

# SPIRITUALITY & JUSTICE

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We did not speak much about “justice and peace” before the 1960s. The two words came together in the Scriptures (Psalm 85:10-11), but nowhere else. The Second Vatican Council set the agenda for the Church in the Modern World. It was Paul VI that enunciated the truism, “without justice there can be no peace”. The bishops at the 1971 Synod of Bishops stated that “the work of justice is an integral part of the preaching of the Gospel”. Over the last thirty years the Carmelite Family has made important statements about the work of justice as a Carmelite response to what is going on in the world. Most recently, the General Chapter of the Friars, in response to the events of the 11<sup>th</sup> of September in New York and Washington stated:

*We were shocked and profoundly saddened by the terrorist atrocities in the United States of America on 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2001. How can we respond to this depth of disregard for human lives? We look to our faith and to our spiritual resources which hold up to us the sacredness of human life and the primacy of God whose name and image must not be used to serve anything other than God's own will. This tragedy, which is a reflection of the violence that pervades our world, is an invitation to turn again to what our Constitutions say about justice and peace. We must respect the sacredness of all human life and seek to plant seeds of a new humanity.*

In the years numerous members of the Church took up immediately following the Second Vatican Council the interest in the work of justice and peace. People began to believe that the commitment to justice would become stronger and that it would change the world. The 1970's put an end to many hopes. In the face of disappointment and disillusionment some gave up. Others looked for deeper motivations and deeper energies in order to be able to continue. It is at this point that we see the emergence of a very serious consideration of the spirituality of justice and peace. This is evident in theological writings and in the chapters of religious orders and congregations.

## **Part I**

### **I.1 What is Spirituality?**

I take Spirituality to mean both what motivates a person and the way of life that results from that motivation. Insofar as everyone is moved to act by some kind of motivation everyone has a spirituality. We talk about a Christian spirituality because we believe that we are moved by Christ. Christian Spirituality is the domain of the Holy Spirit. It is what happens to us when the Spirit speaks in our hearts. Belief in the reality of a Christian spirituality depends on the belief that God's Spirit acts in the world.

We can see that Christian spirituality is motivation, which comes from Christ, but we still have to recognize that each one of us experiences Christ in a different way and learns from him in a different way. Different Christian spiritualities are different ways of ordering the values of the Gospel to form a way of life that is recognizable, describable, and transmittable: Carmelite, Franciscan, Patristic, Desert, Feminine and so on.

The quest for justice is common to all forms of Christian life. The ways of understanding justice and pursuing it will differ from person to person, from place to place and from community to community.

### **I.2 Levels of motivation**

The spiritual doctrine of St. John of the Cross suggests ways that help to distinguish deeper levels of motivation from the more superficial. The Dark Night of the senses, The Dark Night of the Spirit, and Union mark stages in the purification of motivations. Growth into the maturity of the Christian life is a growth into deeper levels of motivation.

Take any aspect of our lives and examine the motivations that shape it. For example, an examination of how we pray will show that it is possible for people to pray simply because they like to pray. They like the words they read, the songs they sing, the people who share their prayer, the feeling of goodness it gives them, the encounter with God in peace. To pray in this way is a great gift, but prayer is not always like that. It does not give us immediate satisfaction. It can be very dry.

Some people pray because they are convinced of the value of prayer. They believe that prayer is effective: it changes their lives, it brings them into a relationship with God, and it moves them beyond themselves. They believe they have a duty to pray, even when it is dry. To pray in this way is a great gift. It can give meaning and direction to life, but it can also become a source of pride, a system of defense or a false source of security.

Some people pray because God prays in them. It is no longer simply their own desire, or their conviction that is at work. God speaks words to them and draws them into such union with him that all their own faculties are caught up in God. They come to something

deeper than all that they like, and deeper than all that they believe. They have come to union of mind and will with God. This is the contemplative dimension that is capable of affecting every aspect of human life and shapes all human faculties and endeavour.

This same kind of thinking applies to all that we do: our life in community, our commitment to the poor, our work for justice and peace. It is helpful to know why we chose to get involved in the work of justice, just as it is important to know from where our energy comes for this work. The deeper our motivations, the more long lasting and enduring will our commitment be. The Dark Night of the justice and peace worker comes from the need to grow from more superficial motivations into deeper and deeper motivations. This has many implications.

### **I.3 The many faces of Justice**

Justice sounds like a good word until it appears in the title of a military campaign such as Desert Storm or Operation Justice. The English translations of the scriptures often use the word righteousness where we might be inclined to use the word justice. Looking around us it is obvious that there are different ways of understanding what justice means. Here are some of the more commonly held views:

- a) Retributive Justice: This kind of justice demands that the person who does what is good must be rewarded; the person who does what is wrong must be punished.
- b) Distributive Justice: This kind of justice has to do with the needs, the rights and obligations of the human person in society. Society has the responsibility to ensure that each member receives what is necessary for his or her dignified human existence.
- c) Justice as righteousness relates to people's character. It is a quality of the human person. The just person possesses many of the qualities that we associate with goodness and moral rectitude.
- d) Justice is a question of right relationships between people, between people and creation, between people and God. The quest for justice is the effort to build constructive and liberating relationships between all of these. Right relationships are those in which the participants grow as persons. One of the expressions of this kind of justice is what we know as Restorative Justice which is based on the belief that there can be no justice in the case of injury until the injured and injurer have been restored. This restoration comes about when the two parties meet and reveal the truth to one another.
- e) Finally justice can be understood as God's way of being and acting. In God's way of doing things there are all of the other four understandings of justice, but with the added element of gratuitousness. God is always just, but God's justice is something more. We have it in the story of the Good Samaritan and in the story of Job. Divine justice holds out the ideal for us of doing what is over and above, and of a justice that goes beyond our limited view of what is right and just. It is justice without a strict measure, justice with generosity, justice that does all that is required and a little more. Where this justice abounds, joy abounds, all of creation is honoured and safeguarded

and there is peace. It is both God's gift and something for which people have to work. This way of justice always seeks the good. It is always salvific. Therefore the quest for justice in this sense is the effort to know the will of God and to unite our will with God's will. Another way of putting this is to say that justice is our acceptance of the Kingdom of God and our ability to judge everything in the light of the Kingdom.

If we speak of justice in all of these ways, we may have difficulty in distinguishing justice from the other major values of our faith, such as mercy, or love or faith.

In many respects these are all the same. They refer to God's way of relating to us. For St. Paul, love is the virtue that never ends. For St. John, the Evangelist, it is through faith that we know the love of God. Mercy is the way God's love is expressed to a people who depend on him to be saved. The work of Justice is the expression of love that is urgently needed today until true dignity and integration are restored.

#### **I.4 Justice and the poor**

While they are not to be identified there is a very close relationship between what is happening to the poor and the work of justice. We could say that the rich are rich only because of some injustice. It cannot be otherwise if in order to become rich they have taken more than their share of the resources of the world, which though abundant, are still finite. Perhaps this is why Jesus says that is so hard for the rich person to get into heaven. (Mk 10:23-27) Who then are the poor?

We talk about the real poor as the materially poor, those who do not enjoy the good things of the earth, freely and in a measure that is adequate to their human dignity: people who survive from day to day.

Then there are the poor by conviction. They are the people who are not born poor, do not consider themselves to be poor, but choose a life of poverty in order to be close to the poor and share their hopes and their struggle.

Thirdly, we can talk about the poor in spirit, the *anawim*, of the Bible. They are the people who recognize and accept their dependence on God and who serve him faithfully. Because of their openness to God they are promised the Kingdom of God.

There is still another category that we sometimes refer to as the "spiritually poor" which we seem to equate with "the poor in spirit". This is the category of people who have no spiritual anchor, and do not enjoy spiritual consolation. They could better be called the spiritually bereft, spiritually arid, spiritually barren, in order to reserve the term spiritual poverty for that virtue which is proposed as a Gospel value and belongs to those who realize and accept that their lives are shared with others and depend totally on God.

## **I.5 The Cry of the Poor**

There is a cry in the world. It is the cry of every human being. It is also the cry of the whole of creation (Rm 8) God is revealed in the Scriptures as the God who hears the cry of the poor, (Ex 3:8) The cry that we encounter in the scripture and the cry in creation may be related to the cry that St. Paul describes when he talks about the cry that is given by the Holy Spirit, the cry that is too deep for words. (Rm 8:26) To recognize that deepest cry, wherever it occurs, and to listen to it, becomes the definition of the prophetic task of the Christian. There is a cry also deep in the heart of the Gospel, the cry of Jesus, mourning over Jerusalem, searching for God at the moment of death. That too is the cry to which we are called to listen.

## **I.6 The Option for the Poor as an approach to Justice**

This option has become part of how the Catholic Church understands itself. At the time of Vatican II it is said that Pope John XXIII want the council to say something important about the Church of the Poor. Nothing much was said until long afterwards when the option for the poor began to be formulated and despite lots of misgivings and misunderstand, the Church made this option its own. What does it mean: the option means choosing between various possibilities. Where there are clashes of interests my option for the poor will make me stand by the interests of the poor; where there are clashes of wisdoms I will choose the wisdom of the poor; when I have to decide where to invest my resources I will invest them in the poor; where I chose my friends, my friends will be the poor. The option for the poor is God's option and it is the preferred and more effective pathway to evangelisation, moving from the world of the poor to embrace the whole world, as opposed to the more common practice of seeking to move from the world of the rich. Our beginning from the world of the poor, with the urgency of their cry in our ears and hearts, will give the greatest possible impetus to the work of justice in our lives.

## **Part II**

### **II.1 Contemplation, the heart of our spirituality**

We are living at a great time in terms of our consideration of contemplation as the heart of the Christian vocation. By contemplation we mean the journey and the encounter with God that transforms us into ever fuller images and likenesses of God, capable of seeing with the eyes of God and loving with the heart of God. It is the contemplation of a God who reveals God's own identity, with God's way of being, of speaking, and of acting. (Ps 115) In our journey therefore we are taking on more and more the way of God. We are coming to greater union with God and with his way. Those who know God in this way will do justice and live in justice. They will be people who will be incapable of living with injustice. They will abhor the kind of injustice that diminishes the human person, or fails to cultivate the human person as created in the image and likeness of God.

## **II.2 God, images of God, no image of God, and idols.**

While we speak a lot about God, as if we knew God as he really is, we have to recognize that we have no complete image of God, who is beyond all images. Our limited images of God have a great influence on how we practice our faith, how we relate to others, how we approach life. Unquestioned images are capable of becoming idols. In order to know God we have to be open to God's new ways of revealing God's self to us. In the Scriptures we can see three very strong images of God:

### **II.2.a The Lord hears the cry of the poor**

The heart of God was moved by the cry of the poor. This God, who knows the sufferings of his people, has heard their cry and is coming down to save them. (Ex 3). Before acting in the name of justice and love it is important to be like this God, to listen first to the cry of the people, to know their suffering and to have a firm desire for the liberation of the poor. When we listen and respond to the cry of the poor, in an authentic manner, we go through a process of conversion. We become more like God. Where the cry goes unheard, it is harder for people to believe.

### **II.2.b Jesus is the perfect image of God**

The God who comes down to save his people from their oppression, sends his Son, the Incarnate Word, to be the full revelation of who God is. All we could ever want to know of God can be found in Jesus. He who sees me sees the Father (Jn 12:45) He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all Creation (Col 1:15) When we think of our life and how we would like to live it, we have to think of Jesus. When we want to understand and deepen our commitment, we have to think of Jesus' commitment. On very many occasions Jesus spoke of why he had come: I came ..... to do the will of the one who sent me (Jn 12:44-50) ....that you might have life (Jn 10), ... to serve and not be served (Mt 20:28). Jesus performed miracles which reveal how he understood his mission: His miracles were an expression of the presence of the Kingdom of God, an expression of his ability to act out of sheer love, and a sign so that people might believe. Jesus was also an expression of God's option for the poor, by being born as one of them and living among them.

### **II.2.c The Reign of God is at hand (Mk 1:15)**

Jesus made the Reign of God the center of his preaching. This Reign is now a reality, but in such a way that it needs to grow among us. Because of Jesus, even now, the blind begin to see, the lame begin to walk, the deaf begin to hear and Good News is being preached to the poor. The Reign of God embraces the whole of creation as we know it. It is a reign of

justice and truth, holiness and peace, grace, unity and love<sup>1</sup>. What we know of the reign of God allows us to understand what God's will is, and the kind of God in whom we believe. By what we know of the Reign of God we can discern what is good, acceptable and perfect. Belief in the Reign of God drives people on to be its servants and to build up the Reign of God, through the love that has been poured into our hearts (Rm 5:5). Our knowledge of the Reign of God is more than mere information. It implies mission and demands participation and commitment. It promises development, growth, transformation for the individual and for the community.

By working for the Reign of God, we are recognizing that in God's reign the image of God is to be defended, by upholding the dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God, and by opposing all forms of manipulation and abuse where God's name is used to defend causes that have nothing to do with God but are much more directed towards defending limited and selfish financial and political interests which have allowed millions of God's children to die before their time.

### **II.3 Pathways to “saving knowledge: the wisdom of *lectio divina*,**

The ancient method of *lectio divina* offers a model for pursuing deeper knowledge of God and his way, and the acceptance of that knowledge. It is only when we accept that knowledge that we will be transformed by it. It is possible to reject, deny or ignore that knowledge. The four steps of *lectio divina* point to key moments in the growth of our awareness. It is a method that is useful for prayer and for conversation in community. It is also very useful in examining together what is happening in our lives as a method of discernment about our lives and decisions.

The *lectio divina* wisdom and method opens us up to the encounter with God and with our neighbour that is capable of transforming us. The encounter with the world of the poor today stands out as an invitation to just such a transformation. It demands a process of letting go of many things, of moving towards the other with less and less conditions, supports, defenses. If we are prepared to look at the life of the poor with the same intensity and commitment that we have in dwelling upon a text of Scripture then we will be transformed by what we see.

## **Part III**

### **The work of Justice from a Carmelite perspective**

The International Justice and Peace Commission over many years has sought to discover and illustrate the call to justice and peace from a Carmelite perspective. There is very much about our calling that we share with all Christian believers and with all women and men of good will. The reason for identifying our particular perspective is principally to help

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<sup>1</sup> Roman Missal, Preface for the Feast of Christ, the King.

Carmelites realize their full potential in the community of believers and to help complete the work of building up the body based on a fuller appreciation of our own Charism and tradition.

By talking about spirituality and contemplation we have already illustrated elements that are essential to the Carmelite perspective. I would like to highlight here some of the elements we perceive in the Carmelite story.

### **III. 1. Pointers from the Carmelite Rule**

Our story as a religious tradition begins with the Carmelite founding experience that was expressed in the Rule. In the rule we find a wonderful attention to relationship, the relationship among the brothers, and their individual and communal relationship with God. In the light of building just relationships we might like to note the following elements in the Carmelite Rule:

- A life in allegiance to Jesus Christ
- Individuals living in community
- The sharing of goods
- Balance and flexibility
- a choice to be open to and at the service of the surrounding world, indicated by the rules of hospitality and the possession of very simple means of livelihood.
- Silence, as the servant of justice
- Work, after the example and teaching of the apostle Paul
- The “something more” that is promised to the Innkeeper.

### **III.2. The choices made by the first Carmelites**

The early Carmelites made their place of abode a place of welcome. They shared in the vision for their own life. They joined the poverty movements in Europe. They chose to live among the *conversi*, the “menores”. They chose to serve and work in the places that would be given to them by the people.

### **III.3. In Carmelite legislation**

A study made by one of our Brazilian confreres shows the attention to justice that we find in the constitutions of the friars, the constitutions of the cloistered nuns and the constitutions of some of the congregations of sisters.<sup>2</sup> This study concentrates on the two notions of poverty and service.

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<sup>2</sup> A study of Carmelite Constitutions, commissioned for the meeting of Solidaridade, Recife, 2001 and presented by Frei Francisco de Sales.

- Poverty:                   An attitude of simplicity
- A willingness to share
  - A commitment to the “little ones”
  - The law of work as a witness to poverty
- Service:                   Prayer, offered for others, taught to others, in solidarity with others
- Itinerancy, freedom for service
  - Houses as places of welcome, solidarity and love
  - A prophetic presence in the midst of people, reminding people of their identity and responsibility

### **III.4. New ways of talking about Mary and Elijah**

The constitutions of the friars state that in Mary and Elijah we find the examples of all that we hope to be as Carmelites. Many Carmelites today can speak of living in a new relationship with Mary. It is a close and familiar relationship. It is inspired by Mary as she is presented in the Gospel. It relies less on the “privileges” of Mary and looks more to her holiness of life: “The Lord is with you”. This experience is very similar to what St. Therese of the Child Jesus looked for when she talked about her relationship with Mary: Why do I love you, Mary? It may be that a new Mariology will emerge in our family on the basis of such an experience of relationship with Mary.

III.4.a In this new view we can identify characteristics that can inspire our commitment to the work of justice. Mary is,

- A woman of the people, close to her own people, sharing in their hopes, joys and sorrows.
- A woman who listens to the word of God, educated in the ways of wisdom and the prophets
- A prophetic woman
- Our older sister in faith.
- A mother giving birth to and caring for new life.
- A woman who is obedient to God’s will: Mary is always a woman, who ponders what she sees in order to come to the deepest possible acceptance of God’s will and to give the best possible response.

Because of her closeness to us, her example of listening to the Word, and her song of praise to the Lord for his fidelity to his people, Mary is a good companion in the work of justice.

### III.4.b      **Elijah: an opponent of idols**

Our tradition has taken Elijah to be our spiritual father, inspiration and model. The ideal Carmelite Elijah is the solitary prophet, standing in the presence of God, burning with zeal for the Lord, A new approach which is emerging in recent times sees Elijah also in terms of the biblical Elijah, the prophet who stands in opposition to the idolatry of the Kings and strives to rebuild the peoples' sense of self-worth and identity after the destruction wrought by the Kings. The prophet proposes the way of justice, in opposition to idolatry and oppression, the mystical way by which the people would recover their dignity as a people through their trust in the one true God, and the way of solidarity by which the victims of injustice would be cared for and brought back from moral destruction and decay.

### III. 5.      **A Carmelite NGO**

One of the initiatives of recent years is that the General Councils of the two traditions of friars approved a proposal to seek the recognition by the United Nations of a Carmelite NGO. This project has now been developed as a project of the Carmelite Family, spearheaded by the Sisters of the Congregation of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Louisiana) Carmelites now participate in a movement of religious orders and families within the workings of the UN. The belief at the basis of this idea is that the UN is like a new Areopaghus, a new opportunity for missionaries to contribute to the formulation of the thinking that will shape the world in the future. The Carmelite contribution comes for Carmelites' attentiveness to God, their allegiance to Jesus Christ and their experience in building community among all kinds of people.

## **Part IV**

### **The work of justice in a committed Church: the Church is mother and teacher**

As mother the Church does all she can to relieve the sufferings of her children. As teacher she teaches a doctrine that will help people to live in such a way that her children will not have to live as the victims of the injustices of others.

Some of the principal elements in the social teaching of the Catholic Church:

- The work of justice is an integral part of the preaching of the Gospel.
- The dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God, is not possible without due respect for the person's, rights, obligations and talents.
- The universal destiny of the goods of the earth. The world contains all the resources it needs so that every woman and man may live peacefully. The problem is the bad distribution of the goods of the earth.
- Solidarity is the new name for love. Love is possible where people come close to one another with the desire to share the goods they have received. Those who choose to

live in solidarity choose to share the plight of the poor as they await the coming of their liberation.

- There is both social holiness and social sin, because of the way that society can have a great influence on the life of each of its members, for good or for evil.
- The option for the poor as the preferred way of understanding the Gospel
- Peace is not possible without justice. Where relationships are right/correct there will be peace. Where relationships are not constructed and respected, whatever peace there is, is bound to be superficial and very temporary.

All of these elements are given to us as truths that shape our thinking, our approach to life and hence our spirituality. Acceptance of them and belief in the truth of them shapes our motivation. With such clear and consistent teaching in the Church we might often wonder, how come the commitment of Christians or Catholics to the work of justice can sometimes appear to be so unconvincing and so uninspired. I have an idea it is a question of what system of values we allow to shape our lives. So often our motivations are a great mixture of the best of the Gospel with the best of what a sometimes alien secular society has to offer. When these two do not mix very well, we have to know how to choose. "If you want to be my disciples, renounce your own self-centred interests, take up your Cross and follow me".

## **Conclusion**

Our covenant relationship with God, as announced by the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah, declares that we are God's people and Yahweh is our God. In this relationship, we receive knowledge of the Father, the law of God is written on our hearts, our sins are forgiven and the Spirit of God penetrates our hearts. It is this closeness to God that makes desire the justice of God for all his people and for the whole of creation. It is the Spirit speaking in our hearts that enables us to see the need for justice, to hear the cry of all creation and to commit ourselves to the work of justice. The words of the 1971 Synod of Bishops, that the work of justice is an integral part of the preaching of the Gospel, remain as a challenge to any approach to spirituality that would suggest that the commitment to justice is one thing and spirituality is another and they are separate.