

## What is the Task of Justice and Peace Mission Today?

2008 was the Year of the Crunch. If the prognostications are correct 2009 will a year of flatlining. Businesses, perhaps whole industries, will go to the wall. Many will be on life-support, hoping the defibrillator of bailout, buyout or loan will keep the fluctuating line from flattening out never to peak again.

We were already getting familiar with other crunch situations. Our oil-driven civilisation and oil-based economy, which were born in western Pennsylvania about the year 1850, will come to an end (almost) in 2050—two hundred short years. What changes that will bring! Global food production, manufacturing, transport and the general maintenance of political and economic structures depend on cheap, plentiful supplies of oil.

We are also familiar with global warming which points to a situation of possible life-systems failure. We are already seeing crop failures, water shortages, extreme weather events, species extinction and refugees fleeing from impossibly hot, parched and blighted lands.

The above three crunch situations are inter-related. It is perhaps the first time in human history in which we can see that not only is our planet a limited resource for life, but also that our political structures and organisations and our way of doing economics (managing our planet, our common home) cannot carry us safely into the future.

### A Present Ominous for the Future

We are living through the worst systemic crisis since the 1930s. The meltdown we are witnessing is due to the system itself. In the crisis of the 1970s it was possible to blame the oil sheiks. Not this time.

The failure of the system is three-fold. In the first place it is institutional: the banks became casinos instead of utilities. They loaned without sufficient security or precaution and invested on the basis of borrowed funds. Secondly, the failure is intellectual: there was a general acceptance of the “efficient market hypothesis”. That is to say that the market *could not* misprice assets and little regulation was needed. Almost no one foresaw nor could explain why the system fell into meltdown. Finally, the failure was moral: it was built on debt, especially that of those least able to repay. The model worshipped growth for the sake of the bottom line. Hedge fund managers took huge risks with other people’s money, out of hubris and for the big bonus. Gangsters? No. Banksters! To this day, two years into the crisis the banks’ CEOs still will not say how much toxic debt encumbers their banks bringing them to the brink of disaster.

Unfortunately our leaders have been deficient in vision. They cannot see ahead to a different way of doing things. Instead they want to restore economics and politics to the way they were about two years ago when the feel-good factor was strong and people felt they could spend themselves to happiness and acquire a secure future.

The paradigm is fragmenting, the model is shattering. The ordinary citizen is confused. Our leaders’ idea is to spend more money in the hope that somehow the system will regenerate itself. Already a second injection of funds is being organised. Never mind that we are committed to a military budget of £33 billion, to constructing two new aircraft carriers at a cost of £1.5 billion each and to a renewal of Trident at a cost of at least £20 billion.

The traditional economic models, capitalistic and socialistic, no longer answer the human needs they were created to fulfil. At the core of both is a fatal materialism which feeds off the continuous production of wealth—derived from resource depletion and destruction—to be appropriated privately

or participated in socially. A new model must have at its core a dynamic which respects the planet with its limited resources and a burgeoning population which must learn to relate to the earth as partner, carer and nurturer.

## The NJPN Today

Over the last more than twenty-five years Christians committed to Justice and Peace in the world have concentrated their efforts in four general areas of concern: Human Rights, Poverty, Peace and the Planet.

In the area of human rights we have a long experience in defending the rights of migrants and asylum seekers, of women in society and in the workplace (not yet in our Church), the rights of gays to have their humanity and dignity respected, the right to a proper job and remuneration and the defence of the rights of the poor.

In the area of poverty we have been present especially on the international scene. We have spoken, written and campaigned for fair trade and just trade, for debt forgiveness, for respect for, and conservation of, natural resources and we have shown solidarity in times of emergency. We are very concerned about the growing gap between rich and poor both overseas and here in our own country.

In the area of peace we have embraced the cause of banning the use, storage and sale of nuclear weapons, of no more wars in our name. We have campaigned against the use of landmines, cluster bombs and other types of weaponry. We protested and marched one million strong against going to war in Iraq and have not been able to stop the juggernaut of war as it rolls on to Afghanistan and later to Pakistan.

In the area of the planet we have embraced the cause of our home planet Earth. We are gradually realising that she is our common mother. The human species has no special rights over the Earth—a concept repugnant to Christian anthropology. We do not have the right of “creative destruction” over the earth and its resources. We are “greening” our way of life and looking for more effective strategies to exercise our responsibilities over the care and nurturing of our “earthhome”.

## Building a Future Earth and a Future Church

We live in a post-Modern and a post-Christendom Europe. Our old models of economics and politics need a critical overhaul. We no longer live in a Europe which is the Faith. It can seem at times that the Trinitarian God of Jesus Christ has become a trinity of Mammon, Mars and Mercury, the gods of Wealth, War and Commerce.

We are Church, and we have not yet succeeded in making ourselves a Church sacramental of God’s reign of Peace, Justice and Wholeness. Therein lies our communal, ecumenical and institutional tragedy. Our post-Christendom society is spending billions in shoring up the foundations of The City’s and Wall Street’s cathedrals and in maintaining their clergy. In current economic and political discourse we do not hear of the plight of the poor, the menace to our planet nor of the coming age which may be marked by shortages of various resources even more important than oil.

There are three global (and local) situations which call out for our attention. They are: systemic meltdown, climate change and peak oil. The three are related and require an integrated response on the part of all those concerned with our common future. All three fall within the areas of concern to which I referred at the beginning of this reflection.

The systemic meltdown is having a strong impact on the lives of the poor in the form of job scarcity and price surges of essential necessities. We have seen the food riots. These will become more frequent. Of course the only ones not affected are the "bottom billion" who are so far outside of the system that their hand-to-mouth existence will not change. To have spoken as post-Thatcherites or post-Reaganites of "trickle-down" economics was an insult.

Climate change seems to be accelerating. The Arctic ice is disappearing at a pace faster than before predicted. This will mean opening up the Arctic to year round merchant traffic and will make the oil as yet untapped more tempting and accessible. The European Union wants to limit global warming to just 2 degrees celsius above 1980 levels. That will be difficult given the idea that the economy must continue to grow. We are already talking about more coal-fired power stations and of augmenting our nuclear power generating capacity. We are caught in our own capitalist ideology and need to take a second look at what an economy would look like if it were directed to the needs of the poor and to the repair of a ravished earth.

When George Bush, Sr and John Major went to war in Iraq the first time they were honest enough to admit that the war was about oil. We know that it is still about oil. It will be extremely difficult to curb our thirst for oil without bringing about trauma to our economic system. Indeed Dr Jeffrey Sachs projects world economic expansion from \$60 trillion in 2005 to \$420 trillion in 2050. Will that be possible without destroying ourselves? Oil has been a motive for war on several occasions. It will be so again. Christian efforts for peace take on a more vital intensity.

The fate of humanity is tied up with the rights of its most vulnerable persons. These are the victims of war and famine throughout the world, the victims of persecution and bureaucratic indifference and hostility in countries like our own, the victims of trafficking for purposes of sexual abuse and taking of body parts, the victims of hiv/aids and those "bottom billion" without voice without name.

As Catholics we must lay aside our man-centred theology and anthropology and expand to a life-centred theology and anthropology as a response to a God of all life and not of a privileged humanity. Our practice must encourage the building of a Church which is for the life of the world because God so loved the world. We shall build a Church which is more community-based, where the laity will have to minister to one another in the absence of male priests and of parish structures. There we will rediscover our baptismal priesthood whereby we are living offerings to God for the life of the world, whereby our pastoral role is directed toward our planetary environment with special regard for the poor and the victims.

As christians we must prophecy by denouncing in ourselves and in others attitudes and practices of consumerism which threaten planetary resources, human life and the social fabric. We must announce prophetically that another world is possible as a sign of the inbreaking of God's reign of peace, justice and wholeness. As citizens we must encourage a greater concern for the local in terms of the common good, popular participation and a new culture of care and respect for the environment. We must engage politically because a politics of peace and justice is a way of giving worship to God. As members of society we must seek newer forms of community rooted in the local with its potentiality for taking charge of its future, its cultural resources, its human wealth, energy and talent, its peculiar ways of doing things etc.

Davos and Porto Alegre

During our patristic era the Church Fathers spoke of two cities: Athens and Jerusalem. Today we can speak of Davos and Porto

Alegre. I write these words as the Davos meeting of 2500 "masters of the universe" is taking place. There Gordon Brown, in preparation for the G20 Summit in London in April, will advocate further measures to liberalise the world economy in the hope of getting business for British financial service companies. I doubt somehow that the God of the poor will be there.

In a few days' time 150,000 people will gather in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to seek solutions to the planetary problematic of peace, poverty and the earth. Theologians have been meeting before the start of the proceedings. Let us hope that the God they are talking about will be the God who created the Earth with all its beauty, who liberated God's people from slavery to an imperial power, who in God's Son showed the way to personal transfiguration and cosmic transformation.

Closer to home our prophetic word is becoming flesh in the widespread campaign to Live Simply. This campaign has a penitential side to it as it encourages us to a more modest, ascetic and abstentionist lifestyle. Paradoxically it is a profoundly joyful affirmation of life which can be lived by all if we allow others to simply live.

Many centuries before Christianity Lao-Tse wrote: "I have just three things to teach: simplicity, patience and compassion. These three are the greatest treasures." Did not the Spirit of Creation's Wisdom speak through him? Very beautifully does Micah write some centuries later: "This is what the Lord asks of you, only this: to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God." And Jesus himself when he says that Blessed are the poor, the peacemakers, the outsiders for theirs is the Reign of Peace, Justice and Wholeness.

In moments of doubt I can sometimes think that our institutional Church is at risk of flatlining. I do not believe in christian optimism. I do believe in christian hope. I hope that 2009 will be a year of generating sparks of light and energy, of being grains of salt and leaven, networked with other men, women and organisations of good will that we all might have life and have it to the full.

We are engaged in an enormous task, way beyond our poor possibilities and our impoverished imaginations. What kind of church is God designing for the future? What kind of christian is God sculpting? We do not know. What we do know is that this is God's work and to paraphrase words attributed to Oscar Romero: we are prophets and priests of a future not our own.

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