

Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216-1999: X – Looking backwards, forwards and around

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Over the past two years eight people—all of them in one way or another concerned with social justice or peace issues—have written in *New Blackfriars* about how one very old and in many ways unique Catholic religious order has responded to justice and peace issues in the course of 784 years: the 784 years from its foundation to the end of the Second Millennium. The authors have not set out to write a comprehensive history, but to focus in each article on one individual or group of individuals, placing them in the context of the world they belonged to. Let us start this epilogue by asking ourselves whether we can see in the achievements of these Dominicans any kind of consistent pattern, any recognisable stance—in other words, a distinctively “Dominican” way of reacting to what is going on in society.

This, though, is a question much easier to ask than to answer. Some of you think our choice of subjects has been too esoteric to make an assessment of this kind possible. Of the personalities we have written about, neither Eckhart¹, Antoninus², Vitoria³, Las Casas⁴, nor even McNabb⁵ could be called “typical” 14th, 15th, 16th or 20th century Dominicans by any stretch of the imagination. Eckhart’s contemporary, William Humbert, the Inquisitor who in 1310 sent the Beguine mystic Marguerite Porete to the stake, was much more a “typical” 14th-century Dominican than Eckhart, who shared some of his most original thoughts with a throng of Beguine women. One or two of you have also criticised us for not devoting an article to St Thomas Aquinas, surely the Dominican who most profoundly shaped the Dominican way of seeing the world. And some readers abroad have pointed out to us that not one of the prominent individuals we have written about was born outside Europe (we do not even give a mention to St Martin de Porres, so revered in modern Latin America for what he did for the poor).

In fact, although his name is not always mentioned, all of these articles—with possibly one exception—directly or indirectly reflect

ideas of St Thomas. It is his influence, more than anybody's, which has given a special flavour to the Dominican contribution to Catholic thinking on justice and peace. In our opening article Richard Finn placed in its world St Thomas's treatment of justice in the *Summa*⁶. In our fourth article Roger Ruston not only pointed out how Vitoria's teaching on natural law, the law of nations, just war theory and non-combatant immunity has influenced modern thinking but he also said something about its roots in the *Summa*⁷. Hugh Walters, in our sixth article, mentioned the influence on the Distributists of St Thomas's teaching on property⁸. At the same time, though, we have to remember that for five centuries St Thomas's role in the Catholic Church has extended far beyond the Order. How satisfying it would be to be able to boast that the Church's first and most influential social encyclical, Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, had got Dominican origins! The truth is that certainly St Thomas made a very important contribution to it, but—St Thomas excepted—the role of Dominicans in the events leading to the drafting of it was modest indeed, in spite of the fact that many of those events took place in Fribourg⁹. Thomism as it was commonly known in the Church, being for so long the basic ingredient of every course in every seminary, was only identifiable with “the spirit of the Order” here and there, now and then.

Many modern Dominicans working in justice and peace would say that quite as much as the thought of St Thomas it has been the anti-autocratic Constitutions of the Order, with all their checks and balances, and the Dominican way of life—partly monastic and scholarly and partly apostolic—which have over the centuries given a special flavour to Dominican work in justice and peace, and drawn Dominicans to this kind of work. But this is not easy to prove. If it is true, why have so many Dominicans in history, including some good and famous ones, had aims and values very different from the aims and values which have led other Dominicans to combat violence, oppression and want? We may say fairly confidently that there has been something distinctive about Dominican work of this kind, but this does not mean we can take it for granted that so long as there are Dominicans it is sure to go on flourishing.

The time has come to take a brief glimpse at what Dominicans have been saying and doing in this area during the last few years. It is now twenty-two years since dedication to justice and peace was listed at the Quezon City general chapter as one of the four

priorities central in any assessment of our fidelity to the mission of the Order. There has been a lot of progress since then, but in 1995, at the Caleruega general chapter, the Master of the Order Timothy Radcliffe was raising the questions:

Do we need more co-ordination so that in times of crisis, for example in Rwanda and Chiapas, we can offer immediate and effective support? Do we need to establish a full-time desk, which can support the promoter of Justice and Peace in his demanding work, or establish new kinds of international networking within the Order?¹⁰

The fact is, of course, that needs were changing, that the world was changing.

In December 1995 met the First InterAfrican Dominican Meeting on Justice and Peace, to organise a network of communications for mutual support.¹¹ A couple of years later the North American Promoters for Justice and Peace were encouraging Provinces and sisters' Congregations "to overcome feelings of political disempowerment" through networking.¹² At about the same time Antoine Lion of the Province of France was initiating the setting-up of an international Dominican network of brothers and sisters dedicated to the fight against AIDS.¹³ To an increasing extent Dominicans were recognising that they could not wrestle with the problems of our time on their own, and the Internet was opening up new possibilities.

During this period Philippe LeBlanc was appointed as official representative of the Order at the UN, being attached to what is now called the Office of Franciscans International and Dominicans, which has status at the UN as a non-governmental organisation (NGO). This enabled him to speak at the UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights at Geneva about human rights violations in countries where Dominicans were actively involved, in other words about the outrages that had occurred in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, in Chiapas in Mexico, and in Shantinagar and Khanewal in Pakistan.¹⁴ In August 1998, after two years of activity, the UN adopted a resolution on the human rights situation in Mexico.¹⁵ The Order was beginning to make its voice heard in a new way.

Increasingly, though, Dominicans working in justice and peace have found themselves working closely with other groups—most frequently with other religious, but quite often with groups of different religions or none. Often now they are working more closely with non-Dominicans with whom they can share their

specialist interests (interest in the refugee problem, ratification of the Landmines Ban, women's rights in Islam, or whatever) than they are working with their brothers and sisters, most of whom do not know precisely what work they are doing and do not seem particularly to want to know. This trend is not limited, of course, to justice and peace activity, and it was discussed at length at the general chapter at Bologna in 1998, as it was seen as undermining community life.¹⁶

The developments just summarised have grown as the world-wide abuse of human rights has grown. Reading the three articles about important movements of the Cold-War period—François Leprieur's article on the French worker-priest movement and its destruction¹⁷, Brian Wicker on the Marxist-Christian dialogue¹⁸, and Valerie Flessati on the Christian peace movement¹⁹—one is conscious that emphases have changed. The need for the Church to get across to the working class is more desperate than ever, and so is the need for conflicting ideologies to seek common ground and for war to stop, but now our attentions seem to be increasingly focussed on a succession of rather different crises. In the words of the communiqué to the Order issued by the 1999 meeting of the Order's International Commission of Justice and Peace:

We listened to stories of suffering.., especially in Iraq, Kosovo, East Timor, Rwanda, Burundi, Chiapas and Colombia. Concerns were also raised about contemporary forms of slavery such as child and forced prostitution, forced migration, trafficking in human organs, and unjust labour practices.²⁰

It is not, of course, that in the past there were no crises of this kind, no forms of slavery. For two decades Andre Lascaris of the Netherlands Province tried to bring Dutch experience to the religious conflict in Northern Ireland, and during the same period Albert Nolan of the Southern African Vicariate was fighting apartheid. And these are only two of scores of such stories.

No, it would appear that what has changed is in us: it would appear that we are coming to see the abuse of basic human rights as a cancerous disease which, having been satisfactorily dealt with in one bit of the body-politic, crops up somewhere else. As the Human Rights Index 1999 reports in the London *Observer*: "Indeed, the past 12 months, if anything, have witnessed a worsening state of affairs for the victims of torturing governments, repressive regimes and murderous opposition groups."²¹ In this situation something important is being said by, for instance, the

Sisters of St Catherine, who resolved to remain in Iraq though this might mean death in a NATO bombardment²², and by the American Maryknoll Sisters who fled from East Timor at the 1975 Indonesian invasion and then returned.²³

Here, already, we are looking beyond the end-date of our series, 1999. For it is fairly obvious that one of the challenges which Dominicans of the coming age who are concerned with justice and peace issues will have to confront will be an increasing devaluing of the individual human being. Here is a trend which may not result in as much suffering as global warming will bring, but Dominicans are likely to see it as more immediately their concern, for fighting it is fighting a war of the spirit.

The past can inspire us, but it is over; how can we help to make people prepared for what most probably lies ahead? We could, for a start, take note of the answer which the International Commission for Justice and Peace offered in June to the question: "What can the Dominican Family do?" By that was meant what exactly could it do to help the Dominicans living and working in the middle of ugly political and social crises. The Commission did not think we should all jump on planes to these hot-spots, or even post off food parcels to them. It thought we should

Inform ourselves about what is truly at stake. Encourage economic and socio-political analysis of the root causes of conflict. Promote theological reflection on questions of war and peace, on hate, on reconciliation and healing. Organise fund-raising efforts. Promote inter-religious dialogue.²⁴

That sounds sensible, even if not terribly exciting.

Many Catholic publishers are saying their customers no longer want to read about "justice and peace". Why? Presumably because they do not think it sounds... "terribly exciting". Ironically, very few of the Dominicans we have written about in this series would have even understood the term "justice and peace". If they had been asked what they were doing, almost certainly they would have said that they believed they were bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to bear on problems in the world around them. And are those of us who at the threshold of the Third Millennium say we are "concerned about justice and peace issues" really doing anything very different?

1 John Orme Mills: II – The Medieval Rhineland: Eckhart and Popular Theological Preaching. *New Blackfriars* Vol 79 No. 929 July/August 1998, pp. 307–308.

- 2 Richard Finn: III – Recovering the Apostolic Life: Antoninus of Florence. *NB* Vol 79 No. 932 October 1998, pp.416–427.
- 3 Roger Ruston: IV – Francisco Vitoria: The Rights of Enemies and Strangers. *NB* Vol 80 No. 935 January 1999, pp.4–18.
- 4 Austin Smith: V – The New World: Bartolomé de las Casas and “the option for the poor”. *NB* Vol 80 No. 937 March 1999, pp. 119–127.
- 5 Hugh Walters: VI – *Pro Foco Non Foro* The Thomist Inheritance and the Household Economy of Father Vincent McNabb. *NB* Vol 80 No. 939 May 1999, pp.220-234.
- 6 Richard Finn: I – Early Voices for Justice. *NB* Vol 79 No. 926 May 1998, pp.2 12-221, discussing St Thomas on p. 215.
- 7 op. cit. pp. 12–15.
- 8 op. cit. pp. 224–5.
- 9 Guy Bedouelle: “De l’influence réelle de l’Union de Fribourg sur l’encyclique *Rerum Novarum*”, in “*Rerum Novarum*”: *Écriture, Contenu et Réception d’une Encyclique* (Actes de colloque international organisé par l’École Française de Rome et le Greco no 2 du CNRS. Rome 18–20 avril 1991), École Française de Rome 1997.
- 10 I.D.I. September 1995, p. 161.
- 11 cf I.D.I. February 1996, p.26.
- 12 cf I.D.I. September 1997, p.167.
- 13 I.D.I. January 1998, pp.12–13.
- 14 cf. IDI. September 1997, pp.168–9.
- 15 Office of Franciscans International and Dominicans, Geneva. cf. I.D.I. pp.189–190.
- 16 General Chapter of 1998, Bologna: Acts nn. 127-134 (“The life of the community as a common project”).
- 17 VII – France in 1953–4: Do the baptized have rights? The Worker-Priest Crisis. *NB* Vol 80 No. 943 September 1999, pp. 384–396.
- 18 VIII – *Slant*, Marxism and the English Dominicans. *NB* Vol 80 No. 944 October 1999, pp.436–443.
- 19 IX – STOP WAR PLEASE: Dominicans and the Christian Peace Movement in England. *NB* Vol 80 No. 945 November 1999, pp.484–490.
- 20 I.D.I. September 1999, p.161.
- 21 24 October 1999, p.26.
- 22 Report of the Journées Romaines Dominicaines 1995. I.D.I. November 1995, p. 223.
- 23 cf I.D.I. April 1997, p. 85.
- 24 I.D.I. September 1999, p. 162.