



Council for Justice and Peace



A Call to Action in Times of Crisis:

A Reflection from the Council for Justice and Peace
of the Irish Episcopal Conference

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Foreword

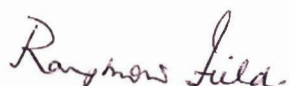
As the title reminds us, *A Call to Action in Times of Crisis*, acknowledges the reality of human frailty but nevertheless offers a reflection on the work for justice and peace which transcends the particularities of any specific moment of crisis in any one country. From our perspective, this reflection is written at a time of continuing crisis in Ireland, the dimensions of which have been outlined over the course of three of our recent position papers: *In the Wake of the Celtic Tiger: Poverty in Contemporary Ireland* (2009); *Challenging Poverty in Northern Ireland* (2010); and *From Crisis to Hope: Working to Achieve the Common Good* (2011).

In the spirit of this reflection we cannot fail to acknowledge that many people throughout Ireland are anxiously awaiting the outcome of the Budget for 2012 in the Republic and the new Programme for Government in Northern Ireland. It is to be hoped that the measures adopted in these crucial areas will contribute to the common good and not further scar the social landscape. There is a need for all of us today to ask ourselves to what extent the social dimension of the Gospel, as understood through the prism of the Sermon on the Mount, is reflected in and through the exercise of ministry that flows from our common Baptism. To what extent does the Gospel message of Jesus Christ and Catholic Social Teaching both inform professional practice and also the multitude of decisions that constitute our daily life?

For those exercising leadership roles in the Church in Ireland today additional questions come to the fore. For example:

- a. To what extent are the concerns of justice and peace at the heart of the work of ministry at diocesan, parish and local level?
- b. To what extent are the concerns of justice and peace at the heart of the work of the new Evangelization as prioritized by the Irish Church over the past number of years and enshrined in the recently published Catechetical Directory for Ireland?
- c. To what extent are the concerns of justice and peace at the heart of our understanding of the Blessed Eucharist?

The seriousness of these questions cannot be avoided if Church teaching on the Work for Justice as outlined below is to inform our pastoral priorities in this time of crisis in Ireland today. The example shown by Jesus Christ in washing the feet of his disciples is a telling reminder, if one were needed, of the centrality of the ideal of service to any explanation or celebration of the Eucharist. Furthermore, as we point out in the section entitled *Promoting the Church's Social Teaching as part of the New Evangelisation*, the work for justice and peace is a constitutive part of the Gospel and the New Evangelization must appear in this light, if it is to be a truly authentic witness to the Gospel.



Bishop Raymond Field.

Chair of the Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Episcopal Conference

11th November 2011

Introduction

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. [Mt 5:6]

This year marked a series of important anniversaries from the perspective of Justice and Peace. It is the 40th anniversary of the Apostolic Letter of Pope Paul VI, *Octagesima Adveniens* (1971), to the then President of the Pontifical Council, Cardinal Maurice Roy. *Octagesima Adveniens* in turn commemorates the 80th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum*, the cornerstone on which a long tradition of Catholic Social Teaching has since been built. Also in 1971, the Synod of Bishops issued *Justice in the World* and Ireland became one of the founding members of the newly-established Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions.

Forty years on, the Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Episcopal Conference has been reflecting on its mission and mandate in light of the tradition outlined above and in the context of a global financial crisis and unprecedented challenges for Church and State in Ireland. In sharing this reflection with others working for Justice and Peace, both in Ireland and throughout the world, we hope to stimulate further discussion about the contribution that can be made, through the work of Justice and Peace, to addressing the challenges facing us at this time, promoting the common good and protecting the most vulnerable in our societies and throughout the world.

Reflecting on our mandate

The Council for Justice and Peace takes up the call for 'Christian communities to analyse with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words and for action from the social teaching of the Church' (*Octagesima Adveniens*, 4). In addressing issues of national concern, the Council has a particular responsibility to set these in the context of the common good of the whole, global human family, speaking out on behalf of the most vulnerable on both a national and international level.

In keeping with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI underlines the importance of active engagement by local Churches with current issues, formulating a response to the 'signs of the times' that takes account of the history of the Church's Social Doctrine and the unchanging demands of the Gospel. Engaging in the work of Justice and Peace is not only one of the ways that the Church serves the world, but also an important contribution to the process of renewal of the Church in the world: 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men (sic) of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1).

The signs of the times in Ireland today

An overview of the themes examined by Pope Paul VI in *Octagesima Adveniens* shows the continuity between the issues affecting people forty years ago and now: i) Urbanisation, city life and isolation; ii) Youth; iii) The role of women; iv) Workers; v) Discrimination; vi) Emigration; vii) Employment; viii) Media of social communication; ix) The environment; x) Social solidarity vs individualism; xi) Engagement with political ideologies, science; xii) Understanding progress and growth (8-21). Pope Paul discusses these issues in the context of the emerging desire for equality and participation evident in the human family at the time (22-41).

Although the nature of the issues may have remained the same, notably the desire for equality and participation, our current globalised society, with its growing secularisation, presents its own unique challenges. In the Apostolic Letter, Pope Paul VI referred to 'widely varying situations' (*Octagesima Adveniens*, 4) but even he could not have envisaged the rapid rate of change in our modern world. That world today is facing a number of serious and inter-related crises: ethical, political, social, economic, and environmental. The impact of these crises has been keenly felt in Ireland, where they have coincided with a severe crisis of trust in the Catholic Church.

In a time of fear, uncertainty and despair, people are looking for strong and credible leadership. The challenge presented by Catholic Social Teaching is that it is not simply a matter of 'recalling general principles' (*Octagesima Adveniens*, 42), but rather working to bring those principles to life through application in concrete situations. The current situation of crisis is one that calls for swift responses from the Church to rapidly-changing circumstances. The Church has a moral responsibility to recognise the urgency of this situation and make its voice heard, bringing a message that is 'characterised by a disinterested will to serve and attention to the poorest' (*Octagesima Adveniens*, 42).

The methodology of discernment

The need for ethical leadership in the Ireland of today is clear, but what should be the particular role and contribution of an Episcopal Council for Justice and Peace? *Octagesima Adveniens* provides clear guidelines for reflection and action:

It is up to these Christian communities, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops who hold responsibility and in dialogue with other Christian brethren and all men of goodwill, to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed. (4)

The document highlights the centrality of a dialogue that should include all levels of the Church and all people of goodwill. Although, as Pope Benedict XVI has clearly stated, '[t]he Church does not have technical solutions to offer' (*Caritas in Veritate*, 9), the importance of consulting people with appropriate expertise in the preparation of our responses should not be minimised.

Promoting the Church's Social Teaching as part of New Evangelisation

A core element of the work of the mission of the Council for Justice and Peace is the promotion of Catholic Social Teaching. Taking its inspiration from *Justice in the World*, the Council considers the promotion of justice and peace to be central to the New Evangelisation: '[a]ction 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' (6).

The New Evangelisation sets out to build 'the capacity of every Christian actively to take part in the conversations taking place within real-life situations and the workplace, so as to bring to these situations the Christian gift of hope'.¹ While much has been done to promote Catholic Social Teaching at the level of local parishes and in education, there is still much that needs to be done to raise awareness of its contribution and enduring relevance. As the *Lineamenta* for the New Evangelisation states '[w]hat is not believed or lived cannot be transmitted'.²

Conclusion

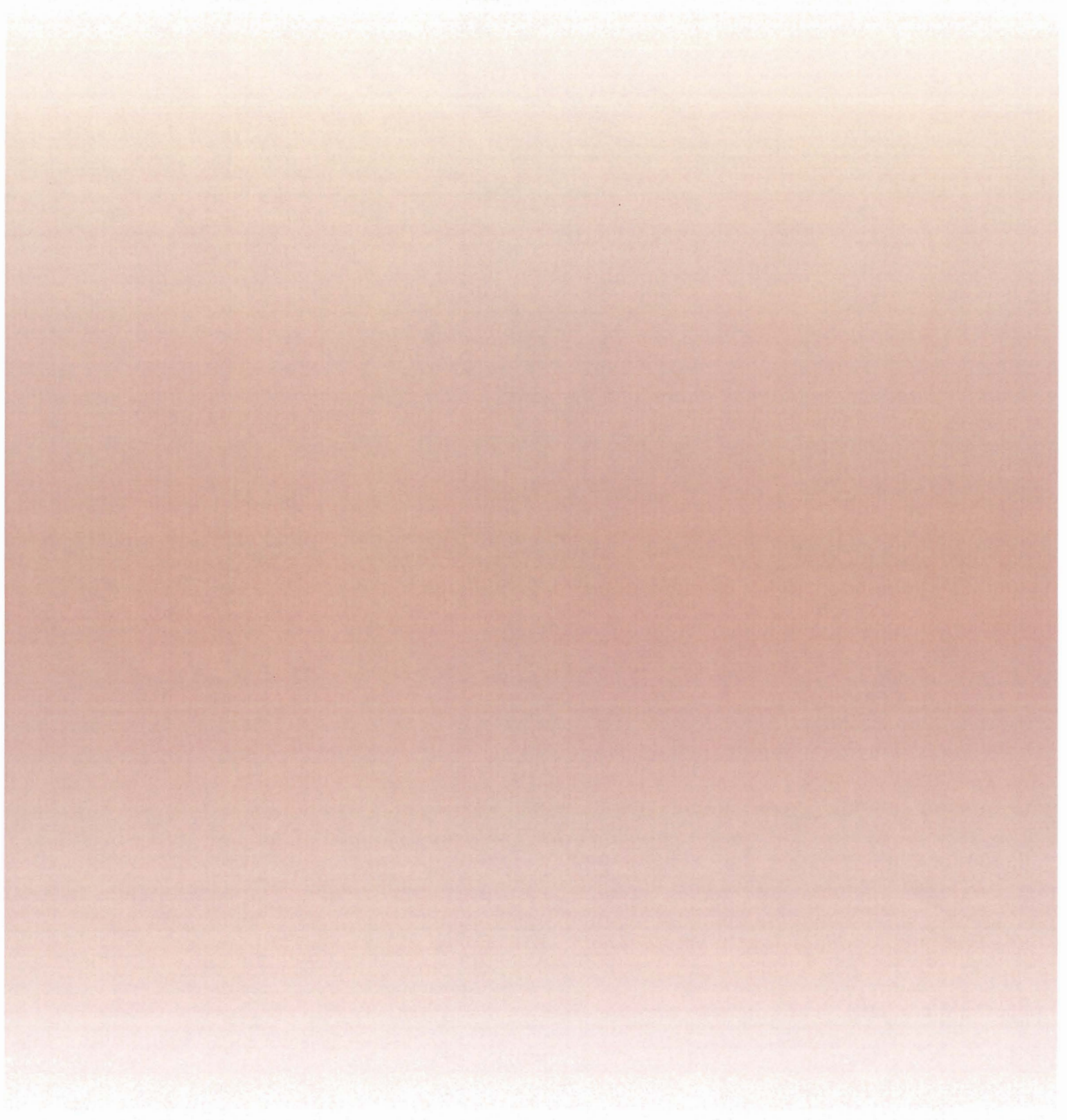
Addressing the European Justice and Peace 'family' on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions, Cardinal Peter Turkson, President of the Pontifical Council stated: '[W]e are well aware of the risk that the multiple challenges of our time will render us victims of anguish and despair. That is why our action must be deeply rooted in the Gospel. We all have to nurture our faith, to stay always open to the Word and to live out that Word in our daily lives.'³

In sharing this reflection, we hope to inspire others, within our own local Church and from other Churches throughout the world, to reflect on the effectiveness of their engagement on issues of Justice and Peace. Are we ready to take up the challenge of Pope Paul VI 'to undertake the daring and creative innovations which the present state of the world requires' (*Octagesima Adveniens*, 42)?

¹ *Lineamenta for XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 'The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith'*, p. 39.

² *Ibid.* p. 29.

³ Letter from Cardinal Peter Turkson, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, to Archbishop Gerard Defois, President of the European Conference of Justice and Peace Commissions, 17 September 2011 (Translated from the original French).



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