

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE RECENT CONTROVERSYP.J. Cullinane

Judging by the angry letters, it seems that for some people the Commission for Evangelisation, Justice and Development can do no right, and in the eyes of others it has done no wrong. Either way, it seems, the bishops are at fault - both for what the Commission did, and for deciding to be more involved with the Commission in future.

In the midst of all this, one tries to respond to the issues themselves and not to the pressures (from either side!)

There was no way the bishops could stand aside. People are entitled to some explanation of the actions of our own Commission. In any case, we were presumably expected to support the Commission's decisions (even if we heard of them first through the media, and subsequently received scant reference to them in the minutes). And so, there are obviously very good reasons why we should be more fully involved in the decisions the Commission makes.

MANY DIFFERENT RIGHTS

Trying to deal with questions after the event runs the risk of hurting people, including those to whom money was given. It is too easy for us to be cast in the role of being "against" them, when that is not our attitude and not the point at issue. They are surely entitled to proof that "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." (Vatican II, The Church in the Modern World, para.1).

Similarly, those Catholics who feel their money was wrongly disbursed are at least entitled to proper assurances. They do have that right! And the Commission - or otherwise those responsible for it - have a corresponding duty to provide such assurances.

As an agent of the Bishops' Conference, the Commission itself has the right to feel supported by the Bishops' Conference. But by the same token, because it is an agent of the Bishops' Conference, it must expect to be accountable, and suggestions to the contrary are naive.

ISSUES

I shall comment briefly on four of the issues raised in the present controversy:

1. .. The most serious problem is with some of the critics of the E.J.D. Commission. There are still too many conventional Catholics who do not seem to realise that the main thrust of E.J.D. thinking and activity is far more Catholic (if the mind of recent popes is anything to go by) than their own ideas about the Church.

In fact, the failure of many Catholics to recognise the moral implications of racism, unemployment, land questions, etc., is far less true to the gospel, and more damaging to the Church, than any error of judgment that the E.J.D. Commission might make in its efforts to do something. Those who make mistakes trying to do the right thing are surely less guilty than those who disconnect their faith - and their consciences - from Social and economic problems.

"Let each one examine himself to see what he has done up to now and what he ought to do. It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustices and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and by effective action." (Pope Paul VI, 80th Anniversary of Rerum Novarum N48).

The educative and funding activities of our Commission for Evangelisation, Justice and Development are tangible evidence of our commitment to justice, and the Commission deserves the support of the Catholic community, even if there is room to disagree with some of its particular decisions.

2. .. Is it enough for those who defend the Commission's decisions just to talk about "a commitment to justice", "an option for the poor", "solidarity with the oppressed", etc.? No, because that is not the point presently at issue. The question is not whether there are people needing help - that's obvious. It is about the right ways of helping.

To miss this point is to misrepresent those Catholics who are committed to the cause of justice, including education for justice and action for justice, but whose reservations concern the particular projects and particular ways and means of pursuing justice.

Even when the end in view is justice, people are still entitled to query the means on two counts: (a) is it a morally just means? (b) is it a higher priority than other means of pursuing justice?

A simplistic equation between the end and the means is also manipulative when it is suggested that "if you don't support this particular project, then you aren't committed to justice".

3. .. Concerning the morality of the means: There was a time when Christians felt entitled to use force against others when those others were considered to be wrong. This mentality was summed up in the saying "Error has no rights." The Catholic Church has officially dissociated itself from that position. It recognises that rights are vested in the person, including the person whom we might consider to be wrong. Consequently, the methods of pursuing justice must treat others as persons and appeal to their minds and hearts, leaving them free to think, choose and act for themselves. Recourse to physical obstruction, harrassment and intimidation can itself be a violation of this basic human right.

The crunch point for determining what means of pursuing justice are compatible with the gospel is surely the gospel's demand that we love both the oppressed and the oppressor! Perhaps that is the ultimate difference between gospel radicalism and mere political and militant radicalism.

It is not for me to pass judgment on the intentions of any particular group; my purpose is to explain why people are entitled to assurances concerning the justice both of the end and of the means.

Similarly, concerning priorities: people are entitled to query whether a film designed to feature "resistance to the 1981 Springbok Tour" by people who believed they had the right to physically obstruct it, merits the same priority as a film that could have been about apartheid or starvation, etc..

4. .. Concerning the right of the bishops to intervene: The Commission for Evangelisation, Justice and Development happens to be a Bishops' Commission (as distinct from a lay organisation) even though the bishops gladly entrust many of the Commission's tasks to lay men and women. Their help with discerning needs and proposing solutions is still needed. However, it is the bishops who authorise the collection of the Catholic peoples' money; it is the bishops who hold it in trust, and it is the bishops who must be accountable for how it is spent.

No-one can claim a "right" to spend what someone else holds in trust. Nor can the bishops totally hand over their own responsibility. Therefore, to speak as if the bishops' involvement were somehow contrary to shared responsibility, is, once again, to miss the point.

WORTHWHILE

This whole controversy will have been worthwhile if it results in a greater commitment by all of us to justice - to just goals by just means - and the greater involvement of all of us.