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CARDINAL HUME CENTRE

OPEN EVENING

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ADDRESS BY CARDINAL HUME

The other day a friend told me that at a family gathering a young girl went up to an elderly aunt she had not met before and asked 'What are you for?' Posterity does not record the reply, but the question is a striking one.

The clear implication, of course, was that the aunt served no obvious purpose at all, but I suspect that the child put her finger on a good question which many adults ask themselves, if not usually aloud.

In our society we are sometimes encouraged to judge people exclusively by what they achieve, by their jobs, their wealth, their position, even where they live. Therefore, to have no job, to be poor, to be old, to suffer from a chronic illness, or to be without a home, -- any and all of those can make a person feel useless and rejected, of no value to society, and a burden on others.

In other ways our society presents a different, and better, scale of values. For instance, when a person is in an accident the ambulance service is meant to act without favour or discrimination. At such moments we recognise that each person has an equal right to life, and so each should receive urgent medical help when necessary.

The book of Genesis teaches that we are each made in the image and likeness of God and specifically elected by Him just to “be”, to exist. Therefore, each individual life, at whatever stage, must be accorded full protection and respect. Furthermore, every individual must be given every opportunity to live a life in which his or her basic needs are provided for, and in which so far as is reasonably possible, his or her full potential is realised. Each person matters. No human life is ever redundant. Indeed, the Gospels tell us that it is particularly in those who are pushed to the margins that Christ is to be found. Matthew describes the last judgement which might be embarrassing for many of us -- “I was hungry and you gave me no food, thirsty and you never gave me drink; I was a stranger and you did not bring me home, I was naked and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not care for me.” (*Mt. 25: 42-44*) It is this Gospel imperative which gives the Cardinal Hume Centre its *raison d’être*.

Sadly, homelessness is still a pressing social problem in central London and throughout the country. It is difficult to walk along Victoria Street, The Strand, Leicester Square, and other well known localities in town and not see those who are labelled homeless. Of course, admittedly there are some who choose to sleep outside as a way of life; but this is not so for most. Of these, some declare their plight by selling *The Big Issue*. Others reveal their circumstances by huddling in doorways and shopfronts, at night especially. Some beg from passers by. Others simply sit and stare blankly into the distance. Sadly for many, it seems there is no sense of hope - and very often some form of psychiatric illness is apparent, including varying degrees of alcoholism. Yet behind each face is a personal story, the circumstances

that brought that individual person to this state. These people are precious in the eyes of God and thus must be precious in ours.

Many here tonight work with young and old who are homeless - many here provide tremendous support to charities working in the field of homelessness. In this area of London we are fortunate indeed to have so many people committed to this work. The Cardinal Hume Centre together with the Passage and the Depaul Trust all do a marvellous job, in complementary ways, to assist homeless people. The work of the Cardinal Hume Centre is the product of a lot of effort and many acts of generosity by individuals and groups of people.

The voluntary agencies working in central London have in recent years been assisted by the central Government Rough Sleepers Initiative, which has had some success in reducing the numbers of people sleeping on the streets in central London. Voluntary agencies in this area have been able to try and do more than just provide emergency accommodation. They have cooperated in developing strategies to provide homeless people with a series of stepping stones away from the street to permanent accommodation, thereby helping them to break out of the vicious circle of homelessness, poverty and unemployment. Continued Government support will be needed, however, to help fund these agencies if they are to provide the same help in future to those who are still becoming homeless in central London.

As you will know better than I, the underlying causes of homelessness are varied and complex. The increase in family break-up is certainly one important factor. Indeed, I read recently that it has been estimated that as a consequence of extra households resulting from relationship breakdown, at any one time an additional 700,000 dwellings are needed in this country mostly in the public sector. So it follows that if we were to do more to bolster and support the integrity of marriage and family life -- and I acknowledge the Church can have an important role to play here -- then it would ease the housing problem. We should note also, however, that family breakdown is not just a cause of housing difficulties; it can also be a consequence of them. The pressures on the most dedicated and committed family, forced to live in inadequate and temporary accommodation, must surely be intense. In fact eradicating homelessness among families would be a valuable contribution towards restoring more stable family life in our society.

Relationship breakdown is only one of the underlying causes of homelessness. Other factors include the evident lack of effective assistance for certain vulnerable groups, -- the mentally ill, alcoholics, drug users and most young single people. But perhaps the most fundamental problem of all is the continuing shortage of affordable accommodation, particularly for those on low incomes.

I know that the Government is at the moment considering amending the legislation on homelessness. It is proposed to replace the present statutory duty on local authorities to secure long term accommodation for homeless families with a much more limited duty to provide emergency temporary

accommodation only. There is legitimate concern that in a few local authorities, particularly in London, the acute shortage of social housing has meant that these authorities have been unable to allocate many permanent homes to those on council waiting lists, as there are so many homeless families who take priority. There can evidently be a genuine problem of fairness in these areas where the housing shortage is particularly acute.

I understand, however, that the Government's proposals have provoked widespread and deep anxieties among many in the voluntary sector working full time with and on behalf of homeless people. They do not believe the legislative changes proposed are either necessary or desirable. I have listened especially to what some of the agencies I know best, including the Catholic Housing Aid Society and Shelter, have to say. They are particularly concerned that removing the present statutory duty on local authorities to secure long term accommodation for homeless families could mean that more homeless families will find themselves spending a very long time in temporary or insecure accommodation. If this were to happen the health, education and stability of these families would be gravely threatened.

As many of you will know, the spectacle of homeless families in very poor temporary accommodation, with many instances of families being split up and children being taken into care, were among the factors which persuaded Parliament to pass the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act in 1977. A statutory duty on local authorities to secure long term accommodation for homeless families has existed ever since. It would be tragic if removing this duty led to a resurgence of exactly those social ills it was designed to remedy.

I would hope that no action would be taken which diminishes the duty on local authorities to help those most in need of housing, and that priority will be given to finding ways of meeting the desperate need to increase the supply of affordable accommodation for those without a home. It is not changing the legislation, surely, which will solve the problem of homelessness but the provision of more resources.

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of a decent home, -- somewhere that is not just a temporary roof but which can be a place of security and safety, -- where a person can grow and develop. The Holy Father, speaking in 1987 said that "the place where a person creates and lives out his or her life also serves to found, in some way, that person's deepest identity and his or her relations with others."

All who are involved with and support the work of the Cardinal Hume Centre, like the other agencies doing such tremendous work, deserve the gratitude of us all. They bring tangible benefits to many people in the most urgent need. At the same time, they symbolise a truth about the ultimate value of each person, made in the image and likeness of God. They point to the true answer to the little girl's question 'What are you for?'

Cardinal Basil Hume
