

Towards the Global Common Good



Pastoral Letter on International Development
from the Irish Bishops' Conference

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1. Celebrating our success

In recent years Ireland has reaped the benefits of global economic development. According to the World Bank in 2004, Ireland now ranks twelfth overall in terms of Gross National Income. *The Economist* magazine ranks Ireland as first in the world in terms of the 'best place to live.' For the first time in our recent history, the country has become a destination of immigration rather than a point of departure. Northern Ireland is enjoying greater political stability and higher levels of economic growth than it has known for many years.

Unfortunately, the welcome benefits of this prosperity have not been shared equally throughout our country. In *Prosperity with a Purpose* we set out some of the social and economic principles which we believe could address these inequalities. In *Towards the Global Common Good*, we wish to explore the international aspects of this recent economic success and Ireland's reputation as 'the most globalised economy in the world.'

Those who contributed to this success – politicians, economists, entrepreneurs, employees, educationalists and others – deserve recognition for the increased opportunity and higher standard of living which their efforts have brought. With success, however, comes responsibility. We are part of a global economy. The policies we pursue and the choices we make to ensure our own national prosperity have an impact on the success and opportunity of others.

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Interdependence, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out, 'is increasing and gradually spreading throughout the world. The unity of the human family, embracing people who enjoy equal natural dignity, implies a universal common good' (n.1911). In light of our recognised economic success, therefore, it seems appropriate that we should reflect on Ireland's role as a 'developed country' in the global context and, in particular, on our responsibility towards the global common good.

As the recently published *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* notes, ‘the fundamental questions accompanying the human journey from the very beginning take on even greater significance today’ (n.16). ‘The disciples of Jesus feel that they are involved with these questions, that they too carry them within their hearts and wish to commit themselves, together with all men and women, to the quest for the truth and the meaning of life, lived both as individual persons and as a society’ (n.17).

It seems appropriate that we should reflect on Ireland’s role as a ‘developed country’ in the global context and, in particular, on our responsibility towards the global common good.

It is in that spirit that Trócaire, at the request of the Bishops of Ireland, is preparing a Report on International Development which will look at the issues challenging the Global Common Good today¹. We, as Bishops, hope that this report will act as a stimulus for reflection and action, to be interpreted in accordance with the principles for reflection, the criteria of judgement and the directives for action which are the starting point for the promotion of a shared humanism based on solidarity (cf. *Compendium*, ns 6,7).

2. Sharing our success

The increasing interdependence of the modern world is more than a social and economic reality. It is also a spiritual and moral reality. To be human means to be called to solidarity with others. This solidarity reaches its fullest expression in the great commandment of love. The commandment of mutual love, as the *Compendium* suggests, ‘must inspire, purify and elevate all human relationships in society and in politics’ (n. 33). In this way the modern cultural, social, economic and political phenomenon of interdependence ‘which intensifies and makes particularly evident the bonds that unite the human family, accentuates once more, in the light of Revelation, a new model of the unity of the

human race... This supreme model of unity, which is a reflection of the intimate life of God, one God in three persons, is what we Christians mean by the word “communion” (n. 33).

Since the time of Genesis, this communion has always found concrete expression in an attitude of solidarity with others, particularly with the poor and the oppressed. When Cain asks God, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’, for example, he is reminded that his wealth and skill are given not just for his own benefit but for the whole community (Gen 4:1-15). Throughout the Old Testament, concern for the defenceless, the oppressed and the poor is rooted in the very nature of God: ‘(The Lord) executes justice for the oppressed... gives food to the hungry... sets the prisoners free’ (Ps 146:7). He is called ‘lover of justice’ (Ps 99:4). We are told that ‘He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity’ (Ps 98:9). For the prophets, a person could not be just before God unless he or she was prepared to take on the cause of the poor and oppressed (Amos 8:4-8).

In the New Testament, Jesus defines his very mission as the one who brings good news to the poor (Lk 4:18). He warns that it will be difficult for the rich person to enter heaven (Mt 19:23). Those who follow him are called to a radical simplicity of life. They are to give away one of their coats if they have two; tax collectors are only to collect what is due and soldiers are to avoid violence, robbery and greed (Lk 6:28; Mt 5:38-48).

What is clear from the Scriptures, therefore, is that our salvation is intimately connected to our attitude to the poor. To protect our wealth is a natural instinct. But to encounter Christ, to experience salvation, is to be liberated from our possessive instincts and to be freed to do what is just, or, as in the case of Zaccheus, to do even more than justice requires, that is, to be generous (Lk 19:8).

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In Matthew’s account of the Last Judgement (Mt 25:31-46) Jesus enters into personal solidarity with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the naked and the prisoner. This means that we are responding

to Jesus himself when we respond to the needs of the poor: 'In as much as you did to the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40).

3. The Eucharist as a 'Project of Solidarity'

In the early Church, this solidarity with the poor was closely associated with the celebration of the Eucharist. Luke tells us in Acts that the followers of Jesus 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers' (Acts 2:42). This fellowship was not limited to worship but expressed itself in what has been described by some as the 'economy of communion' of the early Church. Those who believed 'had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need' (Acts 2:44-45).

This practice of the early Church remains the standard for every Christian community which celebrates the Eucharist. In the words of Pope John Paul II, 'the Eucharist is not merely an expression of communion in the Church's life; it is also a project of solidarity for all humanity' (*Mane Nobiscum Domine*, n.27). Each Mass has a universal character. Every time we gather together in the name of the Trinity, we commit ourselves to making the Church the sacrament of the unity of humankind. Every time we bring the gifts of bread and wine to the altar, we acknowledge that the goods of the earth are a blessing from God and that we have an obligation to share with those in need. Each time we say the *Our Father*, we commit ourselves to work for the coming of the Kingdom of justice, peace and love and we affirm the right of all to their 'daily bread.' In this way, as Pope John Paul II explains, 'the Christian who takes part in the Eucharist learns to become a promoter of communion, peace and solidarity.' (*MND*, n.27)

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Pope John Paul II

Yet, while many of us enjoy much more than our 'daily bread', somewhere in the world a child dies every three seconds for want of basic resources such as food, water or medicine. Over 800 million people across the world go hungry. In Ireland life expectancy is 77 years, and rising; in a country such as Zambia, it is 37 years and falling. In Ireland one in every thousand children dies before their fifth birthday; in Zambia it is one in every ten children. The inequalities are stark.

What is clear is that despite the advances brought by economic globalisation, inequalities across the world, whether measured in terms of economic or social indicators, are widening. Whilst research has shown that globally, the number of people living on less than \$1 a day has fallen over the past decade, the gap between those in absolute poverty and those who live in relative luxury is growing. Such gaping inequalities in our world are unacceptable. They make an urgent moral claim on every follower of Jesus and on every human conscience.

4. Structures of global solidarity

It is against this backdrop that we are compelled by the commandment of love to consider Ireland's responsibility to the global common good. Our reputation for generosity, particularly in terms of voluntary aid, is widely recognised. Ireland has one of the highest levels of public support for such aid in the Western world.² A recent Irish Government survey indicated 'a strong degree of goodwill towards assisting developing countries',³ with over 95 per cent indicating that they had responded positively to recent appeals.

The good work of Ireland's missionary congregations and aid agencies is also renowned throughout the world. In bringing the Gospel of hope to those in need, our missionaries have extended the hand of solidarity of the Irish Church to those facing oppression, poverty and injustice. In responding to emergency appeals and promoting the work of development, many Irish voluntary agencies have gained great international respect. Trócaire, which we established over thirty years ago as a further expression of the Irish Church's solidarity with the poor, has developed into a leading non-governmental organisation. Together

with similar Church agencies in both wealthy and poor countries, it plays a key role in building a fairer world. The women and men who undertake this work as missionaries and aid workers are true ambassadors of Ireland's commitment to the poor. They deserve our whole-hearted encouragement and support.

This level of response to the needs of the poor is a tribute to our inherent generosity. Yet there is no room for complacency. Solidarity, as Pope John Paul II explained, 'is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.' (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 38) This in turn requires 'a commitment to the good of one's neighbour with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to "lose oneself" for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to "serve him" instead of oppressing him for one's own advantage' (cf. Mt 10:40-42, 20:25; Mk 10:42-45; Lk 22:25-27) (SRS, n.38).

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Nations which embrace such solidarity soon recognise that commitment to the common good requires a change of mindset. It requires going beyond a model of international relations in which nations seek their own advantage often at the expense of others, to one in which national advantage will sometimes be limited by the need to find common solutions to common problems. This in turn requires a spirit of cooperation and a willingness to sacrifice short-term gains, or even national interest, for the sake of the global common good.

It is clear that deep structural inequalities exist within global economic and financial systems which have a decisively negative impact on the poorest countries, keeping them in poverty. This requires what the *Compendium* describes as the transformation of 'structures of sin',

structures which favour the rich and disadvantage the poor, 'into structures of solidarity through the creation of laws, market regulations, and juridical systems' which uphold the global common good (n. 193).

5. Keeping our word

A welcome development in this regard was the decision by 191 States, including Ireland, to sign up to the Millennium Development Goals during the Jubilee year 2000. At the heart of these goals was the commitment to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger from the world. Many world leaders were taken by surprise when the Irish Government made the commitment that Ireland would reach the UN's goal of 0.7 per cent of GNP to official aid by 2007. It was a courageous commitment which broke with traditional political thinking and was consistent with the more general support within Irish society for addressing the needs of the developing world.

Indications that this target will not now be achieved have been met with widespread disappointment. The Irish Government has consistently proved itself a world leader in terms of its commitment to development aid. The Jubilee pledge to reach the UN target by 2007 was an outstanding example of that commitment and set a compelling standard for the rest of the world. As we write, the Irish Government is revisiting this pledge. We urge the Government to go the extra mile in expressing Ireland's solidarity with the developing world and to re-establish its public commitment to reaching the UN target at the earliest possible date and to honour the target it sets.

6. Playing our part

Such official aid, of course, is paid for out of tax revenues. In this sense, responsibility for ensuring that levels of official aid are consistent with our duty towards the poor does not rest solely with the Irish Government but also with the electorate. It is they who set the 'value climate' which make such political decisions feasible. Each of us has a

responsibility to ensure that Government and elected representatives are aware of our support for increased development aid and of our willingness to accept the domestic implications of such aid for taxation and public spending.

Likewise, there is a key role for the business community to play in promoting sustainable development. The Church's social doctrine considers the freedom of the person in economic matters a fundamental and inalienable right. It 'recognises the proper role of profit as the first indicator that a business is functioning well' (*Compendium*, n. 340). Yet, as the *Compendium* notes, 'Goods, even when legitimately owned, always have a universal destination; any type of improper accumulation is immoral, because it openly contradicts the universal destination assigned to all goods by the Creator' (n.328). In this context, profit and riches 'fulfil their function of service to man when they are destined to produce benefits for others and for society' (n.329). Those growing number of Irish businesses which share their expertise, technology, profit or personnel with developing countries demonstrate the possibility of new forms of economic association which seek to reconcile legitimate profit with the global common good. Business movements inspired by Christian principles of sharing and communion, such as the 'Economy of Communion', have emerged over the past decade and demonstrate the possibility of combining the freedom of the market with the common good.⁴

Responsibility for the growth of a more ethically and socially responsible private sector, however, does not rest with business alone. Businesses, by their very nature, respond to demand. As people who regularly make choices about what to consume and how to invest, we have a responsibility to become informed about the moral as well as the financial implications of such decisions. Where it is clear that a particular purchase or investment will contribute to the exploitation of others or undermine the dignity or rights of the human person then it cannot be reconciled with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This may mean being willing to pay slightly more for products or to earn less on investments because they meet higher ethical standards. Paying extra for a Fair Trade product, for example, may mean paying a

small premium in the interests of equality and justice, but it has the moral benefit of delivering a higher quality of life to the person who produced it. Avoiding investments which rely on the exploitation of child workers may mean less return from an alternative investment, but has the moral benefit of discouraging companies from engaging in such practices and upholds the rights of all workers to just conditions.

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Thanks to the growth of ethical investment funds many individuals and companies now opt for ethical investment policies as a matter of course. Much more could be done, however, to strengthen the link between investment and development.⁵

Commitment to the global common good also challenges the international structures of trade. Despite initiatives designed to give less developed countries preferential market access to the markets of developed countries, tariff barriers and non-tariff restrictions greatly diminish the value of these mechanisms. The shift to an open trading regime through the World Trade Organisation means that trade reform is inevitable.

How we engage in this process of reform will shape the economy of Ireland and the developing world. Christian commitment to the global common good implies that Ireland must participate in this process with a real concern for the developing world.

7. A shared planet

More could also be done to highlight the link between development and the way in which we treat our natural environment. The pressing problems of global warming and climate change are exacerbated by a model of international economic development which is heavily reliant on burning fossil fuels and deforestation. The disposal of waste, depletion of fish stocks, and pollution, are also by-products of an

economic model which pays little regard to the environmental consequences of certain aspects of economic growth. Some have suggested that if all people in the world were to sustain a lifestyle like that in the West, it would require the resources of ten planet earths.⁶

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Achieving the objective of environmentally sustainable development involves a dual challenge. The first is ensuring that poor countries can access the benefits of economic and social development with minimum environmental impact and that they are protected from the negative effects of current environmental problems. The second is that of reducing the environmental impact of rich countries such as Ireland.

This requires what Pope John Paul II called an 'ecological conversion' (Pope John Paul II, *General Audience Address*, January 17, 2001). Whether it is the type of energy we use to heat our homes, the method we use to dispose of our waste, or the form of transport we use to get to work, every decision we make in favour of a more sustainable environment is a decision in favour of the global common good.

On a national level, much more needs to be done to cut Ireland's greenhouse emissions. As a nation, we are legally bound to fulfil our obligations under the Kyoto Protocol, which came into force in February 2005. According to the most recent review of the Government's *National Climate Change Strategy* projections, Ireland will not reach its targets set under the Kyoto Protocol.⁷ It is a moral imperative, therefore, that the measures set out in the *National Climate Change Strategy* in 2000, are implemented with greater speed. All of us have a part to play: homes, schools, parishes, business, industry and government. All of us can review our own practices and establish our own challenging targets to ensure that we meet our moral obligation to care for creation as God intended and to create a sustainable global environment.

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8. Conclusion: Towards the Civilisation of Love

At the beginning of this year of the Eucharist, Pope John Paul II asked: 'Can we not make this Year of the Eucharist an occasion for diocesan and parish communities to commit themselves in a particular way to responding with fraternal solicitude to one of the many forms of poverty present in our world?' (*MND*, n. 28) As the year of the Eucharist draws to a close, we renew that appeal and ask people in all walks of life in Ireland to respond to the call of the Gospel to human solidarity and active commitment to the global common good. All of us have a part to play. 'What is urgently needed is a **moral and economic mobilisation**' (Pope John Paul II, *Message for World Day of Peace*, 2005).

In this regard, the role of the lay faithful in social, political and economic life will be critical. As the *Compendium* points out, 'fostering a social and political culture inspired by the Gospel must be an area of particular importance for the lay faithful' (n.555). 'The lay faithful are called to identify steps that can be taken in concrete political situations in order to put into practice the principles and values proper to life in society. This', the *Compendium* goes on to say, 'calls for a method of discernment' (n.568), 'a discernment of the current models of economic and social development. Reducing the question of development to an exclusively technical problem would deprive it of its true content, which concerns the dignity of individuals and peoples' (n. 563).

We hope that our reflections, and those of the Trócaire Report on International Development, will be an occasion for more and more Christians to engage in this discernment and in particular, to reflect on their responsibility as Christians in social, economic and political life. The Church's social teaching is part of its mission of evangelisation. It reminds us that 'at the root of the personal and social divisions, which affect this world, there is a wound which is present in man's inmost self'

(*Compendium*, n. 116). ‘The doctrine of the universality of sin, however, must not be separated from the consciousness of the universality of salvation in Jesus Christ’ (n.120). As believers we speak of ‘the universality of hope’ (n.123) even in the face of realities which cannot be attained by human forces alone.

We are reminded of this hope in Mary, mother of the Messiah of the poor (Is 11:4; 61:1), who proclaimed that nothing is impossible to God. As she gave thanks for the great things God had done for her, she rejoiced in God’s power to ‘raise up the lowly’ and ‘fill the starving with good things’ (Lk 1:46-55). As we give thanks for the economic success of our country in recent years, we ask God to bless us with a determination to respond generously to the cry of the poor and to work for the civilisation of love, justice and peace in our world. As we reflect on Ireland’s contribution to the Global Common Good, we express our conviction that ‘the complete fulfilment of the human person, achieved in Christ through the gift of the Spirit, develops in history and is mediated by personal relationships with other people, relationships that in turn reach perfection thanks to the commitment made to improve the world, in justice and peace’ (*Compendium*, n.58). We express the hope that Ireland will continue to play a leading part in building a more just and peaceful world through its commitment to the global common good.

Jesus teaches us that the fundamental law of human perfection, and consequently of the transformation of the world, is the new commandment of love (cf. Mt 22:40, Jn 15:12; Col 3:14; Jas 2:8). ‘Only a humanity in which there reigns the “civilisation of love” will be able to enjoy authentic and lasting peace’ (*Compendium*, n.582).

Notes

- 1 Following the UN Millennium plus Five Summit, Trócaire will publish its report entitled *Towards the Global Common Good: A Report on International Development prepared by Trócaire for the Irish Bishops’ Conference*.
- 2 Together with Holland, according to Weafer, J, 2002, *Attitudes towards Development Co-operation in Ireland*, p. 34.
- 3 Ibid p.9

- 4 ‘The Economy of Communion’ is an initiative involving around 800 businesses in building a corporate and economic culture centred on the values of sharing, solidarity and fraternity. Through the initiative, which is inspired by the spirituality of unity of the Focolare movement, the businesses also commit to sharing a proportion of their profits with those in need and for building a culture of giving. Gold, L (2004) *The Sharing Economy* www.edc-online.org/testi/sharing-economy-e.pdf, www.edc-online.org/testi/sharing-economy-e.pdf
- 5 There are now a range of websites providing gateways to information on ethical consumption and investments. See, for example, www.ethicalconsumer.org, www.getethical.com. See also, Clark, D (2004) *The Rough Guide to Ethical Shopping*, Rough Guide Publications.
- 6 Bruntland Commission (1987) *Our Common Future*, UN.
- 7 Plain Guide to the National Climate Change Strategy [HYPERLINK www.environ.ie/DOEI/DOEIPol.nsf/0/2f96644fae717d7d80256f0f003bc7ec/\\$FILE/pccguideinside.pdf](http://www.environ.ie/DOEI/DOEIPol.nsf/0/2f96644fae717d7d80256f0f003bc7ec/$FILE/pccguideinside.pdf), [www.environ.ie/DOEI/DOEIPol.nsf/0/2f96644fae717d7d80256f0f003bc7ec/\\$FILE/pccguideinside.pdf](http://www.environ.ie/DOEI/DOEIPol.nsf/0/2f96644fae717d7d80256f0f003bc7ec/$FILE/pccguideinside.pdf)

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