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Revisiting Justice in the World 1971

Stephen J. McKinney

Abstract

It is over fifty years since Justice in the World (1971) was published and it is worth examining the message and impact of this document. This article will provide an overview of some of the key themes of Justice in the World and discuss some of the debates about the approach taken to justice ad extra and ad intra in this document. The article will conclude by drawing some parallels between the aim and vision of Justice in the World and the social teaching and actions of Pope Francis.

Introduction

There is a rich body of Catholic Social Teaching and Thought that draws on scripture, theology and papal teaching. It is widely accepted that modern Catholic Social Teaching begins with *Rerum Novarum*, the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII in 1891. This continues through the 20th and 21st centuries with key documents such as: *Pacem in Terris* (Pope John XXIII, 1963), *Populorum Progressio* (Pope Paul VI, 1967), *Centesimus Annus* (Pope John Paul II, 1991), *Deus Caritas Est* (Pope Benedict XVI, 2005), *Laudato Si'* (Pope Francis, 2015) and *Fratelli Tutti* (Pope Francis, 2020).

Justice in the World (Justitia in Mundo) is the post-synodal statement published from the 1971 Synod of Bishops. It is now just over fifty years since this was published and it has recently been critically reassessed.¹ This post-synodal statement is not a Papal encyclical, but, nevertheless, is considered to be a major document in the body of Catholic Social Teaching and is included in the key studies and commentaries, notably in Curran (2002), DeBerri et. al., (2003), Dorr (2012) and Himes (2018).²

Justice in the World 1971

Dorr (2012) comments that *Justice in the World* is a 'quite radical document' that challenged the myths of western-style development. Like *Octogesima Adveniens*

issued by Pope Paul VI, which was also published in 1971, this document was a call to action. It was produced within the immediate post-Vatican II context and the fundamental changes in thinking about the relationship of the Catholic Church with the world.³ This involved discarding the rejection of modernity and focusing on reading the signs of the times and adopting an openness to dialogue with the world. Further, the influence of the bishops of Asia, Africa and Latin America, a move away from Eurocentrism, and the challenging ideas that emerged from the conference of the Latin American Bishops, held at Medellin in Colombia in 1968, are very evident in *Justice in the World*.⁴ Kammer (2004, page 103) comments on the influence of these Latin American bishops:

They also brought the strong thrust toward social justice, liberation and a commitment to the poor from the Medellin conference of 1968, which was in the process of implementation.

It is worth examining some key aspects of this ‘quite radical document’ to assess how it can help us understand social justice in the contemporary Catholic Church. One of the greatest strengths of this document is that, in keeping with *Lumen Gentium* (1964) and *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), it has both an *ecclesia ad extra* and an *ecclesia ad intra* perspective. This *ecclesia ad extra* perspective is summarised in the early sections of *Justice in the World* and is highlighted throughout the document. The bishops stated that they have perceived the ‘serious injustices’ throughout the world (section 3) and articulate a vocation to proclaim the Good news to the poor in section 5:

Listening to the cry of those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures, and hearing the appeal of a world that by its perversity contradicts the plan of the Creator, we have shared our awareness of the Church’s vocation to be present in the heart of the world by proclaiming the Good News to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted (section 5).

This is a vocation that is clearly rooted in (1) the Old Testament revelation of a God who liberates the poor and oppressed and in (2) the Gospel message of the mission of Jesus to the poor and the marginalised (sections 29-38; Himes, 2018). This is the gospel message that can be observed, for example, in the first public words of the ministry of Jesus in Luke’s gospel in chapter 4: where he proclaims

this mission to the poor and marginalised in the synagogue (Luke 4: 16-21). The concept of the Church's vocation is also rooted in the love of god and love of neighbour and that every person has dignity as a 'visible image of the invisible God' (sections 33-34; 55).

Some of the poor, oppressed and afflicted groups highlighted by the bishops include migrants and refugees (including those fleeing persecution on grounds of race, ethnicity or tribe) and those abandoned and rejected – older people, orphans and the sick (sections 21-26). Also included were those who are persecuted for their faith. The document acknowledges and denounces the structural injustices in the world that oppress the poor and afflicted (sections 3; 10-14). As has been stated, *Justice in the World* called the Catholic Church to action:

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, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation (section 6).

This is one of the most frequently discussed sections in the document. The use of the words *constitutive dimension* was to prove controversial after the synod had concluded.⁵ There were attempts to have the words replaced to temper the meaning. The proposal was that action on behalf of justice be understood as an *integral dimension* rather than a *constitutive dimension*. However, there was anxiety about the ambiguous nature of the word integral. The word constitutive remained and is understood to mean that the work of social justice is central to the mission and work of the Church: it is an essential part of the gospel, not a peripheral part. Dorr's analysis of the controversy is that the two sides represented two different spiritualities: those who emphasised the 'spiritual message of Jesus and the Church' and those who emphasised the work of overcoming injustice and seeking to 'create a world of justice peace and reconciliation, and respect for the environment'.

The Bishops acknowledged that if the Church is to teach about social justice in the world, then, there is a need for an inward-looking perspective, an *ecclesia ad intra*, that seeks to attain internal social justice. This involves close self-examination of the ways in which the Church itself operates:

While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognises that anyone who ventures to speak to peoples about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence, we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and lifestyle found within the Church itself (section 40).

This striking and prophetic section is described by Sedmak and Nebel (2021) as ecclesial non exceptionalism and combined with section 6, as outlined above, proposes a vision of justice *ad extra* and justice *ad intra*.⁶ These remain very serious challenges for the Church and will be discussed further in the last part of this article.

There is a statement in section 41 that the rights of people who are associated with the Church should be preserved and the right to a sufficient livelihood for all those who work for the Church: priests, religious and lay people. While there is little detail on what this self-examination would entail, it would have to be a continual and honest process to be effective. There is a recognition in this document that the different voices within the Church should be heard and in a positive way:

The Church recognises everyone's right to suitable freedom of expression and thought. This includes the right of everyone to be heard in a spirit of dialogues which preserves a legitimate diversity within the Church (section 44).

The bishops recognise in section 42 that women should have their 'own share of responsibility and participation' in the Church.

One of the ways forward in achieving greater justice is in the daily Christian witness of believers (section 49). This is to be supported by a method in education that challenges the replication of established orders (section 50):

But education demands a renewal of heart, a renewal based on the recognition of sin in its individual and social manifestations. It will also inculcate a truly and entirely human way of life in justice, love and simplicity. It will likewise awaken a critical sense, which will lead us to reflect on the society in which we live and on its values; it will make people

ready to renounce these values when they cease to promote justice for all people (section 51).

There are, of course, some limitations in the document. Curran (2002, page 189) argues that there is no development of a ‘theoretical understanding of justice’ in the document.⁷ This lack of development was consistent with many other Church documents on Catholic Social Teaching. Curran points out that there are some direct or indirect references to neo-scholastic concepts of cumulative, distributive and legal (now referred to by some as social or contributory) justice in earlier documents, though not in any detail. Curran adds that it would have been expected that a document focussed on social justice would ‘treat justice in great detail’. *Justice in the World*, however, does contribute to the move from Neo-Scholasticism to a renewed understanding of justice rooted in biblical concepts.

There is another interesting issue concerning this document: like most Church documents on Catholic Social Teaching, children are ‘barely visible’ in *Justice in the World*. Regan (2014) points out that this can be contrasted with many documents on marriage and the family in which children are referred to extensively.⁸ There is one very important comment in section 26 on the right of children and the young to ‘education and morally correct condition to life’. However, this morally correct condition to life is publicly confronted by the scandalous revelations of the extent of child abuse within the Church in recent years. Sedmak and Nebel (2021, pages 220-221) argue that ‘a lot of epistemic innocence has been lost’ since *Justice in the World* and that the sexual abuse crimes are part of the contemporary ‘wound of knowledge’ that also includes the global ecological crisis and the inequality in the world.

The Relevance of Justice in the World for the Contemporary Catholic Church

There are a number of strong links between the content of *Justice in the World* and the social teachings and actions of Pope Francis.⁹ I wish to highlight three. The first is the condemnation of structural injustice which is concerned with justice *ad extra*. This is followed by a discussion of the role of women in the Church and the recent apologies of Pope Francis to the Indigenous peoples of Canada. These are both concerned with justice *ad intra* - the inward-looking perspective that seeks internal social justice.

Pope Francis is as emphatic as *Justice in the World* in his condemnation of economic and political structural injustice that was a feature of colonial domination, and is now a feature of the empty promises of globalisation that excludes the poor and unjustly favours the elites and the developed world (for examples, see *Laudato Si'*, 2015, sections 48-52, *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, sections 10-12, 30-31, 73, 75, 218-221).

Pope Francis was born in the southern hemisphere and his election represents a geographical and theological move away from Eurocentrism. Massaro (2021) argues that Pope Francis is 'strongly for the poor global majority struggling for justice and economic development' and he has strongly identified with the poor global majority. In his lifestyle, he has positioned himself as 'both *for* and *of* the poor of the Global South'. This is also very clear in his teaching. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) section 198, he discusses the option for the poor that the Church has made and that he wants 'a Church which *is* poor and *for* the poor'. One notable difference between Pope Francis and *Justice in the World* is his strong emphasis on mercy and justice.

As regards the role of women in the Church, there are a number of signs that Pope Francis is attempting to address this. In 2021, fifty years after *Justice in the World*, he formally recognised the role of women as lectors and acolytes in canon law – a formal recognition of accepted practice in many churches. Other recent, and high profile, examples have included the appointment of four women (three religious and a lay woman) as consultors to the secretariat of the Synod of Bishops and, at the time of writing, his intention to appoint two women to the Dicastery that helps him select bishops.¹⁰

The call for internal social justice and the self-examination in section 40 of *Justice in the World* is an ongoing and incomplete process. There are two relevant examples that were highlighted in the Pope's recent Apostolic visit to Canada (24th-30th July 2022) and both refer to children and young people. Pope Francis described the visit as a penitential pilgrimage and offered repeated apologies to the Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) of Canada. The apologies were for the role of the Catholic Church and religious communities in the heinous assimilationist strategies to 'civilise' and 'evangelise' the Indigenous children in the mandatory residential schools (run on behalf of the government). He was very

clear that this physical, verbal, psychological and spiritual abuse of the children was ‘incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ’.¹¹ In his final public statements at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Quebec he asked forgiveness of the victims of sexual abuse.¹²

Concluding Remarks

There are many key strengths to *Justice in the World* including the focus on justice as essential to the mission of the Church; the emphasis on structural injustice; the need for an inward-looking perspective on justice within the Church and a call for the greater inclusion of women in the Church (DeBerri et al., 2003; Himes, 2018). Over fifty years later, the vision of *Justice in the World* is arguably even more pertinent within the contemporary context of the loss of epistemic innocence and wounded knowledge. The challenge of working towards justice *ad extra* and justice *ad intra* continues for Pope Francis and the Catholic Church.

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¹ Procaro-Foley, C.B. (2022) “Justice in the World” at 50: A Call to Action Worthy of Recovery. *Religious Education*, 117(2), 171-179.

² Curran, C.E. (2002) *Catholic Social Teaching. A Historical theological and ethical analysis*. Washington: Georgetown University Press; DeBerri, E.P., Hug, J.E., Henriot, P.J. & Schultheis, M.J. (2003) *Catholic Social Teaching. Our Best Kept Secret*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis books; Dorr, D. (2012) *Option for the Poor and for the Earth. Catholic Social Teaching*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis books; Himes, O.F.M., KR. (Ed.) (2018) *Modern Catholic Social Teaching. Commentaries and Interpretations. 2nd edition*. Washington: Georgetown University Press.

³ McEvoy, J. (2006) Church and World at the Second Vatican Council: The Significance of Gaudium et Spes. *Pacifica*, 19(1), 37–57.

⁴ Himes (2018); Massaro, T. (2021) Justice in the World, Then and Now: How Pope Francis Carries Forward the Agenda of the 1971 Synod of Bishops. *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 18(2), 161-183; Kammer, F. (2004) *Doing Faithjustice. An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*. New York: Paulist Press.

⁵ See Dorr (2012) pages 214-217 and Himes (2018) pages 553-554 for a detailed explanation of the debate.

⁶ Sedmak, C. & Nebel, M. (2021) From Where do we Speak? Enacting Justice with a Wound of Knowledge. *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 18(2), 209-226.

⁷ Curran (2002) page 189.

⁸ Regan, E. (2014) Barely Visible: The Child in Catholic Social Teaching. *Heythrop Journal*, 55(6), 1021-1032.

⁹ Massaro, T. (2021).

¹⁰ Lamb, C. (2019) Pope appoints four women to top synod jobs. *The Tablet*. 24 May. Vatican News (2022) *Pope says he will appoint women to Dicastery for Bishops*. 6 July.

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-07/pope-francis-says-he-will-appoint-women-to-dicastery-of-bishops.html>

¹¹ Pope Francis (2022a) *Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Canada. Meeting with Indigenous Peoples: First Nations, Metis and Inuit. Address of His Holiness*, 25th July.

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220725-popolazioneindigene-canada.html> Pope Francis (2022b) *Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Canada. Meeting with*

Indigenous Peoples and members of the Parish community of the Parish Community of Sacred Heart Edmonton. 25th July.

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220725-incontroedmonton-canada.html>

¹² Pope Francis (2022c) *Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Canada. Vespers with Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Persons, Seminarians, and Pastoral Workers in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Quebec. Homily of His holiness. 28th July.*

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220728-omelia-vespri-quebec.html>