

# Young Catholics told to take their faith out to the public and be real leaders

Simon Whittle MA

How can Christians be leaders today, and how can they be Christian leaders?

At the heart of what it means to be Christian is the commitment to the joyful message of Christ. We are perennially exhorted to acknowledge the relevance of this message for our entire lives, not only for how we live in our own private spheres, but also to how we act, and lead, in the community.

Last month I met with a small and international group of young Catholics at the newly opened, but not yet complete, Theodore House, the Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst. We gathered, in what was part-conference, part-retreat, to discuss how our faith can and must inform the ways in which we participate in society, and to consider what it means to be a Christian leader in public life.

Clearly, at the heart of Christian leadership must be a living faith. Alongside it is an understanding of the principles of Catholic social teaching, and an appreciation of the history of the faith and the examples given by others.

Finally, the help given by being formed alongside others – supporting one another, challenging each other and sharing experiences is essential in this process of formation.

Alongside the lectures, workshops, and spiritual conferences, which we had arranged at Theodore House, we were able to see the unique collections at Stonyhurst College (on whose grounds Theodore House is found) now accessible to all through the new museum. The many objects in the collections tell stories of Christians from different ages, of their struggles, interests, their successes, and their failings. The relics of martyrs, from Thomas Beckett through Thomas More and Edmund Campion, to Oscar Romero, are a poignant reminder of the cost which a commitment to Christian leadership can carry.

A true reflection on our Christian heritage, which relics and special collections are so well placed to aid us in, inevitably includes not only a recognition of the glories and triumphs of the Church, but also of the times and situations in which we as Christians have failed, been mistaken, misguided and sinful. Through such reflection we learn the need to be humble and open to revision and correction. All Christians, and most especially those in positions of power, must show this humility and openness through their ability to listen and engage constructively with their critics and opponents, be they inside or outside of the Church.

Christian leaders are more than ever under scrutiny – and rightly so. In the Church a good deal has been learnt through secular criticism. If



The group of young Catholics who met at Theodore House to discuss what it means to be a Christian leader in public life



Theodore House is an excellent Catholic resource

Christians are going to be credible, and effective, leaders in the future, they must be able to engage with such criticism, while continuing to ground their own leadership and vision in what is authentically of the faith.

Formation of Christian leaders therefore requires the cultivation of the spiritual life and an understanding of the basic principles of the faith. This is alongside a formation in the practicalities and theory of leadership, and politics. To this end, our conference not only included talks and workshops on some of the basic skills required for a role in public life, but also daily Mass, and spiritual and theological talks. Our faith, after all, requires appreciation of both theory and a lived practice.

What also became increasingly evident over our conference was the need not only for formation, but for formation in community. This is a pragmatic and spiritual necessity. Pragmatic because it is only through sharing experiences with another that we will be up to speed on the range of approaches, problems, solutions, and responses which both we as Christians, and society, can offer. By the experience of sharing, and of challenging each other, we

learn the vital skills of collaboration, communication, and consensus building. Through this sharing we can become effective in engaging with the discourses of our world and with the challenges, worries, reservations of our brothers and sisters.

There is a spiritual necessity for such formation in groups, too. In the words of St Paul, there are different gifts and various forms of service. It is together, united with Christ, that we make up the one Christian body, and thus a Christian leader can

never be one who leads without regard for or recourse to others. Equally, we will not be well formed if we are not formed in a community, by a range of people who share their gifts.

One gift which the Church shares with us is her social teaching. The weekend gave the opportunity to explore some of this treasure. The social teaching sets out those principles for society which the Church recognises as essential to society's fruition. Part of its wisdom is that it is rarely focused on particular policy implications. Instead, it demands that we, and most especially of those in positions of leadership, begin to find Catholic responses to the situations of our own times and places, in a spirit of humility and prayerful and rational discernment.

The aims of our group gathered at Stonyhurst were clear. The group was formed to help potential future leaders to recognise and work effectively for the common good and the dignity of the individual. The sources of its principles was transparent, drawn from scripture and from the Church's reflection. The vi-

## How to support the Christian Heritage Centre

The Christian Heritage Centre is a registered charity, established to increase access by the Catholic community to the Stonyhurst Collections. Images are kindly reproduced by permission of the Society of Jesus and Stonyhurst College. The CHC has built Theodore House – to be followed by a Visitors' Centre – to enable scholars, parishes, schools and retreatants to deepen their Christian faith. Further details of how to support the project or to book Theodore House are available at [www.christianheritagecentre.com](http://www.christianheritagecentre.com) or from [info@christianheritage.com](mailto:info@christianheritage.com)

sion of each member was and remains their own. Such group formation strengthens each member it by offering them a space for grounding their vision in our shared faith.

Theodore House is not only set in the stunning grandeur of the Ribble Valley and Stonyhurst College, it shares in the college's tradition of formation. It offers both a peaceful retreat from the distractions of our everyday lives, and a site for engagement with our faith, a recognition of the diversity of our history, and a place for reassessing our own values and principles. At the recent conference we all learnt so much about what Christian leadership can look like. Through Theodore House's ability to bring together cultural and intellectual traditions we will form more effective Christian leaders for a mission of service, not only in the UK, but across the world. This is a mission to be Christians able to witness to the Gospel, with an openness and the tools to transform our world, by God's grace, into a society of love, peace, and justice.

Simon Whittle is an alumnus of Stonyhurst College. Following his studies of Theology at the University of Oxford and The University of Durham he worked at the International Theological Institute in Austria, and is now a teacher of Theology at the Oratory School in Reading. The CHC is developing programmes of Christian Leadership formation and this is being overseen by Trustee, Ryan Day. Theodore House will be fully operational when the remaining funds have been raised to equip the building with furniture and fittings. If you would be willing to support this please contact Anton' de Piro via [anton@christianheritagecentre.com](mailto:anton@christianheritagecentre.com).

