

Justice in the World

Have we forgotten it?

BY PETER HENRIOT

PETER HENRIOT, S. J., served for 21 years as the director of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection in Lusaka, Zambia. He is currently engaged in Jesuit educational work in Malawi.

A

A seminarian I taught recently asked me to name the most influential document on church social teaching since the Second Vatican Council. He was surprised by my vigorous response: “Justice in the World,” the statement from the world Synod of Bishops of 1971. Surprised, I suppose, because if it were so influential one would expect to hear more about it in this the 40th anniversary year of its publication. But there seems to be no official Vatican celebration; the document is not on the Vatican Web site, nor is it included in the Vatican’s monumental *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

“Justice in the World” appeared at a critical moment in church and global history. Ripples and rapids of changes in the Catholic Church, stirred up by the winds blowing through the open windows of Vatican II, meant that the church was called to be ready for engagement with the political events of the day. The liberation theology of Latin America was one among many influences that shaped this engagement. The ethics of the social revolutions of the 1960s, the heightened tensions of the cold war, the increasing focus on the socioeconomic challenges of the so-called “third world” and the expansion of the media were other global factors that a church in the modern world could hardly ignore.

In the 2010s, we Catholics find ourselves in a similar church and global environment. Living with the recent experience of two powerful popes, grappling with scandals that raise questions about ecclesial integrity and accountability and facing declines in lay membership and in priestly and religious vocations, the synod called on the church to examine its message and its structures. The challenges of the global economic crisis, unpredictability of terrorism,

mounting environmental problems and emergence of new power centers in the developing world call out for effective responses from the church. If “Justice in the World” is more relevant today than when it was first published, why has a pall of official forgetfulness fallen over the anniversary? I suggest two reasons: its source and its message.

It is appropriate to ask whether the evident sidelining of the statement in Vatican circles has as one of its causes the downgraded role of the synod itself in church governance. The synod of bishops, established by Paul VI after Vatican II, was designed to implement the collegial character of the episcopacy. But as greater emphasis has been put on the papacy and centralized Vatican institutions, collegiality has been a subject of heated difference within the church.

One consequence has been that periodic assemblies of the Synod of Bishops—called by the pope to discuss both topical and regional issues—have not been asked to produce magisterial statements. Their messages have been secondary to the post-synodal apostolic exhortation made by the pope. Of the 23 synods held since 1967, only the third gathering, the October 1971 synod, issued on its own a major teaching document, “Justice in the World.” Synods, even when meeting with the pope, have been denied any teaching authority of their own.

Too Controversial?

There may be other reasons “Justice in the World” has not been accorded prominence in this anniversary year. Its principal message, some of its language and various recommendations are controversial, giving rise to disputes in both ecclesial and political circles.

The document’s message can be summed up in one well-known sentence: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation” (No. 6). The promotion of justice is a necessary feature in the task of evangelization. There simply is no sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ if the commitment to justice is downplayed or eliminated.

Use of the word “constitutive” has been a bone of contention for many who have found JW too controversial. In two significant articles in *Theological Studies* (June 1983 and June 2007), theologian Charles Murphy explored in depth the origin of this phrase in the text and noted various interpretations given to it in subsequent discussions. Rather than understanding the word to mean “necessary” or “essential,” it has been interpreted by some to mean only “integral” (simply one part among many in the evangelical message) or merely “helpful” (assisting the work of spreading the Gospel). But when “constitutive” is taken to mean an

absolute requirement, then work for justice cannot be ignored in any ecclesial project. This has been the widely accepted understanding in the justice and peace work I have seen in the United States and in Africa. Is it fair to say that the official oblivion into which JW has fallen is due to the discomfort this understanding caused more conservative elements in the church?

Paul VI in 1975 “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*” (the apostolic exhortation following the 1974 Synod of Bishops) spoke of an evangelization that includes messages “about life in society, about international life, peace, justice and development—a message especially energetic today about liberation” (No. 29). But the discussion guidelines (*Lineamenta*) for the 2012 Synod of Bishops, “*The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*,” mentions the promotion of justice only in passing.

JW offers a brief but powerful scriptural analysis emphasizing God as the liberator of the oppressed in the Old Testament and Jesus as preacher of justice for the poor in New Testament (Nos. 30-33). But it is especially in describing the scriptural link of justice and love that the document makes one of its strongest points: “Christian love of neighbor and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one’s neighbor” (No. 34). If I say I love my neighbor, then I want my neighbor’s dignity respected, her rights recognized, his development promoted and effective community solidarity effected. These demands of love are essential elements of social justice enforced in the political context of today’s world.

Though the influence of JW on subsequent teaching is not always explicit, Pope Paul VI was especially strong about the unity of justice and love. He proposed building “a civilization of love,” a program that echoes in subsequent papal teaching. Pope Benedict XVI has written two encyclicals on love, dedicated “*Love in Truth*” (“*Caritas in Veritate*”) to the memory of Pope Paul and elaborated the idea of political charity, a concept Paul would have approved.

Inductive Method

In its discussion of pertinent issues of the day, JW uses a method with wide currency (although not always accepted in some ecclesial circles), the well-known triad of “See–Judge–Act.” This method, articulated clearly in Blessed John XXIII’s 1961 encyclical, “*Mater et Magistra*” (No. 236), calls for observing reality, analyzing and evaluating it in light of Catholic social teaching and responding to it with effective action. Its wide use in Latin American pastoral work was sidelined by the 1992 CELAM meeting in Santo Domingo but reinstated in the 2007 meeting in Aparecida, Brazil.

This method emphasizes an inductive, experiential

approach to designing responses to social challenges rather than a deductive, top-down approach that relies on already stated positions in theories or instructions from hierarchical sources. Thus JW emphasizes the need to listen to “the cry of those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures,” since the hopes moving in the world today “are not foreign to the dynamism of the Gospel...” (No. 5).

In its analysis and recommendations JW could take up, with a certain freshness and urgency, specific issues like world hunger, fair trade, migrants and refugees, abortion, human rights, religious liberty, environmental concerns, the role of media and promotion of the United Nations. Mention of these issues as discussed in this 40-year old document demonstrates to me the relevance of JW to the contemporary struggle for justice in the world.

The “See-Judge-Act” method, or reading the Signs of the Times as it was more often called, became widespread in the social-pastoral work of many bishops’ conferences and national and diocesan justice commissions. Religious communities adopted it especially in their work with the poor. In the U.S, it lay behind the 1976 U.S. bishops’ convocation A Call to Action. Ultimately it resulted in the two influential pastoral of the 1980s on peace and economic justice.

The method also contributed to JW’s emphasis on the relationship of social structures and the promotion of justice. While this element might earlier have been present in Catholic social teaching, it is made explicit in JW. In speaking of a growing demand for the right to development, it cautions: “This desire however will not satisfy the expectations of our time if it ignores the objective obstacles which social structures place in the way of conversion of hearts, or even of the realization of the ideal of charity” (No. 16).

This appreciation of social structures accounts for the document’s teaching about social sin and its recognition that “education demands a renewal of heart, a renewal based on the recognition of sin in its individual and social manifestations” (No.51). Indeed, pastoral attention to social sin is called for in the sacrament of penance (No. 58).

Eventually Blessed Pope John Paul II, generally regarded as an opponent of liberation theology, adopted the notion of structural sin, like that of liberation, into his own teaching (“On Social Concern”). Pope Benedict XVI made the analysis of sinful structures his own in “Love in Truth.”

Justice in the Church

The 1971 Synod statement broke new and important ground—however controversial—in its call for an internal examination of conscience: “While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, it 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 itself" (No.40).

This was explicitly developed with mention of respect and promotion of rights within the church, the need for administration of temporal goods in a way that does not diminish evangelical credibility, and the call for a "sparingness" in lifestyle among all Christians, including bishops, priests and religious.

Regarding rights within the church, for example, JW spoke of the wages of church workers and the roles of laity in administrative positions. The synod stated: "We also urge that women should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the Church" (No. 42). To assure action on these calls, a special commission was proposed for serious study.

One need only think of the scandals that have rocked the church in recent years to see how relevant is this call for an honest examination of conscience. While major strides still need to be taken, especially with regard to episcopal accountability for clerical sex abuse, some model bishops have performed public and private acts of repentance and reconciliation with victims. Blessed John Paul, though he seems to some to have been blind to the crisis, made repentance for the church's offences a distinctive personal ministry. He made tens of apologies to offended groups, put corporate self-examination and repentance on the agenda of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, and himself led the Service of Pardon that opened that year.

Some celebration of the 40th anniversary of JW is in order. Good theology, keen social analysis and relevant practical recommendations make it one of the most influential documents of the Catholic social tradition. It is taught in many formal and informal courses around the world. And it has influenced the identification of the contemporary mission of Jesuits and other religious as "the service of faith and the promotion of justice." The Justice and Peace and Integrity of Creation Commission of the Rome-based Major Superiors of Religious is planning a November seminar to explore the statement's implications for religious life. Now more than ever the world needs the good news in which justice is a constitutive dimension.

PQ: Of the 23 synods held since 1967, only the third gathering, the October 1971 synod, issued on its own a major teaching document, "Justice in the World."

The 1971 Synod statement broke new and important ground—however controversial—in its call for an internal examination of conscience.

"Christian love of neighbor and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbor" (JW, No. 34).