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CHRISTIANITY and SOCIAL ORDER - REVISITED

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The martyrdom of St Laurence in the year 258 and the theme of this address "Christianity and Social Order - Revisited" reflect the stark contrasts between the power of God, the power of the State and the powerlessness of the poor. In particular, we are reminded today that the 'social order' implied in the Kingdom of God is of a very different nature to the kingdoms of this world. There was a time in medieval history when the church and the state stood side by side wielding the swords of power and authority in separate but related realms. Today that has gone and we are now in a far better position to understand and rediscover the real mystery of faith and the secret of Christian life than at any other time in 1000 years or so.

The martyrdom of St Laurence is an outstanding witness to that mystery proclaimed by our Lord Jesus Christ, "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25). St Laurence became the patron saint of the poor because he lived out the teaching of the new testament, proclaiming the poor and the powerless to be the treasures of the church. This was in total contrast to the values of the Roman world at the time and explains why the church was seen as a threat to its stability.

What follows is a series of brief 'revisits' to past social orders so as to regain our bearings in the contemporary social order.

THE ROMAN ORDER:

The 'pax romanum' as it was called, was based upon military expansion, armed oppression, central control and a slave class. It was a peace hewn by an imperial power claiming divinity, buttressed by absolute military authority. The Roman Empire was still at its height in St Laurence's day. It was another hundred years before the Emperor Constantine needed to use the Christian church as the cement to heal a cracking edifice. By 410 a.d. Rome was sacked by Alaric the Goth, heralding in the dark ages, as the lamps of civilisation gradually went out. The result was inevitable because no social order based upon such premises can survive indefinitely. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword, and a civilisation based upon such power will

ultimately fall to another power bloc.

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ORDER:

The Christian social order by way of contrast sought to operate in early times on a totally different basis. Jesus revolutionised the meaning of leadership. He resolved a leadership dispute among his disciples by telling them "let the greatest among you become as the youngest and the leader as one who serves . . . but I am among you as one who serves (as a deacon)" (Luke 22:26-7).

The basis of the leadership thus established by our Lord, and carried forward by the apostles, was to proclaim a new and revolutionary approach toward the ordering of the church, and by implication the whole of society. The apostles were quick to realise that the church had two basic tasks - preaching the word and serving the people. Clearly a division of responsibility and labour was required. Thus in the Acts of the Apostles we read how the apostles laid their hands upon seven deacons, so that they for their part could devote themselves more fully to proclaim the good news while the deacons could minister to the poor, the widowed, and the fatherless.

Two hundred years later a Spaniard called Laurence came to Rome, and because of his special qualities he eventually become Archdeacon of Rome, in charge of the seven deacons. The story is well known and does not need elaborating. In the midst of periodic persecution by the Roman authorities, the young Laurence was left with the responsibility for the treasures of the church and when ordered by the Prefect of the City of Rome to produce them, he went around the poorest and meanest parts of the city with, it is said, laughter in his heart and confidence in his smile. Three days later he delivered the treasures of the church to the Emperor by producing the poor of the city of Rome - it was an affront to the Roman understanding of imperial power and authority.

In this powerful story there are four important elements in the Christian social order - the emphasis upon serving people;

the priority placed upon the poor as first in the Kingdom of God; the freedom to be audacious and bold in the midst of adversity; and the profoundest truth of all, whoever is willing to lose his life for Christ's sake, will find it.

THE MEDIEVAL SOCIAL ORDER OF CHRISTENDOM:

To return again to the historical theme - when Europe emerged from the dark ages 500 years later, the Christian obligation to the poor and the weak remained intact, but was now organised under the authority of Canon Law. The medieval system of social service was operated mostly by the Religious Orders and included the hospital, the hospice and the alms house. At the parish level, the priest had a canonical obligation to administer hospitality and charity to the poor, the fatherless, the widowed, the stranger. I do not intend to describe this in any detail, nor to discuss the disrepute that the medieval social service network fell into after it had been secularised under the English Elizabethan Poor Law. It is sufficient to remind ourselves that the highest aspirations and best intentions of people can be corrupted and become distorted over time and so they need constant scrutiny and reform by the administering authorities.

THE INDUSTRIAL SOCIAL ORDER:

The nineteenth century was a time of rapid economic expansion and growth, leading to a major transformation of society. It brought great wealth to some, but in its train created much hardship, poverty and social dislocation for many others. From the 1840s onward, there were concerted moves by English Christians, politicians, novelists, poets and writers, to draw attention to what Disraeli described as the "two nations" - the rich and the poor. Two strands of activity eventually emerged out of this growing social concern.

The first was the development of sensitive and humane ways of caring for people based upon a more scientific approach,

which came to be called casework. In due course, voluntary social welfare agencies developed new concepts of personal dignity and self-determination to replace the older notions of charity. Social work and welfare thus superceded noblesse oblige. This movement came into its own in the twentieth century during the inter-war years and more particularly in the post-war years with the development of modern social science insights, social work techniques and the organisation of the welfare sector.

The other stream of development was in the area of justice. After the unsuccessful efforts of the early chartists in the mid-nineteenth century, the Christian socialists like Maurice and Kingsley among many others, sought to lay out the foundations for a more truly "Christian social order" based on the Kingship of Christ. Two years ago this day, I delivered the 10th Barry Marshall Memorial Lecture at Trinity College, Melbourne on that theme. The title of this sermon suggests that we need to "revisit" and address ourselves to the issues raised by this movement, asking whether it has some relevance for late twentieth century society, as we enter once again into an economic recession with growing levels of poverty and unemployment.

THE ROLE OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH:

The church today is placed in a position of peculiar paradox. We are well placed to tackle these issues on the basis of new testament teaching, the example of the martyrs and the early fathers, the welfare work of the medieval church and a long standing moral responsibility to establish a just social order. In most respects the churches work has been creditable. It has provided a seminal influence on the society despite periodic fallings from grace.

But we are also confronted with a complex problem insofar as modern society has differentiated its major responsibilities and segmented them into compartments. In other words, welfare has now become the prerogative of specialist statutory and voluntary welfare organisations independent of the church, while

Justice issues have been left largely to the labour movement. Once causes are taken up by special interest groups they become part of a distinct sector in public life, making it difficult for others to contribute.

The great challenge confronting Christians today is to take up the themes of caring and justice and promote them within the church and the wider society. We have some legitimacy through public acknowledgment of our role in this respect, and a long record of service. Unfortunately, we have suffered from a loss of practise and must approach the subject with humility as learners and servants. Groups like the Community of St Laurence believe they have a special responsibility to act as catalysts on the churches, ensuring that the issues of love and justice are placed again at the heart of the church's life and are not seen as peripheral to its work of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

THE POSITION OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH:

The Christian churches in this country have been pushed to the margins of public life, so that their impact upon social and political structures is now minimal, while Christian belief has become a private matter.

Much of the church's energy today is now taken up in helping individuals and small groups understand the true nature of Christian vocation in order to rediscover their bearings in a materialistic and secularised society. Corresponding to this is a growing emphasis upon Christian nurture and fellowship. Such actions are very significant but they must be seen as forerunners to wider initiatives. The Christian challenge in these difficult times is to rediscover the meaning of the Kingdom of God and its key insights and relationships can permeate the life of our world and nation.

A CONTEMPORARY PARABLE OF SOCIETY:

Melbourne's Exhibition Building is an important part of

our past. The Federation of Australia was proclaimed there in 1901. Prior to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference last year a decision was made to demolish the old annexe and to build something new in order to accommodate the Conference and other subsequent events of importance to our nation and city. The brief given to the architects was to create a structure which blended into the surrounding landscape. They fulfilled their brief by constructing a square building with mirrors reflecting the character of the surrounding environment.

It is salutary to look at the mirror reflections because they give the impression that the old rooming houses and boarding houses opposite are on the verge of collapse. Is this a reflection of social reality? I do not think that our economic and social order is about to collapse, although anyone working with low-income people would be quick to recognise the symbolic significance of the reflection. There are between one and two million Australians living in very severe hardship who probably feel from time to time that their world is on the verge of collapse and that society in which they live is hard, mean and uncaring. These are the areas where we have a clear responsibility to take up the challenge of building a more just society, or as we often say, "a caring and sharing society". There is no question that the life of the community is often distorted by injustices that occur to particular minority groups. Christians have a special responsibility to bring those matters before public attention and insist that conditions are improved.

Thank God it is possible to raise such matters with Government and that the actions we take in these respects will not land us in prison, as is the case in some other countries even today. St Laurence's grid is a constant reminder to us that others have suffered and some have even lost their lives in the cause. Today we can speak up in a spirit of critical participation. Participation because we live in a democracy where citizens are expected to express their views; critical because the poor still do not receive the basic resources which would enable them to lead fulfilling and purposeful lives.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

1) Promote the idea of social justice:

On the last Sunday of every September, all the churches are called to observe Social Justice Sunday. We made a small beginning last year and this September we will all be concentrating upon the problem of housing. The time ahead must be seen as a build up to Social Justice Sunday 1983. All the major churches have agreed to direct their energies in raising public awareness of the condition of the poor, the excluded and the vulnerable. They will also try to understand more about the nature and causes of relative poverty in Australia, seeking ways of taking constructive action. The first thing you can do is to go back to your local congregation, see that Social Justice Sunday will be properly observed on September 26th, and start promoting the theme for the coming year "Goals for a Just Australia". The churches are committed to the idea of a joint statement and a joint programme. It is now up to ordinary Christians to make sure that these commitments are properly observed and acted upon at the level of the local parish. The result could be that our local congregations are not only warm centres of Christian fellowship but also powerhouses of concerned action. Indeed there are already some preliminary signs of movement, witness the fact that our modest little broadsheet "Poverty Watch" goes out to about 3000 people every month. There is growing interest in questions of justice. The task ahead of us is to convert those stirrings of concern into action.

2) Identify with the poor:

It is obvious, but we often forget that we are all bound up together in a common humanity. Poor people are no different to anyone else, sharing the same hopes and fears, aspirations, stresses and anxieties. St Paul in Romans 12, exhorts us to "make genuine friends with the poor" and not to adopt

anything resembling haughty attitudes. The poet Keats, talked of empathy, by which he meant "a going out from oneself into the identity of another, so as to perceive and understand their life circumstances and the nature of their being". Try to do this when you look at the photographic exhibition. The recent publication of our poverty oral histories "On the Breadline" is one important start we can make in really gaining some feeling of what it might be like to be a low-income person in Australia 1982. In Broadmeadows, Uniting Church families have invited others to come and live with them for a few days to see how they cope with hardship on a daily basis. These are all important ways by which we can break down the barriers which tend to turn us into two nations, and help us to understand at the most basic level the struggles of the poor. After we have understood our fundamental equality as children of God, and learnt to treat each other as being of equal worth, we can then consider the prospect of voluntary service. There is a great need for people to spend their time and energy, but only if it is based upon a common humanity and not based upon any sense of superiority or a mistaken belief that one has something to give to others except of course ourselves as friends in Christ. Those of us who have been privileged to work in the welfare field, value the special qualities of relationship which we gain by our association with all sorts and conditions of people. Perhaps there is a classic expression in the devotion of Ruth, a young widow and a refugee who had nothing to offer to her mother-in-law Naomi and her adopted people, other than her love and affection and a continuing relationship throughout life - "where ever you will go, I will go also".

3) Contribute to the needs of the saints:

This was a clear obligation that the early church placed upon all Christians. When one part of the church was struggling because of famine and hardship, congregations elsewhere would rally immediately in support. Today, of course, we organise ourselves through modern social services, and one would be remiss not to mention the

continuing need for financial contributions of good quality clothing and furniture. At the Brotherhood we now have the means through our Sharing Centre of providing these necessary household items in a way which does not diminish or demean people, nor take away their human dignity. On a broader front we must remember that contributing to the needs of the saints must also be done through the taxation system. We must press for its reform, reminding ourselves that taxation is the essential means of distributing the wealth and resources of a community from those who have to those who have not. Having reduced unnecessary public expenditure, there is no excuse for members of the public to seek to avoid tax, but rather to acknowledge that this is part of the responsibility incumbent upon all those who have benefitted from the facilities and services of our modern society. Every benefit has a cost and those of us who have reaped a rich reward must also bear an obligation. One of the major moral problems of modern life, is that growing numbers of people who in the past have accepted such an obligation now seek to avoid it. Christians must raise their voices strongly to ensure that everyone pays their proper tax and that the poor can be given the opportunity of living a life of at least simple dignity free from hardship and insecurity. Furthermore, we should also be vocal in saying where we want our tax money spent, indicating what we believe should be the priorities of public expenditure. For example, we may well want to question defence budgets and feather-bedding to industry where no conceivable good can accrue to human beings. Such matters are difficult judgments to make and yet we must be willing to speak out if we believe that the expenditure priorities of our nation are wrong or misconstrued.

A SECOND LOOK AT WHERE WE ARE HEADING:

There is a deepening concern in many parts of our community with thoughtful people asking where we have gone wrong. In the

post world war period, in the times of expansion and abundance, the belief re-emerged that an expanding economy would provide the necessary wealth to solve the problems of poverty, housing and unemployment. For a few short years people were beguiled. But as in the past, we have found out once again that this is not so, because economies are subject to cyclical change, to recession, even depression, and once again the most vulnerable are the most savagely hit. The questions that will be put to the churches over the subsequent months will cause us to ask with renewed depth "What kind of society are we trying to build here in Australia?" In particular, we must ask what place will there be in it for the poor and the excluded. Any society which even partly excludes certain groups of people is a society in danger of collapse. The western democracies have realised that the surest way of avoiding civil disorder is to provide people with benefits. Mostly the benefits have been minimal, but they have been a salve to the national conscience and just sufficient to avoid extreme poverty. There is no reason for us to rest upon our laurels in the belief that we have done our best as a nation. If the poor are to be regarded as the "treasures of the church" then to treasure and cherish somebody involves wanting more for them in a way that will enhance their well being and offer them the means to grow and contribute to society.

Today, lots of people are "revisiting" various things - national trust buildings, reconstructed villages, former family homes - even Brideshead. Television and the film industry have been busily recreating films that have brought back intriguing facets of our past which evoke a certain nostalgia. It is almost as if we know we have lost our bearings in a jungle of concrete and need to return to the old, the tried and the familiar ways of doing things. Obviously we can't turn the clock back on history, but we can enunciate those fundamental and unchanging beliefs and values which must inform our actions and shape our corporate relationships.

With regard to the question of Christianity and social order a great deal of work has been done over the past 100 years. This

provided an opportunity to elaborate the great themes that Christian social thinkers developed over the past 100 years in the wake of western industrial civilisation. One of the high points of thinking occurred in the mid-1920s with the establishment in Birmingham of the Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship under the vision and inspiration of William Temple. It is sufficient for me to conclude with the statement printed on the masthead of all Temple's notepaper of the time -

The basis of this Conference is the conviction that the Christian faith rightly interpreted and consistently followed, gives the vision and the power essential for solving the problems of today, that the social ethics of Christianity have been greatly neglected by the church with disastrous consequences to the individual and to society, and that it is of the first importance that these should be given a clearer and more persistent emphasis. In the teaching and work of Jesus Christ there are certain fundamental principles such as the Universal Fatherhood of God, with its corollary that mankind is God's family, and the law 'who so loseth his life, findeth it' - which if accepted, not only condemns much in the present organisation of society but shows the way of regeneration. Christianity has proved itself to possess also a motive power for the regeneration of the individual without which no change of policy or method can succeed. In the light of its principles the constitution of society, the conduct of industry, the unbringing of children, national and international politics, the personal relationships of men and women, in fact all human relationships must be tested. It is hoped that through this Conference the church may win a fuller understanding of its Gospel and hearing a clear call to action may find courage to obey.

The achievement of such things can no longer be regarded by the churches as an automatic right. Justice is not so much conformity to an order of things already established in creation, but rather a claim which has to be argued, won and then imple-

mented in human history. Our society is in a constant process of development. We have to persuade the state, not only that it must uphold order but that it is the agent on which the primary responsibility rests for implementing justice and peace.

In the post-war years we have gone through a further revolution, a post-industrial revolution of an equally dramatic nature. But we have not solved poverty and we have not found peace. There must be fostered a genuinely, Christian passion for social righteousness, which insists that justice and peace must go hand in hand.