



## ADVOCACY, Faith and Justice.

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*“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute”*

Proverbs 31:8

A “ Discussion Paper for the Decade of Evangelisation: From Charity to Empowerment “ published by the Catholic Bishops Conference in 1992 set out a relationship between “ Welfare Charity”-” Advocacy”- and “ Empowerment “.

**“Welfare charity”** is social provision for the immediate relief of poverty - notably practiced by our parish SVP conferences over the years. “

**Empowerment”** gives priority to enabling the poor themselves to be shapers of their own destiny, running their own communities and local economies.

**“ Advocacy”** attempts to understand the causes of poverty and to work on behalf of the poor and voiceless to tackle them. It leads naturally to getting engaged in the struggle for justice but does not displace welfare action or preempt empowerment.



### The Advocate (Paraclete?)



Welfare action, advocacy and empowerment are not mutually exclusive, rather they should be “integrated on the basis of effective Christian love expressed as 'solidarity’”.



## Diocese of Leeds: Justice and Peace Commission

*For the Common Good in our Common Home*



The regular work of the SVP and parish groups, not least during the Covid crisis, providing food banks and visits was the hallmark of the Catholic welfare contribution. Church Action on poverty ( and CAFOD projects internationally) has for the past decade worked with local communities on empowerment strategies.

And while there is not a direct sequence or linear progression in time from welfare action to empowerment, focus on these two themes has tended to squeeze out any practical understanding and development of Catholic “ Advocacy “ practices.

In our UK context , still suffering from the original sin of “austerity” and a short termist negative political culture, the question is increasingly that of how can “ Advocacy” be part of the Church’s mission? In a political culture of “ fear-politics and manipulation of information in which truth is sacrificed to expediency, how can the practices of Advocacy make any difference? In an increasingly divided and polarising society in which the poor pay the highest price how can Advocacy be effective against power “ lobbying” dominating the political decision making of laws and budgets?

Moreover, recent repression of protest (under new public order laws), anti-trade union laws and the suppression of voting rights is turning people into “ passive citizens”, a “ leave it to us” view of governing degenerating into a despairing “ nothing we do can makes any difference “. This council of despair undermines any positive role for Advocacy.

Pope Benedict in “ Caritas in Veritate”( para 21) writes that these times

*“ oblige us to replan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and to reject negative ones.. to shape a new vision of the future “*

We could start by reclaiming a deeper understanding of “Advocacy”and its relation to the Church’s mission rather than leave it to be misunderstood and disparaged as corrupting political lobbying of parliament and Whitehall.

St Oscar Romero said:

*“ When the Church hears the cry of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises”.*

In other words, for us there needs to be a theological and popular shift from the necessary charitable action of Pope Francis’s Church as “ field hospital “- on the battlefield healing wounds - to challenging the causes of poverty and oppression.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it

*“ There comes a point when we need to stop pulling people out of the river .We need to go upstream and find out why they are falling in”.*

Moreover, this has also been part of the approach of Catholic social teaching . In “Populo Progressio” Pope Paul VI wrote

*“ the individual who is animated by true charity labours skilfully to discover the causes of misery , to find the means to combat it, to overcome it resolutely “.*



More recently Pope Benedict XVI in “*Caritas in veritate*” spelt out in detail the need for  
“further and deeper reflection on the meaning of the economy and its goals”  
( para32)

and in “*Fratelli Tutti*” (2020) Pope Francis writes

“the Church has a role over and above her charitable and educational activities “  
insisting that the Church

“cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the building of a better world”  
continuing, it is true, that religious ministers must not engage in the party politics that are  
the proper domain of the laity, “*but neither can they renounce the political dimension of life  
itself*” (para 276).

Pope Francis notes in “*Fratelli Tutti*”;

“Today in many countries, hyperbole, extremism, and polarisation have become  
political tool. Employing a strategy of ridicule suspicion and relentless criticism in a  
variety of ways denies the right of others to exist or to have an opinion. Their share  
of the truth and their values are rejected and as a result the life of society is  
impoverished and subjected to the hubris of the powerful. Political life no longer has  
to do with healthy debates about long term plans to improve people's lives and to  
advance the common good but only with slick marketing techniques primarily aimed  
at discrediting others. In this craven exchange of charges and counter charge, debate  
degenerates into a permanent state of disagreement and confrontation. Amid the  
fray of conflicting interests, where victory consists in eliminating one's opponents  
,how is it possible to raise our sights to recognise our neighbours or to help those  
who have fallen along the way?”

( Para 15-16).

Fr Austin Smith CP warned us that in these circumstances

“believing in being all things to all men and women is rooted in a theology that never  
splashed down in the real ocean of human suffering “

Again Pope Francis addressing the Bahrain Forum for East-West Dialogue for Human  
Coexistence ( Nov 2022) said

“A true love for the Divine creator means acting on behalf of his children who are  
neglected by the powerful, acting for the poor, the unborn, the elder, the infirm...If  
believers don't take the side of the voiceless who will? It is our duty to encourage  
and assist our human family, interdependent yet disconnected to sail the sea  
together”.

In other words, we need a Church that takes risks and not a version of softly whispered  
“lobbying”.

The word “*Advocacy* “ is rooted in the Latin “*ad vocare*” , to call towards, meaning to plead  
the cause of a person, not least in a court of justice. It means to intercede , to speak up for  
another. Moreover, there are theological roots in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament and  
prophets God urges us to plead another's cause, invites advocates to speak boldly, whether  
or not they are qualified ( cf Exodus 4:13, Esther 1:10; Nehemiah, Nathan and Paul's letter  
to Philemon. John's Gospel frequently references the Advocate (and the “*Paraclete* as a  
helper or counsellor alongside us). The First Letter of John references the Holy Spirit



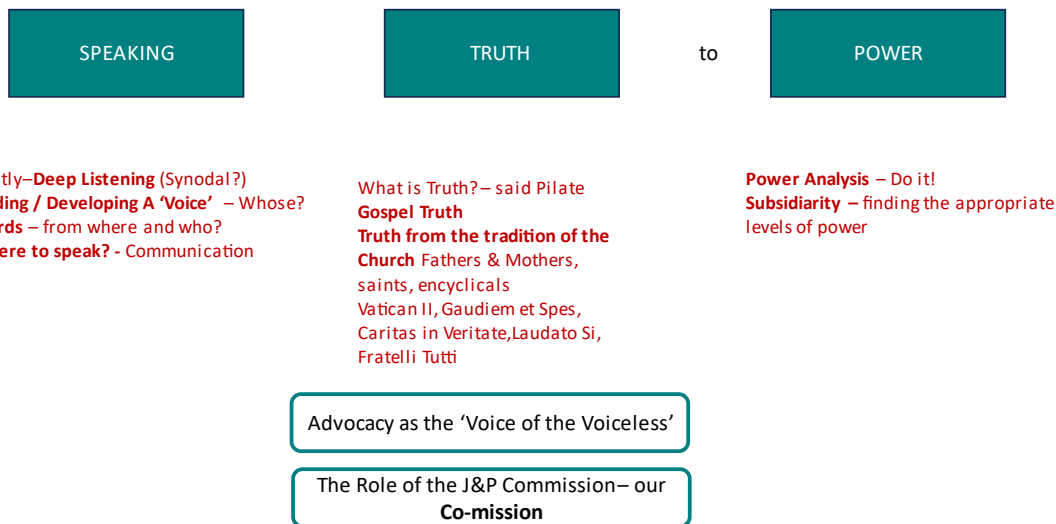
especially, as well as Father and Son - all as the Advocate” in our support. In medieval times an “advocate” was a “patron saint” of a person. The theological resonances of “advocates” remains to be explored.

But as “advocacy “ should not simply mean “lobbying” ( increasingly a professional occupation), nor be limited to sending emails to MPs, the practical question opens up of how should we as Church “speak truth to power”?

How do we effectively challenge unjust laws and unfair budgets?

How can the Church be a catalyst for change?

How do we identify and truthfully name the scope and scale of the challenge?



Deep listening is the key that must precede speaking( synodal process?) but how do we develop a voice for the voiceless?

Who speaks to who and with what words?

How do we communicate the “truth” of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our context?

How do we confront power and do a truthful “power”analysis to take on dominating narratives?

Dare we refuse to be cowed by conflicts and controversies perpetuating deliberate confusion and fear?

In 1965 a friend and adviser of Pope Paul VI, Jean Guitton, suggested that the “aggiornamento” of VaticanII needed to be fused with a process of “approfondimento continuo”. By this he meant a process of “constant deepening”.

Developing a theological praxis of “advocacy” moves us towards that deeper encounter between “the world”, especially of those suffering and written off, and Christ of the Gospel.