

September 1, 2009

Dear Brothers,

Next year, 2010, will mark the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the Order of Preachers in the Americas. Christopher Columbus had died in 1506. In 1507, Bartolomé de las Casas was ordained a diocesan priest in Rome at the age of twenty-three. In 1510, Columbus' son, Diego; Columbus' younger brother, Bartolomeo; and Las Casas arrived once again on *la isla española* (Hispaniola, today's Dominican Republic and Haiti); and in that same year so did the first Dominicans, headed by Fray Pedro de Córdoba. They had been sent from the Convent of St. Stephen in Salamanca, a center of the Order's reform with its double emphasis on contemplation and poverty, the convent so central to the theological renaissance of the sixteenth century, on which faculty after 1526 was Francisco de Vitoria, the "father of international law," whose bronze sculpture is in the garden of the United Nations in NY with the inscription "Defender of Human Rights."

In the year after their arrival, 1511, on a Sunday in Advent, Pedro de Córdoba and the community of friars commissioned their best preacher, Antón Montesino, to preach in the thatched cathedral church of Santo Domingo the community's sermon, based on the text of John 1:23 ("I am a voice crying in the wilderness"), proclaiming damnation for all Spaniards who held Indians in *encomienda*, saying they must be set free if their holders were to hope for salvation. Diego Columbus and Las Casas were present for the preaching. Asked to retract what had been said, it was instead repeated the following Sunday, along with the threat of refusing absolution. Las Casas himself was refused absolution at a later time when he went to confession to one of the friars since at that time he was also an *encomendero*, even though kind to the Indians in his service. This was before his own conversion to the truth of what the Dominicans had preached as he prepared to preach for Pentecost in 1514 on Sirach 34: 18-22, and before he later became a Dominican himself.¹

The most recent General Chapter of the Friars, in Bogota, in 2007, asked that we commemorate the anniversary of the arrival of the Order of Preachers in this world, which we will do at our Assembly next June. I quote: "With the fifth centenary of the arrival of the Order in the Americas approaching (1510), we recommend to the Master of the Order, to all the Provinces, especially the Provinces of America and the Vicariate of St. Dominic in the Dominican Republic, with the whole Dominican Family, to take initiatives to actively celebrate the memory of this first community, whose prior was Peter of Córdoba—including some charitable works in solidarity with those most in need in the Caribbean region" (#74).

In light of that, the words of that early sermon in the Indies bear quoting here.

¹For further details see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas, In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993): 27-37, 46-53; and Helen Rand Parish, "Introduction," in Bartolomé de las Casas, *The Only Way* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992): 9-58.

You are all in mortal sin! You live in it and you die in it! Why? Because of the cruelty and tyranny you use with these innocent people. Tell me, with what right, with what justice, do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged such detestable wars on these people, in their mild, peaceful lands, where you have consumed such infinitudes of them, wreaking upon them this death and unheard-of havoc? How is it that you hold them so crushed and exhausted, giving them nothing to eat, nor any treatment for their diseases, which you cause them to be infected with through the surfeit of their toils, so that they “die on you” [as you say] – you mean, you kill them – mining gold for you day after day? And what care do you take that anyone catechize them, so that they may come to know their God and Creator, be baptized, hear Mass, observe Sundays and Holy Days? Are they not human beings? Have they no rational souls? Are you not obligated to love them as you love yourselves? Do you not understand this? Do you not grasp this? How is it that you sleep so soundly, so lethargically?²

Caritas in Veritate

The same social consciousness that stirred the preaching of these early friars gave rise, in modern times, to the church’s social doctrine, most explicitly delineated since Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* -- a teaching however which goes back to the preaching of Jesus and the Gospels and is consistent with patristic theology as well. The most current expression of that social teaching is Pope Benedict XVI’s recent social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. The encyclical is too comprehensive and dense to summarize and covers topics ranging from infant mortality, world hunger, and the right to water, to areas of bioethics, the right to life, as well as the right to religious freedom; from migration and the environment to socially responsible investing, micro-finance, and the strengths and limitations of market economies; from moral underdevelopment to building peace.

As a reflection on Pope Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio* and how the world has changed since then, Pope Benedict notes most strongly the “explosion of worldwide interdependence” (#33). Reiterating the Church’s commitment to social justice, he affirms: “ Thus every economic decision has a moral consequence” (#37). Committed to Paul VI’s notion of integral development, he highlights: “The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice-versa” (#51). “The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, she must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. She must above all protect mankind from self-destruction” (51). Globalization, or the explosion of worldwide interdependence, necessitates “a reform of the United Nations.” He continues:

One also senses the urgent need to find innovative ways of implementing the principle of the *responsibility to protect and of giving poorer nations an effective voice in shared decision making. This seems necessary in order to arrive at a political, juridical and economic order which can increase and give direction to international cooperation for the development of all peoples in solidarity. To manage the global economy; to revive economies hit by the crisis; to avoid any deterioration of the present crisis and the greater imbalances that would result; to bring about integral and timely disarmament, food security and peace; to guarantee the protection of the environment and to regulate migration; for all this there is urgent need of a true world political authority, as my predecessor Blessed John XXIII indicated some years ago.* (#67)

² Gutiérrez, 29.

For our times, these too are strong words that will meet with much resistance. Yet, as Pope Paul VI had already seen, what is truly necessary is *integral human development*.

The Right to Life

Unfortunately, in our recent history, certain moral issues have become primarily associated with the politics of the left and others with the politics of the right, which can lead each side into a self-righteousness about moral issues that they espouse. We have lost sight of, or perhaps never had, a consistency in our ethical vision that gives witness to the gospel as a whole. That the right to life has become an issue of the right, and the promotion of justice on behalf of the poor an issue of the left is deplorable. Do we as Catholics fall into the same trap whereby our deepest identity is not with the gospel itself and the social teaching of the Church but with a particular ideological perspective created by the current reality of American political life?

I would like to share an experience I had in 2007 that awakened me more deeply to the tragedy of abortion. I practice Qigong rather regularly, a set of exercises aimed at balancing the energy in the body. One particular exercise is entitled the “Joining of Yin and Yang.” Your hands come together around a ball of energy about the size of a volleyball, you roll the ball around by moving your hands from top to bottom, and you imagine your body’s energy being renewed in the ball. You have a sense of connectedness to the universe, a sense that you are in the universe, a part of it, not apart from it. It is a comforting sensation. You feel embraced by a benevolent universe that is friendly towards you. On this one occasion I had the sense of being held by the universe as if in it as in a womb. It was upholding me, nourishing me; we were one – what a wonderful space in which to be. Then sadness came over me as I thought about how a womb ought to be the safest place in the world, a place safe for vulnerable emerging life, and the tragedy when it suddenly becomes an unsafe and violent place, just as the universe itself longs to be a home for us and to be a safe place for us, and how tragic when that is not the case. The tragedy of abortion came home as I had the sense of being in a womb (the universe), being safe there, but with the awareness that a womb is not always a safe place for others. I have been given the gift of life that others will never have due to our culture of violence.

I grant that there have been many philosophical and theological arguments making this same point, but the point came home in a different way as I experienced a womb as a safe place to be in the Qigong exercise. The tragedy of its not being such for others hit me and I woke up.

One of the most powerful lines in the sermon preached by Antón Montesino on behalf of the first Dominican community in Santo Domingo, calling for the end of the *encomienda* system by the conquistadors and defending the rights of the indigenous, was “Are they not human too?” Not all thought the savages to be so. The same line is apropos our discussions today on the right to life. *Are they not human too?* Does the fact that the unborn are pre-born mean that they are not yet human nor on the path that all human life takes? Did the fact that the indigenous in this world were so non European, so “uncivilized” and non Christian, mean that they were not human? What a shortsightedness of vision! Certainly the Scriptures speak to us of God’s presence with us already in the womb. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer 1:5). “For Thou didst form my inward parts, Thou didst knit me together in my mother’s womb, I praise thee, for Thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works” (Ps 139: 13-14). “The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name” (Is 49:1).

Owen Barfield, one of the founding members of the Inklings in Oxford, a protagonist and respected friend of C.S. Lewis, in his account of the evolution of consciousness and of civilizations, points to

their blind spots and inquires into ours – e.g., the Athenian emphasis on liberty while accepting slavery as a matter of course, or Calvinism’s affirmation of the sovereignty and love of God along with its doctrine of pre-election to eternal damnation, and we might add that the young American experiment was based on all men being created equal without giving the right to vote to women.³ I can’t help but think that someday, perhaps years hence, people will look back at our brutality and be amazed how blind we have been. We have become preoccupied with human rights and do not see the right to life as one of them. Why should this be conservative agenda rather than integrally Christian? This is not to say that work on behalf of the right to life needs be everyone’s priority, only that we all need to see the importance and be supportive of the challenges involved. Are they not human too? And who decides who is? I have the sense that even a significant number of Catholics no longer think of the unborn as human and vulnerable but simply as extraneous matter to do with as one wills – which is the way we think about the rest of creation.

A “Consistent Ethic”?

Pope Benedict in his recent encyclical, as was true of Pope John Paul II before him (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, a social encyclical; *Evangelium Vitae*, an encyclical on the value of life) as well as of Pope Paul VI before him (*Populorum Progressio*, his social encyclical; *Humanae Vitae*, his encyclical on human life), weaves together, but within a single encyclical, the right to life and the other human rights. These are simply inseparable. Life is a justice issue; justice is a life issue. The promotion of peace, justice and the integrity of creation cannot absolve itself of a concern for the right to life. Likewise, those who are genuinely pro-life cannot absolve themselves of social concern for the poor, most of who are women and children; for victims of displacement due to war, violence, trafficking, and the migrations of peoples; or for the depletion of the earth’s resources and its effect on climate, all of which are necessary for sustaining life on the planet. On previous occasions Pope Benedict has called attention to these same social concerns.

Speaking last November to participants in a conference organized by the Pontifical Council for Assistance to Health Care Workers, Pope Benedict affirmed the dignity of human life from the moment of conception but also reminded us of the need for concern for those already born. He noted that every year some four million children die within the first month after birth due to malnutrition, poverty, lack of access to health care, and armed conflicts. We also know that refugees in the world number in the millions, as do the orphaned, starving and street children. Fifteen million die annually from starvation. In his message this past January for the World Day of Peace on fighting poverty to build peace, Pope Benedict noted that almost half of those living in absolute poverty today are children.

In 2007 (Sept.) Scientific American reported in an article:

During the 30 minutes it will take you to read this article, 360 preschool children will die of hunger and malnutrition. Twelve a minute, around the clock; more than six million a year. But that is only the tip of the proverbial and ugly iceberg. One in four pre-schoolers in developing countries suffers from hunger and nutritional deficiencies.... More than 800 million people – two and a half times the population of the US – live every day with hunger...The problem does not stem, as some might think, from insufficient production. The world is awash in food, and more and more people are overeating. The main reason hunger and nutritional deficiencies persist is poverty.

³ Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances, A Study in Idolatry*, Second Edition (Wesleyan University Press, 1988): 167.

Pope Benedict has for a long time been aware of these dire straits. Critical of both Marxist socialism and a centralized economy as well as *laissez-faire* capitalist theory, as Cardinal Ratzinger, in a 1986 essay, “Church and Economy: Responsibility for the Future of the World Economy,”⁴ he described it “astounding” that one might judge the laws of the market as in essence good or as necessarily working for the good. Cardinal Ratzinger was saying this at the same time that Pope John Paul II was preparing *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* in which he also asserted:

For we know the tension between East and West is not in itself an opposition between two different levels of development but rather between two concepts of the development of individuals and peoples, both concepts being imperfect and in need of radical correction....This is one of the reasons why the church’s social doctrine adopts a critical attitude toward both liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism...” (# 21).

In August of 2007, in a question and answer session with priests from the dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso, Italy, Pope Benedict highlighted the need for our attentiveness to caring for the earth: “Today, we all see that man can destroy the foundation of his existence, his earth, hence that we can no longer simply do what we like or what seems useful and promising at the time with this earth of ours, with the reality entrusted to us”; and in the following year (August, 2008) in a similar setting with priests from the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone: “In recent decades the doctrine of Creation had almost disappeared from theology, it was almost imperceptible. We are now aware of the damage that this has caused. The Redeemer is the Creator and if we do not proclaim God in his full grandeur – as Creator and Redeemer – we also diminish the value of the Redemption.”

In the same message referred to earlier for the 2009 World Day of Peace, Pope Benedict wrote: “Effective means to redress the marginalization of the world’s poor through globalization will only be found if people everywhere feel personally outraged by the injustices in the world and by the concomitant violations of human rights” (# 8). Another area for concern “from the moral standpoint, is the relationship between disarmament and development. The current level of world military expenditure gives cause for concern” (# 6). The areas called to our attention in that message of this past January are more or less the same as covered in the recent encyclical and in some ways can be seen as a preview of what was to come: poverty due to demographic changes, pandemic diseases, child poverty, the current food crisis, the relationship between disarmament and development, international commerce and finance.

Questions to Ponder

Can we not in these areas of urgent social concern, as in so many others, think in terms of both/and rather than either/or? Can we not be both pro-life and pro-justice, both pro-justice and pro-care of the earth, both pro-care of the earth and pro-life? Indeed not only can we, but how can we not be? Can we truly care about the earth and its capacity to sustain life without caring about the life we want it to sustain? Can we care about vulnerable life still in the womb without care for that life once it has come forth from the womb? Have we simply accustomed ourselves to this “cognitive dissonance” that we now assume acceptable and rational?

To have the right to be born or to have the right to survive: is that the question?

If so, both to be able to be born and to be able to survive: that is the answer.

⁴ Communio 13 (Fall, 1986): 199-204.

Of course we cannot each put all our energy into all the needs of the world. We have only so much energy and need to choose where to place our greatest efforts. But in doing so, can we not also hope and pray for the success of someone else's efforts? Do we need to see theirs as over against ours rather than as complementing and completing ours? Can we not see all our varied efforts as the work of the Body of Christ in which there are many gifts? Of course, in the end, it comes down to some practical and political decisions as well. Even here we can do our best and support brothers and sisters who choose wisely but differently than we. And in the end, politically, maybe my choice at times will be not to exercise the right to vote, as problematic as that may seem.⁵ But whether to vote or not to vote, the question remains in the moral arena whether I am aware of the interconnectedness of all these varied but vital concerns.

One final question: Am I myself open to conversion? It is not easy to be open to conversion even though we talk much about it in our lives. Conversion implies an openness to re-structuring my way of thinking. It is not easy. It may mean the loss of friends. But is this not what the Gospel asks of us? I am aware in discussions like this how easy it is to think, "I hope so and so heard this or read that." It always reminds me of a question that was once asked of us as diocesan seminarians during a communal examen of conscience. As we were listening attentively, the seminary's spiritual director, after asking several other questions, asked: "Whose conscience are you examining now?" Rather, the question for me to ask is: Am I open to re-thinking where I have been on these urgent questions and to seeing the link among the Church's varied but connected social concerns?

I am not saying all these concerns carry the same moral weight. Where I place my effort will remain a question of prudential choice. But as we prepare to commemorate the arrival and prophetic preaching of our brothers in 1510, can we not in 2010 honor them best through our own lives of gospel poverty and preaching grounded in an approach to moral issues that recognizes the interconnectedness of life, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation? How can we be for one and not the others? Whatever our individual contributions to developing a culture of non-violence, a civilization of love, or the new evangelization may be, ought we not all recognize that non-violence means the non-violation of the personhood of all?

I thank you for giving the above reflection your consideration. May we all do what we can to promote deeper care for the earth, justice, life, and peace – to promote both the right to live and the right to live with dignity -- as we prepare to commemorate the arrival of the Holy Preaching in this part of the world.

Your brother in St. Dominic,

Don Goergen, O.P.
Provincial Promoter of Social Justice

⁵ See especially Todd David Whitmore, "When the Lesser Evil Is Not Good Enough: The Catholic Case for Not Voting," in Electing Not To Vote, Christian Reflections on Reasons for Not Voting, ed. Ted Lewis (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008): 62-80.