

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH – WORLD'S LARGEST CHARITY

Stalin famously said of the Church, “The Pope! How many divisions has he?” Less well known is Churchill’s response that Stalin “might have mentioned a number of legions not always visible on parade”. Indeed, the reach and influence of the Church are not easily described by statistics alone, yet the raw statistics are staggering enough.

The Church operates more than 140,000 schools, 10,000 orphanages, 5,000 hospitals and some 16,000 other health clinics. Caritas, the umbrella organisation for Catholic aid agencies, estimates that spending by its affiliates totals between £2 billion and £4 billion, making it one of the biggest aid agencies in the world.

Even these numbers only tell half the tale. Caritas does not include development spending by a host of religious orders and other Catholic charities, while most of the 200,000 Catholic parishes around the world operate their own small-scale charitable projects which are never picked up in official figures. Establishing like-for-like comparisons is hard, but there can be little doubt that in pretty much every field of social action, from education to health to social care, the Church is the largest and most significant non-state organisation in the world.

A sceptic might point out that that influence can be both positive and negative. So, for example, it might be queried whether the Church’s work in education or health would be more effective if control was switched to the state. In much of the developing world, if the Church was not involved, the services would not be provided at all. But there is a good deal of research which has attempted to compare the performance of Catholic provision of education or health with that of other providers and, in general, Catholic institutions come out rather well.

The health analyst Kenneth White, of Virginia University, found Catholic hospitals in the US to be on average more efficient than equivalent secular hospitals. This was a particularly remarkable finding given that he also discovered evidence that Catholic hospitals, reflecting their mission to reach out to disadvantaged communities, were providing more compassionate care than other providers.

In Africa, a recent research review found not only that maternal care at Church-run mission hospitals was of the same or better quality than at public facilities, but that Church hospitals were also more likely to offer services accessible to the poor.

Looking at education, although it is well established that Catholic schools perform exceptionally well academically, they also contribute to helping the pupils live lives moulded by gospel values. Most intriguingly, the University of Chicago Law Review recently concluded that the closure of Catholic schools in poorer areas of Chicago led to a significant increase in urban social disorder and crime.

Of course, we should expect the role of Catholic social action to go beyond standard measures of performance. Indeed, Pope Francis has urged Catholic institutions always to put Christ front and centre, arguing that otherwise “we would end up merely as a compassionate NGO”. Put another way, Catholic ethos and identity is crucial to the survival of Catholic social action.

Measuring the quality of the Catholic ethos of schools, hospitals and development work is difficult. Detractors can point to the disastrous rates of pupils attending Catholic schools lapsing from the faith, but it is unfair to pin the blame entirely on the schools, many of which do an outstanding job of trying to pass on the faith in the face of a culture which is increasingly secular.

Indeed, aggressive secularisation is a threat to the full range of Catholic social action. Just last month Dame Louise Casey, the Government’s integration tsar,

asserted that “it was not okay” for Catholic schools to be against same-sex marriage. Although she later clarified that she didn’t advocate legal penalties for Catholic schools, it exemplified the increasing pressure on Catholic institutions to conform to secular norms.

Witness, for example, the way in which former US President Barack Obama withdrew funds from Catholic projects that help victims of human trafficking because they would not commit themselves to providing abortions.

How we respond to these challenges is going to be critical to the future of Catholic social care. In the short run, it can be tempting to conform to secular expectations for the sake of a quiet life and so as not to put valuable services at risk. But when Catholic institutions become entangled with activities inconsistent with Church teaching, the fallout is rarely pretty. The church, for instance should distance itself from institutions such as amnesty international simply because it supports abortion which they misguidedly regard as a human right.

A strategy more likely to yield long-term success for Catholic agencies is to follow the advice of Pope Francis, and Benedict XVI before him: to uphold our Catholic identity and ethos ever more boldly and to put into action the positive message of Church teaching on sexuality, life issues and the unique dignity and worth of all human beings.

It is not our job to go looking for a fight when none is necessary. At the same time, Church organisations should never sell people short by underestimating the way in which proclaiming the truth and sticking to a bold Catholic identity can, through the power of grace, transform lives in the most unexpected ways.

Secular opponents also have come to terms with the fact that if they insist on doing battle with the biggest charity in the world, they are putting at risk the wellbeing of millions of vulnerable and marginalised people.

If Catholic institutions are able to carry on delivering their services in the context of an ethos that has at its heart the dignity of every human life from conception until natural death, the Church can continue to be the greatest force for good in the world today.