

PRO LIFE FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PERSPECTIVE

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One would think this would be an easy assignment -- to discuss concerns for human life from the perspective of social justice. Social justice has many concerns, but they all center about human life. I know the agenda well because I have spent much of my life as a priest working on it. First, civil rights were the great concern for there is no responsible human life in a democracy if one does not have some control over those who exercise governance in a society. Without the power of the ballot, one is no better than a slave. That indeed was the condition of many of our minority citizens before the Civil Rights Commission, with help from many others, definitely obtained the vote for all in the Civil Rights Act of 1965. That was what we first set out to do in 1957, but not that alone. Our agenda was continually broadened, first to include educational and housing rights, and later employment opportunity and equal rights in the administration of justice.

Let me say a word about all of these. Education is the door to better employment and upward mobility. The availability of greater income then insures better housing in a better neighborhood with better educational opportunity for one's children, so that the upward human developmental cycle continues, generation after generation. Good education is the essential key. If it is not available on all levels, social justice is stymied, unemployment of uneducated

minorities is rampant. One can then forget about better housing and better educational opportunities for one's children. The trilogy of equal education, equal employment, and equal housing opportunity rests on the point of education. If the balance is not there, the triangle topples, none of the three rights at the heart of social justice for all can be accomplished. That is why all of my early concern about social justice centered on educational opportunity, a right largely obtained through Title VI of the 1964 omnibus Civil Rights Act. Equal housing was subsequently insured by the Civil Rights Act of 1968.

The year 1964 represented a sea-change in American society. One day we Americans, in many of our states, were practicing apartheid as bad as the South African system. The next day the mores of more than two centuries were outlawed. No civilized nation has ever instituted such a basic change overnight. It was a bright dawn for greater social justice, a proud day for America. The struggle would, of course, continue because social justice must be achieved each day of each new year. The forces of evil are always alive and at work.

When I was fired from the Chairmanship of the Civil Rights Commission in 1972, fifteen years after it began, I redirected my efforts to the work of world social justice, an easy transition to the Overseas Development Council's Chairmanship, for ODC addresses social justice writ large. Our world concerns for social justice speak to the basic needs required to create a larger possibility for human dignity and growth -- food, shelter, health care, employment, literacy.

Without these, there is no possibility of achieving a decent human life. We rightly criticize the social justice nightmare in South Africa where one-fifth of the population, which is white, enjoys four-fifths of the human resources available, while the four-fifths, the black population, has only one-fifth of the human life resources. At ODC we continually emphasize that South Africa's situation is in microcosm the situation for social justice in all this world, where 80% of the population, which is colored, enjoys only 20% of the total world human goods. We euphemistically call this group of more than one hundred countries the Third World, or the worst of them, the Fourth World. They will not be really helped until we find a new system of world justice, as we earlier tried for a better system in our own country. Social justice is a system, an institution, as much as it is an act, an individual virtue. One must be concerned for the totality of justice, for it touches every single human person, his or her dignity, hopes, and dreams for a better human life.

I have indulged in this rather extensive preface to what I have to say about abortion from the social justice perspective because I believe that all of us have to be concerned about this whole range of social justice perspectives, whether local, national, or international. As John Donne said, "No man is an island." Neither is one single social justice concern in isolation from the totality. Our concern must be as broad as all human life, everywhere. If we are allowed any preference, it must go to those most threatened, as Jesus said, "What you did for one of these, my least brethren, you did it for Me."

It is for all of these considerations that I suffered several shocks on the occasion of the Supreme Court decision which granted legal abortion on request. The first shock was that the Court that had given such great leadership during the Civil Rights struggle of the '50's and '60's should now render a judgment that, at least to me, seemed contrary to the moral instincts, not to mention convictions, of most Americans. It seemed fairly obvious to me that one cannot ground human rights, philosophically or theologically, anywhere but in the human person. It seemed equally obvious to me that individual or social justice has great transcendent purposes, to enlarge human dignity, to assure human development, to allow one and all to live more humanly, and, in a larger sense, to allow all to achieve in freedom their temporal and eternal goals as human persons. I have always been seized with the rightness of Maritain's words about the human person:

"The notion of personality involves that of totality and independence; no matter how poor and crushed he may be, a person as such is a whole and subsists in an independent manner. To say that man is a person is to say that in the depths of his being he is more a whole than a part, more independent than servile. It is to say that he is a minute fragment of matter that is at the same time a universe, a beggar who communicates with absolute being, mortal flesh whose

value is eternal, a bit of straw into which heaven enters .... the value of the person, his dignity and his rights belong to the order of things naturally sacred, which bear the imprint of Father of being, and which have in Him the end of their movement."

Maybe all of this was a bit metaphysical for the Justices who spoke of trimesters as if time could transcend eternity, or as if temporal values could outweigh eternal values. Anyway, they said it and the deed was done.

My second shock came from the fact that many of my valiant companions-in-arms during two decades and more of struggles for social justice, here and abroad, generally agreed with the Justices. I have tried hard to understand how what was so obvious to me was so unconvincing to them, many of whom were deeply moral persons, some leaders of minority groups, all more than moderately intelligent and dedicated to social justice. How did we lose them on this issue, regarding what I conceive to be the most basic right of all, the right to life, absent which all other human rights are meaningless?

I wish I had an easy answer to this lack of consensus which thoroughly complicates this problem here and throughout the world. One must note likewise the rather open abortion laws in traditionally Catholic countries, like France and Italy. Why is the abortion issue so different from other civil rights which are generally protected by law?

One of my friends who happens to be a medical doctor favoring abortion notes that there are 40 million abortions in the world today, 30 million of which are spontaneous miscarriages, and the other 10 million induced. I don't know what one makes of this, except that nature may have its own mechanisms for fetuses that are imperfect.

The nub of the moral question seems to be that many people do not consider the fertilized ovum to be a human person possessing human rights. Even the angelic doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas, thought it took a fairly long period for acquiring personhood and even differentiated the period for males and females. For myself, I recognize that personhood requires individuation, and until implantation occurs, there could be one or several persons involved. On the other hand, personhood is not conferred at birth, as though the ability of a fetus to survive outside the womb were paramount. Indeed, modern prenatal technology has advanced to the point where fetuses of 24 weeks or fewer can be saved, and "viability" has a shifting definition.

I do not think the philosophical issue of when personhood begins admits of an absolute answer, but, on the other hand, I do not think an absolute answer is necessary to what we are fundamentally considering in the moral order of social justice and abortion.

What really persuades me of the basic immorality of induced abortion is a sign I once saw in Chinese above a cemetery in Hong Kong. It said: "What you are I once was; what I am you soon will

be." A fetus could well say to us, "What I am you once were; what you are I soon will be, if you let me."

The fetus from the first moment of life is on the way, irrevokably, barring abortion, to full human life and human personhood. We all passed through this stage. To deny the fetus life, is to deny a human being the opportunity that we all have had to live and love, to achieve a measure of human perfection, to have faith, to experience grace, to consciously love God and to aspire to eternal life. To deny that opportunity is to deny that for which social justice yearns and strives -- full human development and fulfillment. It is to deny to another the greatest promise that life offers each one of us. To deny life consciously is at best a benightedly serious deviation from what social justice most fundamentally demands, and at worse, for those who should know better, a sacrilege. It denies to another what we most prize for ourselves -- to live, a sacred gift.

Having said all this, may I allude to the fact that social justice must be accomplished in a free human society where conscience reigns and where people often differ for sincere and subjectively honest reasons. At this juncture, we must persuade those with whom we disagree and with whom we must work, as we did during the Civil Rights campaign, for that which we think is a just solution. Democracies are not given to bludgeoning the opposition, but we are all committed to work for a just social order, geared to the common good as all law must be, yet giving special attention to the least brethren, at

one moment a minority group, at another, beings unprotected as they develop in unborn human life.

I believe our efforts, both at persuasion and lawmaking, will be most efficacious if we are seen to be consistently on the side of the unprotected, on the side of life threatened. As Dr. Albert Schweitzer said, "If a man loses reverence for any part of life, he will lose his reverence for all life." This means that our social justice efforts must range worldwide and must embrace the whole spectrum of systematic injustice, be it starving children, 15 million of whom will die this year in a world of plenty, those suffering economic blight and illiteracy by the sheer geographic prejudice of where they were born, women who suffer injustice on all levels, those many millions who are not free to live and worship as they wish, those racially discriminated against, to mention only a few concerns among many.

Hungering and thirsting for justice is a high calling for all Christians. It knows no bounds and it should not tire. But it is a universal hunger and thirst that must forge worldwide alliances to meet all the goals of social justice which are not unrelated to the Kingdom of God.