

Are you carrying the fire?

Cormac McCarthy in his novel *The Road* which has recently been made into a hit movie imagines the world after some kind of apocalypse. The sky is gray. The wind is cold and wet. And the earth is barren — nothing grows anymore. All there is to eat is what the dead have left behind. A few shrivelled apples in the dirt of a leafless orchard. A can of Coke stuck in a broken vending machine ...

A man and his young son are heading south to the coast. The father is sick and they are both slowly starving to death.

The most terrifying thing about this situation isn't the prospect of death — it's the annihilation of community. The man and his son have no family but each other. They have no friends. And they trust no one. They are alone.

Other people are a threat. They will take their food. They will steal their clothes. And perhaps the father's greatest fear is that they will ...

... but you're eating so I won't go into details. I'll just say that in the world of *The Road* "having people for dinner" can be taken literally.

So what's the point of all this bleakness while you're trying to eat breakfast and wake up? Well, as Cormac McCarthy said in an interview with Oprah, the point is that: "Life is pretty damn good, even when it looks bad." And one of the things that is pretty damn good is community.

Years of working in social services can lead us to over use terms such as 'community' and its meaning and significance can blur.

But community is something real. Underneath the soft bureaucratic buzz of terms like 'social capital', 'social cohesion' and 'social inclusion' is a hazy understanding that the only reason society functions at all is because people care about each other and — mostly without thinking about it — live their lives within the boundaries set by laws and social norms.

In Catholic social teaching we talk about these two things under headings like fraternity and justice. We hold that every human being is made in God's image and is entitled to live in dignity. We say that love inspires both friendship and solidarity. But used too often and too unthinkingly, these words too can sink into a soft, pleasant buzz of churchy rhetoric.

What are we really talking about?

According to the Church's teaching which is a reflection on human experience through the ages, people are *made* to live together in community. In its pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes*, the second Vatican Council referred to "the laws of social life which the Creator has written into man's moral and spiritual nature".

And you don't have to read far into the Bible to get the message. In Genesis God looks at Adam and says: "It is not good for the man to be alone". One of the bedrock claims of Catholic social teaching is that human beings can only find fulfillment through relationships with each other and

ultimately with God.¹ And in the end these two relationships can't be separated. Christ made it clear that reaching out to others is a way of reaching out to him.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells a story about how at the end time we will stand before him and account for our lives. When the king turns to those on his right, those who will inherit the kingdom, he says:

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.'

Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?'

And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.'²

The clarity of these words of Jesus cuts through the buzz words and rhetoric- the meaning is clear.

A remarkable thing about this passage is the way Jesus puts visiting a person who is sick or in prison on the same level as feeding someone who is hungry or clothing someone who is naked.

People have social and spiritual needs that are just as important as their material needs. We all understand how painful it is to be lonely, to be ignored, to be rejected, or to be despised- to be unloved. And one of the things McCarthy's novel *The Road* helps us understand is how terrifying it is to be alone.

And this is why what you do in your community based agencies is so important. Governments can give people money to buy food or even a place to sleep. But the kind of concern people need from each other can't be put out to tender or written into a performance indicator.

Contracts and funding agreements can only go so far. The acceptance and genuine concern that vulnerable people need has to come from a human heart. What we hope sets agencies like ours apart from purely commercial enterprises is that this spirit of *caritas* – love, charity and justice- is part of *who* we are and *why* we are. That is the reason we exist.

Pope Benedict captures this sense when in his encyclical *God is Love* he described the sort of people that we should have working in our Church agencies:

Individuals who care for those in need must first be professionally competent: they should be properly trained in what to do and how to do it, and committed to continuing care. Yet, while professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient. We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper

¹ International Theological Commission, (2004) *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, 10.

The Bible affirms that man exists in relation with other persons, with God, with the world, and with himself. According to this conception, man is not an isolated individual but a person — an essentially relational being.

Accessed from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html on 9/10/2008.

² Matthew 25: 34-40.

care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern. Those who work for the Church's charitable organisations must be distinguished by the fact that they do not merely meet the needs of the moment, but they dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity. (Deus Caritas Est 30)

It is that heartfelt concern that is the soul of our work and along with our ethos of community it fills the gaps that contracts and service agreements can never adequately specify. It is this same ethos that guides us in our advocacy work with governments and in the public forum more generally.

The human concern of love and friendship are the face-to-face foundations of community. But as social service organisations we need to go further than that. Catholic social teaching is also about justice and solidarity. These too are foundations of community.

The Church teaches that solidarity is both a moral virtue and a social principle. It goes beyond the empathy we have when we see another person in pain and draws on the anger we feel when we recognise that that pain is the result of injustice.

Pope John Paul II said that the virtue of solidarity “is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far.” Instead it is a recognition of others which demands action.

In the movie version of *The Road* I was struck by a recurring theme. In the battle for survival the father at times has to do some pretty tough things even to the point of avoiding and abandoning other people who might cause them harm. The boy is there looking on at times urging his father not to be so harsh. After a couple of these instances there is a little conversation that takes place- the boy represents innocence and his voice is like a little conscience- “so are we still the good guys?” and the Dad replies “Yes we are still the good guys”. “Cos we don't eat people right?” “That's right”.

It's not a bad idea to ask ourselves this question from time to time- not so much the bit about eating people but- to reflect on our own practices and motivations- “are we still the good guys?” We can ask ourselves that now but it is probably best to leave the answer to others- especially those struggling and vulnerable “others” for whom we claim to exist.

In the spirit of professional competency and heartfelt concern and out of the tradition of *Caritas* and Justice- we should ask ourselves what are we doing to make the world a more just and loving place?

Well specifically in answer to that, through its advocacy work with government and in the community, Catholic Social Services Australia has set some priorities and has an agenda it is working for that we believe could make the world a more just and loving place:

- **An Australia where everyone has enough to live on:** The low level of income support payments means that many Australians lack an adequate income. We've suggested that the Australian government can address this problem by setting up an Entitlements Commission, empowering it to set benchmarks for income adequacy as well as by ensuring the adequacy of minimum wages and other supports to low-paid workers.
- **An Australia where everybody has an opportunity to contribute through paid employment:** A low unemployment rate and a strong and growing economy give us a wonderful opportunity to bring jobless and underemployed Australians into the economic mainstream. We want to see a greater investment in employment services combined with more joined-up approach to service delivery is needed to take full advantage of this opportunity.

- **An Australia where everyone has a place to call home:** One of the consequences of a growing economy and a high rate of immigration is a severe squeeze on affordable housing. We've argued that the Australian government needs to increase the supply of affordable housing as well as extending support to those who are most vulnerable in the housing market — people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness.
- **An Australia that includes people living with mental illness:** Too often people with mental illnesses slip through gaps in services — particularly people with personality disorders or substance abuse problems. As well as needing a more adequate level of income support and a more tailored and joined-up approach to employment and housing services, people living with mental illness would also benefit from more timely, effective and appropriate treatment and a more active approach to including them as friends, neighbours and citizens.
- **A strong and sustainable community sector:** Organisations like ours often struggle to attract and retain high quality staff. We've argued that the Australian government can help maintain the strength and sustainability of the sector ensuring that departmental funding for services keeps pace with rising wage costs as well as protecting measures such as the Fringe Benefits Tax. We've argued that engaging the sector as partners in policy making and service delivery will produce better results than enforcing a strict separation of 'purchaser' and 'provider'.

It is encouraging to see some progress on at least a couple of these fronts over recent years. We have heard at our conference over the past couple of days about the commitment of Government to social inclusion, about the major investments into housing and homelessness and the development of a Compact to guide relationships between government and community organizations. All important advances which in our view go part of the way but there is of course still a good way to go to reach the goal of a fair, just and inclusive Australia for all.

In a few moments Bishop Pat Power is launching our own paper on social inclusion.

Social inclusion policies usually focus on tangible things like jobs and housing. And these things matter. But at the most basic level, social inclusion is about relationships — about whether people feel understood, valued and accepted by others.

Cormac McCarthy's story of the Road is grim- it is a cautionary tale describing what might happen if we were to lose trust in one another- if community were to break down leaving law and order to disappear in an environment where its every man for himself- but McCarthy's characters talk about "carrying the fire". Carrying the fire is about maintaining hope in a world that looks hopeless and as McCarthy said in the interview "Life is pretty damn good, even when it looks bad." In the end the Road leave us with a glimmer of hope- hope in the amazing resilience of the human spirit and the power of love to restore humanity and community.

One of the reasons life remains pretty damn good is because none of us has surrendered to a vision of society that isolates human beings from their community context. Hopefully the work of our agencies is testimony to that. And there remains as well in our society as witnessed in the response of Australian people to disasters such as refugee crises, fire, earthquake and flood- a commitment to others especially those who are suffering or in distress.

Our agencies and our communities continue to carry the fire but we need to maintain vigilance and care for those on the margins however I think we can conclude- Life is pretty damn good even when it looks bad!