

LESSONS FROM A VATICAN CONGRESS ON *POPULORUM PROGRESSIO*

From my very limited experience of participating in Vatican conferences (only two in my whole life!), I've found them to be marked by (1) a wonderful opportunity to meet and exchange with good people from around the world, and (2) a disappointing occasion for discussing the papers presented and arguing the issues. At least that was my experience last month during the "2nd World Congress of Ecclesial Organisations Working for Justice and Peace" that gathered in Rome 22 to 24 November 2007.

This Vatican-sponsored Congress brought together about 300 laity, religious, priests and bishops from over 80 countries to discuss the significance of the great social encyclical of Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* ("Progress of Peoples"). It commemorated the 40th Anniversary of PP by looking at its message of integral development and its relevance to contemporary challenges in today's globalised world. High on the agenda was PP's important message that development was not only economic growth but "The movement of people from less human conditions to more human conditions."

Coming from the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) in Lusaka, the social centre of the Zambia-Malawi Province, I was particularly interested in the relevance of PP's definition of integral development to our current situation in this resource-rich but people-poor country. To be honest, Zambia has many problems, but the potentials – people and resources – far outweigh the problems. The challenge is to apply the potentials to the problems, and it is here that I believe PP has a very important message. While the economic indicators of Zambia are going up (e.g., annual GNP growth of over 6%), social indicators are not (e.g., poverty levels close to 70%). PP stresses that what is happening to humans should be the norm for evaluating an integral and sustainable development in any economy.

Jesuit participation in the Congress was sparse but substantial. Among those present were Father Stephen Fernandes from East Timor, who described the post-independence challenges there, especially critiquing the government's use of oil profits for purchase of armaments. Three Jesuit Bishops participated, bringing concerns from their respective areas: Francisco Claver and Antonio Ledesmas from the Philippines, and Pedro Barreto from Peru. From France, John Yves Calvez brought his many years of experience in the faith and justice struggle.

Plenary sessions were dominated by long papers read out in full, with little or no time for discussion. (Someone remarked to me that she could have stayed home and read the papers on the internet!) In many of the academic presentations, I missed a grounding in actual experiences of development. What struck me most, however, was the appreciation that the church's social teaching does indeed have policy relevance in the debates and decisions shaping our increasingly globalised world.

My hopes after participating in the Congress are two-fold. First, that the anticipated new social encyclical coming soon from Pope Benedict XVI will pick up *Populorum Progressio*'s sharply critical analysis of neo-liberalism and push forward its agenda of meaningful solidarity between the South and the North. Second, that General Congregation 35 takes very seriously the globalization context of our mission for faith and justice, challenging and empowering us Jesuits to be closer to the poor and more politically active, based on a true Ignatian spirituality of justice.

Pete Henriot, S.J. phenriot@jesuits.org.zm www.jctr.org.zm
Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection
Lusaka Zambia
13December 2007