

**THE JUBILEE AND NEW BEGINNINGS:
EXPANDING THE CONSTITUENCY OF CONSCIENCE**

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Bruce Duncan CSsR

Xanana's return

You may recall the television scenes, after the United Nations force had intervened in East Timor, of Xanana Gusmao addressing some thousands of East Timorese for the first time after his return. This was one of the most moving images I had seen on TV. After all the suffering of the killings, the fear, the forced deportations and panic of flight, after 24 years of oppression, seemingly endless, of apparently hopeless struggle and resistance, East Timor was at last free. Despite the systematic razing of the country, there was now hope of a new beginning.

God as Liberator

I was struck how similar was the experience of the ancient Hebrews in their liberation from Egypt. The Jews were facing genocide, with the killing of the male children, and savage oppression. In the Bible account, they are rescued not by Xanana Gusmao or the United Nations of course, but by God himself as their Redeemer, their Liberator.

It is this experience which Jesus takes as his own in the metaphor of the Jubilee. Except that in Luke Jesus promises his liberation *not just to Jews, but to all peoples*; and that God reveals himself in Jesus *not as a warrior God* slaughtering the enemies of his people, but *as a suffering servant*, identifying profoundly with all who suffer or endure oppression.

You will recall immediately Luke's accounts of how Jesus took up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read the passage:

`The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He sent me to proclaim
liberty to the captives,
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the Lord's year of favour' (Luke 4: 18-20),
meaning the Jewish Jubilee.

Yet it is astonishing how we moderns have missed the power of this passage, which Pope John Paul II has repeatedly highlighted this year. Part of the reason we have not grasped how central this passage is for Jesus is that we haven't well appreciated the social significance of the Jewish Jubilee.

As we have heard so much this year, this was the time

- to remit debts,
- that every family receive back their ancestral land,
- to free those in debt bondage, and
- to reinvigorate the land.

The point was that God had freed his people from slavery in Egypt and given them their own land to nourish them and prosper. The Jubilee was envisaged as a way to return social conditions to the way God had intended. Not to do so would be a grave offence against God.

We would talk about it in terms of redistributing wealth and restoring equality of opportunity so everyone had enough to live a decent life.

Why does Luke present Jesus as taking such a demanding social situation and making it the foundation of his own mission statement? In other words, who is God for Jesus? The Jubilee message is that God is deeply concerned about human freedom and wellbeing. Jesus' God is not, as the pop song says, 'watching us from a distance', but is so passionately involved in human suffering that he intervenes, as once in Egypt, but now in Jesus, to come as our Redeemer, as we translate the word, but more accurately to capture the social significance, as Rescuer, as Liberator. We are invited to share this passion of God for our neighbour, especially those most disadvantaged, suffering and alien to us.

As you know, the Pope has repeatedly highlighted the social implications of the Gospel. I don't think it is going too far to see his social program outlined in the Jubilee as part of his continuing attempt to sketch a **theology of liberation for the entire Christian world**. Far from disapproving of mainstream liberation theology, you will recall that he wrote to the bishops of Brazil in 1986 that liberation theology is not just legitimate, but necessary and obligatory for the entire Church. Since then he has been developing such a theology in his voluminous and urgent social teachings.

Of course, over the centuries we have interpreted this notion of liberation or redemption to include all forms of alienation, pain, suffering and injustice, in a word, as sin. But we have often given these foundational religious truths too abstract, devotional or spiritual a meaning, even to the extent of falling into a form of angelism, as if spiritual truths had nothing to do with painful earthly realities of injustice and social conditions. As the Second Vatican Council said, such views cannot be condemned too strongly. **Jesus was not a proponent of angelism**. It is not those who call 'Lord, Lord' who will enter God's reign, but those who genuinely care for their neighbour.

What the Pope has been calling the Church to in this Jubilee **is a fresh transparency**, so that the Church might be a living reincarnation of the Jubilee message of love and Liberation. The problem is that many do not see these values embodied in the Church, either in its history or currently.

Developing a constituency of conscience

How are we to move forward from here then? I would put it like this: an answer to the Jubilee call must be to recommit ourselves to developing a far more robust constituency of conscience, particularly on social matters, within the Church, and indeed in collaboration right across the spectrum of belief system, most particularly in dialogue with other Christian denominations but increasingly with people of other faiths.

I recognise of course, that there are great numbers of men and women of conscience in every field of our society, and the contribution of those of us who are Catholics or Christians may well be modest and certainly must be humble. But the truth is that we often fail to reflect the image of God Jesus portrayed in his Jubilee message.

Acknowledging the limits of Church authority

These failures present the Church with a major problem of credibility in its social engagement. But I think the Pope has indicated a way forward, particularly in his apologies for past errors by the Church and even betrayals by Catholics and churchmen over the last thousand years. As you know, Pope John Paul particularly mentioned the Crusades, the Inquisitions, the acquiescence in the use of violence in the service of the Faith, forced conversions, the Church's involvement in the conquest of the New World and the violation of the right of religious conscience. In other words, the Church has often failed in its social responsibilities.

The making of the apologies was an unprecedented event in the Catholic Church, but one which I think many Catholics, and bishops, have found hard to comprehend. Even some of the cardinals are opposed to what the Pope has said. There was a report that the Pope's message of apology in Lent was at the last minute watered down because of opposition. But the Pope has been determined to see through his program for the Jubilee, and I think it not unreasonable to see this program as also helping set the agenda for the next pontificate.

These apologies have confirmed that sometimes the Church's most loyal members have been its sternest critics. It is remarkable to see that the Czech church reformer who was executed for heresy by the Church has begun the journey to canonisation.

Some theologians have argued that past mistakes by the Church, some of which we might now consider outrages against human rights, were committed by Church members, and do not affect the magisterium, or teaching authority of the Church itself. Such an explanation will not do. As Cardinal Ratzinger has pointed out, the magisterium itself has made mistakes, not indeed on the core matters of faith, but on some major questions of doctrine and particularly in social morality. He mentioned specifically the Church's condemnation of the principle of religious liberty and many of the statements of the Biblical Commission during the Anti-Modernist campaigns at the beginning of the last century.

Here I think we Catholics find difficulty because of confusion about the nature of the Church and its authority, and secondly, about the role of conscience.

Firstly, how can the magisterium of the Church be wrong on such doctrinal matters? In response, I would suggest that we need to adopt a more sophisticated understanding of what the magisterium is. The Church claims to have access to the fullness of God's Revelation in Christ, and authentically to reflect the Truth about God. The Church, as we say, is the precious Bride of Christ, without spot or wrinkle. As a Catholic, I have no difficulty with this claim, if we mean by the Church in this context the living presence of Christ among the community of believers and as his grace reaches into our humanity to transform it.

But this is not what we usually mean in the discourse of ordinary civil language by the term 'Church'. We then mean the community of believers who struggle in the limitations of time, culture, place, personality and especially sinfulness to respond to the call of God.

Outsiders especially see the Church as a human institution, claiming high moral ideals certainly, but subject to critical judgment as any other human institution is. They find especially disconcerting the way some well meaning apologists for the Church invoke the claim for the divine element as a sanction or obfuscation for errors or mistakes by the Church as it appears in history.

For a believer, however, the Church is both human and divine at the same time, or as the Pope says, holy in Christ but sinful in its members, including the bishops and popes themselves. Hence the Pope's apologies for the failures of Church members to live authentically by the Gospel.

Some are very reluctant to concede that the magisterium could be in error, for fear that the authority of the Church will be damaged. But it is clear that the magisterium, too, involves the human reality of the Church, and to this extent is capable of error. The magisterium depends on all the instruments and limitations of human learning and judgment, but often has to make decisions for the sake of good order in the Church, to the best of its ability at the time.

How then are we to know when the magisterium is in error or not? There is no easy answer to this question, except by evaluating its decisions and directions in accord with our normal conscience. This does not mean that we are free to discard the Church's teaching on mere whim, but if after prayerful consideration, study and consultation, we feel unable in conscience to accept something, then we are entitled, and indeed are morally required, to be guided by conscience.

The role of conscience

Here we face a further problem, for there is currently some confusion about the role of conscience. I would like to draw on the work of the moral theologian, Brian Lewis, in situating conscience in relation to the obligation to search out the truth in any given situation. Lewis talks of a reciprocal interrelationship between what he calls the primacy of truth, the primacy of freedom and the primacy of conscience. Each hold a primacy in different areas: conscience in the interiority and ownership of decision-making; freedom in the agency of the person; and truth in striving for an accurate knowledge of reality and the good to be achieved.

The development of a constituency of conscience begins from a determination to search out the truth of a given situation, to establish the good to be protected or pursued. As in East Timor and with our first Australians, our search for justice must be based **on the primacy of truth**. We recently saw that Australian governments were exposed for past lies and deceit over East Timor, resulting sometimes from mistakes in trying to negotiate very difficult situations, but with the danger of falling into complicity with Indonesian oppression.

Second, we need to recognise the **primacy of freedom** for individuals and peoples. God wants all people to be free, to search for the truth of their social situation and freely to respond in social solidarity. Indeed, as moral theologians have long insisted, there can be no moral action at all without adequate inner and external freedom.

Third, I would relate freedom and truth to the traditional Catholic teaching on the **primacy of conscience**. This is not conscience in a radically subjective sense, not 'what I believe is true', as the song says, as if truth is whatever I want it to be.

The authentic Catholic view of conscience insists that we are bound to search for the truth and to shape our lives and action on that truth. As Cardinal Newman once said, conscience is 'the aboriginal Vicar of Christ' in our hearts and minds. We are bound to follow its determinations, even if it is objectively mistaken. The theologian Joseph Ratzinger commented that conscience even puts limits to the Church principle itself, or Church authority.

Broadening the constituency of conscience

What we need to do is to build up a **much larger constituency of conscience** among Catholics, in collaboration with people of all religions and of none. Such great Catholic thinkers as Jacques Maritain and Pope Paul VI contended that this was one of the primary tasks of the Church.

Never in our 2000 years of history have Christian communities been so abundantly blessed with human resources, with skills and expertise in every field of endeavour. How can we encourage them to focus their energies more productively on the great tasks confronting us, on eliminating poverty and hunger entirely from our planet? We know from experts that we have the resources completely to abolish hunger and the worst forms of poverty within a matter of decades, if we used our resources well.

So many Christians in the past acquiesced in the practice of slavery, and indeed cruelly enslaved whole peoples. Are we today in a similar situation of acquiescing in the impoverishment of billions of people? Why are we not demonstrating in the streets?

Where are our economists, media and business people working with determination on these concerns? Can we say we have developed a constituency of conscience on these matters? Why is Australia's overseas aid so miserably parsimonious? Are these matters lively and vigorous aspects of our school curricula? Are they considered of utmost importance in our tertiary institutions?

Particularly here in Victoria, where is the Church voice addressing the overarching moral issue of our time, the situation of half the world's population struggling with dire poverty, at a time when the richer countries are enjoying unprecedented and rapidly increasing prosperity?

I confess that others and I are deeply troubled that a million Catholics in Melbourne are unable to develop any significant public voice on these matters of the utmost urgency.

Again, are we acquiescing in the redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich throughout much of the world, and even in our own country as the national president of the St Vincent de Paul Society said so eloquently earlier this week? One could be forgiven for thinking that the rich are waging a new form of class war on the poor. Why do we still largely ignore the social encyclicals and the innumerable appeals from Pope John Paul to give these issues our most urgent attention?

In some areas I think we have people speaking and acting very creditably, particularly on local and state issues, like the gambling debate, prison reform and issues surrounding the shameful treatment of asylum seekers. We have an excellent tradition of care for the sick and elderly, and education. We have thousands of highly dedicated staff and volunteers working in our many social service agencies.

We have the national agencies in Sydney, the Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace and Caritas with excellent and committed staff. In Canberra the Catholic Social Welfare Commission informs our responses nationally. But the work of these national agencies barely touches us in Victoria. How do we extend our energies to the wider struggle for justice and human rights, for an end to warfare and the new arms race emerging in Asia, and the continuing spread of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction? Are we engaged in the vital decisions determining the future of our nation, concerning the environment for instance? I do not suggest that our bishops and church leaders need to become instant experts in all these areas, or attempt to take a prominent role in public debate if they do not have the expertise. Normally such debates should be left to lay specialists or groups. My point is, why do we not have more vigorous forums for debate in the Catholic and Christian community, drawing on the expertise of so many of our members? Is this not the Christian vocation in the world, to transform social conditions so that all can live in justice, freedom and sufficiency?

But how do we develop better structures of participation, of communication and of collaboration?

Again, do we have in Melbourne a constituency of conscience ready to challenge the sanctions against Iraq, for instance, which in my view violates the conditions of a just war since they have cost the lives of perhaps half a million children? What will be our response if, despite all our efforts to support one of the largest petitions to governments in world history, the campaign to reduce the crushing debts of the most impoverished countries produces no substantial results beyond a camouflage of fine rhetoric, as now seems increasingly likely?

As the Jewish Rabbi cheekily put it, it is not enough to love God with all our heart, and all our mind, and all our strength. *What about our possessions? God wants us to love him with all our possessions and goods as well.* We might add, we must love God with all the human resources of skill, knowledge and expertise as well. In other words, again, God is not impressed with angelism, or pious sentiments without any real commitment. When did we see you hungry and not feed you, naked and not clothe you, in prison and not visit you, homeless and not shelter you?

At this Jubilee the Pope has effectively asked us to get our priorities right, as a Church to be transparent with the passion of a God who in Jesus lays down his life for our Liberation, so distressed is he about human suffering in all its forms.

How can we pursue this vision as an ecumenical endeavour, and embark on inter-faith collaboration as well, based on **a profound respect for the religious conscience of others?** By some miracle of grace, Jesus' Jubilee vision of God as passionately concerned about the wellbeing of all people, particularly of the weakest and most vulnerable, is a vision that people of all religions and of none can readily embrace.

This is what I mean by developing a broader constituency of conscience.