*Reflection for CUAC Board of Trustees*

*10th June 2020*

In the past few months Jill and I have been trying to get organised to emigrate to Australia—which, if all goes to plan, will be in a couple of months’ time. It is, as our President, Bob Derrenbacker, knows from recent experience, an enormous undertaking, in many ways.

Moving house is familiar to the majority of the population these days, and it a massive undertaking. So much so, that it often appears near the top of those opinion polls, continually reported in the media, of things that people most dread. The CEO of the charity, Anxiety UK, recently described moving house as “one of life's most stressful experiences”.

He said that this anxiety arises primarily from having to confront change, but this does not apply in our case. Yes, we are sad to be leaving the familiar places, and particularly the people, especially the church congregations, who have been the constant companions of our lives for many years. But Jill and I are in many ways returning to familiar territory, where we will be surrounded by our families and many other friends. For us, the tremendous challenge is not so much the change as the logistics of moving. These logistics, the imperative of dealing with *things*, have brought us face to face with a powerful spiritual conundrum.

It is a conundrum about our attitude as Christians towards physical possessions. As a student, I had a holiday job helping a doctor to move house. He said to me, “Has it ever occurred to you, Mark, that life consists of nothing but moving things from one place to another?” In our case, it is not only moving things that is complicated, but choosing *which things* to move. Now, Jill and I are not among this world’s collectors or magpies; we are not, I think, particularly possessive; yet we are confronted by a vast array of things, the majority of which we have to get rid of.

It is demanding enough moving from one house to another, but since I took up the position of Head of Whitelands, we have lived in two houses: the college house that goes with the job, and our country house which has been our regular refuge from the overwhelming complexity of city living. We therefore have two households’ worth of things—two sets of furniture, utensils, pictures, and appliances; two collections of books; two sets of wardrobes full of clothes; plus two lots of those innumerable little objects that all of us seem to accumulate in the normal course of life. We are constantly having to make decisions about what to keep, and what to dispose of, in preparation for the 10,000-mile shift.

It has made us think deeply about our relationship with things. We are deeply grateful to God that we have never had to struggle to obtain even the most basic needs of life—a home, a bed, enough clothes and food to get by. On the contrary: as we are realising only too clearly, we have far, far more than the necessities for living, and we have to decide about those. We have one or two objects that are financially valuable, and a few that have special associations with loved ones. These we will keep, but probably 99% of our possessions are not like this. I estimate that around two-thirds of our possessions, in both houses, we are happy either to retain as useful in our new home, or to let them go.

I have been asking myself: is it wrong to acquire so many incidentals? Should I imitate St Francis and possess literally nothing except the clothes I stand up in? Or should I simply view the things I have as ultimately unimportant, neither good nor bad, to be enjoyed for a while and gladly surrendered when the time comes?

I recently came across a wonderful answer to these questions by a little book, *The Divine Pity*, by Gerald Vann, who was a Roman Catholic priest and highly-respected educator in England in the 1950s. Vann says that we must learn more and more to love all things for themselves, including inanimate things great and small, with a passion, because they are ultimately the work of God. They are vital, not in themselves, but as pointers beyond themselves. The more profoundly we love them as emanations of the divine, the more we will come to praise God for them. And paradoxically, Vann says, as we do so we become more detached from them in themselves, and more intimately drawn to the Creator of all things.

So, amidst all the complexities of moving, I have begun to grapple with a profound truth. Contrary to what the charity CEO said, moving house has become for me “one of life's most spiritual experiences”.