

***Pacem in Terris*, 40 Years After: Human Rights and Practical Action**

Mateo Garr, S.J.

Pope John XXIII's encyclical letter on peace in the world, *Pacem in Terris*, was published 40 years ago, April 11th, 1963. Our current pope, John Paul II, in his annual letter for World Peace Day, January 1st, 2003, asked the local churches to commemorate Pope John's encyclical in some special way. The following Beckman Lecture on Catholic Belief and Practice was presented at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio on April 10, 2003.

Why Did Pope John XXIII Write *Pacem in Terris*?

The first reason is because the Cuban missile crisis had happened a few months before John XXIII wrote the letter, and the bishops suggested to him that as Pope he should try to say something to prevent the world from blowing itself apart in an east-west conflict. That is one reason.

In addition he also saw that the institutional church was a late arrival on the human rights' scene. The United Nations had proclaimed its *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* a decade and a half before, and if the church really wanted to be open to dialogue with the world, then it would be necessary to get on board.

I personally think he had a third reason: The first session of Vatican II had finished a few months before, and that session seemed to have accomplished almost nothing. I believe that good Pope John knew in his heart if not in his mind that he did not have much time to live (he died two months later), and so he wanted to give the bishops a wake up call.

Mateo Garr, S.J. is the Assistant Director of the Social Action Commission of the Peruvian Catholic Bishops' Conference in Lima, Peru and held the Beckman Chair in Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati for the spring semester of 2003. This summary article originally appeared in *Blueprint for Social Justice*, (December, 2003) and is reprinted here with permission.

While the inspiration for the encyclical was his own, the idea of writing it did not spring fully formed from his mind. He had help. Nor am I referring to the fact that most of the encyclicals are actually written by theological *periti* who can faithfully reflect the pope's mentality. His sources were much deeper than that.

How Do the Popes Write Social Encyclicals Anyway?

Church social teaching is traditionally defined as the application of universal moral principles to specific reality. It is a top-down deductive process. But even the earliest encyclicals like Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 or Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931 were not written in a vacuum. Those popes were concerned with the loss of the working classes to apparently anti-religious socialism, and they were also concerned with the fact that industrial capitalism treated those workers as merchandise and did not even provide them with sufficient salary so that their families could live a decent life.

The popes in those days were not out on the streets with the impoverished people of Rome to experience their suffering first hand. Nor indeed were most of the bishops. But at least the bishops were hearing about those conditions from many of their pastors who lived among the poor, and the bishops for their part were sharing that experience with the pope. In other words there has always been a process by which the people themselves participate, at least indirectly, in the formation of what the institutional church teaches on social issues.

John Paul II talked about that in his most recent social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, (1991, n.4):

“The pope (Leo XIII) also drew inspiration from the teaching of his predecessors as well as from the many documents issued by bishops, from scientific studies promoted by members of the laity, from the work of Catholic movements and associations, and from the church's practical achievements in the social field during the second half of the 19th century.”

Over the last few decades that **indirect** participation is becoming increasingly more **direct**. Charles Curran, in his recent study on Catholic social teaching,¹ points out that not only has the **content** of the church's social *magisterium* evolved as it reflects on the changing

¹ Charles E Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis* (Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C., 2002).

social reality, but in fact what has really changed is the **method** itself: while its roots go back much further, it was right about the time of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council that the deductive methodology of church social teaching began to change to one of **historical consciousness** which gives more stress to the particular and the contingent, and employs a bottom-up, inductive methodology. This is no more apparent than in Paul VI's teaching.

It is not a leap from the grass roots' community to the papal doorstep. It goes through a whole process. Perhaps the most official description of the way that process ought to work is what Pope Paul VI said about it in his 1971 apostolic exhortation, *Octogesima Adveniens* (n. 4):

"In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for me to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not my ambition, nor is it my mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words and for action from the social teaching of the church."

How Do the Local Communities Analyze Their Lived Situation?

The well-known method, of course, is **see-judge-act** which, although made famous by liberation theology in the sixties and the seventies, actually has a more orthodox origin. Pope John XXIII talks about it in n. 236 of his 1961 social encyclical *Mater et Magistra* and describes it as the method employed by European Catholic Action since several decades before.

But before analyzing in more detail how the process works in practice, let's get back to *Pacem in Terris* and see what practical effect it produced:

Bryan Hehir² proposed that one of the most important effects of Pope John's encyclical was to provide a license, a motivation for local Catholic groups to get involved in direct human rights work. The encyclical was written in 1963. A year later Brazil experienced a military *coup d'état* and the repression of many political and social leaders. It was an organization of church people that came to the defense of the victims and their families. Those who suffered arbitrary detention, torture,

² J. Bryan Hehir, "The Ministry of Human Rights and Catholic Higher Education." Excerpts from the Vincentian Chair of Social Justice Address delivered during Founder's Week at St. John's University, January, 1996.

extrajudicial executions, and those who became the *desaparecidos* were all helped by people from the Christian communities.

The story of the church activity that occurred in Brazil was repeated over the next four decades in Chile with its justifiably famous Vicariates of Solidarity, in El Salvador and in Guatemala with their Archdiocesan human rights offices, in Peru and Bolivia, more recently in Colombia and Venezuela, and in other ways in almost all the other countries on the continent. The only tragic exceptions were Cuba and Argentina.

A Concrete Example: Our Experience in Peru

Let me describe in a little more detail what happened in Peru, since I was and am a direct witness there. Most of you know that during the 1980's and the early part of the 90's, Peru suffered from an internal war with a Maoist revolutionary group called *Sendero Luminoso*, the Shining Path. Indeed, a terrorist group by any other name could not have been more brutal and indiscriminate in its actions. The *senderistas* soon gave up any attempt to convince the local peasants by rational means to join in their effort. They imposed their will by force. And those who disagreed were either killed or formed part of the hundreds of thousands of displaced persons.

The problem was serious enough that after a couple of years, the government called in the armed forces to restore order. The problem with using the army for internal uprisings is that the military are not trained like the police to maintain or restore order. They are trained to see the other side as the enemy. One would think that the military could have entered into dialogue with the local population in order to form a common front against the terrorists. But the Peruvian military officers followed the French strategy from Algeria and Viet Nam, a strategy which they learned from the U. S. military at the School of the Americas, and their concrete tactic boiled down to this: "If the people join the terrorists because they are afraid of the terrorists, then we'll make them even more afraid of us so that they will join us." All that this produced was to place the peasants between two fires, to deny them neutrality, and in the practice to make them choose the apparent lesser of two evils which was terrorism.

In the area where I lived in the central Peruvian mountains, terrorism only arrived in the late 1980s. We naïvely thought, or at least hoped, that the terrorists would bypass our region because the people were more organized than in many other places. We neglected to realize

that the *senderistas* were not coming to dialogue with us. It only took a couple of selective assassinations until the rest of the local authorities resigned from their positions, and all of the local political and social organizations, including those formed by the parish, ceased to exist. The terrorists had “pacified” the area.

The police and the army did not come in to defend the people. They only made occasional forays in order to arrest anyone whom they found suspicious, which meant any former political leader or social organizer or the relatives of suspected terrorists. Their tactic was to pick up these suspects and take them to an army base where the armed forces played the role of police, judge, jury, and unfortunately, executioner.

What we did as a parish was repeated in many places around the country. We hired our own lawyer, and whenever a family member would report to us that their son or daughter or brother or sister had been picked up by the police, we went with the lawyer to the local jails and army bases and tried to discover where our people were being held. The whole point was to act quickly to prevent them becoming part of the *desaparecidos*. Frankly, at the beginning we did not even stop to ask who might be innocent and who might be guilty. The important thing was to save lives. We let the people in the parish know that we would be willing to accompany any victim’s family to help them find out what had happened. We even joked that the peasant population learned some Latin as a result. My own thesis is that people only discover what their human rights are when one or another of those rights is forcibly removed. That is how our peasant population learned what *habeas corpus* means.

Moving From the Local to the Regional Level and to the National Scene

The work of accompanying the victims and their families soon became the only task that we (myself first and then the Jesuits who replaced me) were involved in. Similar situations were occurring in other places in the archdiocese. Our Archbishop, Emilio Vallebuona (may God be good to him) went through a sort of conversion analogous to what happened to Oscar Romero in El Salvador. I remember his very words, “If our parishes are being attacked by both the terrorists **and** the army, then it must be that we are doing **something** right!” So he set up an archdiocesan human rights office and hired our parish lawyer to work full time on all of the cases that were presented.

What happened in our archdiocese was happening all over the country. Between 1985 and 1992 more than 25 diocesan human rights of-

fices were established all over Peru with the double task of attending to the immediate social and legal cases of the victims and their families and, secondly, of offering a human rights education to anyone who was willing to listen—the police included.

The social action commission of the national Peruvian bishops' conference, the place where I currently work, took on the task of coordinating the regional efforts, of assuming the legal cases which reached the national judiciary, and of course, looking for the funds so that the local offices could continue to function on a full time basis.

There are now more than sixty human rights organizations that form part of the umbrella organization of the Peruvian Human Rights Coordinating Commission, and more than half of them are Christian groups.

The End of Terrorism Did Not Mean the End of Human Rights Work

In 1992, as a result of good police investigation work, the head of *Sendero Luminoso* was captured. That terrorist organization was so hierarchical in its functioning that soon the body died away. That, and the fact that the military had finally learned to work with the local peasant communities in the efforts at pacification, meant that most of the external violence ended by 1993.

A normal reaction after such a catastrophic experience is that people want to forget about those terrible years. Nevertheless the human rights organizations continue to carry on legal battles to achieve acquittal for those who have been unjustly condemned to prison, just as they also are cooperating with Peru's ongoing Truth and Reconciliation Commission to bring to trial those people on both sides of the conflict who were guilty of massacres.³ Some of the organizations, with the help of such international groups as the Sant'Egidio community from Rome, are trying to develop models of reconciliation.

But since Peru was no longer considered to be a dangerous place, many of the generous sources of funds, especially from European Catholic organizations, began to dry up. A similar situation happened in

³ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission handed its final report over to the Peruvian government on August 28, 2003. See their webpage <<http://www.cverdad.org.pe/ingles/ifinal/index.php>>.

Chile where, after the return to democratic government, the *Vicarías de Solidaridad* were reduced to their minimal expression.

Fortunately, what happened in Peru and in several other countries, was the ability of the human rights organizations to widen the scope of their operations from a sole concern for the protection of political and civil rights to include a more integral vision which covers social, economic, and cultural rights too. So the same organizations that were started in the mid-eighties, without neglecting their original platforms, are now also concerned with issues such as the ecological rights of the peasant communities affected by the major mining corporations or also issues such as prisoners' rights, workers' rights, and even international issues such as the reduction of the foreign debt. But that is a story for another day.

From the Human Rights Experience to Further Development of Church Social Teaching

To conclude, we will now examine how that human rights movement, inspired originally by John XXIII's encyclical, has come full circle: The movement offers a deeper development to the church's own message.

The Latin American church counts on a continent-wide institution which allows the many national churches a forum for sharing their experiences. That is the Latin American Bishops' Council, known by its Spanish abbreviation of CELAM. The CELAM **council** is the institution that organized the Latin American Bishops' **Conferences** in Medellín, Puebla, and Santo Domingo. Those are **Conferences** which normally meet every decade or so. The CELAM **council** on the other hand is a permanent organization with its headquarters in Bogotá Colombia. Bishops, clergy, and laypeople are invited by their local churches to be representatives for a constant series of activities sponsored by CELAM. One of these, the social pastoral office, holds regular meetings on human rights and church social teaching to which representatives of all of the countries are invited.

In 1993 a group of the representatives began to share what their own experiences with the ministry of human rights had been. They were surprised to discover how similar their work had been over the whole continent. Even more so they came to realize that during the years of political violence, the ministry of human rights not only occupied most of their time **quantitatively** but indeed also provided a **qualitative** focus for all of their social ministry. In other words, even when they were not working specifically on a human rights case, like for example

when they were giving parish courses in church social teaching, the focus on human rights became the unifying principle of their efforts.

Could that be a universal experience? What they decided to do was to convoke a continent-wide encounter on the topic of human rights ministry and ask that very question. Representatives from 19 Latin American countries met in Lima in 1994. At the conclusion of their experience, they formulated the following hypothesis: “Human rights ministry on our continent is not simply one of many ways of being involved in the church’s social apostolate. It is rather the unifying principle of all of our social commitment”.

What they decided to do was return to their own countries and try to prove or question that hypothesis. The issue was not limited to asking whether they were involved in direct human rights work. It went beyond that. The deeper issue was to ask the people who were involved, for example, in prison ministry or in hospital ministry, or those who worked with community development programs or in justice and peace work, what role human rights played in their pastoral view. If the question were asked, do people make explicit reference to human rights in their ministry, then only a minority could answer in the affirmative. But, on the other hand, if the same people were asked whether the basic principles of human rights—the dignity of the human person, the social nature of human beings, the need to have one’s basic human needs fulfilled—if those principles had anything to do with their work in prisons and hospitals and adult literacy programs, and so forth, then the answer was a resounding “*sí*”.

Another concrete “impact indicator” for the presence of a human rights perspective is to examine if people who are involved in social ministry also consider that lobbying for legislative change is an important part of their apostolate. What the human rights movement in the whole world attempts to accomplish is to move from a general acceptance of the **ideals** of human rights to the creation of **practical** legislation within each country to assure the reality of those ideals. If the persons who are involved in prison ministry, for example, in addition to their attention to the inmates themselves, are also trying to raise the consciousness of the public in general and are trying to press for juridical support of the prisoners’ basic rights, then it is true to say that they are involved in the work of human rights.

In 1997 representatives, this time from 24 countries on the continent, including the U.S. and some observers from Catholic organizations in Europe, met again in Lima to share the results of their surveys. The

fact that they confirmed their hypothesis was not simply limited to an academic conclusion. It is like St. Paul who said, “since we are reconciled, let’s be reconciled.” In other words, since human rights forms something akin to the backbone of all of our social ministry, then we should work to make sure that the perspective of human rights really becomes the backbone of all of our social ministry. The conclusion of the CELAM encounter was the *magna carta* for bringing human rights into the mainstream of the church on the continent. No longer could conservatives within the church or politicians outside of the institutional church accuse us of being involved in something that religious people should better leave to the secular world.

On to the International Level Too

1998, the year after the second CELAM encounter on human rights, was the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the part of the United Nations. Pope John Paul II himself considered it an important enough event that he dedicated his message for world peace day on January first, both in 1998⁴ and 1999⁵, to commemorating that declaration. In fact, the dignity of the human person is perhaps the principal contribution that the Pope has made to the whole corpus of church social teaching. It is, for example, the central point he makes in this year’s letter for world peace day⁶, the very one that asks us to commemorate blessed John XXIII’s encyclical on that topic, *Pacem in Terris*.

In July of that year the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace organized the first World Congress on Human Rights. I would like to say that the thesis of the Latin American conferences about the essential nature of human rights for all of social ministry formed the groundwork for that Congress. But, unfortunately, that would not be true. Nevertheless the Pope’s talk to the delegates on that occasion reaffirmed his own commitment to the apostolate of human rights. But

⁴ John Paul II, World Day for Peace 1998 (December 8, 1997) “From the Justice of Each Comes Peace for All”, available at: <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121997_xxxi-world-day-for-peace_en.html>

⁵ John Paul II, World Day for Peace 1999 (December 8, 1998) “Respect for Human Rights: the Secret of True Peace” available at: <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/%documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_14121998_xxxii-world-day-for-peace_en.html>

⁶ Available through the Vatican web site at <<http://www.zenit.org/english/>> (code ZE02121702).

what I do think is true is that the Justice and Peace commission would never have even considered convoking the Congress if the Latin American experience had never occurred. Human rights work is being done by church people on every continent in the world. But I know of no other continent where it has achieved the importance that it has in Latin America.

Some of us hoped that in 2001 the Pope would have published a new encyclical to commemorate the 110th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* and that the defense and promotion of human rights would occupy a similar place to that given to justice in general as being a constitutive part of Evangelization by the Justice in the World Synod of Bishops in 1971. But at least we can be content that human rights are now part of the ordinary agenda of the universal church.

And Here in the United States?

How much importance do human rights assume in any theological and pastoral perspective here in this country? It does not necessarily have to be explicitly conscious. It does not mean that every parish team must affirm in their mission statement that they are doing the work of human rights. But what is required is that those teams examine their own activities to ask if they are being motivated by the basic principle of the dignity of each and every human being; if they are striving to develop a consistent ethic in favor of the defense of life in all its forms; and if they are working so that their people can move from less human to more human conditions, which was Pope Paul VI's way of defining integral human development and, finally, peace.

Bryan Hehir, in the same article I quoted earlier, sees the need for human rights activities to attain a "critical mass" in our churches, schools, and universities. If more and more people are involved in their own work from a human rights perspective, and if those people are also explicitly Christian and are taking the time to pray and reflect and share about what they are doing, then the moment will arrive when human rights will move from the sidelines to center stage, that is, when taking human rights into account becomes the ordinary rather than the unique way of doing things.

Insofar as the church's reflection that accompanies their activities occurs at the local, national, and international levels, then church social teaching will be accomplishing the goal of promoting structures of participation within the whole church community.