

WORKSHOP: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE WORLD CHURCH

This workshop was strongly influenced by the fact that it followed immediately after the plenary session which featured the address by Professor Lisa Cahill on "Moral Theology and the World Church". Professor Cahill's stimulating remarks about the need to be respectful of the various cultures' perspectives on moral issues raised many questions during both the presenter's opening remarks and the lively discussion that followed.

The presenter offered the following *thesis* to begin the discussion: "The more that the Church becomes a world Church, the more it must become a socially just Church and a Church committed to promote social justice." Theology and theologians have a key role to play in this transformation. Three challenges were offered to provide a framework to explore this thesis:

1. *Context*: the challenge to the world Church of the global social justice agenda.
2. *Content*: the challenge to theology of grappling with social justice within the world Church.
3. *Consequences*: the challenge to theologians to engage in moving the world Church to a social justice response.

Challenge to World Church

The vision of a Church committed to social justice is found in the opening lines of Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes*: "The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." The call to work for justice precisely as a task of the Church's mission of evangelization was stated in the 1971 Synod of Bishops and reiterated in the 1975 letter of Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*. Wherever the Church brings the good news, it must bring the work of justice.

But is this vision threatened, brought into question, by the concept of the "world Church"? This is a Church which will be much more listening, interchanging, adapting, as it meets other cultures. Will this mute its message of justice?

It is true that the Church of the past has not always been noted for emphasizing the justice dimension in all its life and ministries, word and work. The Church of today, since the Council and the emphases of recent Popes, takes justice as "constitutive" of its being. But will the Church of

the future? Or will the Church's transformation into a world Church mean a lessening of the work for justice, which, after all, may be simply a "western" concept?

This question is both fascinating and disturbing. It is fascinating, because it brings the issue of "inculturation" into contact with the issue of justice, but in a new way. It is disturbing, because the context of the world is today so very frightening. To ponder a lessening of commitment to changing the world toward justice is to ponder something profoundly upsetting.

The justice agenda cries out for response today. This city of Washington, where the CTSA is convening, is a good example of the "two cities" which co-exist side-by-side in our world, the city of those who enjoy the good things of this world and the city of those who are deprived of the means to meet their basic needs. Washington has its government offices, monuments, and parks; but it also has the highest rate of infant mortality in the country (higher than in many Third World countries), the highest rate of functional illiteracy of high school graduates, and the highest rate of minority youth unemployment. And around the world, the gap between rich and poor grows, hunger and unemployment plague billions, women and refugees are oppressed in subhuman fashion.

So the challenge to the world Church is: how to be Church in the midst of a world where "griefs and anxieties" frequently outweigh "joys and hopes." In becoming a world Church, what happens to the social justice agenda? What tensions arise in our sensitivity to other cultures? What is the impact on the social justice commitment? And is this theme a *distraction* from important issues in a world threatened so greatly by war and poverty?

Challenge to Theology

In doing theology in the world Church, the social justice dimension of every branch/discipline of theology must be emphasized. This will assure the breaking open of any "privatized" or "a-historical" constraints on theology in the world Church. An agenda, a set of problematics, a series of questions, need to be addressed. This is not to propose a series of "themes" (such as "theology of peace," "theology of ecology," "theology of economics," etc.) but a focus on "disciplines." Some of the issues which suggest themselves include the following:

1. *Biblical*: justice emphasis has been much enriched here, especially by themes of covenant and reign. But we must avoid a "fundamentalism" or a "proof-text" approach, and strive for an integrated theologizing, e.g., on scriptural themes of social responsibility, creation and work, etc.
2. *Systematics*: the christological themes have been most influential in much of contemporary justice theology.

3. *Historical*: recovery of early Church doctrine and practice has influenced our thinking on pacifism as a Christian option. Similarly, a look at the concept of private property and a critical examination of the role of women in the Church are assisted by good historical research.
4. *Moral*: applied ethics has frequently avoided justice issues by focusing on the personal and not the societal; e.g., medical and business ethics looks at deeds of individuals and not at structural questions. A major question does arise with sensitivity to cultural differences within the world Church, e.g., treatment of women, concern for the poor, etc.
5. *Liturgical/sacramental*: the major challenge still is how to celebrate justice and how to celebrate justly, especially with Church restrictions on women's full participation.
6. *Spirituality*: in the struggle for peace and justice, we experience need for a spirituality that motivates, guides, sustains. Developments of social spirituality which are promising include liberationist, feminist, black, creation-centered, charismatic.
7. *Missiology*: key to an evangelization sensitive to justice is the task of evangelization of culture.

Challenge to Theologians

If theologians are to contribute in a truly effective way in the struggle for justice in the world Church, it may be helpful to locate the social theological project within the elements of the "pastoral circle."

1. *Insertion*: the "social location" of the theologian is very important; i.e., with what class does she or he associate, from what perspective does he or she examine society, what are the experiences which are brought to the project, etc.? The "option for the poor" seems to be essential for any theologizing which would relate effectively to justice issues.
2. *Social analysis*: gaining a holistic picture of the structural relationships, causes, history, values, etc., of a situation is essential for theological insight. In effect, this is a contemporary "reading of the signs of the times" such as urged by Vatican II. It is also a practice of societal discernment.
3. *Theological reflection*: this implies an experiential, inductive, team, interdisciplinary and prayerful approach. While drawing on the work of "professional" theologians, this also values the insights of ordinary members of the community of faith.
4. *Pastoral planning*: the decision and action elements of the project must always be present, as a genuine "praxis" occurs. Involvement in the struggle for peace and justice gives new experiences which call for a return through the "pastoral circle."

Discussion

Many in the workshop found very disturbing the suggestion that the movement to a "world Church" could undercut the justice mission of the Church. Yet it forced a re-examination of the classical question of the universality of the natural law. For example, are there certain basic rights which should never be violated, no matter what the cultural mores might hold? Should torture always be condemned? Should the position of women in society, or the plight of the poor, always be spoken of, no matter what particular cultural practices dictate?

One participant suggested that three themes seemed to be involved in much of the discussion:

- the universality and particularity of the Church around the world
- the universal and relative character of ethical norms
- the prophetic and dialogic traits of evangelization

The poles expressed in these themes are always held in creative tension. This will surely be the case in the movement to a world Church.

The discussion also moved frequently to the topic of justice *in* the Church as a necessary element in any promotion of justice *by* the Church.

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