

SPEECH BY CARDINAL HUME ON THE OPENING OF THE HOSTEL AT THE
CARDINAL HUME CENTRE, WEDNESDAY 8 NOVEMBER 1989

Living and working as a bishop in the centre of London one cannot but be affected by the sight of the homeless on the streets. They are almost an expected feature of life in a big city, and it is tempting to think there is little or nothing that can, or even should, be done about it.

This is not so. My interest in homelessness stems from the Christian obligation to help those in need. Our Lord says in St. Matthew's Gospel: "Insofar as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me". So I believe that we have a duty to look frankly at the social conditions around us, and as Christians of all denominations to work together and with others to do what we can to address the specific needs which we find.

Homelessness is one of the most pressing of contemporary social problems. Without a home or family surroundings a person lacks something fundamental. As the Holy Father said last year: "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". So the lack of a home is deeply affecting.

One aspect of the problem in London which I find particularly distressing is the number of young people living rough, who are in great danger of being exposed to the risks of prostitution and drug addiction. Some of these young people have never had a real home. Others have been thrown out of their homes or have found the conditions at home intolerable and joined the homeless young people in Victoria. Whatever the cause, they lack this vital base - a private, secure place where they can be themselves, and grow to maturity.

Because of the importance I attach to the issue of homelessness I have become involved with others in a number of initiatives and projects which in different and complementary ways try to assist the homeless in central London. One aspect of this involvement has been the establishment of this Centre.

We are here to celebrate the opening of the medium term hostel which is part of the Centre. For eleven young people, the hostel provides a home. There is a bed and eating facilities and shelter. The rooms are single and private to each individual resident. Within them they feel secure. No one, not even the hostel staff, can enter their rooms without their permission. If the hostel did no more than make these provisions it would be of great assistance to these homeless young people. But it does more than that. It helps them to learn to relate to their fellows, to develop those skills which enable us to get on with other people. Self-esteem grows, the community spirit develops.

In the first six months of its operation, the hostel has accommodated twenty two young people, of whom fourteen have moved on. We frankly don't know what happened to two of the fourteen. Two others went back to their own homes. All the others have moved to long term housing of different kinds. Simply on that account, that seems to me a good beginning. But it's quite clear from the eagerness of those who have lived in the hostel to come back to meet the staff and their friends, that they see it as more than a place to eat and sleep. It's a welcoming place, a source of support.

Now, of course, set against the many thousands of homeless young people in London, this figure of twenty two will seem a very small contribution. But the enormous problem of homelessness cannot be tackled by schemes catering for very large numbers of young people in one place. That would not permit their individuality to be recognised. The community

needs more places like this. Let us rejoice in what the Centre has done and wish them well for the furtherance of their work.

That work is the product of a lot of effort and many acts of generosity by individuals and groups of people. This Centre could not have started without the generosity of the Sisters of the Eucharist, who made these premises available in 1986. We are so pleased to see two of them here today. Nor could the project have started without the help of the religious orders and congregations who responded so generously to my appeal for funds in 1986. I am delighted to see so many of them here.

The plan for the development of the Centre is the product of much careful research by the trio of dedicated religious who were the founding team of the Centre: Sr. Eileen, Sr. Maria and Fr. Peter. I pay tribute to their pioneering work and to the large number of local bodies, statutory and voluntary, many present today, who contributed so freely and so generously of their experience and expertise in this field. It is very pleasing indeed to recognise and acknowledge the extent of this friendly co-operation among so many helping agencies. And I know, too, that this co-operation continues to this day.

Ostensibly, we are here to witness the formal opening of the hostel. But you wouldn't wish me to fail to mention another project, the first of the helping services provided by the Centre, which has now been in operation for two years. This is a family day centre which has now catered for almost 300 families, living in bed and breakfast accommodation in the area. It is a great pleasure to note that parents and their children have made already 10,000 visits to the Centre. They have had meals, playing space and facilities for their children. Young parents have had space to learn to be parents, to share experience with their fellows, to take

part in craft instruction and educational classes, to demonstrate to themselves and others what high, if latent, talents they possess in so many areas.

I am very pleased to learn that plans have been agreed for the completion of the next stage in the four-part programme for the development of the Centre. Early in the New Year the family day centre will be expanded to help meet the needs of single young people.

You who are here have helped to make all this possible. Your very presence shows your concern for these homeless young people. You don't need me to tell you that the provision of the services I have described is only a small contribution towards alleviating the problem of homelessness among young people in Central London. We must all be diligent in our continued pursuit of the resolution of these problems. But, in the meantime, we can rejoice in what has been achieved here in this Centre and renew our determination to help the Centre to maintain and improve its range of services.

I formally declare that the hostel is open.

Thank you for your attendance. Thank you for your support in the past. Thank you for the pledge of future assistance which your presence here betokens.