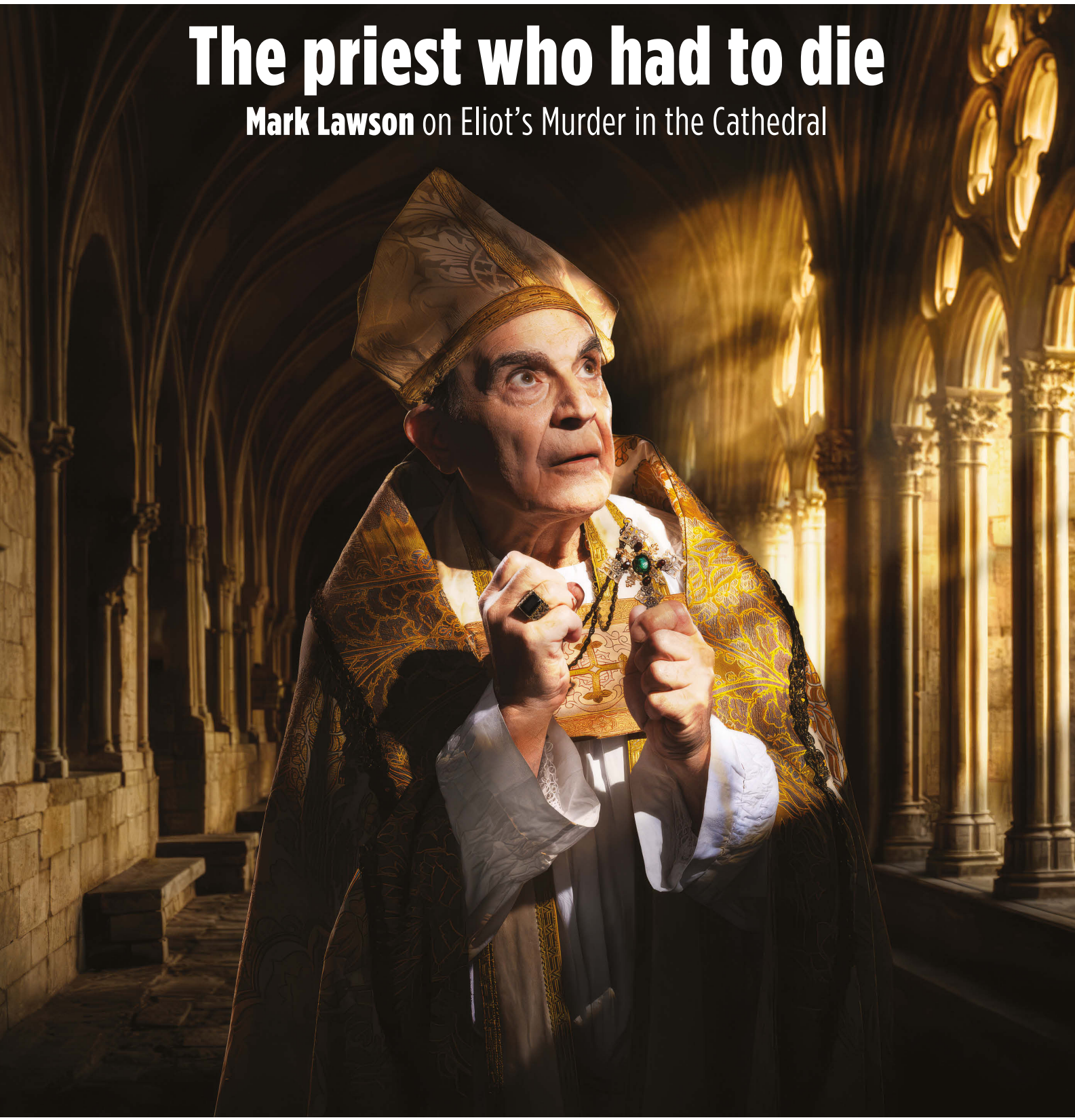
THE INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

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‘Each person matters’

The director of the homelessness charity founded by Cardinal Basil Hume tells **Peter Stanford** that the problems faced by young people and families are greater now than they were when it was founded forty years ago

WITH A NEW prime minister in post with deep Catholic roots and a continuing attachment (according to most reports) to Catholic Social Teaching, the Cardinal Hume Centre in the heart of Westminster surely has reasons to be optimistic as it celebrates its fortieth anniversary this year. Since being set up by Basil Hume, it has been working with homeless youngsters and families, and Andy Burnham, on day one in 10 Downing Street, made a public pledge to end rough sleeping.

“For anyone in the homelessness sector,” says George O’Neill, the centre’s clever, articulate, empathetic director, as he sits opposite me in his office with two pictures of the late, much-missed cardinal on the wall behind him, “when the new prime minister stands where he did, and says what he did, it’s our job to give him a standing ovation.”

One of Basil Hume’s many skills was his ability to move effortlessly but discreetly among the British establishment – there was something about him that made them trust him – and he was particularly good at getting important folk to visit his centre. Diana, Princess of Wales, for example, dropped by at his invitation and bestowed her secular blessing. So perhaps O’Neill should be nudging Hume’s successor-but-two, Archbishop Richard Moth, to send an invitation to 10 Downing Street for Burnham to pay a visit.

He smiles at the idea. Yet I feel a “but” coming. “I shouldn’t be quibbling about details,” he explains almost apologetically, “but the vibes at the moment for the families and young people we are working with point to a far bigger challenge.”

In other words, the tide of government engagement is flowing the other way. In the years since Covid, he reports, the big picture around the country has seen rates of homelessness increasing significantly. “The numbers of children experiencing homelessness in England is 170,000. That is record levels.”

THERE ARE, of course, many and complex causes, but for O’Neill one stands out. “The really sad thing when you look at the roots of homelessness is that it is found in childhood. If you are poor as a child, experience trauma as a child, you are far more likely to be homeless. If you are homeless early in life, you are far more likely to see that experience when you grow up.”

Given this perspective, it is fitting that among the Cardinal Hume Centre’s fortieth anniversary celebrations will be a live lecture on 19 November, in association with *The Tablet*, where the Children’s Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, a graduate of Heythrop College, will speak on the theme “Childhood begins at home”. She will argue with her usual passion, persuasion and clear-sightedness that every child has the right to reach their potential.



GEORGE O’NEILL

Those words carry with them a favourite phrase of Basil Hume’s, “Each person matters”, which is also the founding motto of the centre. “Too often,” reflects O’Neill, “that is being lost in public-sector delivery. But here at the centre our clients, as we call them, feel known.”

O’Neill grew up in south London and was raised Catholic by his father. “Then in my teens I was confirmed as an Anglican. There was a youth group I attended at the Anglican church that was important to me. And then, my wife is an Anglican vicar.”

> ‘4,000 children from Westminster alone are sleeping in temporary accommodation tonight’

The Cardinal Hume Centre is not a Catholic institution in the old-fashioned sense, he explains. “The majority of our clients are black, a large proportion of them migrants or refugees, and we don’t ask people what faith basis they have. But I suspect the biggest number are Muslim. It is possible to be both a charity rooted in your Catholic faith and values, and to be open. Our challenge is to learn how to do that well.”

After university at Strathclyde, O’Neill got involved with community work around homelessness with the St Mungo’s charity and the Homeless Alliance. That was followed by more than a decade as a senior civil servant, rising in the later years of the New Labour government to be the communications adviser to various Cabinet ministers.

After a spell in Oxford, his wife became the curate at a church in south London. They moved nearby and his life took a different path. “I ended up as the leader of a L’Arche community and that was a real life-changing moment. It really taught me something about the dignity of each individual, introduced me to Catholic Social Teaching, and taught me something about the importance of values in public-service delivery. Why is the voluntary sector so much better at doing some of this stuff than the public sector? And why is the faith sector, in particular, offering something distinct?”

And what conclusion did he reach? “It is simple and comes down to this belief that every person matters. Or as Cardinal Hume said often, each person matters, each life is precious.”

He spent four years at L’Arche. “At times it was super-stressful, but at other times a place of real joy. I’d never done anything like that before in my life. All the clichés about L’Arche – that you learn to live in the moment, to take joy in the small things – really are true.”

He took up his role at the Cardinal Hume Centre in 2018, two years before the revelation that L’Arche’s founder, Jean Vanier, had been a serial abuser of women. “I met Vanier on a number of occasions and I found him quite

inspirational. A friend who had been involved with L'Arche for much longer than me said: 'It is not our shame. We don't need to feel shameful because of what Vanier did'."

Did O'Neill ever meet Basil Hume before his death in June 1999? He shakes his head. "I've heard from lots of people he was always very interested in the plight of the people sleeping outside Westminster Cathedral. Bishop Nick Hudson [a trustee of the centre before moving to Plymouth] talks about how, when Cardinal Hume first showed him round the cathedral as a young priest, the tour began outside on the piazza and meeting the rough sleepers there."

IT IS AN ORDER of priorities that continues to inform the centre's work. As does Hume's own Benedictine spirituality. "Our objects don't say anything about only working in Westminster but I think we have always strived to be located and rooted in our community and that comes from our Benedictine roots." The number of people supported by the centre last year was 1,500, a rise of a third in the past few years. Around 40 homeless youngsters are given accommodation. Its family centre works with homeless families, put in usually unsuitable temporary accommodation by the local council. And then there are the homeless people of all ages who attend its "GP surgery".

There is clearly need on its doorstep. "Westminster is the seat of the royal family, contains the headquarters of many multination corporations and the homes of some of Britain's wealthiest people, but it is also a place of real inequality. There are 4,000 children from Westminster alone who are homeless and sleeping in temporary accommodation tonight, while 30 per cent of children in Westminster live in poverty. In some areas of the borough, life expectancy is lower on average by 15 years between its richest and poorest residents. A lot of that is hidden."

These are the same issues that so troubled Basil Hume that he hatched the plan for this centre back in the mid-1970s, assembling both the money and the personnel to convert what had once been an enclosed convent into the centre that bears his name. After four decades, the needs it is addressing are greater than ever. "The different factors impacting on homelessness have changed," O'Neill says, "and in nearly all cases got worse."

Running a cash-strapped care and support service (its budget is around £3.5 million) in the current social, political and economic climate is hard work, he confesses. "I am very worried right now about funding in the homelessness sector, about how we go on supporting people who are very easily overlooked, and working with families who have spent years in a constant battle for the care and support of their children."

The core ethos established in those early years, by the cardinal and those he handpicked from various religious orders to help him, is the guiding light in this gloom. "It is an ethos of welcome, welcoming people, recognising that their dignity is innate and not earned. It is demonstrated practically daily, in giving time to people, in listening to them, in working across the complexity of their need. When I joined, I thought, 'Oh that's quite a nice way to do things'. Now I am absolutely convinced it is central to our success and the difference we make."

A five-minute walk from the Palace of Westminster and the government offices along Whitehall, the centre is a powerful sign of contradiction to the broader political agenda that talks of those in need and on benefits as a burden, dragging the country downhill. "I understand," says O'Neill, "the financial constraints the government is facing, but must it always be the poor who bear the brunt of the need to make savings?"

It is not a party political argument he is making, where the debate seems to be between those who want to cut benefits and those who don't. "I don't believe that the right answer is always to increase benefits but I do believe we need to be fair with benefits and always couple them with support. Right now, that isn't happening." The result is a system that is wasting money and lives. As O'Neill points out, "our government, working through local authorities, is spending nearly £3 billion a year on housing homeless families, but getting no return for it. Most of the money is going into the pockets of private landlords for poor-quality accommodation."

It is why he is so keen, in this anniversary year, to hold up the example of the centre, and share the well-documented evidence that it provides to show there are other ways to tackle this national crisis of homelessness. "The people caught up in it aren't struggling because of a lack of strength and determination. They are struggling because the right support isn't available at the right time. It's too fragmented. What we are providing is wraparound support in an accessible way. We can prove the value of what we can do in short term and long term."

So, if Andy Burnham turns out to be a *Tablet* reader, what would O'Neill say to tempt him over to the Cardinal Hume Centre for a visit? "That we need to deal with the problem of homelessness as a whole. I believe that he knows that, but I would like to hear what his ambition means for the children caught in this crisis now. That really would be tackling the problem at its roots."

For other *Tablet* readers, keen to see for themselves, the same invitation is there. Come along on 19 November to hear Dame Rachel explore the often life-changing impact of homelessness on children and see how Cardinal Basil Hume's vision is daily being realised.

To purchase your ticket for this event go to: https://shop.thetablet.co.uk/collections/frontpage/products/childhood-begins-at-home



LONDON / La Sainte Union Catholic School fights to stay open

Faith schools' future at risk

BESS TWISTON DAVIES

THE CATHOLIC alma mater of the actress Dame Imelda Staunton could face closure from Camden Council.

La Sainte Union Catholic School (LSU) is one of four faith schools whose future is at risk in north London.

Alongside St Patrick's Catholic primary school, Kentish Town, St Joseph's Catholic primary school, Holborn and St Alban's Church of England primary school, Holborn, LSU is the subject of a public consultation by the council, which begins on Monday, 2 November.

All four schools face financial pressures amid falling pupil numbers. "As school funding is linked to pupil numbers, empty places can put significant pressure on budgets," said Camden Council.

The Diocese of Westminster has opposed the six-week consultation which may lead to school closures: "We recognise the challenge presented by surplus school places. However, all four schools now being considered for possible closure are faith schools and follow the closure of three other faith schools in Camden. Taken together, this represents a significant erosion of faith-based education in the borough," it said.

ALAMY, ROBERTO HERRETT



La Sainte Union school

Sophie Fegan, headteacher of La Sainte Union told *The Tablet*: "LSU provides a unique offer within Camden as the borough's only Catholic girls' secondary school ... We bring together a strong Catholic identity with a genuinely inclusive community." She urged parents, pupils, staff, governors and alumni to take part in the consultation. "LSU is more than a school; it is a community institution with a proud history and an important future."

By Tuesday this week, more than 3,700 people had signed a petition to save the school, founded by the Sisters of La Sainte Union in 1861 and rated "good" by Ofsted. It has a reputation for empowering women: alumni include the space scientist Dame Maggie Aderin.

Leo XIV named St George's Papal Confrater

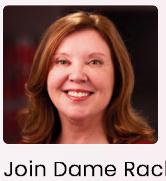
POPE LEO XIV has been named Papal Confrater of St George's Chapel, Windsor, following King Charles III's acceptance of the title of Royal Confrater of the Papal Basilica of St Paul's Outside the Walls in Rome during his State Visit to the Holy See in October last year, *writes Ruth Gledhill*.

With the approval of King Charles, the Dean and Canons of Windsor announced that Pope Leo XIV has become Papal Confrater of the Chapel.

According to the announcement, the appointment represents "a visible sign of spiritual fellowship, ecumenical friendship and Christian fraternity". Vatican News said it recognised the centuries-old relationship between the College and Chapel of St George and the Holy See.

Tablet Live Lecture in partnership with the Cardinal Hume Centre

Childhood begins at home





Join Dame Rachel de Souza – Children's Commissioner for England, at the Cardinal Hume Centre for a thought-provoking 40-minute lecture exploring the often life-changing impact of homelessness on children.

Dame Rachel will reflect on the challenges too many children and their families face today, the importance of community support, and the practical steps needed to help every child reach their potential.

The lecture will be followed by a 20-minute conversation between Dame Rachel and journalist Peter Stanford, offering an opportunity to explore these themes further.

Join us for Mass before the event and a drinks reception afterwards.

Thursday 19 November 2026

Mass: 6.30pm at Sacred Heart Church, Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2EF
Lecture: 7.00 – 8.00pm at the Cardinal Hume Centre, Medway Street entrance, London SW1P

For tickets, visit: www.thetablet.co.uk/events

We help young people, children and families facing homelessness and poverty in Westminster to build lasting stability

