

Theme 4 – The Human Perspective

Presentation: Environmentally Conscious Citizens

Presenter: Bishop Mauro Morelli

I am not a theologian or an economist, but a pastor who has learned not to worry so much about a place in heaven for the children born today but about whether they will have a place in our world and what kind of life they will have. Over the last 22 years I have worked on the outskirts of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the two largest Brazilian cities, an environment of pollution, violence and human destitution. Almost 1,000 people are killed every year in the two municipalities of the diocese and I am convinced that while misery and democracy are incompatible, degradation of environment and misery walk together as twin sisters.

Environment and social exclusion

Civilisation is the process of improving the quality of human life through the transformation of natural resources into food, housing, clothing, means of transportation, leisure facilities and provision of public services such as education, health, sanitation and water supply. Recently humankind has started to be concerned about sustainability or the impact and consequences of civilisation on nature.

We should have the same concern about the impact of progress on people. Throughout history, suffering imposed by progress has never been equally distributed, the greatest burden being placed on the shoulders of those who are socially, politically or economically weak. In the Middle Ages, for example, while the clergy and the nobles were enjoying the pleasures of life inside their castles and palaces, poor peasants lived amidst dirt and sewage, like the inhabitants of today's urban slums. In the last century, while business people made fortunes selling a great variety of products, the workers who manufactured them were dying of tuberculosis because of overwork, malnutrition, exposure to contamination and poor living conditions.

Today, while a minority of rich people enjoy a sophisticated and excellent quality of life, one out of six human beings goes to bed hungry every night and about 50% of the world's population are excluded from the benefits of economic growth and the development process. Many people suffer the consequences of accelerated urbanisation, such as lack of urban infrastructure, inadequate nutrition, educational and health services and exposure to chemical and nuclear pollution. In some places we are heading towards ecological disaster. It seems that we have come to such a degree of environmental and human degradation that people and even nations are treated as garbage that is not even worth recycling.

Recent trends from powerful economic groups point to the total liberalisation of international trade as the magic solution for poverty. Yet we watch with dismay and indignation an ever-increasing distance between the rich and the poor, with greater concentrations of wealth and misery and about 20% of all human beings consuming close to 75% of everything that is produced.

Even if the present economic system brought to every human being the average living conditions enjoyed by most people in the first world, the planet would be heading towards unsustainability. Mother Nature cannot sustain any longer the degree of consumption, spoiling and destruction that she has endured over the last decades. Governments and people need to work together to meet the needs and rights of all citizens and new mechanisms must be sought to guarantee citizens' control over state, public services and the market, which left to its own devices will never solve the problem of hunger and will instead accelerate the destruction of our beautiful planet.

If we truly want to build a world based on solidarity among people and nations and respectful to Mother Earth, we must look for new paradigms for progress and development. The victims of social and economic exclusion cannot wait for better days to come. This is our biggest challenge. We need to create the proper conditions to achieve growth and maturity to become partners in the history of our community. Any present or future goals must confront the sufferings of those who experience hunger and marginalisation. No argument can justify the denial of human freedom, peace and happiness to people living today. They cannot be mocked by the promise that their children will live in a prosperous future.

We have to advance inspired by great visions:

Our vision is of people of different faiths beginning to learn from each other's spirituality and inspiration while developing practical examples in commitment to community and sharing. Our vision is of those with enough material goods beginning to live with less while replacing their idolatry of consumerism with a new spirituality, and of those with economic and political power making decisions based on the needs of all creation, leading to a fuller life for all. Our vision is one in which the local communities are empowered to resist the many threats to our survival.¹

In this context, solidarity among people becomes the energy and source of social, economic and political transformation. It becomes a bridge that unites people while they share bread. Solidarity is a good way to restore human

dignity to those who suffer starvation or live in affluence. The humiliation of any human being is a denial of everyone's dignity.

The path to a new civilisation

The crisis which disturbs the nations around the Black Sea and in many other regions of our planet has deep and ancient roots. We will need much wisdom, courage, humility and patience to find and follow the paths which will bring peace and guarantee life with justice and dignity for all people and nations. New technical solutions, new social habits and new cultural values can only be implanted slowly. Without a doubt, it is much easier to record a crisis, than to find a solution for it.

Crises are always accompanied by the seeds of renovation. The planetary dimension of the present crisis will contribute to the rise of new patterns of production and consumption. Even more, it will make us search for a new international economic order. How can any country remain prosperous and at peace while one billion human beings are condemned to languish in deprivation, suffering discrimination and the denial of their own dignity?

We are being forced to become aware of the limits of nature and of the rightful autonomy of nations. The new moral imperative is that the solutions for which we are searching cannot exclude any part of humanity. The need to eliminate hunger precedes politics: it is a basic human need and right. I believe that the self-confidence with which the First World countries impose and sustain their linear model of development is being shaken and the limits for development, whose existence was once denied, are now the subject of discussion.

There is an urgent need to implant a new model of development which does justice to the hungry and to the excluded of the human family and which respects the integrity of creation. The non-governmental organisations and religious institutions could assume the task of producing a minimal body of universal ethical norms, founded not in diplomatic bureaucracy, but on international networks in defence of fundamental principles. In this way we will be able to find new patterns of production and consumption. Domination will be replaced by respect and affection for creation. Bureaucracy and stagnation will be replaced by dynamism in cultural and social relations. Individuals deformed by greed and power will be replaced by people rich in solidarity and communion.

It is true that economy is not controlled by politics and neither are based on ethical values. The reality of hunger, for example, is neither talked nor thought about. The aim of the process of production does not include supplying basic necessities, only guaranteeing and increasing production, usually for export markets. For this reason, the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil, in a pronouncement made before UNCED, criticised the basis and the concepts of the proposition of sustainable development:

Even though it is meant to have an all-embracing effect, reorienting the relations between peoples and between people and nature, sustainable development is still thought out within the economic sphere and it is within this sphere that the social element is thought of, the only new factor being the incorporation of nature in production costs. This reduction of nature to the purely economic is unacceptable. It is much more important to recognise the inherent value of creation than to put a material value on nature.²

For a model of development to be genuinely sustainable, visions which reduce social life to its economic dimensions ought not prevail. If a solution is to be found which will effectively preserve life on the planet, economic ideas will have to be submitted to ethical judgement. Ethics has as its object the analysis of the nature and purpose of our acts. Any definition of social ends which does not wish to be submitted to an ethical judgement is no more than an authoritarian imposition of hidden private goals.

To act ethically is to act with justice. Justice is, simultaneously, the central axis of all moral virtues in private life and the foundation of the ethical norms of public life. On the personal level, the virtue of justice is the internal and subjective disposition which leads a person to fulfil the actions prescribed by law and, through this, to become his or her own master. On the social level, justice furnishes the juridical and political norms which organise social life, guide the correct division of material goods and enforce respect for the common good. Therefore, to have justice as the basis of development, two principles ought to be recognised and respected:

- everybody possesses certain natural rights, rights resulting from the very essence of being human;
- the full and universal citizenship of all people must be assured through just laws and governments which provide and guarantee the basic necessities of the human person.

The first principle recognises the potential of citizenship; the second promotes the practice of citizenship. The application of these two principles does not mean the elimination of all differences due to injustice. Such differences are not metaphysical (first principle), but historical (second principle); therefore the challenge is not to eliminate inequalities, but to place all on the same level of justice.

Finally, it is my understanding that neo-liberalism does not meet ethical demands and suffers from the same evil which it condemns in Marxist economic proposals. Reflection brings me to the conclusion that the actual models of production and consumption of goods derived from nature are anti-ethical.

Faced with the devastation of nature and the increasing poverty and exclusion of millions of people from the Banquet of Life, I would dare to affirm that the model of development of the international economic order is not only

unsustainable, but is also criminal and blasphemous. It tears the roots of life and eliminates hope from the face of the Earth.

Notes

1. World Council of Churches, (1991) 7th Assembly, Canberra, Sub-theme: 'Giver of Life - Sustain Your Creation', p.59.
2. Igreja e a Questão Ecológica, CNBB (1992).