

Archbishop Peter Smith's J&P address – Thoughts from a laywoman Ellen Teague

I've just spilt tea over my keyboard! What's this? "Scathing criticism" of a conference I helped plan and which was widely regarded as being very successful. The National Justice and Peace Network (NJPN) needing to be revitalised! I was reading my daily ICN e-mailed news when I came across Archbishop Peter Smith's address to the Archdiocese of Southwark Justice and Peace Assembly on 16 October. I'd like to give a personal rejoinder, particularly since I chaired the group planning the event referred to - this year's annual NJPN conference.

Of course, Archbishop Peter is very supportive of Justice and Peace work. NJPN members greatly appreciated him attending one of the NJPN quarterly meetings in Cardiff a few months back, before taking up his new post at Southwark. And Southwark Justice and Peace people were delighted that he gave the time to address them. However, may I suggest that one of the most thriving lay movements in the UK Church faced more criticism than it deserved.

He opened his talk by quoting Catholic journalist Paul Donovan as making "a pretty scathing criticism of the National Justice and Peace Network Conference and expanded his remarks to include the work of Justice and Peace in the Dioceses of England and Wales". At the conclusion of his address, Archbishop Peter urged his audience of Justice and Peace activists to be inspired by the Church's Social Teaching "to participate fully in promoting the Common Good" and "encourage others to do the same". On this point alone, I would just like to ask: what do you think the Justice and Peace movement in Britain has been up to for three decades? Inspired by Catholic Social Teaching, the laity have been acting on their own initiative and doing just this. The point is worth making, but out there in the pews where Catholic Social Teaching is rarely mentioned, rather than to an audience of people who can probably rattle off the names of relevant encyclicals, list the key features of Social Teaching and give several examples of ways they are putting it into practice in their daily lives.

In Paul's original article, printed in *The Universe* a week after July's conference (25 July 2010), he had certainly pointed out that commitment to Justice and Peace at diocesan level was sketchy with few dioceses having workers and some lacking commissions. But he didn't lay the blame with a network of activists who are either poorly paid, or more often not paid at all to promote this key area of the mission of the church. It is worth reiterating Paul's comment that, "there is a definite belief among the hierarchy that while Social Justice is a constituent part of practising the faith, in terms of resourcing it is an added extra that can certainly be done without". In so many dioceses, financial and properties staff are employed full time and adequately funded, but Justice and Peace staff are not - a glaring example of church maintenance taking priority over church mission. The situation is better than it used to be - and the bishops do provide office space to NJPN at the bishops' conference - but with the papal visit giving so much attention to Social Teaching, outreach work and advocacy, perhaps the conference could look into stepping up its commitment.

Paul's second key point was that formation needs more attention from the Justice and Peace movement itself, particularly to draw young people in on a long-term basis. By that I understand he is talking about the pastoral cycle process, where groups - either Catholic or ecumenical - look at their experience of an issue, undertake social analysis and then theological reflection, before moving into action under the headings of further awareness raising, lifestyle, political/commercial action, and liturgy. The complex issues of justice, peace and environmental stewardship need significant time put in to understanding the causes of problems, particularly in the light of faith, and then activity emerging from this process. Paul's view - and one that I share - is that too often Catholics now are encouraged to believe that signing a card, waving a placard at one event or saying a bidding prayer is enough to move human society in the direction of a just, peaceful and sustainable world. This goal means a lifetime of commitment to all these things but much more. It is about transformation, and training for transformation is crucial. Lack of formation of young people is particularly short-sighted if we expect them to play a role in the political and economics spheres, motivated by their faith, and indeed to play a role in a future NJPN.

Again, we need to look at the reasons why the NJPN has less focus on the process of formation for Justice and Peace than it used to. Again, it is all to do with resources. NJPN once had a national level fieldworker, funded by one of the member religious orders, but the post only lasted as long as the funding, which had a time limitation. It was recognised that many current Justice and Peace activists had come through CAFOD's development education programme for adults, which no longer exists, but the limited resources were put into keeping an administrator, running an annual conference and newsletter and improving the NJPN website. All of these, in my view, are crucial to strengthening the Justice and Peace community - the newsletter reaches about 8,000 people - and networking role. Formation continues to be an emphasis of groups linked to us such as the Young Christian Workers, Pax Christi and Catholic People's Weeks. Also, dioceses holding events which have a formation content are advertised throughout the whole network.

The NJPN focus, particularly with its annual conference, on issues such as Migrants, Peacemaking, Work and Environment and relating to faith is extremely worthwhile and recognised as such by Paul Donovan in numerous other articles. The National Justice and Peace Network in fact ran a vibrant conference in July - 'Our Daily Bread - Food Security, People and Planet' which was fully booked with 400 people and which received overwhelmingly positive evaluations. One of our speakers, a consultant to supermarkets who worked at the highest level of Sainsburys for 25 years, said publicly that the quality of the discussion of fundamental food issues was higher than any conference she had attended in recent years in the corporate world. Journalist John Vidal from *The Guardian*, who chaired a food debate, said he was surprised and heartened to see such an active engagement with the secular world by a church group. Links were made to Catholic Social Teaching and celebration of the sacraments, and the conference presented action ideas for the whole church which can be viewed on the NJPN website. The planning group had spent 18 months worth of meetings and networking involving Lancaster Faith and Justice, and representatives from Arundel and Brighton, Brentwood and Westminster Dioceses; the Sisters of Lyon and Columban

Fathers; the National Board of Catholic Women, CAFOD, Progressio and Christian Ecology Link. We were very happy that the conference met its objectives and overall aim of working for God's kingdom. Of course, much of this work is invisible unless you attend the conference or monitor the NJPN website and I would strongly urge the Bishops' Conference to send representation in the future.

It is interesting that Archbishop Peter asks NJPN members to "start thinking about and analysing the notion of 'The Big Society' as put forward by David Cameron". I hope gratitude towards his government for being so positive about the papal visit doesn't blind our Bishops' Conference from analysing it critically themselves.

The Bishops' Conference says on its website that on legislation and Public Policy it will provide a clear vision on issues of the day when fundamental moral questions are at stake. Yet, I can see nothing on the website about 'The Big Society' and nothing since the papal visit on Climate Change, which has been identified as a key area for collaboration between the Holy See and the British government. NJPN member Church Action on Poverty has already expressed reservations about the notion of 'The Big Society'. A recent blog on its website expressed despondency, "that for all the rhetoric about the army of volunteers that can plug the gaps resulting from spending reductions, many smaller charities are rightly in despair that they are about to lose their local authority funding that underpins their work and so supports volunteering".

NJPN has always felt hampered in providing a national Catholic voice on justice and peace issues, because it was strictly set up as a liaison body of the Bishops' Conference. I think prophetic and public witness to gospel values may be acutely needed in the months ahead by both NJPN and the Bishops' Conference. Archbishop Peter should be thanked for immersing himself in NJPN work, and, helpfully, suggesting areas for further reflection and action. Yet, public acknowledgement by the Bishops' Conference and its members of the excellent work already underway at grassroots level by Justice and Peace activists would be equally well appreciated.

Now, I'll finish cleaning up my keyboard and desk!

Paul Donovan's article "Justice and Peace activism in need of formation" can be found at:

[Viewpoint: Justice & Peace activism in need of formation](#)

Archbishop Peter Smith's address to Southwark Justice and Peace Commission on 16 October can be found at:

<http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=16958>

See also: [London Citizens leader responds to Paul Donovan's J&P article](#)