

Catholic Social Teaching and Vatican II



At the request of the Social Justice Group, the Boroondara Deanery arranged for Rev. Dr. Max Vodola, Lecturer and Department Head at Catholic Theological College and Parish Priest of Flemington and Kensington, to give a presentation on 31 May 2015. The following is a summary of his presentation.

Although Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is often perceived as having commenced with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII in 1891, its origins are much earlier in time.

Its origins can be traced back to the Old Testament and in the Prophets who spoke of God's desire to see justice in the world. The clearest example is Micah "What the Lord requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God". (Micah 6.8)

In the New Testament its development continues in the whole ministry of Jesus – the message to serve and not to be served, the concern for the poor, right relationships with all. Luke's Gospel has been described as showing a concern for "the least, the lost, the last". Luke spoke of the lost (sheep, coin, prodigal son), the last (shall be first) and the least (of these, you do it to me).

The emphasis on "*Rerum Novarum*" as the modern origin of the Church's social teaching is due largely to the fact that as an encyclical it was unique. All prior encyclicals had been documents dealing with various issues of faith. This encyclical dealt with social and economic realities. For the first time an encyclical provided a theological overlay to social economic issues. It was written in response to the industrial revolution which brought about fundamental changes in society by moving people from an agrarian to an industrialised system - the establishment of factories, of new methods of production, of capitalism and socialism.

In those circumstances the encyclical dealt with "The New Things" and although maintaining the right to private ownership of property spoke of the conditions of workers, the concept of a just wage, the right to form trade unions to counteract the power of the new type of employer. One vital aspect of it was that it dealt with the role of the lay apostolate.

It dealt with an existing situation rather than propounding a system. It was written a hundred or more years after the Industrial Revolution got under way. As the French Church historian Peguy once remarked, "at the turn of an age the Church arrives a little late and a little breathless".

The same concern with social was the foundation of the work of Joseph Cardijn, the Belgian Priest (later Cardinal) who proposed the approach of “see–judge–act”.

John XXIII pursued strong threads of Social Justice in *Pacem in terris*. It also broke from tradition in that all encyclicals prior to it were addressed to the Bishops of the Church. By contrast this encyclical, written after the enormous upheavals of two World Wars and the Depression, was addressed “to all people of good will”.

All the documents which came from Vatican II started as drafts before the Council began and were the work of committees, except for one – *Guidium et spes* - which was born on the floor of the Council and which was the last document issued by the Council. Those who interpret the purpose of the Second Council as one of embracing this world use *Gaudium et spes* as the primary hermeneutic for all its documents. It begins, “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.”

All previous Councils were called to deal with matters of faith and Church discipline, commonly some specific threat, and in those circumstances concluded with Canons – mandatory directions. In contrast, when John XXIII called Vatican II he had no blueprint in mind for its operation. It was to be built by those standing on the shoulders of giants who went before. It issued no Canons. Instead it was concerned with dialogue – dialogue between the Church and the world – dialogue between faith and culture – dialogue between faith and history.

Pope Francis and his approach have been widely welcomed and the thrust of his papacy is social justice. He exemplifies it by the way he lives, the language he employs, the symbolism of his conduct such as washing the feet of prisoners and Moslem women and embracing the disfigured man. He cuts through to the basics. He is a Pope of gestures such as appointing as Cardinal the Archbishop of Tonga rather than those of centres like Venice, Turin and Genoa who have historically been Cardinals. By doing so he witnesses to the universality of the Church and his wish to hear directly from the marginalised - those on the periphery.

Pope Francis is indeed a walking, talking Social Justice Statement.

For further information about Catholic Social teaching, please visit <http://olgc.com.au/outreach/social-justice-group/>