

LAUNCH OUT INTO THE DEEP!

WHY THE POPE STRESSES SOCIAL CONCERN SO STRONGLY



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In his January apostolic letter, *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, Pope John Paul II invited the whole Church into a process of reflection and planning to chart a course into the future. He reaffirmed the Jubilee message of Jesus as the beacon for our journey, emphasising the social aspects of being a disciple. The Pope considers that the Jubilee helps provide a sharper focus for the Church today, calling Catholics to a more robust social engagement.

Cardinal Etchegaray, to whom the Pope gave special responsibility for the Jubilee, commented that John Paul II has placed a special stress on the social dimensions of faith, and wanted to relate social concern more directly with the spiritual message of prayer, worship and personal renewal.

The Pope is not against piety, of course. Indeed he constantly affirms how important is genuine intimacy with God. Nor does John Paul wish to downplay the significance of parish and ecclesial activity and revival.

But he is trying to correct an imbalance in the view which would regard the social implications of faith as merely secondary, or even marginal, to the core issues of faith and worship. He is particularly trying to overcome any view that considered social concern had little or no relevance to faith.

John Paul is following the Second Vatican Council document, *The Church in the Modern World*, which lamented that the split in the lives of many Catholics between faith and the

affairs of daily social and political life was "among the more serious errors of our age". "Long ago the prophets of the Old Testament fought vehemently against this scandal, and even more so did Jesus Christ himself.... threaten it with grave punishments" (#43).

Reject a privatised spirituality

In his January letter, John Paul insists "we must reject the temptation to offer a privatised and individualist spirituality which ill accords with the demands of charity" (#52) as well as social justice.

During the Jubilee, the Pope called the Church to purify itself by returning to the pristine revelation of God in the Bible, particularly as exemplified in Jesus declaring himself the fulfilment of the Jewish Jubilee (Luke 4). The Jubilee commemorates God's liberation of his people from Egypt at the Exodus, an event immensely rich in both social and religious meaning. These two dimensions are not separate or antagonistic, but interdependent and complementary.

So much so that the Pope has repeatedly talked of Jesus as our Liberator, and insisted that the mission of the Church involves everything that supports human liberation in all its forms. "Liberation" is a correct translation of the word we usually translate as "redemption", but "liberation" preserves the original social context more adequately.

The Exodus events reveal who this God is: as so moved at the suffering and oppression of the Hebrews as to intervene most dramatically to lead them to their own land of freedom and abundance. The practices of the Jewish Jubilee outlined in Leviticus 25 were to ensure that social conditions did not long depart from what God had intended for his people: those in bondage were to be set free, the land redistributed to its ancestral owners, and debts remitted. This amounted to a vast redistribution of wealth and resources so that everyone could live a decent life. Social concern and religious reverence for what God had done for the Hebrews were intimately bound together.

In this way, the people of Israel were to honour their Covenant with God who would in turn guarantee them peace and prosperity. Their religious culture and traditions were developed to celebrate not just *what* God had done for them, but *who* God was for them, as profoundly committed to their human wellbeing.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus makes this Jubilee message absolutely central to his mission. Indeed, in Jesus God now has a human face. But he remains so passionately concerned about the dreadful situation in which the human race is caught - summed up in the mysterious word "sin" - that Christ lays down his life, not just for the Jews, but for all peoples. All are invited to enjoy the Reign of God where the Jubilee promises will be fulfilled. The values of the Jubilee are not just to be restored every fifty years, but lived constantly by the Christian community.

For Jesus there is no separation of religious practice from social commitment, love of God from love of neighbour. If we understand who God is, as deeply distressed about the suffering of the poor and marginalised, we can see immediately that we cannot love God unless we care for our neighbour.

This is indeed the precise message of Matthew 25 when, at the Last Judgment, the Son of Man totally rejects from heaven the Jews who had undoubtedly devoutly carried out all their religious rituals but had neglected the poor, the sick, the hungry and the stranger. There can be no evasion on this: sin - with all its cultural overlays and complexity - is not just about interior attitudes and personal morality; we are either committed to the wellbeing of the poor and suffering, in solidarity, prayer and service, or we are fighting against God.

Hence John Paul II makes this Last Judgment passage a fundamental test against which to evaluate all our activities. "This Gospel text is not a simple invitation to charity: it is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ. By

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The new economy and the old in East Timor. The United Nations and entrepreneurs have brought a lot of money to the Island but the majority of the population still lives below the poverty line.

these words, no less than by the orthodoxy of her doctrine, the Church measures her fidelity as the Bride of Christ" (#49). The Pope could hardly put it more strongly.

Go to the poorest

John Paul models in his own person this combination of contemplation and action, faith and works, deep prayer with strong social engagement. He urges the Christian community to go to the poorest as caring brothers and sisters: "there is a special presence of Christ in the poor, and this requires the Church to make a preferential option for them".

"Christians must learn to make their act of faith in Christ by discerning his voice in the cry for help that rises from this world of poverty", including also all the current forms of addiction, broken relationships, loneliness and isolation. "We must ensure that in every Christian community the poor feel at home" (#49-50). Our act of faith cannot be made in isolation from those who suffer from the various forms of poverty and marginalisation.

This has been so throughout the history of the Church. The early Church immediately embraced the social implications of faith, sharing their goods and property, feeding the hungry, and caring for widows and orphans. The apostles themselves were so involved in these works that they didn't have enough time for preaching, so they ordained deacons to help carry out these tasks. This should not be interpreted as relegating social ministry to a secondary place, but as recognising that the disciples needed a division of labour if the Church was to pursue its several essential missions.

During the era of persecutions, it was not just the fidelity of the martyrs which attracted people to the faith. It was especially the way the Christian communities cared not only for one another, but for the sick, the poor and the distressed. At a time when the Roman gods considered mercy a form of character weakness, the Christian communities, as also the Jewish communities, modelled a new quality of life and relationships which was manifest in social concern. Jesus' God is revealed as one of mercy and compassion.

What is so different in our time from that of the early Church is that we have unprecedented opportunities to design our social and economic structures to ensure equity and eradicate poverty. In earlier ages, people responded to the poverty they encountered close to them, but today, according to leading economists and development experts, we have the resources and technology to eliminate hunger and the worst forms of poverty totally from our planet within a matter of decades, if we used our opportunities well.

Never before has this been possible. Because it is now possible, it is also a moral obligation. That is why the Church speaks so much about social justice. It is an extension of our duty to care for the poor and suffering beyond our immediate circle of contact to a wider circle, indeed to the global community. Hence work for social justice is not a peripheral aspect of the Gospel, but springs straight from the heart of Jesus as an essential dimension of faith and evangelisation.

Our commitment to shape history

Pope John Paul talks of this social dimension as our commitment to shape history to prefigure the Reign of God.

It is the special vocation of laity to engage in this task of social transformation, avoiding the temptation to become "mere social agencies" by a keen sense of God's special love for those in any form of suffering.

The Pope urges that we learn to commune with God in such a way that he opens us to our social responsibilities. "Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God's plan" (#33).

The challenge before the Church now is to take up the Pope's invitation to re-evaluate our faith commitments in light of God's own concern for social wellbeing and our "commitment to history". Readers of *The Summit* in particular may be wondering how better to reflect all this in our liturgies, as Church documents, including the 1971 Synod of Bishops, have long urged.

As Gerard Moore SM pointed out in his recent booklet for the Social Justice Council, *Eucharist and Justice*, what more powerful symbol of concern for others could Jesus have chosen than breaking and sharing bread together? One can easily spiritualise the liturgy in a way which robs it of its social import. How can we draw more transparently on its power as a stimulus and guide in our "commitment to history" and social transformation?

In short, the Pope urges the whole Church to leave our safe harbours and "launch into the deep" at Christ's command, in a renewed solidarity and concern for the poor and afflicted. ❖