

The SVP's good works are 'an outward sign of faith'

PROFILE

Former politician **Ann Widdecombe** tells Anita Boniface about her role with the Catholic charity

“YOU can't judge truth by popularity,” says Ann Widdecombe. “Just because something's true, it doesn't have to be popular.” It was this belief that drew the former Conservative politician away from her Anglican roots, and into Catholicism. She felt the Anglican Church “was forever sacrificing faith to fashion, creed to compromise, any other alliteration you can think of.” And it was the Catholic Church's determination to resist so many of the pressures placed on it to change that attracted the former politician into the fold.

Standing for what she sees as truth is an approach that has driven much of Ann's life. Many of the policies she has supported – opposing gay marriage and being anti-abortion for instance, have put her at odds with politicians and sometimes the public. Equally, in more recent times, the brute honesty about her self-image in TV shows has shown her valuing authenticity over approval. Indeed, it was her firm belief in doing something because she believed it was true, rather than because it would win her acclaim, was the foundation upon which she made her decisions as an MP.

The pro-life movement had a prominent role to play in Ann's conversion to Catholicism. Meeting the passionate and “steadfast” anti-abortionist, the late Phyllis Bowman, and participating in services and rallies alongside David Alton in the late 1980s, she noticed that the movement was very much led by the Catholic and the Evangelical Churches. It was through the pro-life campaign that she came back into touch with Catholicism for the first time since her convent school education, and she says: “That was probably what started my conversion.” However, she insists: “You can't divorce faith and principle. A lot of my principles, I have always had. There are things I have always believed whether I was an Anglican, a Catholic, or as an agnostic. The pro-life stance was one of them.”

Much as Ann advocates truth and principle, she too had to compromise her beliefs on many occasions during her career as a politician. Although she comes across as forthright, bold and out-

spoken, her life has not been without dilemmas.

“You get dilemmas in politics,” she says. “It's no good going into politics if you are an absolutist. If you're never compromising.” Of the abortion bill exempting disabled children, meaning that babies with disabilities could be aborted after 18 weeks she says: “It was a compromise some members said was a compromise too far. But you have numerous dilemmas when you are an MP and you've got to say: ‘What is it I want to do? My driving force throughout those bills was the maximising of the saving of unborn life and I wanted to save as many lives as I could.’”

She says that compromise is integral to politics: “You don't compromise on the principle, the principle is that all unborn life is life and you want to save it. But you may have to compromise on the methods and practice. That's a fact of life. You either go with it, or you achieve nothing. It's a mix of principle and pragmatism.”

For Ann, there have often been times when where to compromise and where to listen to conscience were closely entwined. Her conscience and her thinking led her in favour of the death penalty as a deterrent. However, Ann says that if someone suggested introducing torture as a deterrent she wouldn't follow the pure logic of it. Ann says that moral instinct has to come into decision making: “Most of the things we believe in life are actually a mixture of reason and instinct. So too is faith. Faith is like courage. If you have no fear you don't need courage. If you have no doubts, you don't need faith. Faith is the thing that helps, it isn't just the reason. It's thinking and it's also about instinct. It's about what you feel. I think that very few individuals, even the coldest of logicians, aren't effected in some way by instinct. It's just part of being.”

She agrees that often our instincts and who we are reach back to our childhood experiences. Ann reflects on her childhood as shaping many of the approaches she has taken as a politician and since leaving politics. She says her ability to quickly depart from one stage of life and transition into another goes back to her ever-shifting experiences as a daughter in an Admiralty family.



Ann Widdecombe – ‘The SVP embodies service to others. You can't divorce faith from good works as James makes clear. And good works are an outward sign of faith. The SVP is not about charitable giving, but charitable living.’ Picture: PRESS ASSOCIATION

“We moved every two to three years – Bath, Portsmouth, Singapore, Tunbridge Wells. As my father was posted, so we moved. We'd move in a day and it would be a case of new house, new friends, new school, new Brownie pack overnight. We were starting all over again. And I think the subconscious lesson of that childhood is that once something is over, it's over.”

She says this realisation that “when something's gone, it's gone”, led to her being able to

immediately adjust when in 2010 she left Parliament and was no longer a politician. “I was able to say: ‘Right, that's over. After 23 years I'm not an MP any more.’ I got that.”

“Therefore, there was not the slightest obligation to take decisions as an MP would take decisions, to act as an MP, to think as an MP. It was over. When I started TV's *Strictly Come Dancing*, a lot of people said that it was inappro-

priate. I said: ‘Yes it would be, if I was still an MP. But I'm not.’”

Ann, who has never married and remains single, now lives alone on Dartmoor, where she says she relishes the peace and beauty. Asked whether she experiences loneliness either herself or in the community around her, she says that her life is “full”, and that loneliness is more of an urban phenomenon. “You can feel lonely in a crowd,” she says.

For Ann, one of the massive factors causing isolation in today's

society is family breakup: “Look at Dickensian families, Victorian families, there were multiple relatives living in the house. That then became the nuclear family. And now with the divorce rate and re-partnering, and the assumption that children must move out as soon as they graduate from university, we are being forced into smaller and smaller units. People are going into much more diverse situations and no longer stay in the locality in which they grow up.”

Ann herself grew up in a full household with her grandmother living in the family home until Ann was 14. She says her own mother grew up in a house with her parents and a bachelor uncle.

One of the consequences of today's custom towards working parents is that “parents want to spend their home time with their young children, meaning there is now a shortage of time to go on others outside of the family”. She says this can create shortfalls for charities who depend on volunteers.

Ann is patron of a number of charities, one of these being the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP), a Catholic charity focusing on combatting isolation and loneliness. With an active membership of 8,000 volunteers who visit the lonely in their own homes, befriending people and offering practical help, the SVP is a thriving charity whose volunteers are close to its heart.

“The SVP embodies service to others,” Ann says. “You can't divorce faith from good works as James makes clear. And good works are an outward sign of faith. The SVP is not about charitable giving, but charitable living.”

For Ann this service to others is the basis of the Gospels: “putting others before yourself, sometimes at the inconvenience of time”. She calls these volunteers the ‘little twigs’ and says: “We think of the vine and the branches, but I say, don't forget about the twigs, the little ones reaching out and doing the work on the end. We are all part of one vine. Don't forget the twigs.”

Looking back at her career as a politician and to her current life as a columnist and an author, she believes her greatest attribute is her perseverance: “When you receive knock backs, carry on.” She says that it is very Christian to embrace adversity joyously.

As she turns her attention to writing, including her book on penance, *Sackcloth and Ashes*, Ann continues a different chapter of her life. Her life is no longer constrained by heavy responsibilities of politics and leaves her room to explore different avenues of being true to herself. Her appearance on the dance show *Strictly Come Dancing* was one way in which she both gave, and experienced much joy, but writing and living in Dartmoor are other ways. Perhaps, if true to her word about perseverance against adversity, she will continue to be a voice for the unborn child – no longer as a politician, but as a writer with a voice strong and clear in what it believes.

Marking the Reformation with honesty about past

HEART OF THE MATTER

Cindy Wooden

AS Catholics and Lutherans prepare to mark the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation, Pope Francis said they should feel “pain for the division that still exists among us, but also joy for the brotherhood we have already rediscovered”.

The Pope will travel to Lund, Sweden, on 31st October, to participate in an ecumenical prayer service launching a year of anniversary activities.

Lutherans mark 31st October as Reformation Day, honouring Martin Luther, who was a Catholic priest in 1517 when he began the process that became the Protestant Reformation.

His ‘95 Theses’ were a list of topics on which, Luther believed, the Catholic Church needed to reform.

Asserting that faith, not deeds, leads to salvation, many items on the list were triggered by the selling of indulgences, a practice the Council of Trent later banned.

The Catholic Church believes that Christ and the saints have accumulated a treasure of merits, which other believers – who are prayerful and repentant – can draw upon to reduce or erase the punishment they are due because of sins they have committed.

Colloquially, an indulgence is described as a promise of reduced time in purgatory.

While making money from indulgences was a spark, the heart of the Reformation became different understandings of justification, or how people are made righteous in the eyes of God and saved.

In 1999, after years of theological study, discussion and review, a joint



Reform – An image of Martin Luther at a church in Helsingor, Denmark

declaration on justification was finalised and signed.

It said Lutherans and Catholics agree that justification and salvation are totally free gifts of God and cannot be earned by performing good works, but rather must be reflected in good works.

Overcoming the hurdle of differences on justification paved the way for Catholics and Lutherans to discuss possibilities for common commemorations of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

In 2013, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation published a doc-

ument, *From Conflict to Communion*. “Luther had no intention of establishing a new Church but was part of a broad and many-faceted desire for reform,” the document said.

The controversy over indulgences and over the degree to which a person must co-operate in his or her own salvation “very quickly raised the question of which authorities one can call upon at a time of struggle”, the document said.

Luther emphasised the authority of scripture while Church leaders emphasised the role of Church teaching and tradition in interpreting scripture.

In the 16th century and later, the document said: “Catholics and Lutherans frequently not only misunderstood but also exaggerated and caricatured their opponents in order to make them look ridiculous.”

“What happened in the past cannot be changed, but what is remembered of the past and how it is remembered can, with the passage of time, indeed change,” the document said.

Especially since the Second Vatican Council and with 50 years of official theological dialogue, Catholics and Lutherans have come to a deeper understanding of Luther's concerns, as well as to a recognition of the hostility and even political factors that pushed the two sides further apart.

In a joint statement published in early October, Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and the Rev Martin Junge, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, said the joint commemorations will acknowl-

edge how Martin Luther set out to reform the church, but – partly because of the “convoluted context of social, political and economic upheaval” – ended up splitting the Church and unleashing centuries of tension and outright war.

At the same time, they said, the anniversary events will honour the progress made in 50 years of Catholic-Lutheran dialogue and, especially, recognise the “strengthened relationships and more profound mutual understanding reached in many parts of the world in service and witness”.

In addition to the ecumenical prayer service on 31st October in Lund – the city where the Lutheran World Federation was founded in 1947 – Pope Francis and leaders of the Lutheran World Federation will witness the signing of a co-operation agreement between the federation's World Service and Caritas Internationalis, the Vatican-based umbrella organisation of national Catholic charities.

“The meeting in Lund stems from a process of dialogue spanning several decades,” said the Rev Michael Bjerkhagen, official chaplain to the king of Sweden.

“A milestone in this process was the document, *From Conflict to Communion*, signed in 2013. In this document Lutherans and Catholics express sorrow and regret at the pain that they have caused each other, but also gratitude for the theological insights that both parties have contributed.”

■ Bookcase – Page 11; Vatican Letter – Page 14

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