

Sunday, May 1st, 2016, Sixth Sunday in Easter

Readings: Acts 6:9-15, Psalm 67, Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5, John 14:23-29

Development: The New Word for Peace

Introduction

In 1967 Paul VI authorized the papal social encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, interpreted in English as “On Human Development”. Paul VI was perhaps the greatest pope of the 20th century, putting flesh onto the dramatic initiatives of his predecessor John XXIII who had initiated the reforming Council Vatican II. In a sense the current pope Francis I sits in the tradition of John XXIII and Paul VI with his attitude of progressive openness to the world, a desire to engage in a conversation with the world, not dogmatic opposition to it. It was in *Populorum Progressio* that Paul made the very modern point that the new word for peace is development, the development of *all* peoples, not just *some*: of African, Asian, Latin American and Pacific communities, not just European. In fact without it, he contended, peace in any genuine sense, certainly in any Christian sense would be impossible. *Only the development of all peoples within and between communities and nations could lead to a peaceful world.*

This was exactly the view of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who incidentally was appointed by Paul VI to be archbishop of the diocese of San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador in Central America. Historically dominated by the so-called *catorce familias* (*14 families*), the Salvadoran elites were not ready to agree: peace, a ‘peace’ of sorts, a peace for the few on the backs of the many, a peace reinforced by state violence; had already existed for generations since the Spanish conquest; and was seared into the collective memory of the masses with the name *la matanza* (*the great murder*).

In the film clip of *Romero*,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XS0yf_Je1Xw&list=RDXS0yf_Je1Xw, we see the early stages of the escalating conflict between the archbishop and the elites in 1977, which finally led to civil war during the 1980s. Weeks before, the military had assassinated the Jesuit priest, Rutilio Grande, who had been heading up a new form evangelization in the town of Aguilares encouraging the people to an increasing critical awareness of the problems of injustice. Under the code name of *Operation Rutilio*, the military made a sweep of the countryside around Aguilares with tanks and aircraft, finally taking over the town and most significantly the local church. Romero travelled to Aguilares and retook possession of that church in the terms that the film depicts. It was Romero who not long before his assassination in 1979, coined the phrase, *the glory of God is that the poor live*: that development, the modern form of peace be shared by all, be inclusive of all.

The Text

Let’s now look at the readings for today for they both focus upon peace but they have also been variously interpreted depending upon the fashions of the times

Revelation is an awkward book, the favourite of fundamentalist sects leading to all manner of craziness. In essence it is a book of theological and political imagination, of protest, a book that understands all too well the violence of the powers of this world, especially the state. Revelation, in letting loose on the Roman Empire and its systemic violence, conjures up an alternative vision of peace: the peace of the lamb, real peace, the peace for all people, not just some at the expense of others. For Revelation a new world is entirely possible through the grace of God and human willingness.

In John's Gospel, a more familiar reading referred to as Jesus' farewell discourse before he ascends to be with the Father, we discover the words given to the disciples and the Christian community about peace. *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives I give to you.* Often the meaning given is that Jesus offers an internal peace, a personal peace, a spiritual peace to the individual believers as they fess up as a minority to the likelihood of state persecution, to the violence of state peace, to the pugnaciousness of the peace of Rome. But the meaning is other than that I think. Jesus the Hebrew understands peace, *shalom*, in the first instance as a social thing, a thing between peoples, a relational thing. So, the distinction between the peace he offers and the peace the world offers, the peace he offers and the peace Rome offers, is not one of spiritual versus political, individual versus state; but rather the difference lies in peace's extent and nature: that is peace's extent as being inclusive of all people, and peace's nature in positively excluding violence.

There is then, because of Jesus' position, the strong conviction in the early Christian community, including the Gospel of John, that any genuine human construction and application of peace that flows from his memory and spirit, cannot be just any peace, but must be *for all* and must eschew *violence*: This is the sort of peace to which Paul VI alluded in his statement about peace and development; the sort of peace for which Oscar Romero ultimately died.

Some Thoughts

May I conclude with two observations about peace and development: the first a *developing* world version and the second a *developed* world version

Developing World: Peace as Exclusive of the Majorities

This modern but also biblical view of genuine peace as being *inclusive* is absolutely necessary for the developing world since what characterises it is *exclusiveness* to the point of death: either through class (as in Latin America), tribe (as in Africa) or religious identity as in the Middle East. Some years ago, I was involved in the negotiation of aid/developmental agreements on behalf of the Uniting Church and AusAID, the then Australian government aid agency, in among other places, South Sudan. South Sudan carries the quintessential marks of exclusivity, for a range of historical reasons, because many tribal communities compete for scarce resources: especially land and cattle. I wrote at that time in a blog,

For peace and development to be genuine, it must be inclusive of all. In this new nation above all that means that the divisive and violent question of tribal identity where the affirmation of one means the denial of another must be addressed over time by the international and local community. Good development as a bridge to peace has to include all tribes, especially: the Dinka, Nuer, and the Murle in their diversity. If these people cannot live together they will surely die at each other's hands.

Developed World: Peace as Exclusive of Minorities

In the developed world peace and development are also elusive but in more subtle ways. While in El Salvador and South Sudan enmities are endemic between classes or tribal groups; *the violence of all against all*; in the developed world democracies, inclusive peace is broken by the violence against *some* not all, in particular innocent groups who are deemed to be guilty. It is a lesser load of violence than in the developing world, but it is violence all the same, and disturbing, because these groups have no means for defence, no way back. In the 1990s I wrote for the bishops and leaders of the National Council of Churches on asylum seeker and refugee policy. The churches at that time, universally opposed mandatory detention of asylum seekers established by the Keating government for three basic reasons: first, the violence imposed upon these people as detainees, objectified in one way or

another as guilty of something. Second, what that would do to the fabric of our own democracy as we violated those international agreements to which we were signatories. Third, that this would be a slippery slope to even worse policy, even to off-shore detention. Today we are at that point! The physical and psychological punishment of people: men, women and children who are slowly crucified in off-shore detention, is killing not just them but us. When we exclude them from the gift of peace, we exclude ourselves; when we demean and diminish them, we demean and diminish ourselves. The measure of our developed-ness, of our peaceful-ness is our capacity for inclusion! The measure of Easter is that life be accessible, be offered to all!



Pope Paul VI (1897-1978)
Pontificate: June 21st, 1963 – August 6th, 1978



An image in a street march in downtown San Salvador of
Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero (1917-1980)
Assassinated by death squads, March 24th, 1980



Two young girls, detained at the Australian Government's pleasure on Nauru