

Seeing person of our Blessed Lord in face of the poor

WESTMINSTER'S Cardinal Vincent Nichols links his childhood memories of going to church with two things: football and sweets. Speaking of his early experiences he recalls: "After Mass I would play football for two hours. And then, as there was still sweet rationing after the war, my parents would buy sweets only after church. And so, going to Mass was automatically connected with getting sweets." In this way, he says: "Faith and fun went together."

But as life progressed and the cardinal's faith deepened, his experiences became more complex and at times, challenging. Reflecting on his training for priesthood in Rome the cardinal admits he nearly threw in the towel and gave up on his calling. It was then that he received a letter from a priest serving in India who the young seminarian had never met before, telling him: "I understand that you are struggling and I just want to encourage you. As the Gospel says, once you put your hand to the plough, don't look back."

"For me that was a turning point in my journey. I truly believe that letter came from the hand of an angel," he says. The cardinal speaks of that point in time as a kind of conversion. Although unlike St Paul's conversion "it may not have been very dramatic, I am of the school that puts its emphasis more on daily conversions. It's like every day is a new start".

On the flip side of this sense of 'daily conversion' and renewal, I ask the cardinal if he ever feels doubt and whether his faith is ever challenged. He speaks candidly: "I remember an answer that Cardinal Hume gave when he was asked if he ever had any

PROFILE

Cardinal Vincent Nichols tells Anita Boniface that we are all called to be missionary disciples

doubts. He answered: 'Most mornings, when I celebrate Mass I ask myself: Can this really be true? Can this really be the transforming of this piece of bread into the body and blood of Christ?' And that's never far away. Just the awesome tremendousness of what our faith gives us, every now and again I kind of just shake my head just blink and think 'can this really be true?'

Listening to the leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales speak a little of his own doubts and his need for daily conversion, there seems to be a message implicit that having doubt perhaps is a necessary part of an authentic and healthy faith.

But that's not all. The cardinal reflects on how he feels about what is happening to Christians being persecuted for their faith today. "Especially at this time when there are so many people suffering and being martyred for their faith, possibly now more than at any other time, I do ask myself what would it be like, what would I be like to be faced with martyrdom. I think I would really struggle and I would depend on the prayers of others."

He continues: "For me, that's a real challenge. To live with the question: 'Would I have the strength, would my faith be strong enough to face what many Christians face in the past and today?'"

As Cardinal Nichols tries to relate the challenges that he encounters when thinking about

Christians being persecuted, I realise that having moments of doubt can in fact increase our compassion, and is a part of our shared humanity.

A sense of compassion and shared humanity was felt by the cardinal even as a young boy, when he encountered people suffering closer to home, in his local community. He remembers as a child, having long arguments with his father about taking people who were homeless in off the streets and letting them sleep on the sofa.

The 'zealous youth' as the cardinal describes himself, was confronted with a firm response from his dad about the need to weigh responsibilities to the family and maintain their home as a place of safety. "In that tiny domestic situation, it was born in me a realisation of the complexities of the issue," the cardinal reflects.

Nowadays Cardinal Nichols appreciates that because of such complexities charities and their volunteers are extremely important. Charitable organisations – by their nature organised and regulated – can help manage some of these complexities and act as a conduit between people desiring to offer help, and people needing to receive help.

Indeed, it was this need for organisation that led the cardinal's patron saint, Vincent de Paul, to establish his first formal charity, the Ladies of Charity as a way of managing and organising the out-



Westminster's Cardinal Vincent Nichols – 'Life comes to every single one of us as a gift. We don't earn our existence. It's a gift, and it is best lived as a gift to be given back.'

Picture: Mazur/catholicnews.org.uk

pouring of generosity from his parishioners for the poor.

This year the Vincentian Family, made up of 25 organisations, celebrates the 400th year since the establishment that first Vincentian charity and with it their special charisma, with a special theme of *Welcoming the Stranger*.

In a pleasing kind of reversal, the cardinal is now a patron of one of the Vincentian charities, the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) whose 10,000 members offer friendship to people on the margins of society including those suffering homelessness, loneliness, seeking asylum, and needing both emotional and practical support.

Cardinal Nichols says: "I treasure the SVP because it is strong in its identification with Christ, seeing the person of Christ, our Blessed Lord, in the face of the poor. And if you think you are serving your Lord in the poor then you are on your toes. You want to do it very well. And I think that is what SVP members seek to do."

He says that charity volunteers such as the SVP's many members,

follow a "golden thread" from the goodness they may have received in their lives, which leads them to do good for others.

"There's one simple way of putting it", says the cardinal. "Life comes to every single one of us as a gift. We don't earn our existence. It's a gift, and it is best lived as a gift to be given back. There is in that sense, a 'grammar' within human nature, of 'gift'. And I think that's why people want to help."

He relates the work of Christian charities and their volunteers in particular, to the call of Pope Francis towards 'missionary discipleship'. While discipleship is a "search for fulfilment through following the person of Christ", it is important to recognise the paradoxical nature of that fulfilment since it is achieved through a discipleship that is "by its character missionary".

"It is missionary because it reaches out," the cardinal explains. "And it is missionary when it gets to the peripheries, the edges. That is where we find in the most dramatic way the person of Jesus who we want to serve.

People can be on the edge for all sorts of reasons, economically, socially, psychologically, in your health, all sorts of ways. It's all those who experience marginalisation – the most vulnerable. And that is where Christ chooses to be," he says, "because that is where he was in his own life."

The goodness carried out by so many of the SVP's members in reaching out to those on the edges, can lead to the transformation of people's lives. It can transform everyone involved – those receiving help, and the volunteer members themselves. The cardinal believes that this 'transformation' is "ultimately the work of grace. And the work of grace always builds on our nature".

However, he points out: "Transformation is not something I receive. It cannot be done to me. Rather, because it is based on my nature, it is something on which I have to work. Charities help restore a person's dignity, a person's self-esteem, and restore a person's motivation. But without this motivation, a person is not going to go anywhere."

He continues: "The role of the

Church and of Christian charities like the SVP is to create those areas of opportunity in which that person can transform themselves, through the grace of God."

Creating a project called Bakhta House for trafficked women where the cardinal has dined with the women, named 'guests', he feels that the person receiving help can also lead to experiences of transformation in the Church and the charity volunteers who encounter them. In this way, to use a beautiful Trinitarian image of love and partnership, the Church, charity volunteers, and their beneficiaries, or "guests", can all be united in an ongoing flow of transformation, leading to enrichment, fruitfulness and a strengthening of Christian discipleship for all.

■ Cardinal Vincent Nichols is a patron of the SVP. If you would like to support or join the SVP to help the most vulnerable, please telephone: 0207 703 3030; e-mail: info@svp.org.uk; or visit www.svp.org.uk

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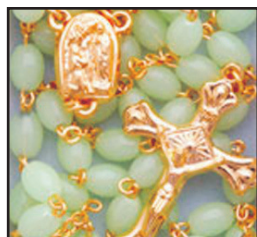
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