

ST VINCENT de PAUL SOCIETY

INAUGURAL GERALD WARD LECTURE

Canberra, 7 November 2008

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Social Invisibility

“[A] worse regulated, worse governed, worse drained, worse lighted, worse watered town of note is not on the face of the globe; . . . a population more thoroughly disposed . . . to cheating and robbery . . . does not exist; . . . in no other place does immorality stalk abroad so unblushingly and so unchecked; . . . in no other place are the administrative functions of government so inefficiently managed; . . . in a word, nowhere in the southern hemisphere does chaos reign so triumphant as in Melbourne.”¹

This appreciation of the capital of Victoria was made, in November 1852, by a writer in the Sydney Morning Herald. It was quoted by Mr Kevin Slattery in his work on Father Gerald Ward, the founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia.² It sets part of the context of Father Ward’s great work. I am honoured to have been asked, by the St. Vincent de Paul Society, to deliver this inaugural lecture in a series to commemorate the founder.

What can a recently retired Chief Justice contribute to an understanding of the problems of poverty, social distress and homelessness? These issues are the concern of a host of dedicated people, some acting professionally and others on a voluntary basis, in religious and charitable organizations, and government and private welfare agencies, many with a high level of expertise and experience. Lawyers may bring some technical skills to marginal aspects of such work, but their professional skills are usually devoted to other purposes. The best I can hope to offer is a point of view from an outsider who greatly admires the work of the Society. That point of view may be of some use if it encourages reflection upon the nature and value of the Society's mission.

Gerald Ward, an English priest, was a child of Irish parents. He arrived in Australia in 1850. His task was to minister to Catholics in the new colony of Victoria, many of them Irish immigrants. Their numbers were increased by the gold rush of the 1850's. For present purposes, his principal work was in his capacity as a priest attached to the Church of St. Francis in Melbourne. In the context of poverty and homelessness, it is interesting to reflect on the conditions in Ireland from which many of those immigrants to Victoria came. I mention the subject, not only because it is part of the background to Father Ward's ministry, but also because it is a good example of the way a community sees, or fails to see, those at its margins.

Between 1840 and 1880, the population of Ireland halved.³ The Great Famine, which commenced in the 1840's, was followed by mass emigration, but about one million people in Ireland died of starvation and disease. The political and economic circumstances of the famine, and the resulting diaspora, are not relevant to my theme. The point I wish to make is simple. Nowhere – least of all in a small country such as Ireland – is it possible for a million people to starve to death unobtrusively. It can be permitted to happen only if the human dignity of the

victims has been lost from sight; if they have become in some way invisible. This concept of social invisibility seems to me to go to the heart of the problems which the St Vincent de Paul Society, and many other religious and similar organizations, attempt to relieve. We all have a way of looking through, or past, people whose condition or behaviour, or whose very existence, we find disconcerting. In social situations this may be very useful. Often it is better to ignore some forms of behaviour than to confront them. Some problems will go away if we leave them alone. There are individuals, and groups, who are skilful in demanding attention, whether from their neighbours or from government. They will not be ignored. Some of them have developed this skill to a level where they command disproportionate notice. Yet, like most skills, this one is not evenly shared, and those who have it in the highest degree are often the least deserving. All judges are familiar with certain kinds of litigant that occupy a disproportionate amount of court time. Yet they also know that some people with just causes lack the means even to approach the courts. People who are so poor as to be homeless are, typically, people who lack the human resources and skills to command the attention of others. Even when we are aware of their existence, we may not accept them as part of the scenery. Like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, many of us are adept at crossing the street so as to be able to ignore a disagreeable sight or a messy situation.

To return to Father Ward, during his early years in Melbourne, and later on the goldfields, there were bodies that were set up to relieve poverty and distress within the Catholic population. He was aware of the St Vincent de Paul Society, which had been established in France in 1833, and in England in 1844.⁴ When he returned from the goldfields to Melbourne, and to the church of St Francis, he took the initiative in bringing the Society's work to Melbourne. His particular concern was the need to protect and shelter orphans.⁵ In March

1854, he presided over the first meeting of an Australian Conference of the Society.⁶ The first major work of the Conference was the establishment of a substantial orphanage in 1855.

In a submission made in support of government assistance, Father Ward described the principal object of the new Society as “the relief of the destitute, in a manner, as much as possible, permanently beneficial”.⁷ This emphasis on the need for the relief to be “permanently beneficial” has a modern resonance. The aim of those concerned with homelessness is to identify and combat its causes, and effects, not to sustain homelessness and make it more entrenched. The challenge of providing assistance which relieves a social problem without becoming part of the problem itself was well understood by Father Ward. Supporting homeless people is different from supporting homelessness.

The dimensions, and complexities, of the issue in Australia are well documented. In August 2007, Sister Myree Harris RSJ, of the Gethsemane Community at Petersham, provided a comprehensive response to a survey conducted in preparation for a meeting, held in the Vatican, on pastoral care of the homeless. She has been kind enough to discuss her response with me. She drew attention to the importance of the information, routinely collected by the St. Vincent de Paul Society in the course of its activities, and stressed that the value of that information should be kept in mind. Sister Myree also referred me to the Report of the 2007 Churchill Fellow, Felicity Reynolds, on the topic of programs that assist vulnerable and chronically homeless people.

Chronic homelessness, as we see it in modern Australia, defies categorization. For example, to seek to identify it solely as an issue of welfare, rather than an issue of health, may be

misleading. From the material prepared by Sister Myree a number of striking points emerge, which include the following:

1. Twenty years ago, the stereotype of a homeless person was a middle aged, alcoholic, male. Now, the homeless include women and children, and the males are as likely to be relatively young. Sister Myree said: “At Ozanam House in Melbourne, more than 70% of the residents, single men, are aged between 20-40”.⁸
2. A high percentage of homeless people have a dual diagnosis of mental illness and substance abuse. Sister Myree reported⁹: “The closure of many large psychiatric hospitals has impacted on the homeless population in Australia, as elsewhere. . . In 1998, a major research study *Down and Out in Sydney* found that 75% of the homeless population had mental illness, 23% of homeless men and 46% of homeless women had schizophrenia, 49% had an alcohol use disorder [and] 36% had a drug use disorder”.¹⁰
3. It follows from 1. and 2. that the causes, and the consequences, of homelessness involve compound medical and social issues. This is not simply an accommodation problem which can be solved by a building program. The characteristics of many of the people without housing make them vulnerable, and their situation intrinsically unstable. Such people are open to exploitation. Many of them lack the skills necessary to take advantage of housing opportunities. The kind of shelter they need is not merely shelter from the physical elements. The French have an expression, “sansabri”, but, except in its application to relatively fit people living in rough conditions, the concept of shelter needs to be understood in its widest sense. The ancient term “asylum” now has unfortunate connotations in respect of mental health, although it is still widely used in

connection with refugees. In its original meaning it signified protection, not custody. Sometimes when such a word loses its original meaning, society loses a value.

4. While affordability of housing is an important part of the problem, and the National Affordable Housing Agreement will involve participation of the Commonwealth and State Governments, people with mental illness and a history of substance abuse have needs that extend far beyond rental opportunities, and they are unlikely to be stable tenants. Programs directed towards mental health and drug and alcohol abuse play a major part in government responses to the problem. Sister Myree pointed out¹¹ the importance of:

- social housing
- emergency, short term and medium accommodation
- income support
- employment and training assistance
- health and mental health services
- services for people with a substance or gambling dependency
- services for people with a disability
- children's youth and other community services.

Felicity Reynolds, in her Winston Churchill Fellowship Report of February 2008 said¹²:

“Chronic homelessness is not just about a lack of shelter or housing. It is about disconnectedness from others in the community and about social exclusion”.

The role of the charitable bodies is not to duplicate government services, much less to compete with them. The Church, of course, has been providing care for much longer than any

government, and it has resources, including skill and experience, that can be used in co-operation with those of government agencies. Furthermore, much government aid for the needy is channeled through religious and other charitable organizations. Even so, the religious mission of the Church has a direct and immediate connection with the point made by Felicity Reynolds. It is concerned with human dignity, and its opposite, social invisibility.

The Final Document which issued from the Vatican in November 2007, following the First International Meeting for the Pastoral Care of the Homeless, said:

“[The] needs of the homeless clearly [demand] both a human and ecclesial response. This [is] to be found not only in providing for basic necessities, but also in upholding their dignity as persons. Likewise the Church must develop a specific pastoral care which sees beyond the needs of a person to the person himself, for who he truly is, made in the likeness and image of God . . . Because of his condition, the person without a fixed dwelling remains unrepeatably singular and unique. In a society that interprets social relations as a function of obtaining economic gain, the Church takes upon itself the task of giving it back the value of a gratuitous relationship and its most profound meaning”.

Sister Myree Harris, in her report, listed many Australian “ecclesial initiatives” although she said she was not aware of any national initiative set in motion by the Church.¹³ She described the work of Centacare Catholic Social Services Australia, its National Office in Canberra, and its member agencies, which operate over 500 programs in Australia, but said that it was individuals and Religious Congregations who tended to respond. One well-known example is Youth Off the Streets, started in 1991 by Father Chris Riley. Another is Marist Youth Care NSW. The list of such committed people and groups is impressive. It is important to identify

what they have in common. They are impelled, not by vague sense of unease and sympathy, but by a much more specific sense of vocation which is founded upon an idea of human dignity and worth communicated to them as religious teaching and inspiration.

We live in a rights-conscious community that takes individual liberty and self-expression as its highest value. Unfortunately, there are members of the community who, permanently or temporarily, lack the resources and abilities necessary to survive and prosper in a competitive environment. Cardinal Clancy, in an address in December 2000, pointed out that “there are winners and losers in the struggle for self-determination”. He said: “Those who, for whatever reason, cannot meet the prevailing social norms and make their own way in the world are left either devoid of the goods of society or dependent on the prevailing fashion of government welfare policy”.¹⁴

This is not to diminish the importance of government welfare or medical policy, or the value of political action. Political action is itself an expression of public concern. Often political energy is necessary to mobilize effective resources. Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that, historically, charitable organizations have welcomed fiscal and other assistance which ultimately is based on political decisions. For example, the taxation benefits made available to donors, while not normally a matter of party political contest, reflect a public policy translated into political action and legislation. The other side of the coin is that religious and other charities relieve governments of burdens that would otherwise be very costly.

Even so, there is a limit beyond which political action, and government welfare and medical policy, cannot move beyond the prevailing ethos, which is one of individualism and mercantilism. Whether we like it or not, there is a strong inclination, in public discourse, to see

the community as a market place, and to see individuals as consumers. If a homeless person is seen primarily as a potential consumer of housing services, then from the viewpoint of a supplier of such services, the characteristics of many homeless people make them difficult to regard as satisfactory or desirable customers.

The market perceives individuals by reference to their capacity to produce or to consume. In such a perception, human rights are atomized. In every market, there are the strong and the weak; the winners and the losers. On the other hand, human dignity is bound up with social values that stress the importance of family and community. A society is not merely a collectivity of egoisms, each striving to assert its rights in competition with the other.¹⁵ It is a function of the Church, and organizations it fosters, to insist that the market's limited perception of humanity must not prevail; to stress the value of human life and the dignity of human beings; and to maintain the importance of responsibilities as well as rights.

For a body such as the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the market place is not the paradigm. When Father Gerald Ward set out to protect orphans, his interest in them was as humans created in the image and likeness of God, not as consumers. Moreover, he was not responding to their assertion of individual rights; he was discharging what he saw as a responsibility, springing from the mission of the Church. It is the separate and individual dignity of the person which makes a claim on this responsibility, not the capacity of the person to assert a right. People who are needy and in distress are often incapable of claiming or asserting rights, or of rewarding providers of services.

The most insidious aspect of a society that responds only to assertions of individual rights is that it looks past, or through, people who have no ability to make claims, or to back up a

demand for goods or services with economic consequences. Such people tend to become invisible. They do not have the qualities that command attention and response. They carry no weight as consumers, or voters, or protesters. They can be ignored at little cost. Even when their welfare is acknowledged as a worthy subject of concern, it is likely to have a low priority. It may be regarded as a matter for discretionary spending, one of the first to be cut back in difficult economic circumstances.

It is the need to see these people with an unblinking gaze, and to recognize in them the dignity and value that comes from their human nature, that impelled Father Ward and those who follow in his example.

I should mention, in conclusion, a topic of particular relevance to Church organizations, and that is the subject of inter-denominational co-operation. In past times, there may have been some element of sectarian rivalry at work even in charitable activity. Churches that rescued orphans might have set out, among other things, to rescue them from rival Churches. The time for that is long gone. This is now a predominantly secular society, and people whose religious conviction moves them to protect the disadvantaged are in a minority. There is every reason for them to make the most effective use of their resources by co-operation. Not only do they have, in combination, a wealth of experience, and commitment from loyal supporters; above all, what they have in common is a conviction that it is a religious duty to see, and to respond to, the innate dignity and value life.

These brief reflections on the inspiration of Father Ward, and the work of the Australian Society that he founded, cannot do justice to the large and complex problem of providing for

the homeless. They may, however, help to explain, and sustain, the admiration for the work of the Society which is general in, and beyond, the Catholic community.

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- ¹ Sydney Morning Herald, November 4, 1852 cited in Serle, G “The Golden Age – History of the Colony of Victoria 1851-1861”, M.V.P., Carlson, 1968, p7, and in Slattery, K “An Enduring Legacy – Fr. Gerald Ward”, St Vincent de Paul Society Inc, 2004, p12.
- ² Slattery, K, “An Enduring Legacy – Fr. Gerald Ward”, St Vincent de Paul Society Inc. 2004.
- ³ Keneally, T, “The Great Shame”, Random House, 1998 at xiii.
- ⁴ Slattery, op cit p3.
- ⁵ Slattery, op cit p15.
- ⁶ Slattery, op cit p16.
- ⁷ Slattery, op cit p16.
- ⁸ She pointed out that some of her data was based on the 2001 census, and that the 2006 census brought some of that material up to date. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the number of homeless people rose from 100,000 in 2001 to 105,000 in 2006.
- ⁹ Harris, Sr. M, “A Survey in View of the Coming International Meeting on the Welfare of Homeless People”, 13 August 2007.
- ¹⁰ Harris, op cit p4.
- ¹¹ Harris, op cit p8.
- ¹² Reynolds, F, Churchill Fellowship Report, February 2008, p8.
- ¹³ Harris, op cit pp12-20.
- ¹⁴ Clancy, E, Address to the Homeless Society of NSW Inc., Parliament House, Sydney, 11 December 2000.
- ¹⁵ Lequette, Y, “Recodification Civile et Prolifération des Sources Internationales”, Le Code Civil 1804-2004, Livre du Bicentenaire, 2004, Dalloz & Lexis Nexus p171 at pp188-195.