

'JUSTICE IN THE WORLD' –THE DOCUMENT OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS IN 1971.

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I feel grateful and proud to belong to a Church which, just forty years ago, produced the inspiring and courageous document called 'Justice in the World' issued by the 1971 Synod of Bishops. This document was—and still is—one of the most important documents that has ever been issued by leaders in the Church. Although it is now forty years since it was issued, it inspires and challenges us today just as much—and perhaps even more—as it did when it was first issued. I must add that I feel ashamed and guilty that we in the Church have not responded adequately to its challenge. And I feel angry that, over the past forty years, some of the key recommendations of the document has not been implemented, and that the people who write Vatican documents, speeches and books and those who edit the Vatican website, seem to have done their best to ignore the document and to ensure that it is forgotten.

There are three parts in this talk. In the first part I shall pick out key elements in the *content* of the document. In the second part I shall look at the *process* which was used to produce the document. In the third part I shall suggest ways in which both the process and the content of the document are extremely relevant *for the Church today*.

PART ONE: KEY POINTS IN THE DOCUMENT

'Justice in the World' is both radical and controversial. Let us look first at the two most controversial passages:

'CONSTITUTIVE'

The first of the controversial passages is the statement that action on behalf of justice is 'a constitutive dimension' of the preaching of the Gospel. The word 'constitutive' means 'essential'. So the document is saying that if the Church in any given situation is not working to promote justice, then it is failing to be what Jesus

calls it to be. The bishops at the Synod had no hesitation in accepting this formulation. However, shortly after the Synod there was a concerted campaign by key Vatican figures to modify the wording of the document by replacing the word 'constitutive' with the word 'integral'. Those who favoured this view were playing down the central role which the official Church should give to action for justice; they held that the Church could still be itself if in some situations its leaders felt it was inappropriate to take a strong stand on justice issues.

This argument about the use of words was the focus for a more fundamental disagreement about how the Church ought to respond when faced with major injustice in society. Should it take an overtly political stand like some of the more 'prophetic' leaders of the Latin American Church? Should Church leaders distance the Church from unjust regimes and encourage active resistance by those who are oppressed? Should Church workers even help to organize such resistance? In certain influential Church circles there was real distress about the new trends that were emerging, especially in Latin America. Those who resisted the use of the word 'constitutive' generally wanted to dissociate the Church from liberation struggles of a political kind.

Behind this controversy lie two different spiritualities. On the one hand there are those who put the main emphasis on what they see as the 'spiritual' message of Jesus and the Church and who tend to play down the Church's commitment to transformation of the world. They fear that Christians who take this phrase 'constitutive dimension' as their slogan are guilty of what they call 'horizontalism', that is, of emptying the Christian faith of its deepest transcendent meaning and reducing it to a religious legitimation for revolutionary activity. They want to dissociate the Church from liberation struggles of a political kind.

On the other hand there are those who reject this 'dualistic' approach and insist that an essential aspect of living out our faith is to work to overcome injustice and to create a world of justice, peace, reconciliation, and respect for the environment. Following the line adopted by the 1971 synod they accept a scriptural

theology which links sees God as the liberator of the oppressed and Christ as one who proclaims the intervention of God's justice on behalf of the needy (JW 30–1). Several years after the Synod the new pope, John Paul II, came down quite firmly on the side of this latter spirituality by saying in Brazil that action on behalf of justice is an 'essential' aspect of evangelization and by the quite radical stand he took in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), where he said: that 'the human person is the primary and fundamental way for the Church'.

Many of those who were worried about liberation theology and the politicization of the Church were people who also wished to minimize the importance of synods of bishops. They emphasized the fact that a synod has a merely consultative role. Its function is to advise the pope; and the pope remains free to accept or reject what is said by a synod. The campaign of these people to replace the word 'constitutive' with the word 'integral' brought out the point that the synod document was not fully authoritative or binding but could be superseded by a statement of the pope. So the dispute about this one word became a focus and symbol for different views about the exercise of authority in the Church—about the extent to which the power of the Roman curia should be limited by a synod of bishops. This in turn related to a dispute about how much autonomy should be left to Church authorities in different regions of the world and whether the Roman curia could exercise tight control over bishops and all aspects of Church life.

JUSTICE IN THE CHURCH

The second controversial passage in the document is the strikingly new and inspiring passage where it says:

While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the Church herself (JW 40).

The document goes on to mention various ways in which the rights of people within the Church have to be respected. It recommends that lay people should be given more responsibility in dealing with church property. Then it says: 'We ... urge that women should have their proper share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the Church.' JW 42. Furthermore it adds:

We propose that this matter be subjected to a serious study employing adequate means: for instance, a mixed commission of men and women, religious and lay people, of differing situations and competence. (JW 43)

The document goes on to recognize 'everyone's right to suitable freedom of expression and thought' including 'the right to be heard in a spirit of dialogue which preserves a legitimate diversity within the Church' (JW 44). Furthermore, it insists that: 'The form of judicial procedure should give the accused the right to know his accusers and also the right to a proper defense'—and that the procedures should be speedy (JW 45). In putting forward these principles or guidelines the document was issuing a strong challenge to the prevailing practice and views in the Vatican.

As far as I know, this document of forty years ago is the only major statement issued from Rome which addresses seriously the issue of justice in the Church itself. It is quite shocking that it has not been acted on effectively and particularly that the proposal to set up a mixed commission to examine the role of women has never, to my knowledge, been acted on by the Vatican and has been left hanging in the air.

STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE AND MISDEVELOPMENT

I now move on to consider parts of the document which are quite radical even though they did not arouse the same degree of controversy within the Vatican. One of these is the strong emphasis on structural injustice. This is described in very vivid terms as 'a network of domination, oppression, and abuses' (JW 3), and 'international systems of domination' (JW 13). The document does not oppose personal conversion to structural reform, but speaks of 'the objective obstacles which social structures place in the way of conversion of hearts' (JW 16).

It goes on to warn about the dangers of 'a new form of colonialism in which the developing nations will be the victims of the interplay of international economic forces' (JW 16).

In the same sentence the synod document insists that this danger can be avoided only by 'liberation'. So the word 'liberation' is used in a positive sense, in a way that is an advance on the usage of previous Vatican documents. The synod phrase 'liberation through development' represents an attempt to take account of those in Latin America who saw the word 'development' as implying exploitation and those in other areas who still had a more positive view of development. The document suggests that things have gone wrong not so much in spite of 'development' but more *because* of it. So-called development has failed to meet the needs of the poor and has actually *increased* the numbers of the poor, by creating a whole category of marginal people.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

One of the most remarkable and admirable features of the synod document is the emphasis it puts on the environmental issue—long before this had become a major theme for many governments. There is an almost lyrical quality to a phrase used in an early paragraph—'the small delicate biosphere of the whole complex of all life on earth' (JW 8). The document is quite radical in pointing out that that it is simply not possible for all parts of the world to have the kind of 'development' that has occurred in the wealthy countries:

... such is the demand for resources and energy by the richer nations, ... and such are the effects of dumping by them in the atmosphere and the sea, that irreparable damage would be done to the essential elements of life on earth, such as air and water, if their high rates of consumption and pollution, which are constantly on the increase, were extended to the whole of humankind (JW 11).

The authors of the document insist that 'Those who are already rich are bound to accept a less material way of life, with less waste, in order to avoid the

destruction of the heritage which they are obliged by absolute justice to share with all other members of the human race.’ (JW 70)

No wonder, then that the document calls for ‘a certain sparingness’ by Church people in the use of temporal possessions (JW 47) and for an ‘examination of conscience’ in regard to ‘life style’ (JW 48). It also says that the lifestyle of bishops and ministers of the Church must be looked at, noting the danger that their possessions and privileges may hinder the Church in its proclamation of, and witness to, the Gospel. Frugality is important both in order to be in solidarity with the poor, and also for ecological reasons. The document was ahead of its time in seeing the inseparable link between ‘an option for the poor’ and ‘an option for the earth’.

Undoubtedly this keen awareness of ‘the material limits of the biosphere’ (JW 12), and the close link between ecology and justice, owed much to the influence of Barbara Ward. She gave an address to the synod, being the first woman to do so. Five years earlier, she had published a book entitled *Spaceship Earth* and she was a pioneer of the concept of sustainable development.

PARTICIPATION: A CORE ISSUE

According to ‘Justice in the World’ there is one central issue which lies at the heart of the structural injustices of today’s world: lack of participation by people in determining their own destiny. There is a ‘concentration of wealth, power and decision-making in the hands of a small public or private group’ (JW 9). The poor are left in a marginal position, ‘voiceless victims of injustice’ (JW 20). So the document calls on ‘the developing peoples’ to take their future ‘into their own hands’ (JW 17) and wants Church leaders to make a definite option in favour of empowering the powerless, the oppressed, the victims of structural injustice.

EDUCATING TO JUSTICE

This option for the poor is to take place through a radical type of ‘education for justice’ which involves ‘a renewal of the heart’. Its purpose is ‘to awaken consciences’ leading to the beginning of ‘a transformation of the world’ (JW 51),

where people will 'be no longer the object of manipulation by communication media or political forces' (JW 52). It is 'a continuing education' which 'concerns every person and every age'; and 'it comes through action, participation and vital contact with the reality of injustice' (JW 53).

PART TWO: THE PROCESS USED

'Justice in the World' is important not only because of its *content* but also because of the *process* that led to its composition. The synods had been seen as a way of putting this into practice one of the most important advances made by the Vatican Council of the 1960s, namely, the idea of 'collegiality', that is, that authority and leadership in the Church is not vested in the pope alone but is a joint responsibility of the pope and the bishops.

Possibly the most important thing about this document is that it was issued by the gathering of the bishops themselves. This was in sharp contrast to what happened at all the later synods where the bishops left it to the pope to issue a document some time later based on whatever parts of these deliberations were acceptable to the Vatican. If this had happened in the case of the Synod of 1971, the final document would probably not have included its more radical and controversial aspects; they would have been toned down or edited out entirely.

A very significant point is that right through the process of the writing of the document there was very close collaboration of bishops, theologians and expert lay consultants. A first draft of the document was prepared beforehand by the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace. This was written largely by three key members of religious orders—the American Jesuit economist and activist Philip Land and the theologians Vincent Cosmao, a French Dominican, and Juan Alfaro, a Spanish Jesuit. Also a major influence in the drafting of the document and during the synod itself was the English economist and ecologist Barbara Ward-Jackson who was a pioneer of the notion of sustainable development and had written a book called *Spaceship Earth*.

The influence of these three people was enormous. Cosmao was the one who drafted the passage saying that action on behalf of justice is a constitutive dimension of preaching the Gospel. Barbara Ward not only drafted background material but also gave an address to the bishops which convinced them of the linkage between justice and ecology. Philip Land wrote much of the document and made a key intervention at a crucial stage of the drafting. When the draft of the statement was being discussed at a preparatory meeting Cardinal Pericle Felici said: 'The Church does not have any injustices.' Coming from a Cardinal who had been a very influential participant in Vatican II and a major figure in the revision of the Code of Canon Law, this pronouncement carried great weight. Land describes the silence where nobody dared to disagree with the Cardinal. Eventually Land himself summoned up his courage and said: 'Your Eminence, I really believe if we cannot say that the Church has injustices, we should not have a document.' This broke the paralysis and led to discussion after which all the members of the Council except Cardinal Felici voted in favor of the paragraph.

PART THREE: RELEVANCE FOR TODAY

The key points which I have mentioned in the document are all even more relevant and urgent today than they were forty years ago:

- The recent financial and economic crisis has shown very clearly the extent to which our world is damaged and corrupted by a structural injustice which forces the poor to pay for the flagrant irresponsibility and speculation of the rich and powerful.
- Furthermore, the environmental issue is now far more urgent and threatening than it was in 1971. We face disasters on an unprecedented scale; the survival of billions of people and of human life as we know it is now at risk. Whole countries in the Pacific and huge areas of large countries like Bangladesh are being flooded as a result of global warming. Poor and rich alike are being threatened by hurricanes and typhoons. Poor people in developing countries are being deprived of their livelihood by over-fishing and by gross ecological damage.

—So the linkage between an option for the poor and an option for the earth is now far more obvious than it was forty years ago. The need for a sustainable and just model of development is more urgent than ever before.

Faced with this crisis it is essential that Church people devote themselves to the kind of education for justice proposed by the 1971 document. It is an education that will empower people to understand and commit themselves to authentic development and to take it into their own hands. The Church must play a part in empowering poorer countries and marginalized groups of people to be able to participate effectively and on an equal basis with those who are at present in a dominant position. There is shrewd wisdom in the maxim: 'If you are not at the table, you are on the menu.'

How well are our Church leaders responding to this challenge? The most one can say is that the response is patchy and inadequate. Faced with the reality of the rapid expanse in many parts of world of escapist types of Pentecostalism and 'prosperity Christianity', many Catholics are promoting a version of what they call 'evangelization'. This inadequate evangelization emphasises only the more personal aspect of Christianity. It is a devotional type of spirituality which neglects or plays down the importance of commitment to the world—especially the issues of justice and ecology.

As an alternative to this devotionalism, it is essential that we find ways to inspire our people—especially the younger generation—with an authentic spirituality which is true to the Gospel of the Jesus who came to bring Good news to the poor and to bring liberty to captives. It is very important that we play our part in ensuring that the new Pontifical Council for Evangelization interprets its title and work in a way that is in line with the insights and commitments of the synod document.

In seeking to foster a more authentic spirituality we are being seriously hindered by a highly influential group of our Church leaders, in the Vatican and

elsewhere. These are prelates who have committed themselves to a project of restorationism. Their main concern seems to have three elements: first, the reintroduction of the Tridentine Rite and of elaborate, expensive and frilly vestments; second, the imposition on unwilling lay-people, priests, and bishops of a stilted literal English rendering of the Latin text of the liturgy—one which is sometimes almost incomprehensible and quite inaccurate; third, imposing a rigid uniformity through authoritarianism centred on Rome. Unfortunately, by devoting their time and energy to this project they are also wasting *our* time and energy in trying to resist it!

At present, the scandal of sexual and institutional abuse is coming to the fore in more and more countries. So it is particularly important now that Church leaders should acknowledge the ways in which the Church structures and practices are quite inadequate and frequently unjust. Sadly, their response and their apologies seem, for the most part, to be minimalist, legalistic, ungenerous and uninspiring. I see our Church losing its moral authority day by day through its failure to bring about the changes suggested by the 1971 document of the synod.

I know there are thousands or millions of Christians who long to be more fully involved in the organizational side of the Church and its pastoral ministry and who feel shut out from this involvement. I am distressed that the efforts of Church authorities to empower the laity are frequently patchy and half-hearted.

I feel sad that the hierarchical Church has failed to tap the full potential of members of religious congregations in general and especially of congregations of religious women. What has happened to the kind of fruitful collaboration of members of religious orders with bishops and Vatican officials which was so important in the genesis of the synod document of 1971?

I feel angry that the hierarchical and clerical part of the Church has made little or no attempt to learn from the experience of the religious congregations in radically transforming the way they exercise authority. I am thinking of team

leadership and of participatory assemblies where all voices are heard where sophisticated discernment processes are used to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit, and where decisions are taken and implemented collaboratively.

I long for the kind of process which led to the production of the document 'Justice in the World'—a process marked by trust, challenge, and close cooperation between bishops, priests, members of religious communities and highly qualified lay people such as Barbara Ward-Jackson.

I am distressed that there has been a breakdown of trust between Church authorities and theologians. I am angry about what I see as the unjust treatment of people like the Sri Lankan Oblate Tissa Balasuriya, the Irish Marist Sean Fagan, and the American Sister Elizabeth Johnson—treatment which took no account of the insistence by the 1971 Synod of Bishops that the rights of any accused person be fully respected.

I continue to be shocked and angry that the ministerial gifts of women are not being adequately recognized and utilized in our Church and that a male chauvinist and clericalist mentality is still so widespread. To illustrate it I borrow a few lines from a poem that was on *Network*:

The Cardinal processed in
bishops flanked on left and right
and the clergy came in sight ...
As the males in awesome splendour
down the aisle careened,
the women stared in silence
at the floor which they had cleaned.

HOPE

After all this you may well ask whether I still hope for change. Yes, I do—because hope is not just human optimism; it is a precious and undeserved gift of the Holy Spirit.

—Inspired by how Pope John opened the windows of the Vatican I hope and trust that a similar breath of the Holy Spirit's fresh air will blow through our Church very soon.

—I am heartened and encouraged by the way so many members of religious communities have looked seriously at their lifestyles and have begun to live in solidarity with the poor and to respect the environment in regard to food, clothes, travel and keeping warm or cool.

—I am enthused by the memory of how, just forty years ago, the Jesuit Phil Land took his courage in his hands to challenge the Cardinal and so broke the silence and paralysis. So I glory in the thought of what the effect will be when everybody here, and the leaders and members of their congregations, and all their lay associates, colleagues and friends, having prayed and discerned, all pluck up their courage and adapt the words of Oliver Cromwell by saying to our church leaders:

'You have sat here long enough.

In the name of God go and implement the document "Justice in World":

—Set up that mixed commission to explore the role of women in Church and society.

—Welcome women into leadership roles.

—Allow members of religious congregations and lay people a real share in decision-making in the Church, learning from them how to work in teams and to exercise participatory, collaborative leadership.

—Learn from religious congregations the value of moving out of formal leadership and returning to regular pastoral work or some other ministry after a maximum of eight or ten years.

—Respect the role and rights of theologians or Church activists who are accused of heresy or disloyalty.

—Allow an authentic diversity to flourish in our Church.

—Inspire us to adopt a simple ecological way of living by taking the lead in doing so yourselves.

- Allow young people to take a lead in implementing the programme for 2012 World Peace Day, which is: "Educating Young People in Justice and Peace"
- Above all, let go of your fears and your tight control and put your trust in the Christian people and the Holy Spirit.