

## Why do we need Dominican Commissions and Promoters of Justice and Peace?

For a long time, Justice and Peace has been a priority of the Dominican Order. Yet, despite this, mention of justice and peace so often evokes ambiguous reactions and even resistance!

Such reactions arise from a variety of negative attributes regarded as alien to Christian faith that people have come to associate with the discourse about Justice and Peace. For example:

- people in many places, and especially in Asia and Africa, often immediately associate it with political activism and even violence; or
- especially in Western Europe and Latin America, it is often associated with the 1960s liberal generation that many in the younger generation today reject; or
- especially in Eastern Europe, it is associated with the discourse of Communism; or
- in some places in North America, it is associated with a liberal pro-abortion agenda!

These negative associations have led many to call for a new name for the Church structures advocating for justice and peace. However, while we cannot refute the experience of people which has led to these negative associations, we have to guard ourselves against “throwing out the baby with the bath water”! For those of us who pray using the breviary every day, there is hardly a day that passes without the prayers of intercession including a prayer for justice and peace. If we change the name, what is to become of such prayers? So the challenge is to recover the evangelical discourse about justice and peace and to uncover the fullness of its meaning!

Our starting point therefore is to understand where the discourse about Justice and Peace fits into our Christian and Dominican vocation.

### ***The Origins of Justice and Peace Discourse and Structures***

The roots of this discourse lie in the reflections and documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). One of the most important documents emerging, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, emphasised that “**The Church is in the World for the transformation of the world.**” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965: §40). This was a radical statement after millennia of the Church being *identified with political power* (enabled by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century). This, in turn, was followed by the Church turning in on itself *in opposition to the world* (after its persecution during the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century).

Soon after the Council, in 1967, Pope Paul VI established the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace **to remind the Church that work for justice and peace is fundamental to evangelisation.**

All Bishops’ Conferences were instructed to establish a Justice and Peace Commission at Conference level, and all bishops were asked to establish Justice and Peace Commissions in their dioceses and in each parish. Many religious congregations too decided to establish Justice and Peace Commissions for themselves.

Then, in 1971, the Synod of Bishops on “Justice in the World” asserted that “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world ...(are) a **constitutive dimension** of the preaching of the Gospel”. The centrality of work for justice for evangelisation continued to be stressed in the encyclicals or exhortations of all the recent popes. For example:

**Pope John Paul II:** *Laborem Exercens*; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*; *Centesimus Annus*.

**Pope Benedict XVI:** Deus Caritas Est; Caritas in Veritate.

**Pope Francis:** Evangelii Gaudium; Laudato Si.

This insistence on the centrality of justice and peace for evangelisation is rooted in Luke's account of Jesus' primary mission, which he proclaimed in the synagogue in Nazareth:

"He has sent me

- To bring good news to the poor,
- To proclaim freedom to captives
- And to the blind new sight,
- To set the oppressed free,
- To proclaim the Lord's year of favour" (Luke 4:18).

Thus Jesus came to "bring Good News", which is the direct translation of "Evangelisation". This good news, when unpacked, consists of:

- **Economic Justice** for the poor: The poor are deprived people who will only find full satisfaction (good news) when they sense that there is a fair distribution of wealth.
- **Forgiveness and mercy** for offenders (captives, prisoners, sinners,...).
- **Healing** for those afflicted (the blind, the disabled, the sick,...).
- **Political Justice** for the oppressed: Oppressed people are those whose power has been taken away. Since "politics" is "the way we organise power" (in relationships, in families, in Church, in communities, in countries, globally,...), oppressed people will only find freedom when they feel that they have a voice – a meaningful participation in the exercise of power.

Thus, when economic and political justice, healing, forgiveness and mercy are present, peace in our world, in our communities, in our relationships and in our hearts becomes possible and the Lord's Year of Favour (the Kingdom of God) is among us!

Any discussion, then, about evangelisation (bringing Good News) without a focus on justice and peace, will be hollow as it will lack this constitutive element!

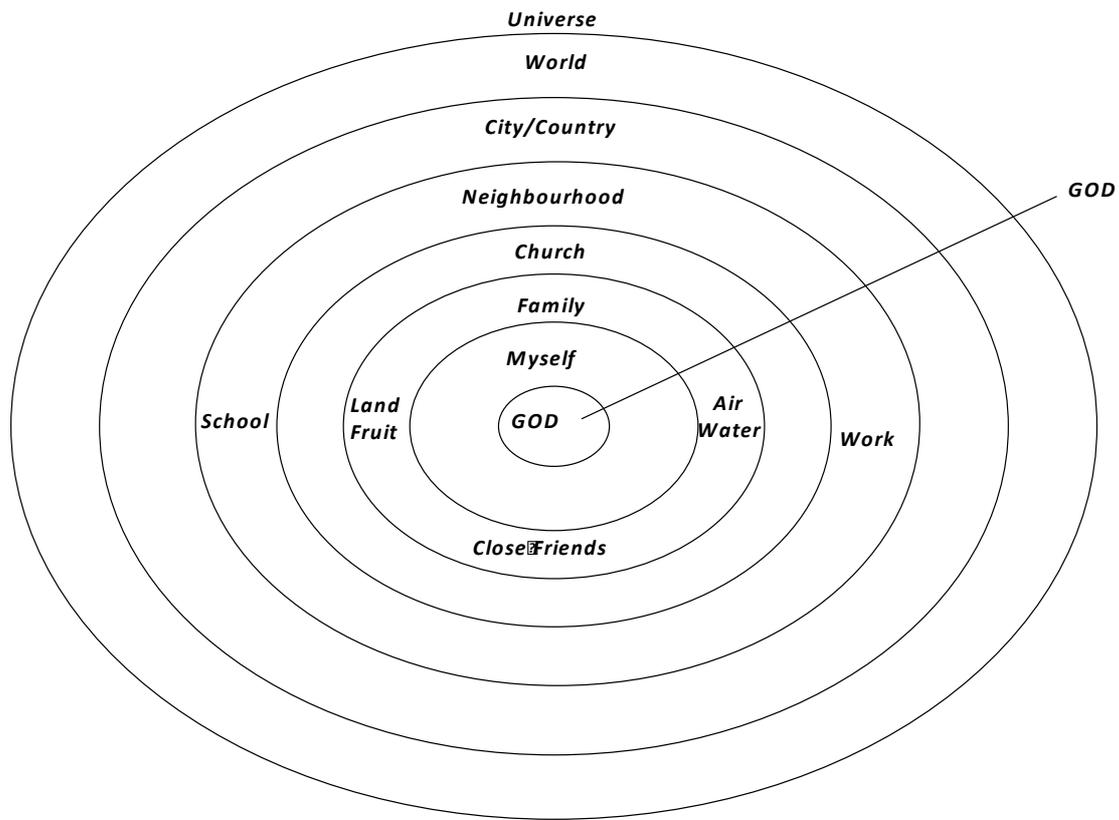
### ***The Scope of Evangelisation***

If we are to be evangelisers, we need to be clear on what it means to be evangelised. So, how do I know when I am evangelised?

I am evangelised when I experience Jesus' good news of economic and political justice, healing and forgiveness in such a way that I feel a burning need (a passion) to share this same good news with all others. It is not enough just to enjoy this gift and to be thankful for it! The experience of the Good News transforms the heart and instils a spirit that overflows into all my relationships!

The African concept of UBUNTU can help us to grasp more deeply the nature of this process. While it literally means "humanness" or "personhood" (in Zulu), it emphasises the fact that "a person is a person through other people". Thus, in the spirit of Ubuntu, I am evangelised when I realise that "I am because of who or what I am in relationship with". I am evangelised when I realise that each one of our lives is a series of relationships – from the most intimate to the most distant – much like an onion (in the diagram below) which has many layers. Yet all of these layers (relationships) are interconnected, so

that freedom and harmony or the lack of either in each layer affects the others, either directly or indirectly.



My most intimate relationship is with myself. If I do not have a good relationship with myself, it is difficult, if not impossible to have a good relationship with anyone or anything else.

Then come my relationships with:

- my family, my religious family, close friends, the land and its fruit, air and water – the people and elements of creation that give me life on a daily basis;
- my church, my family in faith;
- my neighbours, my colleagues at work or school, whom I do not necessarily know well, but with whom I share similar conditions;
- my fellow-citizens in my city and country. Even if I never meet them, we are bound in relationship by our common government, economy, laws, etc.
- my fellow human beings in the world. Our abuse of the economy or of the environment results in us all suffering the effects of climate change or unemployment or unjust trade relations, etc.
- my fellow-organisms in the universe. We can, for example, be at the mercy of the sun or of meteorites that can crash into the Earth (as happened in Russia only a few years ago!).

God is within me and is at the heart of each one of these layers/strata, bursting for the Holy Spirit to be manifested. Thus Pope Paul VI could say (in *Evangelii Nuntiandi 18*): “For the Church, evangelising means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new.”

I am therefore relating intimately to God when I allow God’s Spirit to use me to bring life, freedom and wholeness to each layer of humanity/ creation given to us. I am evangelised when I have a passion for enabling justice and harmony to prevail in all our relationships.

So, these are some criteria for knowing whether we are evangelised or not, whether we know Jesus or not, and whether we are spreading Jesus' good news or not! We can even assert that, for Jesus, work for justice and peace is a spirituality at the heart of his faith and his concept of salvation. It is not an optional extra! His Good News breaks down every barrier between people so that the dignity of each and every person is recognised and so that each can gain the fullness of life!

### ***Obstacles to Evangelisation***

Despite every recent pope and many synods of bishops stressing the centrality of work for justice as central to evangelisation, relatively few Catholics (including Dominicans) show much interest in engaging with justice and peace issues! Why is this?

Most acknowledge total ignorance of Justice and Peace or that they have no idea what to do about it! This reveals that our formation processes, whether in seminaries, religious formation houses, or in parish catechetical programmes, are often failing to focus on the essence of our faith! Hence, this **primary task of evangelisation** is often seen as an optional extra and relegated to the care of marginal interest groups – “those interested in politics”. At the same time, REAL pastoral work is identified as: liturgies, sacraments, choirs, catechetics, accompaniment of sodalities, etc., which are usually centre-stage. While these are all vital pastoral activities, they remain **complementary tasks** - the means to realising the primary task. They should not be seen as ends in themselves without reference to the primary task.

The emphasis on the complementary tasks to the exclusion of the primary task of evangelisation has been reinforced for many centuries by the growth of two phenomena in particular in the Church. Firstly, the growth of **clericalism**: a focus on the superior status of priests which creates a distance between them and people. This inevitably attracts to the priesthood many men seeking higher status who would not usually be very enthusiastic about justice and peace! And many of our own cultures affirm such clericalism! Too many of our people want priests to be placed on a pedestal! This challenges us to do a deep analysis of the assumptions of each of our cultures that contradict the Gospel.

Secondly, we witness the growth of **legalism** – the absolutising of laws, rubrics and doctrines (Tradition) even when they lack meaning or cause great suffering. This was the practice of the Pharisees that provoked the strongest criticism from Jesus! Yet, in a world torn apart from its roots in many places, the prevailing deep sense of insecurity drives many people to search for clear identity and absolutes to cling to. This has led to the growth of many forms of fundamentalism – even in the Church! In this context, a focus on the primary tasks of evangelisation, justice and peace, where ready answers are not always easily available, can be too challenging, which makes the “clearer, focused and tangible” complementary tasks more alluring as a primary focus. Unfortunately, as Pope Benedict XVI said, this can lead us to “absolutising what is not absolute but relative (which) is called ‘Totalitarianism’”<sup>1</sup>.

In the face of too much indifference in the Church, the need for Jesus' Good News is as urgent as ever today in a world ravaged by poverty and inequality, war and oppression, lack of respect for human life

---

<sup>1</sup> Address at the Vigil for World Youth Day, Cologne, Germany, 20 August, 2005.

and dignity, environmental destruction, and ethnic, racial and gender discrimination and intolerance. This is why Pope Francis is always emphasising the priority of the poor and suffering and why he is so critical of clericalism and legalism as major obstacles to us making these people a priority.

Therefore, if all religious, priests, pastoral workers and active Christians are to be messengers of the Good News, they must first be enabled through their own formation to be evangelised and empowered to realise this primary mission of Jesus. Any focus on evangelisation without a spirituality and perspective of bringing justice and peace into each of the layers of our relationships is thus not offering the Good News of Jesus. It therefore risks being a pagan exercise!

### ***Method and Content of a Spirituality of Justice and Peace***

If a spirituality and perspective of justice and peace is integral to our Christian mission, how can we integrate this into our life and work as Dominicans? What method and what content can enable this integration?

1. The first thing to stress is that adopting a perspective of justice and peace is not necessarily a call to stop what we are doing in order to take up a separate “social or political project”. Rather it is a call to see the goal of justice and peace (bringing the Good news) as the **perspective that shapes and flavours everything we do**, whether it be teaching (even seemingly unrelated subjects such as metaphysics or languages), celebrating sacraments and other liturgies, catechesis, directing formation, studying, or doing parish work.

The question we all have to ask ourselves is whether our formation or study or liturgies or community life or apostolic work are helping us to bring or preach this Good News to the poor, the afflicted, the offenders or the oppressed. If we cannot see this connection, then something needs to change so that we can more faithfully promote an evangelisation which is integral and complete.

2. A **general methodology** to strengthen our work of proclaiming this Good News, i.e. to evangelise, is:
  - a. Firstly, to identify personal experiences of suffering in **our own lives** and to see the link to broader experiences of suffering, injustice or human rights violations.
  - b. We then need to **encounter** the people who surround us in our places of work and study, especially the poor, the sick and afflicted, offenders and the oppressed and marginalised, so that we can grow in **compassion** for their experiences of suffering.
  - c. This should lead us to have a **critical awareness** of the issues and the questions that preoccupy them, and to see how they relate to the broader environmental, social, political, economic and religious issues. This should include an **interrogation of our own cultural and ideological assumptions** related to these issues.
  - d. Then, we need to **analyse** these issues to learn their systemic and structural **causes**.
  - e. This is followed by an examination of possible **responses** to resolve these issues in the light of the Gospel (the lens of Jesus’ Good News) and the Church’s social teachings. This is a moment of theological reflection (**incarnation** of the Gospel).
  - f. Finally, we need to **integrate** these preoccupations and questions with our own so that all of our pastoral, sacramental, liturgical, intellectual and formation activity can be focused on responding to these issues and questions.

- g. As far as possible, all these steps should be conducted **in community** so that we are not responding only in our personal capacity but in the name of the Order - even if we end up acting individually. This enables our diversity to enrich our search for the truth (which is always in front of us) and to challenge us to deepen our critical perspective of all reality.

This approach is basically the methodology being proposed in the promotion of the **Salamanca Process** that the General Chapters of the Order at Trogir (2013) and Bologna (2016) have highlighted. These chapters looked to our brothers, especially in Salamanca, during the first years in America in the sixteenth century, who tried to address a very difficult human and social situation from the point of view of revelation (in their preaching, as well as their theological studies). So, in like manner, the Salamanca Process is proposing a regular conversation between preachers and theologians on the one hand and people of other disciplines (especially law and the social sciences) on the other hand about the social situations as well as the faith and pastoral experiences that are calling for response today. This should enable a deeper conversation between God and the world which is a condition for authentic theological studies.

In a broader sense, the Salamanca Process also highlights the importance of linking our intellectual life and our apostolic life. In other words, for an effective conversation between God and the world, all our study should be geared towards bringing Good News by answering the questions posed by people in our local contexts and in the world at large.

This was also the basic methodology being proposed by the **Five Frontiers** of the General Chapter of Avila in 1986. All Dominicans were called on to move away from the comfort of the centre and to move to the uncertainty of the frontiers :

- 1. The frontier of *life and death* where the masses of people live under terrible oppression and exploitation crying out for *justice and peace*!
  - 2. The frontier of *humanity and inhumanity* where millions are marginalised through poverty and discrimination and treated as less than human – crying out for *solidarity* and conversion from our blindness!
  - The frontiers of 3. *Catholic experience*; 4. *Christian experience*; and 5. *Faith experience*, where we are called to reach out in *dialogue* to those who are different to us (other Christians, other faiths, and secular ideologies) and to deepen our *search for the truth* by trying to understand and engage with the truth that they believe they have discovered.
3. The study of **Catholic Social Teachings** should be an integral part of all Dominican basic, complementary and ongoing formation. As the incarnated articulation of the Gospel, these are central Church teachings which should be integrated into the study of all other theological disciplines, whether it be dogma, moral theology, ecclesiology, liturgy, spirituality, etc. These can help provide the justice and peace perspective required for all our study and apostolic work. Some of the key themes are:
- Recognising the *Sacredness and Dignity of each and every person* which gives inalienable rights and responsibilities to each – and not only to the rich and powerful!
  - The *Common Good* – and not only the good of “my people” - has to be sought and implemented if everyone is to have the opportunity to develop.
  - *Solidarity* with the whole human race and the whole of creation is fundamental to concern and care for each person – and not only concern for my family, my tribe, my culture, or my nation!

- *An Option for the Poor* (seeing things from the perspective of the least in society – and not from the perspective of the rich and powerful) is necessary if we are to take care of everyone.
- *Subsidiarity* is the principle that empowers people to take decisions in all areas of their lives that they can handle effectively and without harm to others - without interference from higher powers. Higher powers should only exercise power requested by vulnerable groups at more local levels to protect them and to promote their development – and not to wield power over all aspects of people’s lives.

The globality of all these themes calls us to view and locate all our local ministries in a global perspective. Since the Dominican Order established a mission and delegation to the United Nations more than twenty years ago, we have a privileged mechanism to make the **connection between our local and global missions**.

4. Highlight the role of **Dominican friars, sisters and laity who have made key interventions in history** through their promotion of justice and peace as an essential part of their ministry: St. Dominic himself confronted the injustices of his time, as did St. Catherine of Siena, St. Martin de Porres, St. Rose of Lima, Bartolomé de las Casas, Antonio Montesinos, Francisco de Vitoria, Pedro de Cordoba, Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste and many others.

St. Thomas Aquinas set the tone for such practices by defining the just act as ‘that which renders what is due’<sup>2</sup>; and in discussing the four cardinal virtues, he wrote most about ‘justice’. Meister Eckhart similarly set the tone by developing a spirituality of freedom. Thomists like Jacques Maritain played a big part in influencing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Twentieth century Dominicans, such as Marie-Dominique Chenu and Joseph-Louis Lebreton, Dominique Pire, Ita Ford, Maura Clark, and layman Giorgio La Pira, and other members and shared projects in the Dominican family have demonstrated and continue to exemplify in an extraordinary way how Dominicans carry out this traditional vision of evangelization in their efforts to promote justice and peace and to defend human rights<sup>3</sup>.

### ***So why do we need Dominican Commissions and Promoters of Justice and Peace?***

The responsibility for deepening our Christian life through the promotion of a spirituality and work for justice and peace thus lies with the whole Church. Hence, the responsibility for deepening our Dominican life in this direction lies with all Dominicans, especially those in leadership positions. However, those in leadership positions cannot do everything, and for that reason, General Chapters and different congregational assemblies have called for the appointment of separate Justice and Peace Commissions and Promoters to assist leaders in ensuring that the dimension of justice and peace permeates our work. When we have fully recovered this understanding of justice and peace as a constitutive dimension of preaching the Gospel, maybe there will no longer be a need for such a separate commission or promoter.

---

<sup>2</sup> Summa Theologica, 1a, q. 21, a 1.

<sup>3</sup> See the reports of the two editors on the current engagement of Dominican sisters, friars and laity in the promotion and the defence of human rights in: Mike Deeb and Celestina Veloso Freitas, *Dominicans and Human Rights: Past, Present, Future*, Adelaide, ATF Theology, 2017.

What then is the particular role of Dominican Commissions and Promoters of Justice and Peace?

1. To remain in close communication with all Dominicans in their entity to encourage a deepening of the perspective of justice and peace as integral to the understanding and practice of evangelisation.
2. As mentioned above, this does not necessarily involve starting new projects since everyone is already very busy! Rather it is to help deepen the exercise of existing ministries (whether it be teaching, parish work, formation, liturgy or whatever) with the methodology and content proposed in this article.
3. Many Dominicans are already using such methodologies and content in their ministry – even if they do not yet see the connection between their ministry and the work for justice and peace. It is therefore important to affirm and to name such activities which bring Good News as good examples of the work for justice and peace.
4. To lead by example in motivating more and more brothers and sisters to understand and analyse the needs for justice and peace in the broader community and within the Church, and to engage actively in addressing these needs. This can happen through communications or events that enable the sharing of news, current issues, analyses, reflections, and especially stories of inspiring ways in which brothers and sisters are already promoting justice and peace.
5. To highlight local or broader violations of human rights or destruction of the environment and to encourage our brothers and sisters to speak out prophetically and forthrightly to promote respect for all people and all of Creation.
6. To encourage brothers and sisters, in a humble and gentle way, to face up to and address our own contradictions that open us up to charges of hypocrisy and that prevent us from speaking out with credibility. These can be manifest in our lifestyles and use of money, in relationships with people or the environment that may appear abusive or disrespectful, or in the exercise of power that may appear dictatorial or unaccountable. We are thus called to BE the message that we want to preach!

To conclude, it goes without saying that great care needs to be taken in choosing brothers or sisters to be Justice and Peace Promoters or members of a Justice and Peace Commission. They need to be people with a passion for justice and peace who are also respected by the members of their entity for their sensitivity to their needs. A failure to appoint such people can only reinforce the negative view some may have of Justice and Peace. This, in turn, will hamper our Dominican Order's efforts to preach the Gospel in its entirety and to have an impact in making the Kingdom or Reign of God a reality in our world.

**Mike Deeb OP**  
**27 August, 2017**