

CARITAS IN ACTION article for Catholic Times

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Our diocese of Brentwood has undertaken an exercise that has resulted in the recent publication of our Vision Document: Shaping Our Future. It sets out our objectives and they rely heavily upon the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI (originally in *Deus Caritas Est* and repeated in "On the Service of Charity");

"The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (kerygma-martyria), celebrating the sacraments (leitourgia) and exercising the ministry of charity (diakonia). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable."

By popular consent, maximising the opportunities for putting faith into action through charitable works became a clear objective for us as a diocese and "Charity, Justice and Social Action" became one of our 12 Strands of Renewal.

Between the Feast of St John Bosco and the World Day of the Poor in 2018 people from all across our diocese came together to discuss how we should make this a reality. Many existing charities, Justice and Peace groups, SVP representatives, religious orders and others had conversations that led to the creation of Caritas Diocese of Brentwood as an important part of our efforts to renew and restructure our diocese.

The conversation developed three clear themes. Firstly, our Caritas should be light touch and complementary to that which was already being done. Secondly, it should encourage greater participation in the exercise of the ministry of charity and thirdly, it should have an intergenerational aspect.

People straight away saw that Caritas could not only be a vehicle for helping others but it could also help us to combine the wisdom of years with the enthusiasm of youth. Of course, this collaboration across generations is far more nuanced than this simple statement and that became clear as we held a day in summer to specifically explore the possibilities. We will continue to develop this aspect of our work.

When we launched Caritas Diocese of Brentwood in November Bishop Alan Williams wrote; "The word caritas means charity, in the fullest sense of Christian love, and our Diocesan Caritas exists to support and encourage everyone who is working to put Christ's love into action by supporting the ill, the poor and the marginalised."

As our plans for our Caritas developed so we looked for an initial cause to champion. The living wage movement has strong roots in our diocese and our very diverse groups and charities agreed that this was something that everyone could get behind. Catholic Social Teaching principles and the encouragement of Pope Francis seemed to lead us to the conclusion that this issue is about justice and fairness and feeds into almost every aspect of our communal life.

Parents who do several low paid jobs frequently have insufficient time to spend with their children. This in turn can lead to further problems down the line. The increased use of foodbanks across our diocese is frequently associated with in-work poverty.

Paying the Living Wage shows people that they are valued. The dignity of work and the dignity of the person demand fairness and justice in this respect. Clergy and lay people worked together and with considerable help from the Living Wage Foundation to gain accreditation for our diocese as a way of demonstrating the importance of the cause. As Bishop Alan wrote at the time;

“On 1st November we heard the excellent news that the Diocese of Brentwood had been accredited by the Living Wage Foundation as a Living Wage Employer; the Living Wage is higher than the National Minimum Wage, and set at a level which lifts people out of poverty. If you are an employer, or can influence your company, please look into the Living Wage. Right now, there are many families in Essex and East London where both adults work, but the family still relies on benefits and even food banks because wage rates are so low. Receiving the Living Wage transforms lives and ends the misery of struggling on the breadline.....I am delighted to endorse the Living Wage, and I am launching Caritas Diocese of Brentwood today full of hope about the difference it will make to all our work for social justice, in the name of Jesus Christ. Pope Francis asks us to ‘go to the edges’ and Caritas is full of projects which do just that. I encourage every parishioner to look at the website and to get involved in any way that they can“

In 2019 we shall continue to promote the Living Wage along with many other projects at “the edges”. Caritas is part of our response to God’s love for us and one way of taking that love out into the world.

<https://www.caritasbrentwood.org/>

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