Hope

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Introduction:

On Good Friday, April 6 2007, the Irish Jesuit Provincialate was set on fire for reasons which remain unclear. No one was injured, much less killed, so this was not a tragedy. Nonetheless a building which was home to some and work place for others, symbolising hope for many, was extensively damaged and put beyond use, causing enormous inconvenience and considerable stress. As the flames licked skywards, it felt to the Provincial and others that all our dreams and projects were going up in smoke.

This got me thinking and remembering, particularly in the context of what we are trying to do here in Piest'any. My thoughts and memories are personal, but they extend to the wider stage upon which our theological reflection on hope needs to be presented.

Part One: Our Context

1.1: Europe

I remember well the so-called student revolution of the late 1960s. We dreamt of a radically changed world, one of justice and equality. We were still living out of the myth of inexorable progress so rooted in Modernity, with Darwin but especially Marx in the background, and for us Christians and Jesuits we were inspired by the rapprochement between Church and World articulated in Vatican II. It was exciting to be alive, and we were full of optimism.

That era didn't last too long and we quickly learned that there was no inevitability about progress, no quick fix to the problems of the world. The oil embargo of the 70s led to economically more austere and then selfish times. The neo-liberalism of the 80s began to flourish and the terrible injustices and sterility of Communism became evident, even to many fellow-travelers in the West, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe that was shortly to follow. You here in Slovakia know well the hard work that is involved in consolidating this liberation, in building up a constitutional democracy and in trying to develop your 'Tatra Tiger' economy in such a way that economic growth is not achieved at the cost of high unemployment. Now we all have another chance to build a more prosperous and just Europe, with an enlarged European Union.

1.2: The Jesuits and companions

I remember the excitement and struggle within the Society of Jesus, and among our religious and lay companions, as we tried to come to terms with the challenge of GC 32 (1974-5) to understand our mission in terms of 'the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement' (D.4, n.2). It seems to me that we have responded to this challenge in terms more of wisdom than of prophecy. I mean that it is certainly true that justice has become much more to the forefront of the consciousness of the Society, it is truly a dimension of all our works. And yet we hear from Fr General, and we know from our own experience, that often the Social Sector of Jesuit Provinces is weak, fewer want to experience the life of the poor, our institutional thrust has not been as radical as we might have hoped.

I was privileged to be part of the reception and confirmation of GC 32 in GC 34. There one had a sense of a closer lived integration of faith and justice, as well as the welcome additions of culture (think of post-modernity in Europe), inter-religious dialogue (think of our post 9/11 need to engage with Islam) and cooperation with laity. But if we are clear-eyed we know that we have a long way to go: we have been divided ideologically in the past, perhaps now we too easily settle for peaceful coexistence rather than real engagement with ideas and difficult choices? There are obvious lay-Jesuit tensions to be negotiated. Some of us have experienced the terrible reality of intra-institutional conflict, when good people differ destructively and we all feel the weight of social sin.

1.3: The Local: Cherry Orchard

I remember too the excitement of moving into Cherry Orchard, a poor area of Dublin, in the 1980s, inspired by this new understanding of our mission, and hoping to do academic theology from this perspective. I will always be grateful for this move, and yet it did not turn out quite as I had expected. The move certainly helped us to theologize, to think and write differently. And we made a modest contribution to the betterment of our area. But the major change that occurred in the lives of people had nothing to do with us – the emergence of the so-called Celtic Tiger economy of Ireland in the 1990s resulted in a reduction of unemployment from around 19 to 4.5%, with huge benefits for our neighbours.

1.4: Northern Ireland

I remember the excitement of doing doctoral studies in Belfast at the height of the N.Ireland Troubles in the 1980s, an excitement quickly tempered by the feelings of hopelessness and intractability which were then pervasive. One is almost tempted to say that if things can change so radically for the better in N.Ireland, then anything is possible, anywhere…and remember Berlin in 1989, the end of apartheid, the Civil Rights movement in the USA.

But of course it's not as simple as that. We live in a post-Holocaust, so-called War on Terrorism world, with globalization that is characterised by massive poverty and inequality. We must face the new challenge of sustainable development owing to the threat to our environment. There are many other challenges: the widespread movement of peoples, AIDS, cultural issues like gender inequalities, religious issues like the loss of our sense of God in many parts of Europe.

1.5: The Personal

Then there are the personal realities of ageing, of poor health, of death: easy to speak of these in terms of statistics, impossible to preserve such detached coolness at the graveside of a loved one or with regard to one's own weariness and failing powers.

1.6: Temptations around hope

Disappointed hopes, the daunting nature of the task, the pervasive banality and radicality of evil- you will have your own memories and experiences of all this. And in any case it is enough to open up the newspaper any day to have all this confirmed: accidents, crimes, structural injustice, terrorism, neo-imperialism…and, almost, it seems, to tease and deceive us into continuing to hope, the occasional success or good-news story.

One of the protagonists in von Donnersmarck's Das Leben Der Anderen (The Lives of Others) says cynically 'Hope is the last thing that dies'. He was referring to the repressive regime of the ironically named Democratic Republic of Germany (DDR), where that ultimate signifier of loss of hope, suicide, occurred at such high rates. It is indeed ironic that now in parts of Europe, seemingly far from repressed but with a Liberal surfeit of 'freedom from' and sunk in what Metz refers to as a Postmodern 'cultural amnesia'[i] with regard to what 'freedom is for', rates of suicide have again soared. And for some, like Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov, life is simply not worth the price if salvation involves the suffering and tears of even one innocent child.

And so we are tempted: maybe not to despair, for most of us, but perhaps to a kind of weary resignation, to see life in terms of a Sisyphus-like project where problems recur eternally and all effort seems in the end to be in vain. The temptation for an older generation is to pour cold water on the idealism of the generation that follows, to warn that all this has been tried before, that your hopes for a better life are bound to deceive, new problems will always arise, while the same dynamics of evil are everywhere at work. One can easily enough clothe this lack of hope in the kind of respectability referred to as 'realism' or, more easily available for older people, a kind of 'nesting' that is in effect a semi-retirement from the struggle, a Nicodemus-like restriction of activity to the night, away from the heat and light of the daily strife. The ultimate expression of this temptation is, vindicating Marx's critique of religion, to take refuge in a Christian hope which restricts itself to the next life.

On the other side, often more typically the attitude of young people, we can be tempted to try too hard – Prometheus and Pelagius now the role-models and Paradise on this earth the goal - to abuse power as a tactic, and to be reactively ideological in ways that are naïve (for example, to so stress the value of wealth distribution that wealth creation gets overlooked; or to believe uncritically in the inevitability of progress).

Burn-out and demoralization have been occupational hazards of the social sector. Poet Seamus Heaney notes that 'Even if the hopes you started out with are dashed, hope has to be maintained'. But how? Can a theology of hope help? Let us try to 'give an account of the hope that is in us' (1 Peter, 3, 15-16). It must be a theology which takes account of disappointment and failure, of the need for the Long March through institutions and systems, and which gives nourishment for the long haul.

Part Two: A Theology of Hope

2.1: Theology and hope

Theology has been traditionally spoken of as faith seeking understanding. However our faith is in a God who loves us and encourages us to hope that this love will save us, set us free, raise us up to be a 'new creation'. Theology then is also hope seeking understanding. I offer some reflections on the complex nature of Christian hope.

2.2: Hope in the Hebrew Scriptures

The Jewish people, with all their reverence for the transcendence of God, believed that God was involved in their history: in the Exodus Yahweh had brought them out from slavery.

There was a relationship then with the People – a Covenant- and with it a Law, and in time Kingly governance, to see that this relationship was well lived. There were many lapses into idolatry and injustice, as the Prophets constantly reminded them. Gradually they came to understand that Yahweh was not just Lord of history but was also Creator, Lord of Heaven and earth, and wanted to extend this covenant more deeply to the hearts of each Jewish person but also more widely to all humankind. But the lapses continued, the poor continued to suffer and from outside there was the reality of imperial domination. And so there developed in the time before Christ both a messianic expectation and also an Apocalyptic sense in which many Jews hoped for the radical overthrow of the evil they endured.

2.3: Hope in the New Testament

What was hinted at in the Hebrew Scriptures is radicalised in the New Testament in a way that both fulfils and subverts. We are put before the wonderful and shocking claim that God's involvement with us is so immanent and so intimate that the Son becomes man. We are given a glimpse into the inner love-live of God's own self, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with the deeply significant gloss that this is a love which 'empties itself' (kenosis: Phil 2, 7) so that creation, incarnation, and the cross are shown to be the free and overflowing love of a God who chooses to become vulnerable to us and to our ability to say yes or no to that love. And so the Principle and Foundation of the life of Jesus, his Ur-Erlebnis, is his ability to address God as 'Abba': and what he has by nature we are called to by adoption, by participation. This changes everything: we live now not according to the law of achievement or legal contract, but according to the gratuity of a love that is both passionate (erotic) and selfless (agapaic). The language of love – *ti amo da morire,* I love you to death – is entirely appropriate here, without exaggeration. It is a love which we catch mere glimpses of even in and through our most wonderful experiences of relationships with spouses, partners, friends, even as parents of children. And that anyone – much less God - can love us like this is what we find hard to accept, and yet it is precisely this which makes all the difference.

Jesus tells us about this love and its consequences for our personal and social lives in his preaching about the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom, often hidden like the seed in the ground, is very near, in fact is already among us, but its full coming is not yet – that 'new creation', that 'new heaven and earth', the 'heavenly Jerusalem' which will occur at the end of history when the 'form of this world has passed away'. It involves the forgiveness of sins, table fellowship with all and sundry, the overcoming of death, but also the establishment of peace and justice among peoples. In particular, consistent with that kenotic characteristic of God's trinitarian love, it involves a solidarity with the least of us in the eyes of this world – the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner referred to in Mt 25 (31-46) in that text which is such a breath-taking and seemingly impossible radicalisation of the Gospel revelation that love of God is expressed through love of neighbour. And not impossible only because through his incarnation, life, death and resurrection we have the assurance that this Kingdom has been definitively established and will ultimately come to fulfillment: and so if at times, like Abraham, we seem to be 'hoping against hope' (Rm, 4,18), still this hope is certain, it will not disappoint (Rm, 5,5). The personal 'yes' to this hope in the Kingdom, with all its radical socio-political implications, is expressed joyfully in Mary's Magnificat: 'He has put 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, 52-3). We see anticipations of this Kingdom in the sharing of goods with those in need of the early disciples (Acts 2, 42-47; 4, 32-37).

2.4: May we hope for a better world?

For our present purposes we need to look more closely at the socio-economic-political implications of this Good News about the Kingdom of God. May we hope for a better world? Can love, even a 'civilization of love', be translated into socio-political reality?

As you will know, we enter theological territory here that has been hotly contested in recent years and decades, not least in the tensions between Liberation theologians and the Vatican, still evident in the recent Notification concerning Jon Sobrino. Nonetheless there has been a great deal of convergence too, particularly evident in that rich and often unknown corpus of Catholic Social Teaching, and my approach here will be to build positively on what is a shared understanding.

2.5: Faith and politics to be distinguished

It is evident from even a cursory glance at the history of Christianity that there have been many different forms of the relationship between faith, politics and social reality. Jesus himself confounded many of those, reared on the memory of the Exodus and the expectation of a politically-minded Messiah, who wanted him to engage directly against Roman imperial rule. He was not a revolutionary Zealot, and even if his Sermon on the Mount and his preaching on the Kingdom have deep social and political implications, still his own practice and teaching ('render unto Caesar…') did not focus explicitly on what we might now call 'party politics'. The contrast with Islam is striking and, in today's world, instructive. Unlike the focus on a society governed by Shariah law, there is no Christian blueprint for the ordering of society, much less politics. After that long Constantinian experiment, in different forms in the East and West, of a close alliance between Church and State, we have come to realise the benefits of separation, the blessings of the relative autonomy of the secular.

2.6: But not separated

However this is not the full story. Church-State formal separation need not involve the separation of faith and politics. If it did, and if –as is the form of the current imbalance in Church-State relations in many parts of Europe – in the spirit of a Modernity that is dying away, we were to banish the voice of the Church and of Christians from the public square and limit it only to private life, then indeed we would be guilty of the Marxist critique that religion is the opium of the people. And we would have little to say to the Islamic focus on a just society and polity.

It is true that there has always been a dangerous tendency within Christian thought and praxis to over-emphasize the personal, the 'spiritual' (narrowly defined to exclude the social and material), the next life. It is a tendency reflected in John Courtney Murray's citing of the example of the early Christian monks and ascetics, part of that flight from the cities to the desert, who are supposed to have spent their days weaving baskets while thinking of God and then their nights unraveling what they had done and starting again.[ii] The clear message was that nothing that we do in this life is of any importance in itself. Of course there is a place for the purely contemplative in the life of the Church. But the 'daily bread' of the Our Father, not to mention love of neighbour, are central to the Gospel message and we –in particular lay

people – are urged to find political and social forms and expression of that common good and preferential option for the poor which are an integral part of the agreed contemporary translations of the preaching of the Kingdom by Jesus. In his address to the general conference of Latin American bishops in San Paulo last May, Pope Benedict XVI is reported to have said: '…we inevitably speak of the problem of structures, especially those which create injustice…just structures are, as I have said, an indispensable condition for a just society'[iii] (The Tablet, May 19, 2007, 15-16).

Society is wider than the State, the socio-cultural is distinct from the political. At the root of the many injustices of our world is that disputed question of the meaning of life which culture, morality and religion address. The voice of faith can have a particular resonance in this realm of civil society. We are all born with a conscience, with a sense of where truth and goodness lie, and we are drawn in this direction despite the counter-tendencies of evil. The Christian faith puts a face on this 'drawing' in the person of Jesus Christ. It offers a vision of life based on justice and forgiveness, leadership as service and not just power, trust in divine providence and in one another, a realistic appreciation of the power of evil and yet a confidence that it may be overcome – all these, and the other elements of the Good News, offer a powerful force for good in our world. At the root of all evil is a lack of intellectual, moral and religious conversion, with concomitant structural forms. The ultimately irresistible power of Jesus Christ – often working through others, indeed through other religions - to lure us to a conversion of mind, heart and social reality is the ground of our hope in a more just society and politics. We believe that this power, operating through the human desire for truth and goodness, is what has brought about peace between previously warring communities in Northern Ireland.

2.7: Faith seeking political form

It is always arguable that, pushed to its logical conclusion, the thought of a certain theologian or theological movement (be it Liberation theologians on the one side, or the likes of Ratzinger or von Balthasar on the other) can err in its explication of the socio-political implications of the Gospel message. What is not questionable however is that there are such implications, and that it is our duty and mission to discover, in the concrete circumstances of our own particular lives, what these implications are and to strive to bring them about. Politics and the structural dimension of reality have become part of the differentiation of modern consciousness in a way that simply would not have been explicitly available to Jesus himself (no more than explicit knowledge of the theory of relativity would have been available to him). It seems to be a strange and egregious form of theological dualism to deny that the Good News extends to how we live our lives together now, in this life, and thus to deny that we may hope for a better world.[iv] The corpus of Catholic Social teaching in particular, with its emphasis on notions like the common good, subsidiarity and solidarity are a powerful resource in the search for the construction of a just society, as the Founding Fathers of the European Union showed. There is no simple blueprint available from the Gospel then: but there is a vision, a set of principles and values, which are of enormous importance.

Our temptations are to look for solutions which bypass the ordinary messiness of human life (and, to console us, this is how Jesus too was tempted, in his time in the desert), and to give up when this is not possible. We want some kind of 'silver bullet', some kind of magic, which will absolve us from the responsible use of freedom. So, for example, when faced with the seeming impotence of constitutional democracies in face of the terrible injustices of our

world, even good people have been know to at least secretly sigh for the coming of some benevolent dictator!

In God's providence our temptations become the kind of testing spoken of in Scripture whereby, through the endurance born of hope, we become intrinsically the kind of person who is fit for God's company, the sort who freely says yes to God' love with all the consequences that this involves. And these consequences inevitably involve the socio-economic-political shape of our lives: our dream for a better, more just world is also, and first, God's dream. And this was already the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes*: '…hope related to the end of time does not diminish the importance of intervening duties, but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives' (GS, 21). The poor and suffering of our world deserve no less.

2.8: <u>The often hidden manifestations of the Kingdom</u>

A somewhat similar text from *Gaudium et Spes* alerts us to the dimension of mystery about the socio-political aspect of the Gospel: 'Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God' (GS, 39). There is a Christian realism about this statement. There is no earthly Paradise, no promise of a necessary confluence between a Teilhardian evolutionary history and the Kingdom of God.[v] The interaction of freedom, sin and grace are more dramatic than that. The classical expression of Christian thought on time and history does not speak of inevitable linear growth or a development that is cyclical, but rather a free going out (*exitus*) and return (*reditus*) to God, the hinge of this journey being the decisive coming of Jesus Christ. Within this journey there are processes of growth, decline and rebirth, deeply influenced by our use of freedom.[vi] The wheat and the tares grow together; progress is often hidden so that what can seem like disaster turns out to be success. We live under the pattern of the Paschal Mystery.

Sometimes this results in visible anticipations of the resurrection after long experiences of the cross: for decades in Northern Ireland it seemed apt to speak in terms of desolation, but now 'You shall no more be called forsaken…you are my chosen one, in you I delight' (Is. 62, 4) seems more apt. We know too that good can come from evil, we have experience of how the wonderfully surprising plan of God can be shot through with that element of the 'felix culpa', God the artist and potter who can remodel the twisted shapes of our lives into something beautiful.

But what about the countless dead and innocent victims of violence, and indeed those who continue to suffer unimaginably today? What of the perpetrators, often caught in a rationalized social and cultural evil? The protests of Job and Ivan Karamazov have validity and cannot be dismissed by any easy recourse to some theological formula or aesthetic theodicy. One thinks as well of the righteous anger of Jesus when confronted with injustice, his cry of abandonment in the face of death. And yet Job at least was content at the last to be still before the mystery of God's plan, and we, with the revelation of Christ's death and resurrection pointing to the intimate sharing and yet overcoming by God of our suffering, may continue to dare to hope, even if it is true that for many this hope is vindicated fully only on the other side of the grave. Very often, of course, it is the poor and suffering themselves who, through God's goodness, are authors of the hope that is in us. Indeed it is they who

through their genuine, if sometimes black, humour remind us of the Christian message that life is ultimately not tragic.

2.9: The notion of Christian realism

It may seem that by speaking of Christian realism, of the unresolved issues that must await the next life, of the impossibility of an earthly Paradise, of the classical Christian thinking on history, of the lack of a blueprint to order society, we are putting unnecessarily strict limits to the scope of Christian hope. Invoking the rubric of Christian realism does alert one to certain important truths: there is no perfect society possible here on earth, 'just structures will never be complete in a definitive way'[vii], one needs to work hard with practical reason and prudential judgment to come up with political approximations to ideals articulated in the Sermon on the Mount. All this is important: sometimes Christian rhetoric about a 'civilization of love' and even 'preferential option for the poor' gets carried away into supposing that a politics of altruism or some other easily available and simplistically radical solution can be applied to solve all the woes of the world. We need to remember that we live in a world shot through with the limitations imposed by nature (creation) and sin, as well as the wonderful possibilities offered by grace.

However recourse to the rubric of Christian realism should emphatically not be used as putting any limits to what God may do in working in the world (Ignatius) with our cooperation – 'whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself, he will perform even greater works…if you ask for anything in my name, I will do it' (Jn. 14, 12-14).

The founding Fathers of the European Union, inspired by their Christian principles and through skillful diplomatic and political negotiation, found a way to bring peace to previously warring countries in Europe and now, hopefully, to all of Europe. The warring tribes in Northern Ireland, again after bitter conflict and through a painstaking peace process, have secured a remarkable peace. We should not allow the 'not yet' of the 'eschatological proviso' spoken about by theologians put limits to the 'already' that is achievable, when we freely cooperate with God's dream and work for our world.

We are good as Christians about being 'as gentle as doves' (Mt. 10, 16), advocating justice and love, and even protesting angrily and prophetically about injustice: and we need to go on doing this. But we also need to learn to be 'as cunning as serpents', to do the hard thinking, advocacy and negotiation which are involved in bringing about change. This social action will be guided by the 'dangerous memory of Jesus' (Metz), which means, *inter alia*, that it will not resort to the use of power as a tactic which unjustifiably abuses the rights of others.[viii] When we act in this committed and respectful way, we know that real, if fragile, achievement is possible. And with this in mind why should 'the preferential option for the poor' not be capable of translation into political and structural currency, as was the desire for peace in Europe and Northern Ireland? And as we work soberly and with practical intelligence for a more just world, we need as well to realise that a theology of hope is shot through with the logic of imagination as much as the logic of inference.[ix] We need baptized imaginations and desires. Given all this, given the need to search for and decide on specific solutions from a wide range of possible ones, the importance of discernment becomes obvious.

2.10: Back to the personal

This leads us, finally in this sketch of a theology of hope, back to the personal dimensions of hope. I will simply state, without developing it, that hope in the Christian scheme of things does extend to the famous four last things (death, judgment, heaven and hell). And as one gets older, this aspect becomes increasingly important! It also assumes a more social form: the hope for continuing relationship with others (the Communion of Saints), the desire that even if the 'form of this world is passing away', nonetheless the Father's plan to 'bring everything together under Christ as head' (Ephesians, 1, 9) at the end will mean that all our human effort and work, and our beautiful if blighted cosmos, will attain an unimaginable fulfillment. But in the meantime we work, and God works in us, to bring about anticipations of this reality now.

Our hope sustains us in this work: and even in dreadful and seemingly intractable situations we can 'hope against hope' and this hope is sure because it is rooted in the love which God is and pours out on us. All is gratuitous and 'all will be well' (Julian of Norwich). Not in any naïve sense such that, as with many of us in the 1960s and 70s, we think that sanctity is the same as psychological wholeness and is achievable by ourselves, or again that societally we can achieve some kind of Utopia by our own efforts. But rather out of gratitude to God's love, which has definitively overcome evil through Jesus Christ, we want others to be treated fairly and we want our own lives to be formed by this mission of justice.

We need to nourish ourselves personally with this kind of perspective: the main work is not ours, we are not Sisyphus, much less Prometheus or Pelagius. And of course we are not worthy, the people we serve are often better than us, and yet God desires us:

'Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back, Guilty of dust and sin….You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat. So I did sit and eat' (George Herbert, Love).

And we need to learn to do all this with others: infamously and ironically the social sector of the Society of Jesus was often known to be decidedly anti-social, at least in so far as many of its prophetic figures practised a rugged individualism, which made it difficult for their good works to assume institutional form and thus more permanent effect. I suppose that has all changed now?!

Part Three: Challenges and Opportunities

I want to list briefly some challenges and opportunities which arise out of this discussion of our context and the theology of hope which addresses it.

3.1: Communities of solidarity

GC 34 spoke about 'communities of solidarity' and one still hears talk in Jesuit circles about 'apostolic discernment in common'. I think we still underuse the potential we have for mobilizing communities of solidarity. As an international organization with lay partners at all levels of society we need to find ways to tackle problems in a more cohesive, multi-disciplinary and focused way. Perhaps to aid this, since many problems are trans-national and cohesion will involve international collaboration, we need in the Society stronger inter-Provincial structures. And perhaps GC 35 will help us with this. This ties in well with the conventional secular analysis of the need in our globalized world for more robust international and global institutions. [x]

3.2: Apostolic discernment in common

And we need to be able to carry out our social mission in a spirit of prayerful discernment together. I don't underestimate the difficulty of this. Prayer can be used to dull the brain and to soften the edges of necessary conflict in ways that are unhelpful. Above all we need always to keep our mind our friendship with the poor, the anger coming from the injustice they suffer which can be a powerful catalyst for personal and structural transformation. Nonetheless we lose perspective if our work together for justice is not permeated and nourished by its roots in faith. Pieris spoke about the danger that social activists who could not collaborate become 'pathological Messiahs' and Gutierrez speaks of the lack of joy which can accompany a social programme without reference to God. Prayer and liturgical celebration can open us up to the liberating perspectives offered by the presence of God in our work with and for the poor, and open us up to each other in new respect and acceptance. Reading the published account of the September 2006 meeting of the Social Sector of the Society in Santa Severa under Fernando Franco leads me to believe that this was such an occasion.[xi] I think we all need to learn how to do this, not just on occasions like Santa Severa or here in Piest'any , but back home in our ordinary workaday situations.

3.3: Other important issues

I note, even more briefly, that it is increasingly clear that our social spirituality, theology and work for justice need to take account of the environmental issue. We are still at an early stage of inter-religious dialogue and the impact it may have on social issues: many have pointed out, in reference to Islam in particular, that the 'dialogue of action' (cooperation on shared social concerns) may be more feasible than the 'dialogue of theological exchange', even if one can easily see that the one inevitably leads to the other. And we have more to do on the gender issue: it is easy for a predominantly male organization, with the best will in the world, to have a blind spot here.

Conclusion

We started with that Good Friday fire in the Provincialate in Dublin. There was a different Good Friday in Ireland in 1998: it was the day the Belfast Agreement (also called the Good Friday agreement) was signed. This year, nine years later, the world saw the photographs of traditional and bitter enemies, Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams, posing together at a meeting which announced their joint acceptance of the terms of that agreement. The London Independent newspaper put as the sub-title to their piece: The Miracle of Belfast.

History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

(Seamus Heaney, The Cure of Troy, a version of the Philoctetes of Sophocles, 1990).

Of course no fine words, whether of poetry or theology, can feed the starving poor or dry the eyes of a child who has lost her parents through the ravages of HIV-AIDS, much less compensate the deceased victims of injustice. But our hope in God can inspire us to make a difference, to fight for justice with ice in our brains, fire in our bellies and warmth in our hearts. It can inspire us to endure the terrible sufferings of this world with a hope that, outrageously, allows us to celebrate life and even to experience its joy: 'Ask and you will receive, and so your joy will be complete' (Jn, 16, 24).

[i] J.B. Metz, God: Against the Myth of the Eternity and Time, in *The End of Time*, eds Tiemo Rainer Peters and Claus Urban, english translation, Paulist Press, New York, 2004, 30-31
[ii] cf J. Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1960, ch 8 'Is it Basket Weaving?'
[iii] *The Tablet*, May 19, 2007, 15-16
[iv] cf G. O'Hanlon, May Christians Hope for a Better World?, *Irish Theological Quarterly*,, 54, 1988, 175-189
[v] cf Larry S. Chapp, Deus Caritas Est And The Retrieval Of A Christian Cosmology, *Communio*, 33, 2006, note 30 p 65
[vi] cf J. Ratzinger, The End of Time, in *The End of Time*, op cit, pp 18-19
[vii] Pope Benedict XVI, *The Tablet*, op cit, 15-16
[viii] cf J.M. Faux, *La Democratie, pourquoi?*, Couleur livres, Centre Avec, Bruxelles, 2006, 41-43
[ix] cf D. Lane, *Eschatology*, in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1990, 342
[x] cf John Palmer, European Integration, A Vital Step on the Road to a New World Order, in *The Future of Europe, Uniting Vision, Values and Citizens?*, Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, Veritas, Dublin, 2006, 130-139
[xi] cf PJ, 92, 2006/3, 5-10