

Why Do Missionaries Get Involved In Justice And Peace Issues?

by Brendan Lovett SSC

There is a language used by missionaries today which was not in evidence even fifty years ago. You will have noticed the emphasis given to issues of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation in our magazines and on our websites, and the attention to global issues like Third World Debt, water, patenting life, globalization etc. Some people wonder if this change of language and emphasis signifies an unacknowledged loss of theological vision. As somebody involved in developing this way of describing our missionary task, I would like to suggest that it is simply a matter of the on-going, self-correcting process of learning inherent to faith itself.

Our task is to preach Christ crucified. We have to note that he was crucified precisely because he confronted the powers of religion and society that were oppressing the people of Israel in his time. In the twenty centuries since his death very little has changed. The poor, those who have least, are still being oppressed. We cannot preach Christ crucified and ignore the oppression, otherwise we are colluding with such oppression.

We are all involved in the sin of the world. We have much to regret when we look back on the most recent period of mission in the Church. From the beginning of the 16th century onward, prophetic voices noted that missionaries travelled along with the colonizing powers: to speak in symbolic terms, the cross and the sword were far too closely identified one with the other. In the conquest of the Americas, for example, the missionaries travelled with the conquering forces of Spain and Portugal. They encountered so many millions of indigenous people who had never heard of Christ; they also discovered how much these unfortunate people had to suffer as a result of being invaded and conquered. As stories of the horrific violence being perpetrated were relayed back by Dominican friars to their brothers in Salamanca, a deep theological debate was initiated. How could people be accused of rejecting Christ in the face of such

cruelty by Christians? Was it ever possible to simply announce the Gospel? How could the Gospel be convincingly preached?

Gradually, through this debate, the people who were intended to be the recipients of the story of Christ's death and resurrection, began to be seen to be Christ crucified, and the Christians began to be seen as those who had placed them on the cross. The above moment was just the first in a long series in which we began to learn what it might really take to authentically preach the Gospel. We could pray, as Pope John XXIII did in relation to the Jewish people: "Forgive us for crucifying Thee a second time in their flesh: we knew not what we did..."

We are forever challenged to look critically at how we present the story of Christ. It is a story that has relevance for all peoples, but it will not be communicated as life-giving Truth unless we are clearly concerned with other people's human integrity and the various ways in which this is under assault. One precondition of being able to proclaim a message of Divine Love for people is a sensitivity to what makes for their human flourishing. We have to endlessly criticize anything in our way of life that could be harming others. The hidden violence of our present globalized economic system has two thirds of the inhabitants of our world living on less than the subsidy which is given to every cow in the European Union. Surely we cannot tolerate, or collude with, this situation.

A Church that is missionary by nature must endlessly strive to share with the whole world its message of a love that is inclusive of all. To fulfill her vocation, our Church must be consciously present at the places of brokenness, the places where humanity is being crucified today. A month before his death, the Dominican bishop of Oran, Pierre Claverie, assassinated in 1996, wrote the following: "Jesus died spread out between heaven and earth, his arms stretched out to gather in the children of God scattered by the sin which separates them, isolates them, and sets them up against each other and against God himself. He placed himself on the lines of fracture born of this sin. In Algeria we are on one of these seismic lines that cross the world: Islam/the West, North/South, rich/poor.

And we are truly in our place here, because it is in this place that one can glimpse the light of the Resurrection."

It is fidelity to the healing Gospel that has missionaries concerned with all the brokenness of our world. It is their concern to be truly in their place that has them endlessly critique anything in themselves and in their world that is bringing death to the people God loves. Far from being a substitute for a lost vision of the Gospel, their concern for justice, dialogue, and the integrity of creation flows directly out of their passion for the Gospel. Unless we share something of the compassion of God, our words have no power to heal.

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