

Principles and values which inform the agenda of Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation (JPIC) – Fr Kevin O’Gorman SMA

“Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel”. (1971 Synod of Bishops, Justice in the World)

Often described as the Church’s ‘best kept secret’ this teaching traditionally takes its origin from the publication of *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things) by Leo XIII in 1891. The body of this teaching consists of papal, curial and Episcopal statements of moral-theological principles and often their application to particular issues and situations. Important landmarks have been John XXIII *Mater et Magistra* (1961) with its insistence that the State has a large responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, Paul VI *Paceum in Terris* which promoted the logic and language of human rights in the tradition of natural law thinking, Vatican II with its moral-theological appraisal of modernity in The Church in the Modern World, the commentary of John Paul II on issues ranging from work through solidarity to criticism of both communism and capitalism. In a guide to the study of this teaching H. Carrier summarised: “The Church stands as one of the most respected institutions for its competent and authoritative interventions in favour of peace, justice, human rights, social and cultural promotion...the Church appears ever more identified with the liberation and promotion of all men and women”.

The Church’s social teaching does not aim to provide a detailed blueprint for organising and ordering the social and international arenas but to state a set of criteria for both the formation and evaluation of individual consciences and institutional corporations. The four co-ordinates for these criteria are human/persons, relations, societies and international order. These are filled out with a focus on issues of human rights, the common good and universal destination of goods, participation, solidarity and subsidiarity. These ideas are not meant as interpretations of the world – which was Marx’s criticism of the philosophers – but ideas to change it, in the words of the Soviet dissident Scharansky, to roll back the darkness in its different dimensions – injustice, ignorance, illness, infidelity. The Church has always been involved in the mission of human liberation through its medical and educational ministries. Since Vatican II this involvement has necessarily assumed a more structural and institutional analysis and action. The horizon of challenge for the continuation of this part of its mission is now universal with the advent of globalisation with geo-political and economic implications.

An interesting ecumenical counterpart was the publication in 2000 of a social doctrine by and for the Russian Orthodox Church which marked a new departure and mirrored much of the Catholic Church’s teaching. This socio-pastoral innovation only serves to highlight the ‘hidden treasure’ of the permanent principles and values which inform the agenda of JPIC -Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation and illuminate the privilege and challenge contained in the living tradition of “the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation”. (1971 Synod)