

The Meaning of Christmas

“So hallowed and so gracious is the time” These words of Shakespeare beautifully describe the wonder, mystery and essence of Christmas. In the busy lives we live today it is all too easy to miss the meaning of Christmas. To quote the poet TS Elliot “We have the experience but miss the meaning”. The meaning of the essence of Christmas lives in Christ’s coming among us. His birth makes possible a new vision of what it is to be truly human and a way of living which respect the dignity of each and promotes human flourishing, unity and peace. Christmas leads to a New Year with new possibilities of being true to vision and values.

In November 2013 President Higgins launched his Ethics Initiative to stimulate discussion across Ireland on the challenges of living together ethically. The President invites us to participate in a national conversation on the vision and values we would like to see in Irish society as we begin the second Century of Independence. As Christians we bring a significant contribution to the conversation - we bring the vision and values expressed in the essence of Christmas.



Beginning a National Conversation on Vision and Values

In the first phase of the President’s Ethics Initiative, universities and third level institutions were invited to contribute and in the second phase, which was launched at an SVP event on the 22nd of September 2014, civil society organisations were also invited to participate in the Initiative.

On the 15th of November 2014 the wider membership of the VPSJ devoted their third Frederic Ozanam Annual Gathering to making a Vincentian response to the President’s initiative.

This edition of Just.Now presents some points which influenced the discussion at the Gathering. They are expressed in quotations taken from the Presidents’ speech to the SVP on the 22nd of September, reflections by Emily O’Reilly, EU Ombudsman at the Wheel’s ‘People’s Conversation’ Conference Oct 11th 2014 - and on the two keynote presentations made by Noeline Blackwell, Director General of FLAC and by Gerry O’Sullivan SJ, Theologian and Author. Unfortunately there is not sufficient space to do justice to these sources. However it is hoped that the quotations will convey a little of the richness communicated on the 15th of November - on the Ireland of the boom and post boom, the challenges and opportunities offered by the National Conversation, A Human Rights Value Based System as the Way Forward and What the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching have to say in response to the President’s Initiative.

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice consists of

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, The Vincentian Congregation, The Daughters of Charity and The Sisters of the Holy Faith. *Working for social and economic change, tackling poverty and social exclusion*

The Challenges and Opportunities posed by the President's Initiative – President Higgins

The current crisis has moral and intellectual ramifications that run much deeper than that. It calls for an interrogation of the values, the vision of life and of human relations that animate us as a society.

We must not, then, miss this opportunity to seek, together, a new set of principles by which we might live ethically as a society. This idea was very well encapsulated by Saint Vincent de Paul's former Vice-President, Professor John Monaghan, when he said:

"We do not want to look back on this period as one when the seeds of future social inequities were sown, but one in which the values necessary for a socially just, fair and caring nation emerged."

Our citizens are anxious for a vision of where we are heading to as a society. Too many of them live in an atmosphere of unabated stress, dealing with financial circumstances that curtail their horizon and constrict them to a regime that is one of survival.

Their voices are telling us something that is urgent we hear. They call upon us all to articulate a sense of our long-term perspectives as a society for an authentic new vision in an impoverished present.

We must seize the energy of our times – find the moral and intellectual energy to overcome the inability that is currently so pervasive when it comes to addressing the matters of economy, society, ideology, and the deadening fingers of bureaucracy.

Thus this Ethics Initiative is an invitation to you. It is a call on all the civil society associations represented here this morning, and hopefully more of them will join this platform, to join forces to voice the values that they wish to see placed at the heart of our collective future. It is an encouragement to you to compel us, your elected representatives, to listen to the voices of the most vulnerable in Irish society.

Ireland – Present and Past – Emily O'Reilly

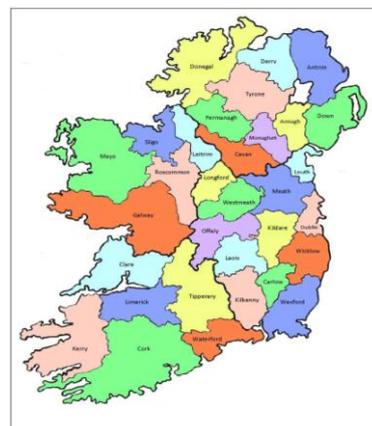
The speech I made in 2004 was one of the first times that someone had stood back and examined the downside of the social impact of what was then a roaring Celtic Tiger economy.

In speech made on that November day I remarked on the fetishising of consumerism, the breathtakingly vulgar displays of wealth, the crude compartmentalising of winners and losers, the scorn reserved for those too poor or too stupid to ride the property wave, the ostracising of anyone who dared to question the miracle that was our booming economy and above all, the absence of any genuine self-awareness of what we as a nation had become almost overnight. I wondered about who the real us were.

And then the tiger left.

And the payback began. We still cannot know how much suffering people have endured over the last six years; how many suicides, how many descents into depression, how many marital breakups, how many family homes destroyed, educations denied, careers abandoned, how much psychic and actual pain was caused by our shockingly sudden fall from financial grace.

You have a chance through the People's Conversation to define a vision that gives a practical and sustainable expression to the finer parts of our Irishness, the parts that have proved immutable despite everything, our energy, our creativity, our openness, our humour, our capacity for friendship and for the giving of a helping hand to friends and to strangers alike. I would encourage you also to be creative both in the creation of such a vision, and in its subsequent implementation.



A Human Rights Value Based Systems as the Way Forward – Noeleen Blackwell FLAC

If we are looking for a set of values to underpin a new vision of Ireland for 2016, we don't have to create anything new: we have a set of rules in many ways unmatched in simplicity and clarity by anything since the Ten Commandments that could guide us - the human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Opening with the recognition of 'the inherent dignity' and the 'equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family' as the 'foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world', the Declaration's first article says that "all human beings are born free and equal in justice and rights".

It then goes on (like the Ten Commandments) with a series of 'thou shalt nots' followed by positive recognitions so setting out that: - No one shall be subject to torture/slavery/ exile/ attacks on their privacy or honour and then that - Everyone is entitled to: life/ liberty/ equality/ free movement/ family life/ freedom of conscience and religion/ social security/ work/ adequate standard of living and the right to participate in cultural living. Then it finishes with the recognition that everyone has duties to the community. Rights are balanced by duties.

I wonder about the hesitation of a lot of good people, including a lot of human rights activists, to use the language of human rights. So many will say that they won't talk about human rights with decision makers because it is off putting.

I also wonder why is that the case? Is it something we could rethink in the context of rethinking our values? After all, human rights are nothing more than a set of shared values which could guide all our lives. And if we are afraid to discuss issues by reference to those values, is it because we don't believe in them? And maybe we could discuss them in the context of the President's Initiative.

What the Gospels and Catholic Social Teaching (CST) Have to Say in Response to the President's Speech – Gerard O'Hanlon SJ

The President is alerting us here to the need for a change of culture, so that we don't go on living what Clifford Longley refers to as 'divided lives' between the kind of decency and virtue which we practise in our 'private lives' and the very different values pertaining in our public and above all economic lives.

At the heart of the Christian world-view is the person of Jesus Christ. And at the heart of Jesus is his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, based on his experience of God as a Father 'who makes his sun rise on the evil and the good', and who seeks out and embraces his lost sons and daughters' (Pagola, 459). This Kingdom is one where all have a basic dignity, and where the value system is articulated in the Beatitudes

We know too that fundamentally our Christian, Catholic faith is one which deeply respects all that is human, which acknowledges evil, and yet which believes that originally, all through and ultimately our human story is a story of love.

The Christian tradition has reflected on the revelation of Jesus over the centuries and since 1891 in its Catholic form, has developed a body of thought known as CST which attempts to apply this teaching to the 'signs of the time' of each successive age One of the great merits of CST is that it is bilingual: that is to say, it operates both at the level of ordinary human reason and at the level of faith.

We join in this conversation towards a better world using a language intelligible to all, but aware too, with humility, that our speaking comes from a love of God that is personal and that gives joy. Let's hope, as with the disciples on the way to Emmaus, this ongoing conversation can fire our imaginations and desire for a more just world, a more just Ireland.

Reflection - Christmas 2014

“While they were there the time came for her to have her child and she gave birth to a son, her first born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the Inn. In the countryside, close by, there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night. The Angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. They were terrified. The Angel said to them Do not be afraid. Look, I bring you news of great joy a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”(Luke 2:6 – 11)

In the world of today there is a lot of FUD – fear, uncertainty and doubt – which are a reality for many in the the current economic, political and social climate. Hope is rooted in the coming of Jesus. It is rooted in Christianity. It permeates the season. We must not lose sight of it.

What is hope?

It is the pre-sentiment that imagination is more real and reality is less real than it looks. It is the hunch that the overwhelming brutality of facts that oppress and repress us is not the last word. It is the suspicion that reality is more complex than the realists want us to believe and that the frontiers of the possible are not determined by the limits of the actual; and in a miraculous and unexplained way life is preparing the creative events which will open the way to freedom and resurrection

The two – suffering and hope, live from each other. Suffering without hope produces resentment and despair, hope without suffering creates illusions, naivete and drunkenness.

Let us plant dates even though we who plant them will never eat them. We must live by the love of what we will never see.

That is the secret discipline. It is the refusal to let the creative act be dissolved in immediate sense experience. It is a stubborn commitment to the future of our grandchildren.

Such disciplined love is what has given prophets, revolutionaries, and saints the courage to die for the future they envisaged. They make their own bodies the seed of the highest hopes.
Rubin Alves (Brazilian Liberation Theologian)

(Dates take 80 years to bear fruit. Hope-providers plant dates for a future they will not see. Are we called and willing to be hopeful ourselves now and to be hope-providers?)



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