

## **“Justice in the World” – Continuity and Discontinuity**

### **in Religious Life in Africa**

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#### **Summary**

The global context in which the document “Justice in the World” was written has changed in a very significant manner since the 1971 Synod. So, after 40 years that document deserves another look, not only because of the Synod’s anniversary, but because the document itself strongly influenced many religious institutes to become involved in social justice. In the African context the existence of widespread poverty and destitution, the violation of human rights, the ecological question, the millions of refugees and of displaced persons within their own countries all cry out for justice to be done. They constitute an unacceptable social scandal, above all in those societies perfectly able to avoid them.

What has become of the numerous initiatives inspired by the 1971 Synod? How can we explain the existence of an increasing number of men and women haunted by misery and the deterioration of their situation, while at the same time large projects designed to help them keep increasing? Has there been a breakdown in the commitment of religious?

An answer to that question is both simple and complex. We have moved from an era where the existence of hunger required rapid action and emergency aid as a priority, to that of collaborative initiatives with other socio-political, economic and religious organisations aimed at human development, so as to avoid creating permanent dependency.

In Africa we must address the causes of poverty and not just be content with looking after its consequences. To do that we need to:

- Encourage solidarity and networking , including the poor in the struggle to promote their own dignity.
- Live justly in our own communities.
- Integrate an ecological perspective into our own lifestyle and social action
- Work in collaboration with other faiths (inter-religious dialogue).

One way of collaboration with other believers would be through an option for the poorest. We can share with our dialogue partners the religious reasons which motivate us to be involved in building a more just world. It is imperative for all believers to contribute to working together for justice.

## **Introduction.**

40 Years of “*Justice in the World*” is the general theme which this seminar has suggested as the starting point for reflection. The organisers wanted to mark the event by celebrating this jubilee around the same table. Thank you for having associated me with this meeting of Religious Life in the African context today.

The question of justice warrants “*concrete, frank and generous*” treatment<sup>1</sup>, as the Synod had already done. I must admit here that in preparing this talk I had to resist two temptations: that of shutting out and ignoring the horrifying picture which the statistics uncover, or wearing you down with the weight of the official facts that reveal immense injustice and human suffering in Africa.<sup>2</sup> In this “in-between”, without resorting to a mere pious wish or some form of false consolation, what I am going to say starts with the following question:

What are the points of continuity among the many occurrences of social breakdown that challenge religious living in Africa? To answer this question I make two points:

Starting with instances of socio-economic breakdown from the past as well as the present, the first point will focus on the continuity with the visionary dimension of the Synod document.

With regard to emergency situations requiring rapid action, we will propose four components and fields of commitment which will allow us to review our works of emergency aid in favour of initiatives aimed at the promotion of human dignity. In speaking of human dignity we are referring to all the expressions of basic rights, individual freedom, or relationships and well-being at every level.

### **1. Continuity of *Justice in the World* in the context of social breakdown in Africa.**

This document deserves to be read, not only because of the Synod’s anniversary, but because it strongly influenced many religious institutes to become involved in denouncing social injustice. The continuity can be expressed through this well-known proverb: “the new string must be woven from the tip of the old one” (*il faut tisser la nouvelle corde au bout de l’ancienne.*) There is no sudden break or disconnection from past situations of socio-political and economic breakdown to see the involvement of religious in matters of justice today.

*“We see in the world a set of injustices which constitute the nucleus of today’s problems, and whose solution requires the undertaking of tasks and functions in every sector of society...Our action is to be directed above all at those men and*

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<sup>1</sup> The Social Discourse of the Catholic Church from Leo X111 to Benedict XVI. Synod of Bishops, 2<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly Justice in the World. The promotion of Justice in the World, 30 Nov. 1971. Presentation of Jean-Yves Calvez p.609..

<sup>2</sup> I leave you to judge from one of the numerous reports of the World Bank, which estimates that “*the inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa, along with those of South Asia, are among the poorest of the world in terms of real income and access to social services. Approximately 45 percent of the 690 millions of the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa live below the poverty level. In 1993 it was estimated that 40% lived on an income of less than \$1 per day.*” World Bank, Poverty Reduction in Sub-Saharan Africa, Washington, 1996.

women, who because of various forms of oppression and because of the present character of our society, are silent, indeed voiceless victims of injustice”.<sup>3</sup>

### **Socioeconomic breakdown from the past up to the present day: A visionary document.**

Scrutinising the “signs of the times” from the past up to the present day we hear the similar cry from those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and mechanisms. For example, let us recall that the promises made at first UN Decade for Development in the 1960’s have hardly been met at all. A second Decade has just begun in an even more depressed atmosphere. There is a growing feeling that something is not working in the system of international economic relations.<sup>4</sup> *“In the last twenty-five years a hope has spread through the human race that economic growth would bring about such a quantity of goods that it would be possible to feed the hungry, at least with the crumbs falling from the table, but this has proved a vain hope in developing countries...”*<sup>5</sup>

We hear the same alarm bells coming from the latest critical assessment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed 10 years ago. If certain progress has been made the results have been very uneven from one goal to the next. Neither has the international context helped. *“It is clear that improvements made to the lives of the poorest have been realised in a scandalously slow manner, and the crises of climate change, food insecurity and economic uncertainty are eroding some of the advancement acquired with such difficulty. The world possesses both the resources and the knowledge necessary to give even to the poorest countries or to those who lag behind because of disease, geographical isolation or civil unrest, the means of attaining the Millennium Development Goals”*<sup>6</sup>

The “Note” of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace published on the 24 October last confirms what was said 40 years ago. I quote: *“the crisis has exposed behaviors such as selfishness, collective greed and the hoarding of goods on a mammoth scale. No one can be content with seeing man live like a wolf to his fellow man, according to the concept discussed by Hobbes. No one can in good conscience accept the development of some countries to the detriment of others. If no solutions are found to the various forms of injustice, the negative effects that follow on the social, political and economic level are destined to create a climate of growing hostility and even violence, and ultimately undermine the very foundations of democratic institutions, even those considered most solid.”*<sup>7</sup>

In Africa today, in spite of faint glimmers of hope on the horizon at the sociopolitical and economic levels, the demand for justice comes from the general increase of poverty and destitution, from human rights violations, from the millions of

<sup>3</sup> “Justice in the World”, No. 21

<sup>4</sup> Ibid Nos. 8-10

<sup>5</sup> Ibid No. 11

<sup>6</sup> Ban Ki- moon ,UN Secretary General, Introduction to the report on the 2010 Stage of the MDGs, published in June 2010

<sup>7</sup> Towards Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems in the Context of a Global Authority” Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, October 24, 2011

refugees (women and children), from those displaced within their own countries and from the ecological question which can no longer be ignored. With regard to migration, large numbers of people have had to flee because of war or to find more favourable climatic conditions. The political system has led to greater individualism and does not respond directly to the general needs of people. There is, in addition, a lack of leadership and formation. It is widely known that the African region longs for reconciliation, justice and peace, as was strongly underlined during the second Synod on Africa.<sup>8</sup>

All this constitutes an unacceptable social scandal, above all in those societies perfectly capable of dealing with the problems. In Africa, justice is the basis on which peace can rest. It is its fruit. Our mission demands that we should courageously denounce injustice with charity, prudence and firmness, in sincere dialogue with all parties concerned. We know that our denunciations can secure assent to the extent that they are an expression of our lives and are manifested in our on-going lives..<sup>9</sup>

Before proposing the four components or fields of action for justice, I want to emphasise the fact that for many Religious Institutes “*Justice in the World*” was a very important element not only in their analysis, in the direction of their mission, in their work for social transformation but also in their way of life.<sup>10</sup> The constant concern for the poor has been as much a characteristic of our different Institutes, as has been our concern for human rights and human dignity.

## **2. Four Components of a Commitment for Justice in Africa.**

Linked directly to the option for the poor is work for justice and solidarity with poor. Through living in solidarity with them we have discovered that society is built on unjust structures. Therefore we suggest that networking, interpersonal relationships, the dignity of woman and ecology become the areas where Religious living in Africa be more visibly committed.

### **2.1 Solidarity and networking in areas of social breakdown.**

In daily life religious are often to be found in places which allow them to see close-up the terrible situations in which people have to live. They are at the forefront of the mission and take the greatest risks for their health and personal safety. Let us not forget that they are, for the most part, involved in the fields of education, health and social service, the situation of women, and the struggle against human trafficking.

<sup>8</sup> Let us remember that the Synod discussed the following theme: “The Church in Africa at the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: ‘You are the salt of the earth... You are the Light of the World’ (Mt. 5:13,14).” Several documents emerged from this theme: The Lineamenta, the Instrumentum Laboris (Working Document); the interventions at the Synod itself; the Message; the Proposals and the Apostolic Exhortation after the Synod.

<sup>9</sup> *Justice in the World* No. 60

<sup>10</sup> For example, let us note the important document, “Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice” of the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation of the Jesuits in 1975. The Congregation singled out the “promotion of justice”, the “absolute requirement” of the service of faith, just as the Synod had stated “the struggle for justice and participation in the transformation of the world” of the “constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel” (*Justice in the World* No. 7.) Some Institutes spoke of the “social apostolate” or “justice ministry”.

We are aware that the cry of the poor and marginalised finds an echo in Religious life and requires that we avoid every compromise with any form of social injustice.

Yet one question conceals another. How explain the increase in the number of men and women trapped in misery and by a growing degradation of their lives, while at the same time our Institutes have continued to produce large aid programmes for the poor, Justice and Peace Commissions, publications, bulletins and reviews, networks, websites, and NGOs? In the context of emergency situations often demanding immediate action, should we not review our aid programmes to favour initiatives aimed at human development so as to avoid creating situations of permanent dependency?

Two possible directions:

- Prioritise working on the causes of poverty and not just continue to looking after the consequences
- Work with other faiths (interreligious dialogue)..

First orientation: How work on the causes of poverty and not just on its consequences.

Let us take as an example one concrete situation among many others

A religious who visits prisoners, bringing them a little soap or medicines witnesses the living conditions of these prisoners, and, I would even say, contributes in some way to the corruption of the prison guards, because her soap and medicines often do not reach the prisoners themselves. It would be better for that religious to become familiar with the laws governing the country and be able to come to the prisoners' defence.

Good formation is, therefore, indispensable<sup>11</sup>. This will allow us to grasp the structural causes of social imbalance. It is important to realise that poverty and injustice happen as the result of the free decisions of persons insulated from poverty who marginalise others because they themselves are concerned solely with economic profit. In the area of power, the majority are manipulated and do not participate in decision-making. In the area of knowledge the doors are closed to the poor. Our mission must be to educate people to acquire a critical mind so as to help awaken their awareness of being citizens, starting with local situations and environmental problems.

Because of migration on the continent Religious are challenged to develop a specific form of evangelical presence among displaced people. Whatever the reason for their displacement, pastoral work with migrants is one area to which religious can increasingly devote themselves.

Second orientation: In collaboration with other religions. If we invite one another mutually to defend the rights of the little ones wherever they are trodden on, our

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Second African Synod, Instrumentum Laboris No. 62.

former resentments will disappear in face of a common commitment to serve the needs of men and women. One form of collaboration with other believers could be the option for the poorest. All believers are absolutely obliged to give themselves to working together for justice. This is the spirit of Assisi which we have so recently witnessed. In a world that is in a state of permanent crisis we can gather together and share with our dialogue partners the religious reasons that motivate us to commit ourselves to build a more just world.

We know only too well that there is no lack of situations in Africa which cry out for justice and peace. In attending to these cases of flagrant violations of justice and human rights we are in danger of ignoring the challenges of justice and peace in our own religious communities. We commit ourselves to the promotion of human dignity in its full integrity, and in doing this we must constantly keep in review our own life choices, our ways of using material goods and our style of relationships. This is our second challenge and field of commitment.

## **2.2. Justice as the new form of relationship in community.**

Whoever preaches justice must him/herself first of all be considered just. *“Within our Institutes rights must be preserved. ...Those who are employed there should receive a sufficient livelihood and enjoy that social security which is customary in their region.”*<sup>12</sup> *“Just as in society our religious communities mention experiences which are contrary to justice, e.g. in their structures, proper recompense is not always guaranteed. The administration of the goods of the Institute sometimes lack transparency”*<sup>13</sup> Thus the concern to ensure the common good beyond what is required by law is an expression of one’s responsibility for justice.

Another challenge in Africa is the fact that we are increasingly seeing that civil society wants to have its voice for justice heard. *“If we do not take care, I fear that the world will become for the Church, at least in its claim for justice, the prophetic model for denouncing injustice and showing the way forward. We must not therefore avoid a certain number of questions, even if they are uncomfortable because the credibility of our mission depends on answering them: are religious today qualified for the work required of them? Do we entrust a certain responsibility to Brother Placide or to Sister Jeannine because of their human and professional competence or because of their holiness of life or because they are good people? ... This is a question of justice where tasks are assigned according to the gifts and capabilities of each person.”*<sup>14</sup> As Religious persons, called to walk the path of human weakness, we must disown the culture of privilege still prevailing among some religious, so as to come closer to the men and women who struggle daily. These latter challenge society and the Church to recognise their human dignity.

## **2.3 The dignity of women in Africa: a call to justice.**

Rene Laurentin noted in his book on the Synod, that *“Mrs Barbara Ward drafted the most important part of the synthesis of the Synod’s discussions. It was the*

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<sup>12</sup> *“Justice in the World”* No.44

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 2<sup>nd</sup> African Synod, *Instrumentum Laboris*, No. 61

<sup>14</sup> Paul Béré *“Religious in Africa: How promote reconciliation, justice and peace in our milieux?”*(Notre de la Paix, Yamoussoukro, February 6,2010).

*first time*”, he added, “*that a woman had played a key role in the development of a document pertaining to the supreme authority of the Church.*”<sup>15</sup> It was hardly surprising then to find in that document the following words: “*we also urge that women should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the Church.* (and) “*we propose that this matter be subjected to a serious study employing adequate means: for instance a mixed commission of men and women, religious and lay people, of different situations and competence*”.<sup>16</sup>

Every day the majority of African women struggle against many forms of degradation which prevent them from contributing to their own future. For example, women produce 80% of food but, legally, they are not considered capable of owning the fields which they cultivate. Remember that the majority of them do this work without modern farm implements, training or other essentials. No one considers that this work has any monetary value. Since the women don't receive a salary, their work is not included in the GNP. If the husband dies, his family can reclaim the land, leaving the women and her children destitute. On the economic and political levels the important decisions are often taken by lawmakers and ministers, mostly men. However no important development is possible if this section of the population, constituting about 50% of the total is marginalised. Without true justice between men and women real development remains a fiction. What can the Church do about this?

It is widely known in Africa that women are very active in the Church. They are the principal collaborators in the mission of evangelisation. When we realise that women are very aware of the importance of organisation they can be considered as the backbone of the Christian communities. Right across the continent thousands of religious women preach the Kingdom of God by concrete deeds of compassion. Despite that the question remains: where exactly do we find that the dignity of these women is honoured, recognised and celebrated in the Church and in society?

The question of women's dignity is sometimes linked to that of ecology. In fact women in rural areas depend heavily on their natural environment. They are those who protect life and as such are the first to be affected by damage linked to climate or the scarcity of natural resources. This will be our final point.

## **2.4 The question of eco-justice.**

The question of the integrity of creation had already been very clearly perceived by “*Justice in the World*”, where the richest countries are seen as

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<sup>15</sup> Rene Laurentin, *Reorientation of the Church after the Third Synod*. Ed. Seuil, Paris 1972, p. 12. In “The General Assembly, Justice in the World, Promotion of Justice in the World, November 30, 1971”, Presentation by Jean-Yves Calvez, p. 609.

<sup>16</sup> *Justice in the World*, Nos. 45-46.

responsible for environmental pollution. *“Such is the demand for resources and energy by the richest countries ...that irreparable damage would be done to the essential elements of life on earth, such as air and water, if their high rates of consumption and pollution, which are constantly on the increase, were extended to the whole of humankind.”*<sup>17</sup> *“The serious nature of the ecological crisis and the cry of the poor who are suffering the consequences of environmental degradation invite us to stop and reflect seriously on whether the functional values which drive our daily decisions and actions do not remain fundamentally consumer-driven.”*<sup>18</sup>

In Africa, questions on the environment are intrinsically linked to the question of natural resources and to poverty. Although rich in mineral resources, it is, however, the continent with the highest percentage of poor people.<sup>19</sup> Here are some suggestions, although I know that religious institutes have already created a widespread awareness among their members:

- Make eco-justice a central pillar of our mission.
- Firstly we should make sure that whatever we do has lasting value.
- We should ensure that there is a practice of recycling perishable and non-perishable materials in all our communities and places of work and especially in our houses of formation, according to the principal of the three R's: reduce; re-use; recycle.
- It would be desirable to make a priority of purchasing local products and taking part in social organisations which work to develop an awareness of the environment with a view to influencing public policy.

## **Conclusion.**

The basic principal of the continuity of *“Justice in the World”* is that the mission of justice is an essential element of the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the chief mission of every Religious is not that of accomplishing a work, it is to incarnate and manifest an evangelical presence. *“Action for justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every form of oppression.”*<sup>21</sup> The chief motivating force for Religious Life in denouncing injustice comes from the invitation to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

The mission of preaching the Gospel dictates at the present time that we should dedicate ourselves to the liberation of human kind even in its present existence in this world. *“For unless the Christian message of love and justice shows its effectiveness through action in the cause of justice in the world, it will only with difficulty gain credibility with the men and women of our time.”*<sup>22</sup> We leave you with this message: Justice in the world.

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<sup>17</sup> Justice in the World, No. 12

<sup>18</sup> This has recently been recalled by a Working Group on Ecology of the Society of Jesus, “Special Report on Ecology; Healing a Broken World” (The Promotion of Justice, No. 106, 2011/2012), p.44

<sup>19</sup> Cf. PNUE (2006) Environmental Prospects for Africa 2. UN Environmental Programme, Nairobi.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Luke 4: 14-21

<sup>21</sup> *“Justice in the World”* No. 7

<sup>22</sup> *“Justice in the World”* No.38

Thank you.