Jesus Christ and Justice

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The first wave of renewal in christology has sculptured a new landscape by removing the church’s forgetfulness of the genuine humanity of God with us. As a result, the incarnation is appreciated as a much more startling event than when it simply involved the union of God with a quasi-humanity. The second wave has chiseled the human features of the historical Jesus in bold relief, giving the church’s memory of Jesus a new and compelling concreteness. Neither of these movements has taken place in a vacuum, which is a misimpression that may be created when they are singled out by people for close scrutiny. Rather, the pressing needs of our age coupled with the character of post-Vatican II theology turned toward the troubled world have led christology into immediate contact with issues of discipleship, that is, the following of Jesus Christ. The question about who we say he is invites an answer in practical living as well as in reflection. Furthermore, the practical concerns of today reach beyond the personal and the interpersonal to include the structural and cosmic, and rightly so if the victory over the “powers and principalities” won in the crucified Jesus is significant for the whole universe and not just for individuals in isolation.

What is the dynamism of our faith confession in Jesus Christ that generates action on behalf of justice as a constitutive element of that faith? What is this relation between christology and social justice that is emerging as a new insight in the Christian imagination of our time?

As soon as we begin to analyze this relation, it becomes more complex due to the pluralism existing in theology today. Similar to the situation in the first century, when a diversity of cultural experiences led different Christian communities to articulate Jesus’ significance in various ways, giving us the diverse christologies of Paul, Mark, and John, the church today as an emerging world church is witnessing diverse christologies born from the experience of believers on different continents. To find a path through this pluralism, and to get to the heart of the question about christology’s relation to social justice, we can borrow a page from Karl Rahner. According to his analysis, all christologies can in the end be characterized as belonging to one of two basic types: a salvation history or ascending type, commonly called christology from below, and a metaphysical or descending type, commonly called christology from above. The two are not mutually exclusive, and the Church needs both for the full confession of its faith. They are distinct, however, bringing into play different scriptural and doctrinal emphases and a different method of thinking.

To illustrate the unbreakable relation between Jesus Christ and social justice in each of these patterns of thinking, we may turn to key teachings of church leaders. This in itself highlights one aspect of the dynamic of a living tradition, namely, once a ferment in theological development reaches a certain stage of maturity, its tested insights begin to be used in common parlance of the teaching of the church. Thus they are preserved and handed on to future generations.

The first wave of christological renewal is clearly present in the first encyclical of John Paul II on Jesus Christ as redeemer of the human race. There he presents a descending type of christology focused primarily on Jesus Christ’s redemptive incarnation and its healing effect on the whole human race. His argument stands or falls on the reality of the genuine humanity of Jesus, for by that humanity Jesus is united to every other human being, giving each of us with a dignity beyond compare which mandates justice for all. On the other hand, the second wave of renewal in christology shapes the pastoral letters on peacemaking and economic justice written by the United States Catholic bishops. In these teaching letters the bishops delineate an ascending type of christology which draws its inspiration from the ministry of the earthly Jesus, culminating in his death and resurrection. Without the concrete example of Jesus and the values
enunciated in his preaching, the bishops’ case loses its persuasive Christian power. While following different trains of thought, however, both approaches are one in appealing to the intrinsic dynamism of the question “Who do you say that I am?” which sets believers to following the way of Jesus Christ in care and commitment for the suffering neighbor, and in critique and change of the systems which cause that suffering. Uncovering the logic of their different arguments shows that both propel the church in the same direction, from the foundation of confessing faith in Jesus Christ to the challenge of action on behalf of justice.

DESCENDING CHRISTOLOGY

This type of christology has been the predominant one in the course of the Christian tradition. It begins its thinking in heaven with the doctrine of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Word of God preexisting from all eternity in unity with the Father and the Spirit. As its name suggests, this christology then traces the descent of the eternal Word into this world, fascinated with the mystery of the incarnation, the Word become flesh. The one through whom all things were made is now in the world under the conditions of sin and alienation, in order to renew creation which God has never ceased to love. As the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ reveals the love and mercy of God and, through his identification with human existence culminating in the cross and resurrection, restores human beings to their likeness to God which had been disfigured by sin. Indeed, the whole cosmos is redeemed and made into a new creation. Thus the genuine descent of the eternal Word into human existence is a redemptive event par excellence; Jesus Christ’s metaphysical identity is the ground of his function as Redeemer of the human race. This pattern of christology finds its scriptural paradigm in the gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word was made flesh” (1:1, 14). It is usually developed in theology with much attention to the doctrinal problematic of true divinity and true humanity in the unity of the one person of Jesus Christ.

In Redemptor Hominis, Pope John Paul II gracefully assumes this descending pattern of christological thought. He begins with the affirmation that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, became a human being: “God entered the history of humanity and, as a human being, became an actor in that history, one of the thousands of millions of human beings but at the same time unique!” (paragraph 1). This incarnation is a radically real one. Christ who is the Son of the living God nevertheless became for our sakes a genuine human being: “He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and he loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin” (8). It is this humanity of the Son of God which attracts us and which speaks even to many who are not Christian. His fidelity to the truth speaks; so does his all-embracing love and the inscrutable depth of his suffering and abandonment on the cross (7). What is to the fore, then, is Jesus Christ’s personal identity. He is unmistakably God; he is also indeniably one of us.

In John Paul’s hands, it is the union of the two in Jesus Christ that triggers the drama of redemption. The whole natural world, which God created good, has lost its link with God through the sin of Adam. And the human race, specially created in the image and likeness of God, has likewise been disfigured through the sin of Adam. In the person of the new Adam, however, who joins the created with the uncreated, the world’s link with God is restored. So too the image of God in human beings is restored, for “by his incarnation, he, the Son of God, in a certain way united himself with each human being” (8). We all, then, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, indeed the whole world, are made into a new creation.

The element which John Paul sifts out of this story of redemption and begins to use to shape a vision of the church’s mission in the world is the unsurpassable dignity of every human being. The descent of the eternal Word into humanity leaves no human being unaffected: “human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare” (8). The result is the establishment of the unsurpassed worth of every human being. How very precious we all must be in the eyes of God that we have been given such a Redeemer, God’s own Son! How very precious we are, united to Christ in the mystery of redemption! What arises in us as
we assimilate this christology is wonder at the goodness of God and deep amazement at ourselves. In reality, another name for this deep amazement at our worth and dignity as human beings is the gospel, the good news (10).

At this point in the development of his christology, John Paul makes the critical move which will lead to incorporating concern for social justice into the church’s mission in the world. This move consists in setting up the relation between Christ and the church according to the metaphor of the way: “Jesus Christ is the chief way for the church. He himself is our way ...” (13). The church is the community of disciples, each of whom is called in a different way to follow the one way who is Christ (21). And where does this way lead? It leads to human beings, to every one in the concrete and to all in our communal and global interrelations. Out of regard for Christ, the church must understand its own true mission as that of being sensitive to whatever serves human well-being or threatens it. Whatever else it may do, John Paul argues, the church cannot abandon human beings for each one is unbreakably united to Christ and enjoys a dignity that he died to restore. Jesus Christ is the way for the church, and that way, the way of God incarnate, leads to human beings. Thus is a dynamic link forged between belief in the incarnate Redeemer and concern for the public issues which affect the well-being of billions of persons.

The logic is inexorable. If the Redeemer loves the human race and everyone in it; if Christ took humanity to himself in such a way as to be truly united to every person (recall the judgment scene in Matthew 25: “as long as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me”); if as a result the human dignity of each person has been raised to a value beyond compare, sealed with the very blood of Christ, then following the way of its Lord the church must also have as a primary concern the promotion of the dignity of human beings. How could it be otherwise, if the church has entered into the amazement of the redemptive good news? It is intrinsic to its mission “to make human life ever more human” (14) in the power of the name and Spirit of Christ.

Following out the logic of this approach, the door is now opened for a host of world problems to enter and claim the church’s attention. John Paul goes on in this encyclical to discuss the military arms race going on at the expense of the poor of the world; nuclear weapons which make possible such a terrible end; burgeoning technology which does not respect human needs; the starvation of millions in the face of the consumerism of others; the need for transformation of structures of economic life; exploitation and pollution of the planet which in the end will leave us with no home at all; torture, terrorism, violations of human rights, and discrimination of all kinds; disrespect for the unborn; imperialism and political domination. In no case is the concern of today’s generation of disciples of Christ about these matters simply an adjunct to the heart of faith, or their engagement in these issues simply a practical, extrinsic application of important principles. Rather, it belongs to the essence of faith itself to care about these things—if we have been grasped by radical amazement at the good news that the human race has been redeemed by Christ and is precious to God.

Here, then, is one example of a descending christology which issues in action on behalf of justice as a constitutive element of faith itself. It begins in heaven, traces the descent of the eternal Son of God into the world, realizes the redemptive effect this has had on the dignity of each person and on all of the human race together, and then follows the Redeemer along the way of cruciform love in working out the fulfillment of this redemption in the concrete circumstances of our communal life. As John Paul II eloquently put it,

The redemption of the world—this tremendous mystery of love in which creation is renewed—is at its deepest root the fullness of justice in a human heart, the heart of the first-born Son, in order that it may become justice in the hearts of many human beings. .called to grace, called to love. (9)

ASCENDING CHRISTOLOGY

This type of christology, actually the earliest to develop has recently been rediscovered in the church thanks to biblical scholars and their critical wizardry with scriptural texts. It begins its thinking on earth, with the memory of Jesus of Nazareth who lived a genuinely free, historical life. It tells the story of his compassionate ministry and of his impact on the women and men who followed him. As
its name suggests, this christology then traces the ascent of Jesus to the One he called Abba, fascinated with the dialectical mystery of death and resurrection—ugly, abandoned, human death and God's sheer gift of new, transformed life. The one who had shared God's crucified love of history, he reveals the compassion of the new creation. As God and, through the power of the Spirit, he becomes the center of the world's faith. This pattern of christology finds its scriptural paradigm in the synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. It is usually developed in theology with much attention to the historical circumstances of the ministry and destiny of Jesus, to his relation with his Abba revealed therein, and to the presence of his Spirit in the world.

In their pastoral letters on peace and on economic justice, Catholic bishops of the United States make use of the paternoster (the Lord's Prayer) to illustrate theDupont's Theological Dictionary of the Catholic Church. In this passage, the bishops express their convictions about the role of the church in promoting peace and economic justice, drawing on the scriptural and theological foundations of the Christian faith. The bishops' letters are characterized by their commitment to the teachings of Jesus and the gospels, which they view as a source of inspiration for addressing contemporary social issues. The bishops urge their readers to reflect on the meaning of the Lord's Prayer and to apply its teachings to their daily lives, emphasizing the importance of justice, mercy, and the common good.
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were dangerous ones in his time, and they led to his death—a cruel and viciously inflicted death, a criminal's death (Gal 3:13)” (The Challenge of Peace, 49). He lived out fidelity to the reign of God to the end, forgiving even those who were killing him. The story does not end here. As Jesus had proclaimed, the loving power of God is stronger even than death. God raised the crucified Jesus to life. The resurrection is the strongest possible sign that God really can be trusted to have the last word, which is life. Now, in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, the arrival of the reign of God, the fullness of salvation, the reconciliation between God and the world finally become fully possible. In the light of this event the bishops confess the Christian belief that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the Christ, in whose coming the reign of God has also begun to arrive.

At this point in the story, the bishops make a move crucial for understanding the mission of the church to be inclusive of the concerns of social justice. They characterize the church as the community of believers, founded on the call to follow Jesus, which means imitating the pattern of his life, continuing the proclamation and enactment of the reign of God. As with John Paul II but in a different context, the operative category for the identity of the Church is that of discipleship, or following the way of Jesus. In the light of the telling of the story of Jesus, this becomes a very concrete way. To be a disciple means to put one's feet in the footsteps of Jesus and, in the power of his Spirit, to continue in one's own historical time and place his mission of announcing and signing the coming of the reign of God. Together as church, the community of disciples is in a unique way called to be the instrument of the reign of God in history. Since peace and justice are among the most powerful signs of the reign of God present in this world, it belongs to the essential mission of the church to make these realities more visible in our time, so marked by oppression, violence, injustice, and threat of total destruction. Following Jesus on this way may well cost disciples their lives—the servants are not greater than the master. But the community of disciples must go on witnessing throughout the conflicts of history, drawing courage from their memory of Jesus, from their experience of his continuing presence in the Spirit, and from hope in the final victory of the coming reign of God.

Drawing out the inexorable logic of their Christological position, the bishops in the end declare their specific teaching:

Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith. We are called to be peacemakers not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus. The content and context of our peacemaking is set not by some political agenda or ideological program, but by the teaching of his Church (The Challenge of Peace, 333).

And again:

The concerns [of economic justice for all] are not all peripheral to the central mystery at the heart of the church. They are integral to the proclamation of the Gospel and part of the vocation of every Christian today (Economic Justice for All, 60).

If we as church are truly following our risen Lord, making his historical concerns our own and committing our lives to the coming victory of the reign of God, then we are compelled to be involved in critical peacemaking and economic issues where the shalom and well-being of all peoples, and indeed of the whole earth, are at stake.

Here, then, are examples of a christology from below which issue in the realization that action on behalf of justice is a constitutive dimension of faith. It begins its thinking on earth with the gospel memory of the life of Jesus, and finds there the basis for the discernment of how the risen Christ is operative in the world today. The paradigmatic role of Jesus on earth becomes a source of light and energy fueling the church's own mission in the world.

OUTCOME: JUSTICE

Tracing these two basically different patterns of christological thought brings us to the same point of intrinsic concern for social justice on this earth. In descending christology, the focus is on the redemptive incarnation of the eternal Word of God. So pure is this type of christology in the thinking of John Paul II that in grafting
his argument he never appeals to the ministry of Jesus, making only once a passing reference to that ministry in suggesting that the parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25 might serve as an outline for an examination of conscience (16). Reflecting on this descending pattern of thought, we are invited to ponder the identification of the incarnate Word with the humanity of every person, gifting each of us with an extraordinary dignity.

In ascending christology, the focus is on the risen Jesus Christ who was crucified as a result of a very particular kind of ministry. So clear is this type of christology in the bishops' peace pastoral that in drafting their argument they never appeal to the doctrine of the incarnation, mentioning only once, in the last paragraph, Jesus Christ under the aspect of the Word incarnate (339); in the economic justice pastoral no such reference is made at all. Reflecting on this pattern of thought we are invited to enter into the joyful, conflictual story of Jesus' ministry of justice and peace, culminating in his death and resurrection, a process which empowers us to proclaim and enact the coming of the reign of God in our own age.

While descending christology is more philosophical in character and ascending christology more historically oriented, not only are they not mutually exclusive, but both are needed for the fullness of the church's faith confession. In both, however, the bottom line is the insight that the church is gifted with the Spirit of Christ and called to discipleship with a mission patterned on the way of Jesus Christ. Whether reflection about him proceeds from above or from below, what is not possible for believers in the end is indifference to the systemic forces in the world which create so much terror and misery. In both types of christology, the final moral imperative is the same: action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world are constitutive dimensions of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race (1971 Synod of Bishops, Justice in the World, 6).

It seems that the church in our time is crossing the Rubicon from a land of privatized piety accompanied by deeds of charity to individuals, at times outstandingly splendid deeds, to a frontier imbued with a spirituality of justice. In this new environment of discipleship, individual persons are certainly not neglected but cared for within the larger structured complexities of an interdependent, suffering world.

Under the impulse of a spirituality of justice, we are realizing in a new way that the gracious power of the incarnate Word and risen Christ cannot be limited to the personal and interpersonal realms alone, but includes the body politic, the social systems which we create and which in turn shape us. We are seeing anew the working of the demonic in this world, and hearing the call to enter into the way of suffering love in order to disrupt the demonic and make room for the new creation to bud forth. We are learning to love this world deeply and at the same time to be profoundly critical of its self-destructive and unjust tendencies. We are finding that in the struggle for justice and peace the moral and the religious converge, and experiencing that in this struggle our union with God is constituted. If studies are correct which show that many Catholics in the United States are resisting the leadership of the Pope and bishops in this direction, it may well be that the christological emphasis in preaching, religious education, and adult formation programs needs to be revitalized so that the intrinsic and dynamic link between christology and social justice can emerge and grasp the hearts of believers.

Readings


Renewing the Earth: Catholic Documents on Peace, Justice and Liberation, David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon, eds. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), compiles earlier social teaching by the popes and bishops' conferences of North and Latin America. Influential theological essays which explore the background of that teaching have been gathered in Official Catholic Social Teaching, Charles Curran and Richard McCormick, eds. (New York: Paulist, 1986). David Hollenbach has written an excellent analysis in Justice, Peace and Human Rights (New York: Crossroad, 1988).