

## 'Charities only go so far: they treat the symptoms, not the cause'



Bruk lost his home when his landlord decided to re-let his house in time to reap a higher rent from people attending the London Olympics. Cameron, who was running his own painting and decorating business, working every hour possible, until he fell 25ft off a ladder, severely damaged ligaments in his leg and couldn't walk or work, ended up homeless, too. No work meant he could not pay his rent.

These are the life stories of two of the people helped by Anchor House, the Catholic organisation in the East End of London. The most disturbing aspect of so many people's accounts of homelessness is just how little separates a secure, settled existence from a life of desperation on the streets.

Six years ago, the trustees of Anchor House started to transform it into a place which not only helps those living rough or sleeping on a friend's sofa, but also teaches them how to cook, how to budget, and trains them in useful skills. The staff at Anchor House know that employability is the key to changing lives.

Anchor House, and its West End counterpart, the Cardinal Hume Centre, are jewels of Catholic service to the wider community. They make a real difference to young people's lives, a difference that those who attended Anchor House's recent reception at the House of Lords applauded. One of the staff, whom I met at the reception – held partly to promote the organisation's bid to raise another £9.3 million to refurbish its old building and build "move-on" flats – told me of their involvement in another Catholic jewel: telling schools about Catholic Social Teaching.

*Tablet* readers might know about it; university theology departments might be discussing it, but Catholic Social Teaching is little mentioned elsewhere. And it's not only schools that don't communicate it: the Labour MP Robert Ffello, a convert to Catholicism, told me recently that he's been bemused never to find it mentioned in parish newsletters. It's not even that well known among Catholic MPs.

But given that Catholic Social

Teaching owes its origins to the Gospels, even those who don't know it have an instinctive understanding of what its underlying theme of solidarity means. They know that loving one's neighbour has wider dimensions beyond one's immediate community, that Christians must serve those in need, and must value others. What it is not is a vague and shallow compassion, but a desire to serve the common good.

The Conservative MP Dominic Raab spoke movingly at the House of Lords event of the days he spent as a volunteer at Anchor House, seeing at first hand the work they do and hearing the experiences of the people who live there. All credit to Mr Raab, who says he learnt there that homelessness is a symptom of other problems, from debt and addiction, to mental-health problems.

That links homelessness directly to an individual's circumstances. But there are other problems too that cause homelessness, including government policies and the state of the economy. And homelessness looks set to get worse. Local authority figures show that more than 50,000 people affected by the so-called "bedroom tax" have fallen behind on their rent and are facing eviction. Tenants with a spare room are getting into dire financial straits because they are losing up to a quarter of their housing benefit.

And then there's the struggle to pay rent if wages are low: Anchor House's local borough is cutting costs by no longer paying the living wage.

Pope Francis has rightly urged Catholics that their first priority is the Gospel – that we have to avoid being just another charitable NGO. But Paul VI also pointed out that if you are to show solidarity, and want peace, then you work for justice. I would not want to denigrate NGOs – whether working and volunteering for them, or donating to them – but they only go so far in working for justice. Take food banks: they do admirable work and the number of people resorting to them for food has tripled since April. But the organisations are dealing with the symptoms, not the cause.

Meanwhile, political party membership seems to have been in terminal decline in Britain. Reversing that and getting involved in politics: now that would be a way of making a difference to the common good, and a dramatic expression of solidarity with the Bruks and Camerons of Anchor House.