

Vocation for Justice



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Preparing for the Election



“Elections are an essential moment in the life of any country, since they allow all citizens responsibly to choose their leaders.”
Pope Francis, speaking to the Diplomatic Corps, 8 January 2024

COLUMBAN MISSION

Collaborating with the National Justice and Peace Network of England and Wales & Justice and Peace Scotland

Editorial

Welcome to our election edition of *'Vocation for Justice'*, filled with thought-provoking content that we hope will be useful to Christians as the UK moves towards a general election.

In *Fratelli Tutti* (#197), Pope Francis poses questions for politicians' self-reflection: "How much love did I put into my work?" "What did I do for the progress of our people?" "What mark did I leave on the life of society?" "What real bonds did I create?" "What positive forces did I unleash?" "How much social peace did I sow?" "What good did I achieve in the position that was entrusted to me?"

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (#205) he says, "I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, the lives of the poor!"

These sentiments are powerful, but might allow us to sidestep the responsibility of our own engagement. We might say to ourselves that, "it's politicians who have to act, not us". However, a general election cycle reminds us that we are a crucial part of the political process – we have to tell candidates what we care about and how we want them to act as our representatives.

The Catholic Church teaches that "*participation in political life is a moral obligation*" (*Evangelii Gaudium* #220). This calls us to much more than voting. We need to inform our consciences, hear the cry of the Earth and of the poor, proactively make ourselves aware of injustice, reflect, pray and discern, and then respond. And there are so many calls to hear, so many actions to take – it's challenging, heart-breaking, exhausting, never-ending. Sometimes I wrestle with the feeling that I can never do 'enough'.

But, thank God, it's not all about me – we are ALL called to play our parts in God's mission for justice and peace, to make our

contributions to a much bigger picture.

This edition of *'Vocation for Justice'* highlights both the underpinning theology (see Jane's article on the Common Good at election time on p3, and Anna's exploration of Catholic Social Teaching and Democracy on p9) and practical actions we are called to as we prepare for an election (including materials and campaigns from other groups – we are stronger together, as highlighted by Shanon on p11). There are tools and reflection materials for discernment, engaging with candidates and manifestos, and, ultimately, playing our part in encouraging candidates to be disturbed by injustice and ready to respond lovingly for the common good.

Some of you reading this are regular subscribers – thank you for your ongoing commitment, to us and, more importantly, to faith-inspired action for peace and justice. For others, this might be your first time receiving a copy of *'Vocation for Justice'*. Welcome! For all who read this, as well as using this edition for your own preparation before the election, I'd ask you to consider who else might benefit from the contents of this magazine?

We have secured extra funding to allow people to order additional copies to pass on to others – please go to www.columbans.co.uk/election or use the QR code below.



For example, you might give copies to friends and family members to keep near the front door, ready to ask political canvassers some of the questions on p5-8. First time voters you know might be particularly



A beautiful positive winning image from the Columban Schools Competition 2024, produced by Chidera Anyakora of Loreto School, Altrincham. She says it shows, "a diverse range of wildlife that mirrors the diverse and unique nature of our world."

interested in Hannah's contribution on p10. Could you give a copy to your parish priest asking him to pay particular attention to Fr Rob's article on p4? It might help him feel confident to offer a sermon series before the election! Maybe after sharing p5 with others you'd feel ready to organise a hustings.

Please make use of this edition to encourage others to prepare well for and engage with the upcoming general election. I'll leave you with an extract from a prayer for the election by Columban Fr Kevin McDonagh, who has recently joined our team here in Britain, after three decades working in Peru. ■

James Trewby

PRAYER

Eternal God, Lord of creation, as we look towards the upcoming elections we ask that your Spirit of Truth be upon us. Let us, your people, be guided by Gospel values of love of neighbour, truth, justice and compassion towards all, particularly the 'least' of our sisters and brothers. Help us to choose political parties and candidates willing to place the needs of the many before the profits of the few, to put the wellbeing of the majority above the wellbeing of the markets, and the conserving of our common home ahead of the cossetting of corporations that harm creation. Amen.

Cover illustration: CAFOD / SVP

The Common Good at Election Time

Jane Lavery

Jane is a member of the Columban Justice, Peace and Ecology Team.

“The political community ... exists for the common good” (GS #74). This extract is from *Gaudium et Spes*, the Vatican II document on ‘The Church in the Modern World.’ It continues: *“The common good embraces the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families and organisations to achieve complete and efficacious fulfilment.”* This is a very powerful Catholic Social Teaching (CST) Statement.

As Christians, we are all concerned about how to vote in the forthcoming General Election. We are advised to use our vote, and to use it wisely – as well as making sure we have a form of photo ID with us. But what does that mean? We can’t ask ourselves what Jesus would have done; even though the Romans practiced a form of democracy, an itinerant preacher from a occupied country would not have been allowed to vote. Therefore we have to make up our own minds about where to place the precious ‘X’ we are privileged to have access to .

We could look at CST, and consider the words from *Gaudium et Spes* quoted above. Are we really sure what is meant by ‘the common good’? We probably recognise it as one of the principles of CST, alongside ‘subsidiarity’ and ‘the preferential option for the poor’, but do we really understand what any of them mean, or, more importantly, how we can apply them to our daily lives? Are these aspects of CST, particularly the teaching of ‘the common good’ important as we try to decide where to cast our vote?

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, there are three distinct elements to the principle of the common good. The first is that the common good *“presupposes respect for the person”* (1907). Therefore, according to

the teaching of the Church, we should be looking for parties and candidates who show respect for each person, no matter what their age, gender, race, colour, religion or sexual orientation. God loves everyone with a deep, abiding love, and doesn’t care about the colour of the skin or the length of the hair, or whether someone’s politics are blue or red – or even green! That is how we Christians should regard our fellow human beings, and what we should expect from all our members of Parliament.

The second element that the Catechism talks about is that the common good *“requires the social well-being and development of the group itself “* (1908) – in the case of a General Election the group would consist of the whole country. This really is the crux of any election campaign: which party’s policies are for the greater good of the whole country – North/South, young/old, rich/poor, black/white? This is what each of us has to discern, and it’s important to remember that, according to CST, we should be considering the common good: what is good for the whole community, the whole country, not simply which policies might be better for each of us personally or for our own particular group. This element is, I believe, the most vital, as we should be acting for the long-term, not simply short-term gains, however attractive those may appear to be.

The third element the Catechism provides is that, *“the common good requires peace, that is the stability and security of a just order”* (1909). Currently, the world is in desperate need of peace. Our country is too and as a nation we appear to be becoming less and less tolerant of ‘the other’ and more and more convinced that we are the only ones whose arguments are worth listening to – and

when we disagree with someone it seems that all we can do is abuse not only their ideas but also them personally. This is not for the common good, and certainly does not lead to *“the stability and security of a just order”*.

Returning to the Catechism, we read some interesting statements: *“Authority is exercised legitimately if it committed to the common good. To attain this it must employ morally acceptable means”* (1921); *“The diversity of political regimes is legitimate, provided they contribute to the good of the community”* (1922); *“Political authority must be exercised within the limits of the moral order and must guarantee the conditions for the exercise of freedom”* (1923).

These statements would appear to be outlining the very basic, minimum values of a flourishing society, yet we are aware that there are many countries around the world where these statements could not be applied. It is of vital importance that these basic values are sustained within our own communities, our own country. We live in a democracy, and the desire for the common good as outlined in CST should be of paramount importance as we exercise our citizenship and consider how we should vote.

Pope Francis says we are living not in an era of change, but in a change of era. Unfortunately, we are not really aware of what the new era will look like. Will it be an era that acknowledges the common good, or one in which the rich continue to get richer while the poor get poorer? Will it be an era when we finally understand that in not addressing the dual crises of the climate emergency and loss of biodiversity we are also irreparably damaging ourselves? Or an era of a continuation of high growth as we persist in using and abusing Earth’s resources? Apparently, this year almost half the world’s population will be voting; let us pray that the principles of CST will prevail as votes are cast across the globe. ■

Preaching the Election

Fr Rob Esdalle

Fr Rob Esdalle is parish priest of Woking & Knaphill parishes in Arundel and Brighton Diocese.

‘Keep politics out of the pulpit!’ There are various reasons why people might invoke this slogan in the coming months. One is the persistent dualism which prefers the spiritual to the material, opposes the soul to the body and thinks that salvation is what happens when you die (assuming you haven’t proved too enamoured of the physical in this life). Good news for the poor, but not here, not now.

A second is the pessimism which presumes that we have no agency in society or confuses fidelity with social conformity. That is already there in the later stages of the New Testament where slaves are told to be obedient to their masters and women to their spouses. It was an understandable reflex for a young religion trying to find its place in a despotic Empire. Traces of this desire to be invisible to the powers that be endure in the Catholic psyche, especially in these islands in the wake of centuries of persecution.

Moreover, unfortunately, social pessimism is returning, not least among the young: ‘Don’t vote. It only encourages them’ And a large part of consumerism is predicated on ‘Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.’ Here salvation means compensation, distraction and diversion.

A third resistance to ‘politics in the pulpit’ comes from the memory of past clerical efforts to railroad Catholic voters to vote for one side or against another. We can hope that no one would pay attention to such corralling of the Catholic vote in the UK – although it still happens elsewhere and there are always some who want to see any election as a single-issue referendum.

Normally, for Catholics the single issue in question has been abortion, though environmental cam-

paigners might similarly be tempted to focus solely on ecological matters – while the majority of the population are focused on the cost of living crisis and housing needs.

So a first plank in any attempt to prepare our congregations for the forthcoming General Election in the UK has to be to underline these points: firstly, that we are not meant to be resigned to the fact that for too many of our brothers and sisters this world and our society is a ‘Vale of Tears’ but should be angered by such injustice; secondly, that we are citizens, not subjects, called to assume our responsibility and take agency for the creation of a society in which Gospel values are enacted; thirdly, that preparing to vote should be a prayerful process of discernment, reading the signs of the times and listening to the voices especially of the voiceless – both voices from the human peripheries and the voice of nature, the ‘common home’ which we are currently trashing.

Catholic preachers are not used to providing ‘Sermon Series’, unlike pastors in some evangelical churches, yet – once the election is called – it might be appropriate to announce the intention to provide just such a series over the three or four weekends of the election campaign.

It would be important not to push a particular ‘party-political’ line but to offer a guide to the building blocks of Catholic Social Ethics – the Common Good, Human Dignity and the Sanctity of Life at all its stages, the Preferential Option For The Poor, Caring For Our Common Home, Peace and the realisation that, whatever the question, war is not the answer.

‘Sermon Series’ run the risk of riding roughshod over the lectionary, ‘reading into’ rather than

‘reading out’ from the Scriptures, in which (as Vatican II reminded us) ‘it is Christ himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church’. But precisely because these very human writings are inspired, ‘God-breathed’, we can legitimately rely on the lectionary to help us hear ‘what the Spirit is saying to the churches’ (Rev 2.7).

Rishi Sunak hasn’t gone for a May election, but the insights and themes that the Eastertide readings present provide rich seams to mine in preparing our communities for the vote. So do the great feasts that follow. From the subversive, creative, revolutionary action of the Spirit at Pentecost: a unity in diversity founded in love (Trinity), the body broken to gather the scattered and feed the hungry (Corpus Christi).

Our guide through Ordinary Time (until the end of November) will be Mark. It is the Gospel of a minority Church in a time of persecution, seeking the courage to take up its cross and lay down its life for others. Despite appearances, says Mark, the *Kairos* is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Mustard seed actions bring forth a mighty tree in which the birds of the air – and the poor of the earth – can take shelter. We journey together to that book’s conclusion: an empty tomb and the question left hanging in Mk 16.8: what will we do in our fear? Keep silent or – like those first female evangelists – tell the story, that our broken nation might find new hope and new life?

And if the government clings on to the last moment, then Luke’s take on the Advent journey will direct our thoughts. Stay awake, and do not let your hearts be coarsened; prepare a way – in a particular political context (cf. Lk 3.1); the ethical teaching of the Baptist; the Visitation story. Let us pray that the general election will also cause Mary’s Magnificat to be sung in our land, a song about raising up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things. ■

Hosting a Hustings

During the period before a General Election, churches and community organisations often organise election meetings - known as hustings - where members of the public can listen to and ask questions of the candidates standing for election. They do this as a public service, to support the democratic process, to facilitate public debate and as a contribution to the common good.

Identify your constituency Constituency boundaries have changed for this General Election. You can input your postcode to find out how boundaries have changed, and what your constituency will be, at jpit.uk/constituency.

Form a planning group Are there other churches, faith or community groups that you can ask to work with? Hustings and candidate meetings do not have to be with candidates from only one constituency.

When should we hold the meeting? Any time between now and the election is possible, but the best time is probably a fortnight or so before election day. The date will depend on the availability of candidates and a suitable hall, room or church. Candidates often respond positively to invitations to meetings held on Sunday evenings.

Where? Church halls are a possibility. Check for an effective public address (PA) system - and a roving mic - and then ensure someone who understands its operation is responsible for it on the night.

If considering a hybrid approach, do you have a building set up with filming or live-streaming facilities and a reliable internet connection?

Who to invite These meetings are run by – but not for – the churches. People from all sections of the community should be encouraged to attend and to participate. You don't have to invite all the candidates but if you don't, you must have an objective, impartial reason for not including all of them.

Chairing the event Identify a respected and impartial person from the community to chair. This could be a church figure, a community leader, or someone else who is comfortable speaking in public and keeping a meeting firmly in order. They should not belong to or be on record as supporting a political party.

Format Chair welcomes people and briefly introduces the candidates, by name and party. Each candidate is invited to make a short statement (a couple of minutes at most). Then questions from the floor on political issues, with each candidate given a similar amount of time to respond. A final few sentences from each candidate. *Bearing in mind that you may have six or more candidates, you will need to ensure that statements and answers are kept strictly to time.*

Online version of traditional hustings This follows the same format as a traditional hustings, but is held online on a video conferencing platform. Questions can be submitted by the audience through the chat function, Q&A features.

A 'people's politics' election meeting Whereas a conventional hustings places the emphasis on hearing from politicians and parties, a 'people's politics' event begins by hearing from those whose voices are not often heard within the political discourse, before asking candidates to respond.

Further information from the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) of the Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed Churches, in collaboration with Churches Together in England, The Church of England, Quakers in Britain, Catholic Parliamentary Office (Scotland) and others.
<https://jpit.uk/elections/hustings>

Reminder: There is a new requirement for people to take photo ID when voting.

QUESTIONS FOR CANDIDATES

PEACEMAKING

The issue:

Cost of military spending – The UK government insists that 2% of GDP is the absolute minimum for military spending – about £45 billion a year.

Militarism - Militaristic thinking means that key security challenges like pandemics and climate change do not receive the attention and resources they need. And hard power is over-used, with many real consequences to militarism that lead to enormous harm both for people in the UK and worldwide.

Costs and dangers of nuclear weapons - New submarines procurement, missile leasing costs, extension of the current warheads' lives, servicing and decommissioning: taking all these costs into account, replacing the UK's Trident nuclear programme will cost £205 billion.

We would like the UK government to see security less through a military lens; but focus on the real threats affecting the security of people in the UK and worldwide, most urgently the climate crisis.

Questions to ask:

- 1. How concerned are you that military spending in UK stands at a minimum of 2% of GDP, the NATO target, while the climate crisis, the most urgent threat to human security worldwide, receives far less funding?**
- 2. How far do you agree that in place of militarism, we need to put sustainable, human security at the centre of our security thinking, and provide resources accordingly.**
- 3. How far do you agree that the UK should move towards becoming a non-nuclear-armed country? This would include the disarmament of existing Trident nuclear weapons and support for the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.**

QUESTIONS FOR CANDIDATES

FOOD SYSTEMS

The issue: Global hunger levels have been on the rise in recent years with over 2.4 billion people without regular access to food. The global food system urgently needs transforming. For too long it has been dominated by a few multinational companies who have pushed for only an industrialised approach to agriculture. This has negatively impacted the diversity of crops available, sidelined small-scale farmers in low-income countries, accelerated the climate crisis and polluted natural resources.

We would like to see a commitment to a new agricultural model that supports small-scale farmers who are practicing sustainable techniques, including agroecology.

Questions to ask:

- 1. Ten percent of the world's population regularly go to bed hungry. We urgently need to transform the way we grow, distribute and consume food to ensure everyone has enough to eat, regardless of where in the world they live. If elected, will you work towards ensuring an end to hunger both in the UK and globally?**
- 2. Given that we are currently facing both a global hunger crisis and a climate crisis, would you work to ensure that small-scale farmers across the world who are practising sustainable techniques, such as agroecology, receive support from the UK?**

MIGRATION AND ASYLUM

The issue: Every year thousands of people tragically die crossing borders as they try to find safety for themselves and their families. In recent years it has become even harder for people who need safety to reach the UK. For many that are able to reach the UK, recent changes in the law make it almost impossible for them to apply for asylum and find sanctuary here. Instead, they face the possibility of being indefinitely detained and deported to a third country, such as Rwanda.

We would like to see an asylum system based on principles of compassion, humanity and dignity.

Questions to ask:

- 1. Every year, people tragically die as they attempt to cross borders to reach safety. If elected, will you champion the right to safe and legal routes for people needing to flee their homes, rather than leave vulnerable people prey to people smugglers?**
- 2. If elected, will you ensure the country is a welcoming one to refugees and migrants, including ending the unjust deportation of people who haven't had asylum applications heard?**

CLIMATE

The issue: The climate crisis is one of the biggest challenges facing humanity. It is already causing mass displacement of people across the world and destroying the natural world, upon which life on Earth depends. The UK is one of the largest historic emitters of greenhouse gases driving the climate crisis, so it has a particular responsibility to take action to keep temperatures rises below 1.5C. We would like to see an end to all spending on fossil fuels both at home and abroad and ensure significant financial support for those countries who are hardest hit but least responsible.

Questions to ask:

- 1. We know that we need to transition away from fossil fuels if we are to have any chance of halting the climate crisis. Would you work to ensure that the UK finally ends all new oil, coal and gas projects and phases out existing ones?**
- 2. Some of the world's poorest communities are facing the greatest burden of the climate crisis. With millions of people already displaced as a result of extreme weather events, how would you support working with other countries to raise new taxes from the most polluting industries such as shipping, aviation and fossil fuels to support countries suffering the impacts of climate catastrophes?**

AID AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The issue: Despite the commitment to spend 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) on overseas aid being enshrined into law, the UK has slashed its aid budget, and now only spends 0.5% of GNI on overseas aid. In addition, increasing amounts of that aid is being spent in the UK rather than overseas, meaning that compared to 2020 there has been a whopping 40% reduction in aid spending overseas. We would like to see restoration of the UK aid budget to 0.7% of GNI and a commitment to tackling the root causes of global poverty, injustice and climate change.

Questions to ask:

- 1. The UK has slashed its aid budget, undermining the fight against global poverty. Will you, if elected, agree to restore the aid budget to 0.7% of national income, as agreed in the International Development Act?**
- 2. Our overseas aid budget has not only been cut, but the Department for International Development has been shut down, and much of the remaining aid money has been redirected to domestic spending. Can you let me know what you will do to ensure Britain restores its aid budget and supports people across the world who are experiencing in poverty?**

QUESTIONS FOR CANDIDATES

BUSINESS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The issue: British businesses are some of the biggest and most powerful in the world, often with supply chains that span many countries. It is vital that the goods they produce are not done so at the expense of either human rights or the natural environment, which is why the UK needs to legislate for greater oversight of business practices throughout their supply chains.

We would like to see the introduction of a new 'Business, Human Rights & Environment Act' to tackle corporate abuses to both people and nature through UK supply chains.

Questions to ask:

- 1. Many of the things we consume in the UK are produced via supply chains that span the world. Throughout these global supply chains, it is too often the case that workers are exploited and/or the environment is damaged. Would you support the introduction of legislation for greater oversight of business practices through these supply chains?**
- 2. If elected, what steps would you take to ensure businesses are held responsible for their operations, both at home and abroad to ensure workers' rights are upheld, affected communities are safeguarded and the natural environment is protected?**

BUILDING RESILIENT COMMUNITIES AND TACKLING REGIONAL INEQUALITIES

The issue: The UK has some of the highest regional inequalities in Europe, and this is leaving many people behind. Research shows that the UK is the most regionally unbalanced large, advanced economy, with growing rates of poverty in particular regions. This leaves millions of people below the poverty line and without the support they need to thrive. Tackling this issue requires ongoing investment in community assets and leadership as well as the creation of good quality employment. We would like to see a solid plan to tackle regional inequalities and help improve social and economic outcomes for left-behind areas.

Questions to ask:

- 1. If elected, what will your party do to address regional inequalities and help communities thrive?**
- 2. Will you commit to working more closely with local groups and communities, including faith groups, to identify the best policies to support left behind areas?**

DEBT CANCELLATION

The issue: Many of the world's poorest countries have been plunged into a new debt crisis. Due to the economic crisis, high interest rates and the fall-out from the pandemic, many countries have unsustainable debt burdens. Money that could be spent on health, education or tackling climate change is instead going to big banks, who are making millions in profit. The vast majority of lower-income country debt contracts are governed by English or New York law. This means the UK could pass legislation to ensure that creditors cannot sue countries struggling to pay. The UK Parliament's International Development Select Committee has recommended this option is explored.

We would like to see the cancellation of unsustainable debts owed by low-income countries, including the introduction of new legislation to prevent private creditors from suing low-income countries in UK courts.

Questions to ask:

- 1. Given that over 50 of the world's poorest nations are currently struggling with a debt crisis, are you supportive of the idea that the UK should champion debt cancellation for those low-income countries who need it so that they can properly fund their essential public services?**
- 2. Money they could spend on health, education or tackling the climate crisis is instead going to big banks and wealthy nations. If you were elected, would you support a new legislation that could prevent private creditors such as Blackrock or HSBC from suing low-income countries in UK courts?**

COST OF LIVING CRISIS

The issue: The cost of living crisis is pushing increasing numbers of people in the UK into poverty. Almost two million people used a food bank last year, the highest number yet. Meanwhile, six in ten low-income households are not able to afford an unexpected expense, and over seven in ten families are going without essentials.

We would like to see better support for the growing numbers of people living in poverty in the UK, including a welfare system that supports people in need, whether they are in work or not.

Questions to ask:

- 1. What are your plans to tackle the cost of living crisis in our area and nationally?**
- 2. If elected, would you commit to improve our social security system by raising the basic rate of Universal Credit so that people can meet their essential needs?**

QUESTIONS FOR CANDIDATES

CLIMATE AND NATURE BILL

The issue:

Zero Hour is the campaign for the Climate and Nature Bill. It is a plan for a new UK law that addresses the crisis of the natural world in line with the most up-to-date science. The Bill would require the UK to achieve climate and nature targets; give the Secretary of State a duty to implement a strategy to achieve those targets; establish a Climate and Nature Assembly to advise the Secretary of State in creating that strategy; give duties to the Committee on Climate Change and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee regarding the strategy and targets.

The Climate & Nature Bill would address gaps, ensuring that the UK:

- Sets a joined-up strategy to tackle the climate-nature crisis
- Commits to a carbon budget to keep global heating to 1.5°C
- Restores lost nature in our countryside, towns and cities
- Takes responsibility for our full emissions and ecological footprints
- Delivers a just transition that protects vulnerable communities and involves us all in a fair way forward.

Nature 2030, Green Christian and A Rocha are among 70+ organisations supporting the Climate and Nature Bill.
<https://www.zerohour.uk/climate-and-nature-bill/>

Question to ask:

Will you back the Climate and Nature Bill if you are elected to parliament?

OTHER CAMPAIGNS AND NEWS

Catholic Union General Election Survey

In a recent survey, the Catholic Union found that participation by Catholics in the next General Election is likely to be extremely high. A survey of the Catholic Union's members and supporters found that just over 90 percent of responders were planning to vote in the upcoming General Election, which the Prime Minister has said is due to take place in the "second half of this year." The survey also found a strong link between politics and religion with 92 percent of people saying that their faith and the teachings of the Catholic Church "help to influence" how they vote. The 4.5 million Catholics are the largest religious minority group in the country and one of the most politically active. The top five issues identified in the survey as being of most concern to Catholics ahead of the election were care for the poor, religious freedom, family life, education, and life issues.

Wealth Tax Appeal

The JustMoney Movement says that as the General Election nears, it's more important than ever that we continue to champion a range of voices calling out for a fairer tax system, with more taxes on wealth.
<https://justmoney.org.uk/speak-out/good-measure-campaign/>

Fight the Anti-Refugees Laws

Asylum Matters has developed 'Building a compassionate refugee protection system' a two-page document setting out key principles and policy asks for parliamentary candidates.
<https://asylumatters.org/app/uploads/2024/03/Building-a-compassionate-refugee-protection-system.pdf>

Columban Competition: 'Biodiversity Matters'

Winners have been announced in a media competition for young people on the subject '**Biodiversity Matters,**' run by the Columban Missionary Society in Britain and Ireland. Protecting biodiversity - which humanity relies on for health, food and well-being - is a mission priority of the Columbans.

The competition attracted 223 entries from 13-18 year olds across Britain and Ireland. In Britain, entries came from 29 schools.

Young people clearly understand how important the issue of Biodiversity is and are proud that the Church is engaging with it. Article winner Austin Beenham said, "I am very thankful that I have been able to raise awareness on the biodiversity crisis and hopefully made a difference."

To the right is the third place image winner Charlotte Moyes' hourglass drawing, which highlights how time is ticking to address the impact humanity is having on Biodiversity.

Full details of winners, judges and winning entries at:
<http://www.columbancompetition.com/>



Catholic Social Teaching and Democracy

Anna Blackman

Anna lectures in Religious Education at Glasgow University.

Historically, the Catholic Church has had a complex relationship with democracy. During the 18th century, the anticlericalism that went alongside advocates of democracy during the French Revolution, and the policies of Italian republican nationalists and the *Kulturkampf* of Bismark Germany in the 19th century, produced deep suspicion amongst the Church. Political liberalism was seen to promote autonomy of the individual, who was independent from God, and demoted the authority of the Church through the separation of Church and state and freedom of worship.

However, with the advent of the modern Catholic Social Teaching (CST) tradition, which began in 1891 with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the Church began to address the changing nature of society since the Industrial Revolution and its own role within it. Whilst *Rerum Novarum* did not endorse a particular form of governance, it did, however, emphasise particular principles that are in keeping with democratic practice.

These include the use of human rights language, though the focus here is on social and economic rights. These include the right to a just wage, rather than civil or political rights, and the importance of freedom to associate, such as through trade unions.

Leo XIII's encyclical emphasised the importance of active participation within society and this continued to be stressed by later popes. From World War II onwards, the Vatican shifted towards a more optimistic appraisal of democracy. The thought of the French philosopher, Jacques Maritain, writing during the 1930s -1940s, was significant here, using principles derived from Aquinas to argue that democracy was the political model most in keeping with

Christian view of the person. Pope Pius XII's 1944 Christmas message reflected this in its condemnation of totalitarianism and a "call for a system of government more in keeping with the dignity and liberty of the citizens".

The most significant shift came with the Second Vatican Council and the period preceding it. Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris* argued for the "inviolable" rights of the person, recognising a wider plurality of forms of rights, such as civil and political, moral and cultural.

The Council's *Gaudium et Spes* pushed the tradition further, specifically endorsing democracy as, "in full conformity with human nature ... providing all citizens ... without discrimination the practical possibility of freely and actively taking part in the establishment of the juridical foundations of the political community". This was so significant that by the end of the 20th century, the Church had become one of the world leaders in championing democracy.

CST's endorsement of democracy, however, is not without qualification. Whilst democracy has been seen as the most fitting system to allow for full participation and to protect against abuses of governmental power, CST argues that it must be underpinned by a commitment both to the common good and to human dignity.

Following this trajectory, in *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II distinguished between inauthentic and authentic democracy which must be governed by "a State ruled by law," hold "the correct conception of the human person," and meet "the necessary conditions ... for the advancement both of the individual and of society." Furthermore, he also warned against the danger of democracies being usurped by "the forma-

tion of narrow ruling groups for individual interests" and by ethical relativism which can allow politics to be "manipulated for reasons of power."

Within CST, the common good, in which every member benefits, is an indivisible good that can only be attained communally. This also entails a commitment to the preferential option for the poor which further guards against the dominance of individualist or elite interests. This is the fundamental litmus test for a moral society by evaluating the health of society from the perspective of the most marginalised citizens to shape their political participation around this commitment. Indeed, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis warns that increased inequality threatens peaceful political and social order.

In practice, CST's understanding of democracy is one that is inherently participative. The *Compendium* explains this as meaning that "different subjects of civil community at every level must be informed, listened to and involved in the exercise of the carried-out functions" (190). The US Catholic Bishops state, in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* 13, that "responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation." Voting is imperative as both a "right and duty" to "further the common good" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 75), however, participation extends far beyond this practice.

CST promotes association through civil society, such as unionising, as well as activism and lobbying, which Pope Francis has prominently vocalised (*Laudato Si*, 179). As Pope Francis summarised in his 2015 speech to the US Congress: "Politics is an expression of our compelling need to live as one, in order to build as one the greatest common good: that of a community which sacrifices particular interests in order to share, in justice and peace, its goods, its interests, its social life." ■

I'm a first-time voter

Hannah Lonergan

Hannah is the Columban 2024 Faith in Action Volunteer.

As a young person, I have a lot of hope for the future. I think that a lot of power lies in the young people of today.

However, I know a lot of people my age feel increasingly disconnected from politics. From not feeling represented, to frustration with those who are in power, to not feeling like we have any influence in those spaces, many young people have written off political dialogue altogether. So it makes sense that electoral participation for young people is low - less than half of people aged 18-24 voted in the 2019 General Election.

But this doesn't reflect a lack of passion or interest of young people in political issues. A 2023 YMCA report into this area found that key issues of importance for many young people are: funding the NHS, mental health, and the cost of living. Young people do have relevant, political concerns, but there is a growing sense of distrust of those in power, and a feeling of disconnect from politics altogether.

And it's not true to say that young people aren't informed on relevant political issues today. The growth of social media has provided an excellent platform for people to get their news in an accessible and easy-to-digest form: for instance, the BBC News Instagram page currently has 27.4 million followers. There is definitely a risk of social media in terms of misinformation and disinformation, but there are good quality, popular sources of news that people access on social media. Generally, young people do want to stay informed, but it's a lack of connection with politics that holds them back from voting.

When speaking to people my age, an area of concern for many

is mental health. At the beginning of March, chancellor Jeremy Hunt delivered his final Spring Budget. Although he had previously claimed to be in full support of improving child mental health services, there was no recognition of this in the budget. Since 2016, the number of young people with mental health problems has nearly doubled. This is a key issue that many young people are passionate about; however, despite several calls from young people and organisations such as YoungMinds, it was not included. There have been many instances of people in power going back on past promises. As young people, how are we supposed to believe that we have any influence, if we don't know that politicians will follow through with their commitments?

Another issue of concern for many young people, including myself, is the climate crisis. Many of us feel that the responsibility now falls on our generation to inspire significant change, in a time where the

opposite seems to be prevailing. However, this isn't an issue that young people have shied away from. For example, Fridays For Future - a youth-led movement organised by young climate activists - has already had an impact on an international scale. For many young people, seeing the climate crisis being recognised and prioritised is something of importance when deciding who to vote for.

As we approach the next general election, as a first time voter I feel many things. I hope that people my age will recognise the importance of their vote, and the impact that young people can have. When reflecting upon the past few years - three prime ministers, a pandemic, and a cost of living crisis to name a few key moments - it serves as a reminder of the importance of who the public elect.

Over the past few years, I have spent a lot of time with people seeking sanctuary, and have witnessed the horrific impact that poor governmental decisions can have on people's lives and wellbeing. Policies such as the Rwanda Plan have left me astounded and angry; I am hoping and campaigning for a future where the rights of all can be respected and honoured. This is what motivates me to use my vote: for me, it is about so much more than voting for my sake - but for the sake of those who can't. ■



Hannah Lonergan and James Trewby on a climate lobby at Westminster.

"It is important, then, that citizens, especially young people who will be voting for the first time, consider it one of their primary duties to contribute to the advancement of the common good through a free and informed participation in elections."
Pope Francis to Diplomatic Corps, 8 January 2024

The General Election: Interfaith Relations

Shanon Shah

Shanon is the Director of Faith for the Climate.

In 2024, countries representing more than half the world's population are holding elections. Billions of voters around the world will elect - or have already elected - leaders who will need to make bold decisions about issues ranging from the climate and ecological crisis and the wars on Ukraine and Gaza to the global majority's increasing impoverishment. These leaders will not only lead their own populations - they have the power to make or break international negotiations to determine the world's future.

Not all elections, however, are free and fair. Even in many liberal democracies, elections are increasingly being influenced by big business and complicit political parties. This is why even candidates who speak the language of justice for people and planet end up becoming beholden to the imperatives of profit once they take power.

The British-Australian scholar Sara Ahmed says, "You can't always choose battles; battles can choose you." Faith for the Climate encourages, inspires and equips people of faith in UK to take more ambitious action to address climate change. We do not engage in political lobbying but, given our charitable objectives to achieve climate and environmental justice, the election battle has effectively chosen us. As a small charity, this is daunting.

Another quote from Sara Ahmed: "We learn about institutions from trying to transform them". The elections provide a valuable opportunity to learn about the multiple institutions that can help or hinder the transformation we hope for. These learnings are crucial for work long term.

'Keep saying it'

Back in 2020 and 2021, Faith for the Climate chaired an informal

network, *Make COP Count*, that had two main demands of the UK as the host of the UN climate talks, COP26, in Glasgow:

- No more public subsidies for fossil fuels - oil, gas, and coal - which are dirty energy sources
- Give more (and enough) money to vulnerable communities coping with irreversible, climate-related loss and damage

Working alongside other civil society networks, we celebrated some important wins. First, at the end of 2020, the UK government did announce that it would end support for fossil fuels overseas. Second, the issue of loss and damage climbed up the global agenda and resulted in an historic fund at COP27 in 2022.

However, the UK continues to support new oil and gas licences. This government also continues to provide fossil fuel subsidies in the form of tax breaks and loopholes, including for oil/gas extraction.

On loss and damage, there is still a large gap between the funding required and the funding committed so far. As one of the biggest historical polluters, the UK could send a strong signal to other countries by paying its fair share of global loss and damage finance. This should be 3.5% (£12.57 billion) of the total needed. Currently, the UK has pledged only £60 million - by repackaging existing promises. This is why we urge UK faith groups to continue calling for:

- A fast and fair phase-out from fossil fuels, which would involve reorienting government spending towards financing a just transition to a truly sustainable economy. This would cover things like insulating cold and damp homes, improving walking and cycling infrastructure, and funding a transition strategy to support workers and communities cur-

rently dependent on polluting industries to make their living.

- Provide the UK's fair share of financing to address loss and damage from climate breakdown. The government we elect will need to show true leadership, nationally and globally.

The values we uphold

I am thankful for the gift of interfaith and intrafaith friendships that support me. As a Sunni Muslim, I recall a special prayer recited during Ramadan: "God, enrich every poor person, satisfy every hungry one, clothe every unclothed one, help every debtor pay his debts, relieve every distressed one, return every traveller (to their home), release every prisoner, correct every wrong in our affairs, cure every sick one, ease our poverty by Your wealth."

This prayer contains resonances that recall this passage from the Book of Isaiah (58: 6-7), familiar to my Christian friends:

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?"

To me, the connection between faith and justice is clear. And despite the core theological differences between Islam and Christianity, I cannot help but read the post-Resurrection and post-Ascension arrival of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles as a celebration of not only multilingualism and multiculturalism, but multifaith and interfaith solidarity: "We all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!" They stood there amazed. "What can this mean?"

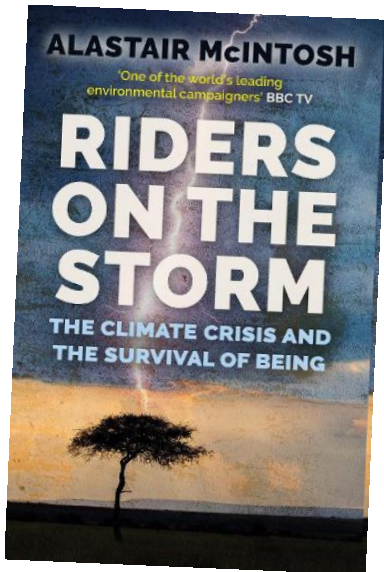
Perhaps it means that, despite election outcomes never being failsafe or ideal, we should not despair. We are stronger when we appreciate what it means to celebrate our diversity, share our faith, and work together for a just and compassionate world. ■

Resources

Riders on the Storm

Alastair McIntosh

Writer and broadcaster Alastair McIntosh sums up present knowledge on the Climate Crisis and shows that conventional solutions are not enough. In rejecting the blind alleys of climate change denial, exaggeration and false optimism, he offers an important discussion of ways forward. Weaving together science, politics, psychology and spirituality, this guide examines what it takes to make us riders on the storm. ISBN-10: 1780276397



Our Fragile Moment

Michael Mann

In this book, subtitled, 'How lessons from the Earth's past can help us survive the climate crisis', climate scientist Mann stresses the gravity of the unfolding climate crisis, while emboldening action. The conditions that have allowed humans to live on Earth are fragile. There's a relatively narrow envelope of climate variability within which human civilisation remains viable. And our survival depends on conditions remaining within that range. ISBN-10: 1915590515

Election Resources

The Centre for Catholic Social Thought and Practice is compiling an easy-to-use webpage where you can find links to resources to help parishes and individuals to engage with the general election. The site will include a directory of speakers. Also, short videos introducing the Catholic Social Teaching.

Resources will start going live from the end of May on <https://ccstp.org.uk/general-election> or you can sign up to the CCSTP newsletter to be kept informed.

And **Green Christian** and **Operation Noah** are preparing an election pack. Available soon.

Catholic Nonviolence

Pax christi International

A global initiative reaffirming the centrality of active nonviolence to the vision and message of Jesus. <https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/>

Sustainable Development Goals and the Catholic Church

Routledge
Subtitled, 'Catholic Social Teaching and the UN's Agenda 2030'. ISBN: 9780367513849

Dignitas Infinita

Dicastery for Doctrine of the Faith

New Vatican document on 'Human Dignity' with sections on Poverty, War, Migrants, Environmental Care. "Respect for the dignity of each person is the indispensable basis for the existence of any society." <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html>

IMPORTANT DATES

Laudato Si Week

19-26 May 2024

Theme: 'Seeds of Hope'. An invitation to gather in community to contemplate and nurture hope for our "suffering planet". *Laudate Deum* reminds about the urgency of the *Laudato Si'* message and the need for both personal and cultural transformation to address our ecological and climate crises. <https://laudatosiweek.org/>

Big Green Week

8-16 June 2024

The UK's biggest annual call for action on climate change and nature. Local events at: <https://greatbiggreenweek.com/>

NJPN Conference 2024

19-21 July 2024

The National Justice & Peace Network of England and Wales Annual Conference will take place at Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, Derbyshire on 19-21 July 2024. The theme for the weekend is 'Just Politics' and the aim is to explore the need for truth and integrity in public life. Booking at: <https://www.justice-and-peace.org.uk/conference/>

Season of Creation

1 Sept - 4 October

The theme is: 'HOPE AND ACT WITH CREATION.' It urges campaigning for climate and ecological justice, and to speak out with and for communities impacted by climate injustice and biodiversity loss. <https://seasonofcreation.org/>

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