

Final version

Solidarity in a Time of Crisis

Message from the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions

Introduction

“Sooner or later, the distortions produced by unjust systems have to be paid for by everyone”. This warning was issued by Pope Benedict XVI in his message for World Day of Peace 2009, which took the theme of “fighting poverty to build peace”. The current global financial crisis would appear to demonstrate the truth of that assertion, impacting on all levels of our society. Those already living in poverty continue to suffer and are experiencing even greater insecurity as a result of cuts to essential social services and Overseas Development Aid. At the same time those who were wealthy have not escaped its consequences, with rising levels of unemployment, loss of savings and crippling levels of personal debt leading to a situation where many people are experiencing poverty for the first time in their lives. As we are all more aware of our own vulnerability there is a temptation to lose sight of the demands of justice and the common good. While this may be understandable, it must be resisted. Our only hope of achieving a long-term response to the crises we currently face is through a renewed commitment to solidarity and cooperation on a global scale.

The global financial crisis has proved to be a powerful reminder of the destructive potential of unregulated economic growth and models of development that fail to address issues of inequality and social justice. As Pope Benedict XVI has observed: ‘As society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbors but does not make us brothers’ (*Caritas in Veritate*, No. 19). In short, at the heart of the problem is greed, at both an individual and institutional level, and a total disregard for the common good and well-being of others. Above all, the crisis serves as a clear demonstration of the ever-increasing inter-dependence between nations, and the extent to which the well being of individuals, societies and nations is inextricably linked to the protection of the most vulnerable at both a national and international level. While our preoccupation with the financial crisis is understandable however, it should not be allowed to mask the other serious – and often inter-related – crises that continue to threaten the promotion of integral human development today, including food, water, natural resources, energy, climate change, war and the ongoing nuclear threat. The resolution of these crises can only be achieved by cooperation on a global scale based on the principle of solidarity.

Recognizing the need to address the inequality, which persists in European nations in spite of the prosperity experienced in recent years, the EU has designated 2010 as the year for the eradication of poverty and social exclusion. This is now taking place against the backdrop of economic recession, rising unemployment, and fear, insecurity and uncertainty for the future. The theme is more relevant than ever before as we are faced with difficult economic choices and those who benefited least from the progress of recent years stand to pay the heaviest price during the current crisis. We are also five years from the deadline for the completion of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) proclaimed by the United Nations, inspired by the desire to build a better world for all. There is now a real danger that these targets and aspirations will be marginalized as the more developed nations focus on their own domestic problems, losing sight of the wider global picture (cf. *The Millennium Development Goals Report*, United Nations, 6 July 2009).

The present paper, from the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions, is not intended as a technical analysis of current economic realities; instead, it seeks to outline some of the key values that should inform our reflections on this issue and highlight the principle challenges that need to be addressed if we are to build a better future for all. The Christian response to the challenges arising from globalization lies in the promotion of human dignity, the common good and integral human development.

Crucially, despite the devastating consequences of the financial crisis, the present time is not without hope. Indeed, it presents us with a valuable, and necessary, opportunity for reflection. As we search for a way forward out of the current crisis we have the opportunity to reaffirm the centrality of these values which have become obscured by the profit-driven focus of recent years.

Spirituality: Gospel in Action

In the debate on the way forward out of the financial crisis, the spiritual dimension is frequently dismissed or ignored. It is vital, however, that this spiritual element, clearly articulated by the Holy Father in his message for World Day of Peace 2009, is not forgotten. Particular emphasis was placed in this message on the threat to the dignity of the human person resulting from the inadequate living conditions that have been imposed on individuals, families and communities throughout our world. The Pope concluded by extending to “every disciple of Christ and to every person of good will a warm invitation to expand their hearts to meet the needs of the poor and to take whatever practical steps are possible in order to help them.”

As Christians, we are called to put into action the values of the Gospel we believe in. These values were clearly expressed by Jesus in the Beatitudes, a call to show love for the poor and the victims of injustice. Our response to God’s love belongs to this spirituality, and how we let it influence our way of living. It is about living what we believe in. Gospel in action is spiritual as well as material in application. This spirituality has to be practiced in the context of our modern world, a world that has long been marked by deep-seated inequalities and is now in the midst of one of the worst economic crises ever. A focus on the spiritual dimension of this problem reminds us of our responsibility to live in solidarity with the poor, both in our own countries and in other continents.

The most urgent and dramatic problems facing humanity today are linked to systems, structures, and social, economic and political practices that ignore the needs and the rights of the most vulnerable, and damage the common good. The right to a dignified life and decent living conditions is a human right. True development can only be carried out with and by the people themselves (*Justice in the World*, World synod of Catholic bishops, 1971). We in the developed countries need to recognize the obligation, not only to provide material aid to those in the less-developed parts of the world, but also to respect the right of those in developing countries to participate as equals in decisions that affect them.

The compassion for the poor and all those who are suffering obliges the Christian community to be an active presence in those areas where human dignity is threatened, for example through poverty, injustice, violence and war. We, as Christians, are challenged to promote a unity based on the hope that is founded on the Gospel put into action. A focus on the Gospel imperative to serve the needs of the poor and most vulnerable prevents us from despair and passivity and will inspire us to become active participants committed to the aim of shaping a more just and fair society.

Solidarity

“A society that wishes and intends to remain at the service of the human being at every level is a society that has the common good – the good of all people and the whole person – as its primary goal.”
(*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, N° 165)

Solidarity, as defined in the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church, is not just sharing in times of affluence, but primarily a fair distribution of the goods of the earth. At a time of economic crisis, it is more important than ever to emphasize the value of solidarity. Solidarity is not about abstract thoughts or wishes. It is embedded in the common good of all nations. Solidarity can be achieved on different levels: in our own countries, the rest of the world, and the environment in which we live. Solidarity is about working towards a quality of life where all people can flourish. It is not merely a question of successful economic activity but refers instead to a process which puts at its core the dignity of the human person.

All economic activity should be at the service of all human beings. Thus wealthy nations, and indeed individuals, need to reflect on how they can share “the fruits of creation” with others. We need to work towards a situation of sustainable economic growth, in which inequalities within and between nations are reduced and in which our environment is respected. If we fail to respond to the new challenges such as scarcity of natural resources and climate change, in a spirit of social justice and international solidarity, we run the risk of sowing seeds of violence between current generations and those to come (Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 43rd World Day of Peace, 1 January 2010).

The Millennium Development Goals are challenging us to be in solidarity with the poor in the southern hemisphere. In 2015 these goals must be attained. This is not an end in itself but a major step towards a more just world. Solidarity demands that donor countries allocate sufficient resources to development aid, provide debt cancellation for poor countries and ensure equitable trade access, in line with the Millennium Development Goals. The current economic difficulties faced by European countries at a national level cannot be used as an excuse to renege on commitments made to the developing world. Broken promises on our side have resulted in a shift of responsibilities and unfair burdens on the most vulnerable populations.

Lately, many European countries have been faced with the challenge of migration. This calls for solidarity nearer to home. Our starting point for any discussion on the theme of migration must be the vital contribution made by migrant workers to both the countries in which they work and their countries of origin. Consequently, there is an obligation to ensure that migrants are treated justly: “Every migrant enjoys inalienable fundamental rights which must be respected in all cases” (*Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* N° 5, Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People).

It is equally important, however, to recognise, as Pope Benedict has done, ‘the burden of suffering, the dislocation and the aspirations that accompany the flow of migrants’ (*Caritas in Veritate* N° 62). There is a need to address the unjust structures and economic inequality that oblige people to leave their home country, and often their families, to work abroad. At the same time, we in Europe have a responsibility to make our countries welcoming places for those who arrive in search of a better life. Currently, our border policies (as outlined in the EU’s Frontex and Eurosur policies) are conditioned primarily by a fear that seeks to keep those in need as far from our doors as possible. In some cases we have even gone so far as to withhold development aid as a penalty for the failure by governments of developing nations to cooperate with these policies and block the entry of migrants into Europe. Only solidarity will enable us to reshape barriers into meeting places where we can meet as brothers and sisters.

Fairness

An assessment of the current distribution of the world's wealth and use of its natural resources leads to the inescapable conclusion that the current state of affairs is not sustainable. It is unacceptable and unfair that a small minority of the world's population use up the vast majority of the world's resources. It is thus incumbent on national governments and international bodies like the EU and the UN to work towards the achievement of practices that protect the needs of the most vulnerable and promote the common good on a global scale.

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church states: "The responsibility for attaining the common good, besides falling to individual persons, belongs also to the State, since the common good is the reason that political authority exists" (N° 168). What this implies is that we as individuals have a responsibility to support political initiatives aimed at the promotion of the common good. At a national level, we must also hold our governments to account in the areas of poverty eradication and the protection of human rights. At an international level we need to scrutinize the actions of our governments, ensuring that they fulfill their international obligations, recognizing the right of all the world's nations to development. For some nations the consequences of climate change are proving a significant obstacle to their development. There is thus an obligation on developed countries to support them in tackling this problem, taking into account the political and economic constraints they face. Development targets must support the economic, political, social and cultural advancement of man and of humanity as a whole.

The question of fairness raised here is not merely a technical one, requiring solutions at a governmental level. It is essentially a question of personal life choices. We cannot close our eyes to the negative impact of our consumer culture both on those parts of the world most susceptible to the consequences of climate change and on the generations to come. The challenge to translate feelings of solidarity into action and work for the common good requires that each one of us assesses how the way we live and use the earth's natural resources impacts on others, especially the most vulnerable. It is our duty and our responsibility.

There are already many positive examples of solidarity put into action within our societies to which we can lend our support. These include: fair-trade initiatives, cooperative economic models, social entrepreneurship and micro-credit schemes. In addition to these concrete actions of solidarity there is a need to look beyond the immediate needs of the poor and vulnerable, questioning and examining the structures that perpetuate poverty and injustice. Growth at any price is not a desirable principle for the promotion of the common good. Solidarity needs to be a guiding principle in all areas of economic activity, placing the needs of human beings above the demands of the market.

Conclusion

"As long as you do this to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it to me." (Matthew 25:40)

In conclusion, we echo the call of Pope Benedict XVI "to meet the needs of the poor and to take whatever practical steps are possible in order to help them." This is a call to show real solidarity, a solidarity that is rooted in Gospel values and inspired by the message and example of Jesus.

We need capital investment to sustain and drive the economy to create means for further development. But "economic activity cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of *commercial logic*. This needs to be directed towards the pursuit of the common good" (*Caritas in Veritate* N° 36). Authentically human social relationships of friendship, solidarity and reciprocity can also be conducted within economic activity, and not only outside it or "after" it. "The economic sphere is neither ethically neutral, nor inherently

inhuman and opposed to society. It is part and parcel of human activity and precisely because it is human, it must be structured and governed in an ethical manner” (*Caritas in Veritate* N° 36).

This is possible through the spirit of the Eucharist that teaches us to break down the boundaries between peoples and groups of people. There is no longer “us” and “them”. We can live this spirit of the Eucharist in the present situation, to help rich and poor alike, to realize everyone’s equality, dignity as human beings, interdependence and common destiny in God.

Above all, we should not underestimate our own ability to bring about change. While it may be undeniable that the problems we currently face demand solutions on a global scale, we all have the capacity to exert our influence in favor of the common good on a number of levels: through political activity, through the lifestyle choices we make and through our day-to-day contacts with others.

Recommendations

In this, the European year for the eradication and social exclusion, the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions makes an appeal to all European nations to:

- Take more effective measures to fight against poverty and social exclusion, recognizing that this is as essential to the future of all nations as the protection of the financial system.
- Introduce a system of standards and regulations that would ensure that economic and financial activity are not conducted to the detriment of human development and in contradiction of our obligations in terms of international solidarity.
- Encourage transparency by establishing an international standard or label that would be awarded to companies who sign up to the above norms and regulations.
- Introduce a tax (of approximately 0.005%) on financial transactions to generate income which would be dedicated to Overseas Development Aid.
- Promote a development policy that fosters the best conditions for decent work and life in all countries.
- Remove unfair conditions attached to development aid, such as the insistence that African developing countries cooperate with Frontex (the EU border control agency).
- Continue to set an example for developed countries through measures to address and reduce the causes of climate change.
- Support developing countries in their efforts to address climate change through the provision of sufficient resources, taking into account the restraints they face in terms of their capacity to deal with the consequences.

For more information contact:

The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions (Justice and Peace Europe or CEJPC) is a European network that today regroups 31 national Justice and Peace commissions. Each one is established or recognized by its Catholic bishops’ conference. The secretariat of CEJPC is currently

situated in Paris (France).