

# SOLIDARITY: THE HEALING OF CONFLICT

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**R**ECONCILIATION in working relations is a fundamental aspect of that peace which is the sign, above all else, of the kingdom of God. For conflict is endemic in our workplaces and the division, injustice and strife that permeate the experience of many working people is a clear indication of the fallen nature of human society and is a call, to those who have ears to hear, to commit themselves to witness to the gospel, there where peace is absent. Men and women labour not only in conditions of toil, hardship and drudgery, but also 'in the midst of many tensions, conflicts and crises, which in relationship with the reality of work, distort the life of individual societies and also of all humanity'.<sup>1</sup> Adam's drudgery is an expression of fallen nature (Gen 3,17) but the fratricidal strife of his children demonstrates its essential nature (Gen 4,1-16). Cain's excuse when challenged by God about his brother's death: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' is a cry that has echoed through countless centuries of selfishness, oppression and violence, and is still on the lips of those who inflict injustice and death on their fellow human beings, or condone these evils. 'Work contains the unceasing measure of human toil and suffering, and also the harm and injustice which penetrate deeply into the social life of individual nations and on the international level'.<sup>2</sup> The account in Genesis highlights the profound insight that it is in two areas, namely sexual relations between men and women, and in work, that fallen nature is shown most clearly; therefore every attempt to combat injustice, conflict and suffering in these two dimensions of experience helps in the work of redemption and liberation which leads to the establishment of the kingdom of God on this earth.

Let the Christian who listens to the word of the living God, uniting work with prayer, know the place that his work has, not only in *earthly progress*, but also in *the development of the kingdom of God*, to which we are all called through the power of the Holy Spirit and through the word of the Gospel.<sup>3</sup>

The unhappiness, drudgery and conflict that are often associated with work, are not 'natural' aspects of it, but evils that we are called to overcome in our efforts to co-operate with God to establish the *New Age* of justice and peace: the kingdom of God. The christian vocation is not to stand apart from the strife that arises in work situations and relations, but, by both prayer and active commitment, to seek to eradicate the causes of conflict. This is hardly ever easy, is often thankless, and may be dangerous. 'Reconciliation stands in opposition to existing reality. To effect reconciliation is to do *justice*' Sobrino argues,<sup>4</sup> and unless our concern for reconciliation is founded on a desire for God's justice and love, rather than human convenience, then we shall not be able to eliminate conflict. 'Happy are those who hunger and thirst for what is right: they shall be satisfied' (Mt 5,6), but if our hunger is for complacent quiet and not the peace of God, then we shall not have that peace.

In our time, as it has been for countless generations, working relations have been very largely defined in terms of who controls the means of producing wealth, who is responsible for the distribution of wealth and who benefits by that distribution. As *Laborem Exercens* points out, throughout the modern period:

the issue of work has of course been posed on the basis of the great *conflict* that in the age of, and together with, industrial development emerged *between 'capital' and 'labour'*, that is to say between the small but highly influential group of entrepreneurs, owners or holders of the means of production and the broader multitude who lack these means and who shared in the process of production solely by their labour. The conflict originated in the fact that the workers put their powers at the disposal of the entrepreneurs, and these, following the principle of maximum profit, tried to establish the lowest possible wages for the work done by the employees. In addition there were other elements of exploitation, connected with the lack of safety at work and safeguards regarding the health and living standards of the workers and their families.<sup>5</sup>

If we are to bring about reconciliation, then we need to recognize that conflict and to understand its causes, and, in the light of the gospel and of the witness that Jesus himself gave us, develop a programme for resolving it.

Our model for this is Christ Jesus who:

is the peace between us and has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, actually destroying

in his own person the hostility. . . . This was to create a New Man in himself out of the two of them and by restoring peace through the cross, to unite them both in a single Body and reconcile them with God (Eph 2,14-16).

The old man, divided as he is, cannot be reconciled; a New Man must be made which overcomes division and conflict; that New Man is brought into being through our co-operation with Christ in the historical process of redemption. The refusal to abandon the work of reconciliation brings Jesus to the Cross and if we are to witness to the possibility of peace we too will find ourselves on the road that leads there. 'Peace on earth? Yes, Golgotha!' cries Bonhoeffer,<sup>6</sup> and the road to peace is usually through the Cross, but the end, as we know, is *not* the Cross but the peace of resurrection.

Jesus, in overcoming the division caused by sin, acts in solidarity with us sinners and if we are to commit ourselves to the task of reconciliation then we must commit ourselves to our fellow human beings and oppose adamantly that which destroys and divides them. Ignatius Loyola, in the *Spiritual Exercises*, asks of us that we should:

desire to be poor along with Christ in poverty rather than rich, to be insulted along with Christ, so greatly insulted, rather than be thought well of . . . to be thought a helpless fool for the sake of Christ who was so treated, rather than be thought wise and clever in the world's eyes.<sup>7</sup>

And how is that done more effectively than by identifying with Christ in the poor, powerless, oppressed, despised and ignorant of this world? This is not to reject the rich and powerful, but to *reject riches and power, and to work for a society where such differences between people are no longer present: a society where human freedom and dignity is safeguarded and human relations are based upon a more just and loving understanding of the essential unity of the human race.*

That unity is demonstrated and strengthened in the sacrament of the eucharist, the sacrament which is at the heart of christian community and which shows its true nature. The sharing of the eucharist should teach us solidarity and commitment to one another and should drive out of our hearts that pride and arrogance which sees others as simply there for our own convenience and self interest. Immediately following the teaching on the eucharist in the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul goes on to speak of the Body of Christ which is the community of believers, and the differing contributions made by each of us: 'the parts may be many but the

body is one. The eye cannot say to the hand "I do not need you", nor can the head say to the feet "I do not need you" (1 Cor 12,20-21). If we wish to overcome division we must pray fervently for the grace of the eucharist: a commitment to human solidarity, a recognition of diversity, and a joyful affirmation that we are all children of the one God. The struggle for justice in the workplace is intimately connected with these truths which also demand, as John Paul II points out, an acceptance that '*the right to private property is subordinated to the right of common use, to the fact that goods are meant for everyone*'.<sup>8</sup>

When the Spirit moved the apostolic community to give living witness to the gospel, they did it not only by preaching the word, and by signs of healing, but also through the formation of a community where private property was not merely subordinated to the common use, but was abolished entirely: a community of *love communism*, so called because it expressed their mutual love and commitment to one another and the Lord Jesus. 'The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared the proceeds among themselves according to what each needed' (Acts 2,44-45), and in another passage this practice of a common life is shown to be part of the proclamation of the resurrection and the coming of the *New Age*:

The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed for his own use anything that he had, as everything they owned was held in common. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power and they were all given great respect. None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from them to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any members who might be in need (Acts 4,32-35).

The awesome story of Ananias and Sapphira, who died after concealing part of their property and trying to deceive the apostolic community, shows how seriously the early Church in Jerusalem regarded the commitment to common ownership. Throughout the centuries, religious communities have tried to give a similar witness to the truth of the gospel, but now we are beginning to see how it might be possible for us to progress towards a more loving and caring community encompassing the whole of society, to follow along the way of Jesus and the gospel.

As far as work is concerned, we should try to establish '*joint ownership of the means of work*'.<sup>9</sup> Through work the community

produces its subsistence: its bread. That bread is the bread of Christ; it belongs above all to him, for our power to produce it is a gift of the Father and a manifestation of the Son. The eucharist reminds us of this truth and that we should be living in such a way as to express it, but our social and work relations are far from providing a basis for this:

The position of 'rigid' capitalism continues to remain unacceptable, namely the position that defends the exclusive right to private ownership of the means of production as an untouchable 'dogma' of economic life. The principle of the respect for work demands that this right should undergo constructive revision, both in theory and practice.<sup>10</sup>

We need the spirit of the first beatitude: 'happy are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. Happy are those who share, who try to build real community based upon fellowship and solidarity, who try to enter into the mystery of the eucharist. . . !

To recognize the share that our brothers and sisters have in the bread of life produced by the community is to see that they should never be subordinated to the demands of 'economic interest', that is to the demands of the powerful in either private industry or the State. And as *Laborem Exercens* puts it: 'We must first of all recall a principle that has always been taught by the Church: *the principle of the priority of labour over capital*'.<sup>11</sup> The wealth that is contained in capital is produced by human work. But capital in certain social systems seems to dominate and oppress workers; they experience the dehumanizing alienation of being at the mercy of economic forces created by their own labour, but to which they are sacrificed. Like some dreadful contemporary Moloch, capital demands high unemployment, cuts in social services, de-industrialization and the increase of wealth and poverty. John Paul II calls this 'the error of economism' and describes it as '*an error of materialism*' which may not be '*theoretical materialism* in the full sense of the term, but is certainly '*practical materialism*'.<sup>12</sup> This economism sees work 'as a sort of "merchandise" that the worker — especially the industrial worker — sells to the employer, who at the same time is the possessor of capital, that is to say of all working tools and means that make production possible'.<sup>13</sup> And 'precisely this reversal of order, whatever programme under which it occurs, should rightly be rejected as "capitalism"'.<sup>14</sup> This profound insight of Pope John Paul II into the *essentially materialist character of 'capitalist' relations* in the workplace arises from his commitment to the personal dignity, freedom and worth of each worker who is seen not as 'merchandise',

nor as a hostile force to be reduced to passivity and obedience, but as a *child of God* and a *co-worker with Christ*. All materialist philosophies must, by definition, reject the fatherhood of God, and the most consistent of them wish to deny the brotherhood of the human community too. If we deny that brotherhood by reducing our fellow human beings to a kind of servitude; if we leave them in alienation and subject to arbitrary economic power, then we deny the truth of the eucharist, even if we partake of the sacrament, and remain in a situation which engenders class conflict. That conflict arose in a given socio-economic system: 'it originated in the economic and social practice'<sup>15</sup> and *struck a blow* first and foremost against *the working man*.<sup>16</sup> The workers' movements did not invent 'class conflict'; they suffered under it.

The existence of this situation of injustice demands of Christians not passive acquiescence but active efforts to change it and to create a more just and human society. John Paul II sees the workers' movements as expressions of this 'ethically just social reaction'<sup>17</sup> which is 'the reaction *against the degradation of man as the subject of work* against the unheard-of exploitation in the field of wages, working conditions and social security for the workers'.<sup>18</sup> To oppose injustice of this scale and dimension, permeating every aspect of social relations, is to be engaged in a bitter and protracted struggle which can be thought of as 'class struggle' because it is for the well being of working people and against whatever humiliates, degrades and alienates them, but '*it is not a struggle "against" others*. Even if in controversial questions the struggle takes on a character of opposition to others, this is because it aims at the goal of social justice'.<sup>19</sup> We can only struggle in this way as Christians if we learn to pray for those who oppose us and with whom we find ourselves in conflict. One loves the oppressed by standing in solidarity with them; by sharing their aspirations, their sufferings and their destiny; one loves the oppressor by calling him to repentance by opposition and by the *loving prayer for mutual forgiveness which recognizes the deep relationship which exists between each and every sinful child of God*, and which also recognizes that *people are placed in opposition to one another by historical conditions and sinful social relations and institutions*. The Lord Jesus was immersed in conflict during the time of his ministry with Pharisees, Sadducees, the temple authorities and the herodian political establishment, but nevertheless he maintained love and solidarity with all, by his hunger for justice, and his overflowing mercy, compassion and love which took him to the point of crucifixion. There is still among

many Christians an attitude which sees Trade Unions as either a threat to public order and stability or as governed by purely material and economic considerations, but, as John Paul II reminds us, they are the '*mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice*'<sup>20</sup> and a 'constructive factor of *social order and solidarity*'.<sup>21</sup> Therefore Christians should not only belong to Trade Unions but should defend them and help to maintain them in the noble contribution they make to social development. The many martyrs of the workers' movements, along with human rights activists and similar courageous people, should be seen as giving living witness to the values of the gospel and following in the Way of the Cross. 'We must shoulder that cross which the world and the flesh inflict upon those who pursue peace and justice'.<sup>22</sup> Let us not delude ourselves that those who enjoy the present ordering of society will easily accept change. We see how the appeal that Archbishop Romero made to the hundred families of El Salvador, to stop oppressing and exploiting their workers, was answered — by assassination. But, as Gandhi and Martin Luther King have shown us in this century, the acceptance 'of persecution and injustice in the cause of justice' (Mt 5,10) is a powerful weapon in the conversion of society from oppression and helps to create solidarity and hope among those that are oppressed.

'Labourers mowed your fields and you cheated them — listen to the wages you kept back calling out; realize that the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts' (Jas 5,4). The labourer can be defrauded of his just wage in many ways; the theft can be perfectly legal and still be iniquitous. Any worker forced to work for poverty wages because he or she does not have the economic and political strength to challenge unscrupulous employers is being defrauded, and the employer need not necessarily be a private employer either. In Britain, many of the six million people officially defined as low paid workers who earn wages below the poverty line, are employed by the State or local authorities. In any case, the State has an important role to play in the fixing of wage levels because it 'is the State that must conduct a just labour policy'.<sup>23</sup> It is now being argued that many of these low paid workers who are employed in the public services should be denied the right to strike, but 'workers should be guaranteed the right to strike without being subjected to penal sanctions for taking part in a strike'.<sup>24</sup> As we have seen, in a series of strikes in the public service industries in Britain, workers do, in fact, take a very responsible attitude towards emergency provision and can regulate their own disputes as far as these

problems are concerned. What is quite clear is that public sector workers should not be deprived of rights, nor expected to accept very low wage levels, unsocial hours of work and bad working conditions just because they work for a public authority. The taking of the means of production into public ownership does not guarantee proper democratic socialization.<sup>25</sup>

As Christians, we are called to be children of the Father and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, and so to participate in the life of the Trinity. But that life experiences nothing of our distorted relationships of domination and subordination, of alienation and exploitation, of arrogance and servitude; in so far as human society is still penetrated with these distortions it is far from the kingdom of God. The persons of the Trinity do not take from one another: they give to one another; they do not assert themselves over the others: they affirm the others; they do not lord it over the others but express their essential nature in the loving care and service of the others. In the fulness of the kingdom of heaven such a pattern of relationship is deepest joy; in our fallen human society it is often expressed only through suffering and painful abnegation. If, in either capitalist or socialist societies, workers are despised because they do unpleasant work: rubbish clearance, sewage disposal, or because they work in dirty, oppressive and dangerous conditions: miners, construction workers, fishermen, or because they are at the service of the public: ancillary health workers, caterers, transport workers, then a fully human society has not been created. That is only possible when such oppressive attitudes are eradicated and *all* workers have access to democratic decision-making about working conditions and the distribution of wealth. 'Listen, my dear brothers. it was those who are poor according to the world that God chose, to be rich in faith and to be the heirs to the kingdom which he promised to those who love him. In spite of this, you have no respect for anyone who is poor' (Jas 2,5-6): and that respect is vital if we are to create a society where the distinction between rich and poor is eradicated. Can we always answer affirmatively to Paul's rhetorical question: 'Surely you have enough respect for the community of God not to make poor people embarrassed?' (1 Cor 11,22). To create a truly democratic and participatory society we need to experience *metanoia*, to be converted from the values of this present age and adopt those of the *New Age*, and then we shall know that God has 'routed the proud in heart, he has pulled down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent



empty away' (Lk 1,51-53). When we all know what it is to be *doulos*, a slave, with Jesus, then we shall also know what it is to share his glory.

It is hope that enables us to work to resolve conflict: a hope that looks to 'the new heavens and the new earth' (2 Pet 3,13), 'for here grows the body of a new human family, a body that is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age'.<sup>26</sup> While it is true that the striving for justice and human community will take us to the Cross in some form or other, it is also true that through it is revealed the glory of the world to come. Anything that the noblest human heart can dream is less than what faith tells us is the inheritance of the children of God; so let us not be afraid to dream of a better human society and to act on these inspirations that the Holy Spirit breathes into our souls. 'One sows, another reaps. I send you to reap a harvest that you have not worked for. Others worked for it; and you have come into the rewards of their labour' (Jn 4,38). Countless generations of courageous people have gone before us, fired with trust in God's covenant and faith in his justice and love. Through their co-operation with God they have prepared the way for us; we should not fail to do what *we* can to bring nearer the establishment of the kingdom of God *on earth*, as we pray every day in the Our Father, through the elimination of all discord, division, injustice and oppression. If we trust in God's help and see that we become truly co-workers with Christ in his achievement of redemption and liberation, then we shall see in reality what our hearts long for: the peace of God on this earth.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II: *Laborem Exercens*, 'Encyclical Letter on Human Work' (Catholic Truth Society, London), p 6. Italicized passages are as in the original text.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 6.      <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 98.

<sup>4</sup> Sobrino, J.: *Christology at the crossroads* (London, 1978), p 119.

<sup>5</sup> *Laborem Exercens*, p 39.

<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, D.: *The cost of discipleship* (New York), p 103.

<sup>7</sup> Fleming, D.: *A contemporary reading of the Spiritual Exercises* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis), p 60.

<sup>8</sup> *Laborem Exercens*, p 61.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 53.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p 52.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p 41.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 47.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p 23/4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p 49.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p 49.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p 49.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p 73.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p 73.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p 73.

<sup>22</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* quoted in *Laborem Exercens*, p 96.

<sup>23</sup> *Op. cit.*, p 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p 76.

<sup>25</sup> Cf *ibid.*, p 54.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p 98.