
PASTORAL PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (2)



As I am eager to share with you what I experienced in Rome at the first World Congress on the Pastoral Promotion of Human Rights, I offer you this second part of my report.

PAPAL AUDIENCE

The highlight of the Congress was the papal audience which took place on Saturday, July 4, on the Pope's fortieth anniversary of episcopal ordination. The Pope's message to the Congress recapitulated several themes he developed in his first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis* (1979). « *It has always appeared important to me to pay special attention to the defense and promotion of the dignity of persons and of their rights at all stages of life, and whatever be the political, social, economic, or cultural context.* » And as the Holy Father also stated, « *Every action that treads on the dignity of humankind and obstructs its development and growth is contrary to God's plan for humankind and for all creation.* »

Of particular concern to Pope John Paul are the economic and social conditions in which people live, since these often limit the application of a broad grouping of human rights. As a matter of fact, he highlighted the "persistence of extreme poverty" in the world, calling it a "true scandal." Besides, he noted that « *The new architecture of the economy on a world scale must rest on the foundations of the dignity and rights of the person, especially the right to work and protection of the worker* » In his concluding remarks, the Pope stressed that « *The pastoral ministry for human rights must, by its very nature, be especially linked to the spiritual and transcendent dimension of the person.* » In this regard, he affirmed « *The obligation of protecting and promoting the right of freedom of religion... I appeal to world leaders... to guarantee the concrete recognition of this right for every one of their citizens.* »

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Congress ended with several recommendations and insights that I would like to report to the C.C.C.B. It was viewed as most important to the Congress participants that it be asserted that human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated. [Vatican *Declaration and Programme of Action*, 1993] In this sense, the participants welcomed this meeting not only as a tribute to the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration, but as a moment to evaluate, five years after the U.N. Vienna Conference, just how far the international community has come in defending and promoting human rights. Participants were pleased that the Holy Father, at his audience, reiterated his support of efforts currently made in another series of meetings in Rome to establish a permanent International Criminal Court (which could try four types of crimes: war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and aggression).

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

All working groups noted the need for more formation in human rights concerns and Catholic social teaching in institutions of Catholic education, especially seminaries. The Congress agreed that we resolve to avoid double standards in our human rights discourse as well as in our ministry. To the extent that we are unable to design our

own structures and working styles on inclusive and just models, our ability to advocate human rights will be negatively affected. For example, several of the working groups criticised the fact that two exclusively male panels addressed our meeting. There are many highly credible women working in human rights ministry in the Church, and their voices must be heard.


THIRD GENERATION RIGHTS

Given that this was the first meeting of its kind, much was accomplished, but we recognised that there was little emphasis on what is known as 'third generation' human rights. For example, in his 1990 letter for the World Day of Peace the Holy Father called for the inclusion of the right to a clean environment as an important new element in our human rights advocacy; yet, this concern received scant mention, at our meeting. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in organising the meeting, created certain expectations for follow-up; thus, many working groups asked that the Council consider how to better communicate with episcopal conferences, especially regarding issues of common concern. It was also suggested that in the interest of enhancing advocacy strategies, especially around international institutions concerning the international debt of the poorest countries, the Council has a role to play in coordinating Catholic efforts.

A SECOND CONGRESS?

Finally, several participants suggested that a second meeting of this sort in a couple years' time would be very useful. In order to evaluate progress and develop better joint strategies, meeting together is often essential. For example, the Latin-American episcopal conferences, through their regional organisation CELAM, have already held two meetings on human rights pastoral ministry (1994 and 1997). I was wondering whether the Canadian bishops would take on the task of organising such a meeting in the year 2000 or 2001.

Have a good week!



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« From A Bishop's Journal » (241) (02 September 1998)