understanding of who God is than a lot of us live most of our lives with. It is essentially the coming of the new heaven and the new earth, created out of what we are in at the moment.

Finally, a few thoughts about 'live simply'. There is a call to live simply so that others may simply live. That comes from being in solidarity. There is also a call to live simply so that we and our planet have a future. That comes from learning sustainability. But there is also a call to live simply in order to honour God and to honour ourselves.

The underlying pressure of any consumer ethic is to keep alive in people at a deep place in our psyche, a permanent *discontent*. The call to live simply is a conscious deep decision to be *content*. When Paul said to Timothy: "For goodness' sake, tell them if they have got a roof

over their heads and food to eat, learn to be content” he was echoing what Jesus had so often spoken about. We cannot come to perceive what God is bringing about, nor to know our true selves in it, if our hearts and minds are dis-content.

As I say, this is a crucial issue today because the whole nature of a consumer-led economy is to persuade us that something that did not exist yesterday is desirable today and an absolute necessity for tomorrow. We are persuaded to know ourselves as consumers. ‘Tesco, ergo sum’ as they say. And this can lead to profound self-boredom and various forms of idolatry and addiction.

Down through the history of the Church every religious order that has been founded has always had something to do with poverty in its agenda. The rest of us let ourselves off by saying ‘well that is because they were called to a special vocation of poverty’. It isn’t that, actually. It’s that the art of making decisions about life to live simply and to be content is intricately tied up with coming to know who we are, and who God is. And most of us kid ourselves, that we can come to that profound knowledge while living along with everything else.

Let me finish with a final reflection and then read you a slightly longer version of the quote I started with. We are living, at the moment, at the end of two hundred years of quite aggressive industrial expansionist-type of society, in which industry, technology and market economies, are all part of progress. It’s brought enormous prosperity, and at the same time created widespread poverty. It has fostered human creativity and at the same time been at

great cost to the planet and eco-systems. I just suggest to you, that we are at a turning point in which that has had its time. We're being called into a quite different way of living in God's planet. To be part of his story we have to move from *hubris*, which is the Greek word for aggressive determination, into *modesty*, which was a beautiful Christian word for the 'art of living within the nature of things' rather than always dominating them. Unfortunately, today, to be *modest* doesn't quite carry that meaning.

I was talking to my architect brother recently, and he has a real feeling that architecture can either be hubris and dominate the scene and show off, or it can use materials according to modesty and to fitting in. Well, I think that applies right through life today. And if we want a living reminder of that, a God who chooses, through his own free will, to present himself to us in bread and wine, is certainly *not* a God of *hubris*. It's a God of *modesty*, because he disappears into the very creation - he is part of the story, he is incarnated in the story that we are part of, and the story is going to unfold through solidarity and sustainability and simplicity. It is not going to unfold by having to have everything that we jolly well want. Right at the heart of the mystery of the Eucharist is the God who reveals himself mysteriously, as the God at the heart of what we are sharing today.

So let me just recover that passage from *Populorum Progressio*. I may say that if the Church lived this and preached this, we would be laughed at as nutters by a whole lot people, and considered as total subversives by others!

“If anyone has the world’s goods and sees one’s brother or sister in need and yet closes one’s heart against them, how does God’s love abide in them? It is well known how strong were the words used by the Fathers of the Church to describe the proper attitude of persons who possess anything towards persons in need. To quote St. Ambrose: ‘You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person, you are handing over to them what is theirs. For what has been given in common for the use of all you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all and not only to the rich’. That is, private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute and unconditioned right. No one is justified in keeping for one’s exclusive use what one does not need, when others lack necessities. In a word, according to the traditional doctrine as found in the Fathers of the Church, and the great theologians, the right to property must never be exercised to the detriment of the common good. And if there should arise a conflict between acquired private rights and primary community exigencies, it is the responsibility of public authorities to look for a solution with the active participation of individuals and of social groups.” Amen.