

The Universe – Comment –

Think carefully before joining in the row over regulations

Any mention of the word 'regulation' is guaranteed to have a negative effect on the reader or listener. It's a boring word with unpleasant connotations, especially in Britain.

Schools, offices and governments have regulations. Employees and businesses alike seek to get around regulations. Regulations are thought to cost money, time and effort, preventing people from engaging in more productive activity. Indeed, one of the major arguments against the European Union during the Brexit Referendum campaign last year was that the EU is widely believed to be a source of time-wasting regulations.

At least until now, a 'bonfire of regulations' was usually meant to be a liberating and positive thing.

But the tragic and terrible fire at Grenfell Tower has suddenly given an horrific new meaning to that expression. It has now been ascertained that the fire began in one flat and then spread with breathtaking speed thanks to the cladding, a form of insulation recently added to the outside of the building. This particular type of cladding was flammable, and in other countries, including the United States and Germany, there are clear regulations forbidding its use on high-rise buildings. The company that worked on Grenfell Tower nevertheless put it on the building's exterior, either because (and this is still a point of debate) there weren't such regulations in Britain, or because they were easily violated.

Other regulations may have been broken, too. There were no sprinkler systems in the building and no working fire alarms. Tenants had complained about these faults in the past, but they were either not heard or just ignored.

The result of this tragedy would appear to be the beginnings of a major backlash against deregulation – and that's unfortunate for a Government that has made deregulation a totemic virtue, putting Prime Minister May in the front line of the onslaught.

That the whole regulatory debate has now become politicised is as inevitable as it is unhelpful.

For the larger point about regulations is that they are not, in and of themselves, either good or bad things at all. Some of them, like those that ban flammable insulation, can save lives. Others, which really do choke entrepreneurship, are negative.

To be meaningful, a discussion about regulation has to be specific and careful, not political or ideological – a discussion, in other words, that isn't going to be possible in this country for a long time.

We would all do well to step back and reflect.

The Catholic Universe

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Now more than ever, we must find room to welcome the stranger

CATHOLIC COMMENT

Anita Boniface



People considered 'outsiders' are often treated with suspicion and hostility. Throughout history prisoners, refugees, asylum seekers, those who are mentally unwell and vulnerable and people living in destitution have been side lined to the peripheries of our communities.

This marginalisation applies not only in terms of physical locality but also in society's consciousness and attitudes. Things today are no different. Strangers' voices often go unheard, their presence unwelcomed.

The Gospel, however, is very clear about the approach we should take when we encounter someone who is an outsider. In Matthew 25, Jesus explains that we should feed, clothe, visit and welcome the stranger in whom Christ resides. "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

This approach of welcoming the stranger formed the foundation of the vocational life of the French 17th century saint, Vincent de Paul. His mission as a priest was to see the face of Christ in the poor. So, too, are we invited to welcome Christ, embodied in the stranger, into our communities.

This is something that the Vincentian Family – a collection of 25 organisations who share Vincentian values – has been doing since the time of St Vincent. This year marks the 400th anniversary of the Vincentian charism and spirituality. Member organisations have been hosting meetings and Masses around the world, adopting the theme of 'welcome the stranger'.

In Liverpool, on 23rd and 24th June, Catholic charity the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) celebrated with a National Meeting supported by CCLA, one of the largest fund managers for charitable, religious and public service organisations in the UK.

The event programme included talks and workshops for the 350 SVP volunteer members who attended the event.

Celebrations concluded with a Mass at Liverpool's Metropolitan Cathedral celebrated by Archbishop Malcolm McMahon and SVP Spiritual Advisor Fr Paul Roche.

During the meeting guest speakers from related charities were invited to give keynote addresses about their work in welcoming the stranger. Sarah Teather, director of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), spoke passionately about the 65 million asylum seekers and refugees in today's world, some of whom JRS assists. In a message echoed by several speakers, Sarah spoke of the stranger as the 'donator of gifts'.

She said: "It is my experience that by

accompanying people and befriending them that we experience their gifts. You get to see what they are like, what makes them laugh, what their hopes are, what their dreams are. What music they listen to even." She reminded us not to "put them on a pedestal, but see them as your equal, people to learn from."

Sarah spoke movingly of the destitution that many asylum seekers and refugees face in the UK. Many have not yet had their refugee status recognised by the Home Office and are therefore unable to work or claim benefits and are financially unsupported. With a huge store of skills they are desperate to offer, Sarah said the JRS enables them to help other refugees by becoming volunteers themselves: "It's like releasing a huge torrent of energy: pent-up skills and a desire to contribute. When they are given the opportunity to volunteer it can be incredibly creative. Their generosity, even when they have lost so much, is absolutely incredible."

This method of welcoming the stranger into our communities by encouraging them to become active volunteers and therefore participants, was reflected in a talk by Bertrand Oussett, former National President of SVP in France.

Beneficiaries become empowered as volunteers and similarly there is an enrichment that comes through the distribution work that the SVP does – sharing out food, clothing, furniture and other practical resources to people in need. Distribution can become an experience of personal exchange: the means of an encounter, where both parties actually give and receive. In this way, the SVP lives out Pope Francis's intention that we "be evangelised by the poor." This is the importance of beneficiary empowerment, participation, and encounter. As Nelson Mandela once said "what you do for me, without me, you do against me."

There is a great poverty of social isolation in the developed world and Bertrand spoke of how this isolation makes any kind of difficulty much bigger. He said: "I believe that the SVP has a special vocation to establish personal

relationships of exchange with the beneficiary we are helping. This way of befriending and establishing a social link will help to break down barriers between the charity doer and the charity receiver. Each will be nourished by the encounter."

This spirit of encounter and its importance in getting to know someone who is a stranger to our communities was reflected by prison chaplain Monsignor Malachy Keegan. Fr Malachy is a parish priest as well as an adviser to the Bishops' Conference for England and Wales. He has worked in prison chaplaincy for over 20 years.

Fr Malachy described the Vincentian spirit, inspired by St Vincent who befriended and cared for prisoners in the galleys during his lifetime, as "to walk alongside and care for those who are forgotten and neglected."

He went on: "Prisoners are frail and weak, just like all of us. Imperfect. Sometimes in terrible ways. But they share our common weaknesses." Fr Malachy encouraged the audience to "share with prisoners not only in their weakness, but to be in solidarity with them."

Showing the very human face of prisoners who so often are demonised by society, Fr Malachy said he had learned so much from people in prison: "How to be vulnerable, and open, and ready to receive the salvation of love that God offers us."

Having described some very testing, challenging situations of prisoners being unloved, Fr Malachy also asked SVP members: "Where are we in all this? Where would Jesus be? Where would St Vincent be?"

"We need a sense of community. Our Catholic Social Teaching speaks about the dignity of the human person. This includes people in prison. There's a call to family, community, participation, solidarity. These are things we need to live."

Being a family of hope was at the centre of the talk by SVP patron, member and former Labour MP John Battle. John highlighted prayer in fostering hope among the SVP's members who

work daily to combat poverty and among those they encounter through their volunteering. "Through prayer we become open to God and become open to the service to other human beings. We become ministers of hope to people in need."

Both St Vincent and SVP founder Blessed Frédéric Ozanam believed every action for the poor is in itself a prayer, if motivated by charity which is of itself an action of grace.

The founder of the L'Arche community, Jean Vanier once wrote: "There are groups of people who are ostracised and treated as lesser citizens. Lesser human beings. So let us listen and look around. Let us experience the dividedness of reality and let us see that we are not confined to this dividedness. We can grow. We can choose to walk across the street, to blur the lines, and step over the boundaries in order to meet the other."

John said: "Jesus stepped over many boundaries. He shared loaves and fishes with the poor on the hillside, became friends with tax collectors, he ate with Pharisees. By facing our fears, by uncovering the walls of protection within us which keep us from even being able to look upon our brothers and sisters, the nature of our hearts begins to be changed. Not only is our human family beginning to be healed, but also our own hearts."

So where now for the SVP? Inspired by this National Meeting, the newly elected national president Helen O'Shea commented: "I am honoured and proud to have been elected to serve as the next national president of the SVP. Our charism of fighting poverty and injustice through befriending and practical help is as important today as it ever has been. I am committed to nurturing that charism and to looking at ways in which it can be extended to offer the hand of friendship and welcome to those at the margins of our society."

"I have been a member of the SVP for 16 years and have seen over and over again the effect of visiting and spending time with someone who feels lost, abandoned, hopeless or unwelcome. Valuing and respecting everyone is at the heart of the SVP's work. There are many challenges to face but I will be inspired by knowing the importance of the SVP mission in what can, for many people, seem like a friendless world."

Looking to the future, the SVP is constantly growing. We have nearly 10,000 members and 500 community support project volunteers providing friendship and practical support to people in need in local communities. If you would like to be part of this work, we would welcome you.'

As Fr Malachy says: "What good we could do, just being alongside, and letting God do the rest."

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