
IN SOLIDARITY WITH OUR AMERICAN BROTHERS AND SISTERS



In what follows I want to share with you what I experienced and heard in Bogotá when as chairman of our country's Bishops' Commission of Social Affairs I attended the social justice ministry seminar held there.

WORLD HUNGER

Within the context of social, economic, and political difficulties being experienced in a number of South American countries, it was important to hear Bishop Paul Josef Cordes, chairman of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, talk about how world hunger is a challenge for all humankind. In an October 4, 1996 Cor Unum document, we read that world hunger is an utter scandal. Twenty percent of the population - nearly two billion people - of developing countries have no access to basic foodstuffs. The most affected are young children, women, and the elderly. While there may be natural causes to this outrageous hunger, it is especially the economic and political systems that cause it. According to recent studies, it can be stated that food available to each person on earth has increased by 18%, in the past few years. Unless food reserves and the development of family gardens can respond in some way to hunger in the world, only true solidarity between prosperous and poor countries can bring some glimmer of hope.

SYNOD FOR AMERICA

Bishop Jorge Jimenez, C.J.M., secretary general of the Latin American Bishops' Council (CELAM), presented preliminary reports on the Synod of Bishops for America, which is to take place in the fall of 1997. Pointing out the three aims of this Synod, he stressed the promotion of the new evangelisation as an illustration of episcopal communion and of the development of solidarity between the different Churches and as a necessity in the different areas of pastoral ministry. The third aim - and not the least - is to shed light on the problems of social justice and international economic relations among the countries of America, especially on the inequalities that exist between North, Central, and South America. The bishops' conference is a key element in the preparation of the Synod study document. Participants in the Synod responded on their own to the questions regarding "The Church and Social Solidarity," and "The Church Confronted with Social Problems." Feeling that the preparatory document does not sufficiently address the social situation in America, they emphasised the necessity of addressing the following (listed in alphabetical order): civil and political rights, corruption, ecology, economic models, human rights, immigration, inculturation of the Gospel, national debt, narcotics and drug trafficking, national identity, peacemaking, poverty, promotion of women, keeping in mind the effects of free trade and militarisation as causes of poverty.

SOCIAL JUSTICE MINISTRY PROGRAMME

After having studied poverty in their own countries, the 40 participants of the Bogotá Seminar evaluated the strengths and challenges of social justice ministry and established an action plan of action. Describing social justice ministry as a constitutive element of evangelisation and as a Church action in society, the participants reviewed the different aspects of this demanding daily ministry: the defense of human rights, respect for the ecology, health, economic solidarity, work, the land, concern for the children, the promotion of women, aid to

prisoners. It would take several pages to describe what is being done and what will be done. It is truly wonderful that 22 bishops' conferences have succeeded in adopting a common programme in the respect of each Church in its pastoral initiatives. Let us briefly look at one of these programmes, the defense of human rights.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Regarding human rights as a major point in all human promotion, as a special dimension of a full evangelisation and as a major response to the project God has regarding the dignity of every human being, those in charge of social justice ministry feel that among the population in general and its leaders there is a stronger awareness that human rights must be respected. If the subject of human rights has been considered marginal or harmless at best, in the past, it is no longer so today: human rights ministry is seen as a fundamental dimension of all social justice ministry. Lay people, religious, priests and bishops are more and more committed in this area, bishops are often requested to solve social and military problems. On the parish and diocesan levels as well as in the ecumenical field, beneficial initiatives are also pointed out. Confronted by the present dissatisfaction regarding respect for basic human rights, Christians are courageously joining forces to insist on the right to food and shelter, health and education. Confronted with the rise in torture, arbitrary imprisonment, the disappearance of loved ones, assassinations, and faced with these institutionalised crimes that go unpunished, several courageous Christian groups rise up as prophetic witnesses to the truth and freedom that Christ has brought to humankind. It is therefore not surprising to hear that in coming months at both parish and diocesan levels and in close collaboration with local leaders, social justice ministry people will increase their interceding for respect and defense of human rights, the defense of homeless children, the unemployed, native people, the illiterate, prisoners, and those who suffer violence. Commitment to women and children, to victims of violence is especially focused as a way to avoid a greater degree of impoverishment among the destitute.

TOWARDS A YEAR OF CHARITY

He who alone can convert us by directing us to the most destitute of our brothers and sisters, he who alone can tell us of Life in his Father is Jesus, the Saviour and Evangeliser. In the years to come we shall present in greater detail his life and the message he has brought us: the message of Charity, the life which comes from the Father and which continuously animates us in service to our brothers and sisters. Down the centuries the disciples of Jesus have witnessed to charity. Saint Paul's Hymn to Charity describes this charity which is all patience, service, forgiveness, reconciliation. The Year of Charity will call us to deepen the theological and pastoral dimensions of this life in God. At the Bogotá Seminar we had a glimpse of this charity in action in the form of the Populorum Progressio Foundation which was created by Pope John Paul II on February 13, 1994, for service to native peoples and the peasants of South America and the Caribbean, and which finances 579 development projects. An example of what is being done in the El Minuto de Dios barrio of Bogotá invites our collaboration and creativeness. In the last 35 years, this community has been able to establish community services in the areas of housing, work, and social communications for its 25,000 inhabitants. The same is happening at Ciudad Bolívar with its population of 75,000.

EFFECTS OF THE SEMINAR

During these hours filled with prayer and reflection we were able to experience as a "foretaste" of things to come what the American Church could be like, aware of its catholicity and respectful of each of its parts. There is already a feeling of "already there" and of "not yet." Each of the 24 bishops' conferences will be the first to benefit from such a meeting and sharing. Major differences mark each of our particular Churches, whether they be Haiti, Brazil, Uruguay or Colombia. As Bishop Cordes pointed out following our Canadian Bishop

Herbert McLuhan, our world has become a global village. May we, in the midst of this village, be closely united with these half-billion brothers and sisters of America, and may gestures of conversion, communion, and solidarity continue to grow at the heart of our common story.

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