



Spring Assembly Report: April 2007

Saturday April 28th dawned bright and clear, but not without incident as television and radio stations reported the occurrence of an earthquake in south Kent! Thankfully, there were no major casualties and Aylesford had not been affected so was open for business. People were offered a welcoming drink (paid for by St Peter's parish, Woolwich) as they arrived before moving into the North Barn, or Edith Stein Centre as it is now known. By 11.00 the room was packed as more than 100 people settled down to participate in the day. Fr Francis, the Prior, began by welcoming us to the Friars once more and wishing us a successful day.

The theme of this year's Aylesford Assembly was 'livesimply - what can I do?' It is based upon the *livesimply* project which draws its inspiration from the 40th anniversary of the Papal Encyclical 'Populorum Progressio' of Pope Paul VI in 1967. The project was launched last Advent and is supported by a coalition of groups and agencies, of which the JPIC Office is a member.

Keynote speaker was **Professor Ian Linden**, formerly director of the Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR) and now an Associate Professor in the department for the Study of Religions at the School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London. His published writings include material on Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Rhodesia and Rwanda, and recently 'A New Map of the World' (2004).

Ian's task was to put *Populorum Progressio* in the context of the Church's Social Teaching, to see why it had been written, and what it continues to offer to the world today.

He began with looking at references to poverty in Catholic Social Teaching (CST). In his view, the first 'push' against poverty was in the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. That was an extraordinary year, he said. Pope John



The tearoom offered a welcoming drink before the meeting began

XXIII spoke of the Church being ordained to be of service to the poor, and in order to be true to itself

"No one is permitted to disregard the plight of our brothers and sisters living in dire poverty, enmeshed in ignorance and tormented by insecurity. The Christian, moved by this sad state of affairs, should echo the words of Christ: 'I have compassion on the crowd.'" PP#74

it must live out that service.

In their opening 'Message to Humanity' at the beginning of the Vatican Council, the delegates spoke of two great problems that were facing the Church - peace and social justice. But then they went on to talk of other things! Why? At that time there was no theological framework available in the agenda which dealt with these issues and as part of which discussions could take place. "This then begged the question", said Ian; "why did poverty not feature as part of the outcome of the Vatican Council?" This was, he felt, because the people attending the Council and promoting the 'Church of the Poor' were themselves a pretty mixed bunch! There was the worker priest movement adherents, which had grown up in France, Belgium and Brazil. Crushed by Pope

Pius XII who feared it was too political, this group caused many to criticise the topic. Then there were the Third World Bishops of Latin America (especially Brazil) whose people were desperately poor and living with a feudal system of land management. The great figure in this group was Helder Camara, the Secretary General of the Bishops' Conference of Brazil. The Church in Latin America was already moving towards more

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Why live simply?

God calls us to look hard at our lifestyles and to choose to live simply, sustainably and in solidarity with the poor people.

In this way we can help create a world in which human dignity is respected and everyone can reach their full potential.

This would be true progress, worth more than economic growth alone.

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involvement in social justice. Thirdly, were the bishops, missionaries and indigenous priests of different countries who were insisting that the Church be 'present' in the world. Notable among these were Charles de Foucard. In their view the Church had to be made present in concrete ways even in Muslim countries. Finally there were those bishops from rich countries for whom the notion of 'symbolic poverty' was troublesome. Hence, although the idea of talking about poverty had many followers, the very disparate nature of the groups made it difficult for them to put forward their views as a body.

Paul VI had wanted a document speaking about poverty - he had hoped that it would be included in the introductory remarks to *Lumen Gentium* (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*), but this did not happen.

One of the 'expert' participants at the Vatican Council was Dominican priest Louis Joseph Lebreton. Born in 1897 in France, he had been ordained priest in 1929 and had created in 1942 'Economy and Humanism' a research centre that looked at and worked for economic and social development. He wrote "*Progress is part of civilisation. Economic growth is based upon people. What counts for Christians is the human person, each person, each group of people, everyone.*" It was Lebreton who introduced the concern for total development of persons and society to the Catholic Church. By the 1960 he was regarded by the United Nations as the number one expert on the question of living- standard disparity in the world.

Lebreton was one of those who worked upon *Gaudium et Spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*) which made some recognition of the need for peace and social justice. But it did not go far.

"Pope Paul VI also asked Lebreton", said Ian; "to represent the Holy See at the first United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva in 1965, at which the newly emerging African nations were present." At that conference there were two outstanding speeches: "one by a young Che Guevara and the other



The New Barn

"Each man must examine his conscience, which sounds a new call in our present times. Is he prepared to support, at his own expense, projects, and undertakings designed to help the needy? Is he prepared to pay higher taxes so that public authorities may expand their efforts in the work of development? Is he prepared to pay more for imported goods, so that the foreign producer may make a fairer profit?" PP#47

by the Dominican Lebreton."

Lebreton it was who became the inspirer of the new encyclical of Paul VI that tried to address the social issues which were clamouring for the Church's attention. This was *Populorum Progressio - On the Development of the Peoples*, and he was asked to write the first draft of it for Paul VI.

Ian then went on to give a brief outline of the issues in the document. "It tried", he said, "to analyse the causes of poverty before giving solutions. Transformation was required - there was a need for structural change. Economics must be at the service of humanity - "we do not believe in separating the human from the economic." It argued that the poor make their own history - that we cannot develop people, they develop themselves out of their own life, experience and culture etc. Whilst they may need help to do so, development must begin from the people itself and not be imposed from without. People will require literacy and education, but want integral human development. In it there is a firm insistence on the inter-dependence of all countries - "look", said Ian, "at the effect on Iraq today of trying to do otherwise."

The document looked at the 'economies of enough', that would not create a massive surplus for the rich and a lack for the poor.

It challenged the economic vision of trade with equal partners as being an

abstract nonsense, that actually trade is organised by the powerful.

The document also made a powerful denial of the Arms Trade - the Pope called money spent on arms "scandalous, whilst schools and homes and hospitals remain unbuilt."

"Implicit in the entire document", ended Ian, "is the firm conviction that the poor must come first. This is because there is an implicit promise that by our working with the poor we will be given a better chance of coming into contact with the compassionate Christ whom we profess to follow."

Populorum Progressio still has much to offer us and our world today.

Our second speaker was **Mark Woods**, the Coordinator of the *livesimply* project. Formerly the CAFOD representative for the Diocese of Westminster, Mark used a PowerPoint presentation to illustrate his talk on the *livesimply* project, and where it came from. He began by introducing us to the 'Koru' a new Zealand fern (*see below*) which is an important symbol for the Maori culture. Mark felt that we could also use the fern as a symbol for the *livesimply* project and to illustrate that 'another world is possible.'

The Koru begins curled up before it springs into life. It symbolises the hope we can see in nature, the fragile beauty of creation, the spiral of life, the wisdom of the indigenous peoples, and reflects the 'one and the many' - ness of life.

the 'one and the many - ness' of life. The spiral also reminds us of the pastoral cycle - 'see, think, act, reflect'.

The *livesimply* challenge comes from Populorum Progressio: God calls us to live simply, sustainably and in solidarity with all. Authentic development contains a benefit for humans as well as for the economy. We live in a complex world that has immense poverty and no easy answers. But there are signs of hope - the 'Make Poverty History campaign of 2005' engaged thousands of people on behalf of others.

It is a world of deep injustice - and we must remember when challenging the large institutions that we must also challenge the injustices in our own relationships, our families etc. We have a responsibility to work just as much on these areas and not to just look 'out there' at others. Injustice is just as much an absence of right relationships in our own lives as between corporations and coun-

A Koru



tries. We can see evidence of these fractured relationships not just between ourselves and cultures but also between ourselves and creation. These could destroy everything unless we acknowledge and work to bring about healing. Our relationships should be ones of love for each other and the whole of creation.

We must believe in an alternative vision for the world being possible (Jn 10:10) where there is liberation from poverty, from 'having' to 'being'.

This will lead us to a spirituality of sufficiency, of simplicity, of sustainability and solidarity. We must build the human community where all can have what they need - 'Integral human development for all'.

We need to see this as a call to action - it requires a change of heart, a

conversion. It requires a turning to God and turning away from old habits. It will be a liberating spirituality that will result in us showing that an-

"For peace is not simply the absence of warfare, based on a precarious balance of power; it is fashioned by efforts directed day after day toward the establishment of the ordered universe willed by God, with a more perfect form of justice among men."

other world IS possible.

The *livesimply* project then, is not an end in itself, but merely a beginning, a change of heart that will lead us on to new ways of living and acting, of taking on actions that show our new lifestyle and will encourage others to do the same. If we truly embrace *livesimply* it will be a life-changing experience!

Mark concluded by telling us about some of the future events and happenings associated with *livesimply*. First, there will be the 'loaves and fishes' picnic which it is envisaged will be held around July 15th all over the country. The idea is to encourage people to share - by all bringing a little there will be enough for all as in the Gospel story. An information pack will be available from May. Secondly, it is hoped there will be a large event next year over the week-end of March 15th & 16th in Manchester. Beginning with a 6th Form Conference on the 14th and then move into the event over the week-end. More details will be made available soon.

There was much discussion after this at the tables with people sharing and reflecting on what they had heard that morning.

A time of questions to Ian and Mark followed.

At the end of it Ian finished with the following story:

Dom Helder Camara was visiting India and one day went to meet **Mother Teresa**. In their conversation she asked him how he coped with people cheering and applauding him as she had found they did whenever she went anywhere. "I hate it", she said, "I am only doing the Lord's will. Helder Camara thought for a moment, smiled and then spoke. "You remember how the people all cheered and clapped Jesus when he entered Jerusalem on a donkey?" he

said. "Well then, just imagine you are the donkey!"

Lunchtime followed, with people invited to spend some time visiting the available agency stalls. Representatives from Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), CAFOD Southwark, CARJ, Christian Ecology Link (CEL), Drop the Debt, Fairtrade, Housing Justice, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Progressio, Pax Christi and Christian Aid had all given up time to be with us for the day and to distribute a range of materials, posters and flyers. JRS also had some handmade crafts for sale which were much appreciated by those who discovered them. People spent the lunch break visiting their stalls and taking advantage of the beautiful (and warm!) weather to wander around the Shrine precincts. Then it was back for the afternoon session, a more interactive one than the morning, with time for discussion and debate.

Back in 1967, said **Christine Allen**, "Pope Paul VI called the Church to have a 'new conscience for our time', that is, to think in a new way about our lives and conscience. What more can I do? Am I prepared to pay a little bit extra for goods so that people can receive a more fair wage? There was to be no room for superiority, his message was emphasising partnership between people and nations. This was incredibly prophetic 40 years ago - and is still so today."

Christine, who became Director of Progressio (formerly CIIR) in 2001, had worked for more than 10 years before this in the areas of housing, poverty and social exclusion. She has always had close contact with justice and peace work, and has visited several countries in Latin America. Her agency, Progressio, is one of the founding members of the *livesimply* network. Who better then, to facilitate the afternoon's session that hoped to look at the practical ways in which we could take the message of Populorum Progressio and *livesimply* and make them part of our changed lifestyle?

Participants each had a leaflet with questions for reflection and sharing around the three aspects of *livesimply* - living simply, living sustainably and living in solidarity. People were invited to spend time in table groups sharing on the extracts, on what

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they had heard during the day, and on how they could make changes in their lives.

Extract 1: "If people are rich and do give help to those who stand in need, they only give to the poor what was already theirs. The earth was made for all, not just for the rich." So wrote St Ambrose." PP#23

Sharing in the large group afterwards, it was clear that people had been reflecting deeply. Here are just some of the comments expressed and shared:

- ⇒ what does 'rich' mean for each of us, possibly something different?
- ⇒ difficult to define riches, but when we are able to make a choice that makes us rich? The poor don't know what is coming next and can't choose.
- ⇒ wealth is having access to credit
- ⇒ time is a great leveller and is the best thing we can give
- ⇒ "the rich give of their interest, the poor give of their capital" E. de la Torre

Living Sustainably

Extract 2: "In God's plan, every single person is called upon to grow. Each life is a vocation. From birth, we carry within ourselves the seeds of personal growth. Each of us can bear the fruit proposed for them. This is progress." PP#15

Reflections:

- ⇒ what kind of world do we want to leave for the future?
- ⇒ e.g. packaging, challenging supermarkets on the amount they waste (but remember we can't recycle all plastics yet, so we need to look at other ways too)
- ⇒ growing/buying locally grown foods, but are we then depriving the Kenyans of a livelihood?
- ⇒ there is a choices issue, the complicity of systems. It is important to THINK about things, to raise these conundrums.
- ⇒ we need to help developing countries develop the infrastructures for cash crops and not for the majority markets
- ⇒ Use your power! Challenge supermarkets etc
- ⇒ important to recognise our relationship with each other, finding space in our hearts, minds,

purses etc.

- ⇒ don't forget those who are living with injustice in our own country

Living in Solidarity

Extract 3: "... aid alone will never be enough, nor will investment or gifts or loans. It is not enough to conquer hunger or put an end to poverty. Our goal must be to build a world - a world developed to the full, so much so, that men and women, no matter what their race or creed, can live a truly human life." PP#45 & 47

- ⇒ we must work together in partnerships, respecting and asking the local people their needs and views
 - ⇒ develop common values, we are all the same if only we listen too each other
 - ⇒ what does it really mean? How do we feel in solidarity with people of a different place & reality? We need to find shared vision and values and we must be prepared to give up things for that
 - ⇒ buying ethically mined gold/silver (Unearth Justice campaign) How can we act in solidarity with the people of Zimbabwe?
 - ⇒ let them know they are not alone, people around the world are thinking/praying/agitating for them, even if we can't change their experiences we can help change their perceptions of themselves.
 - ⇒ *livesimply* is an expression of solidarity
- The day ended with the most difficult question - how can we take back the message of today, and get our parishes/groups involved in the *livesimply* project? What can we say or do to introduce and get others to join in this change of life-style?
- Some table groups already had ideas or actions on which they were working, and they were encouraged to share them with the rest of the participants. Suggestions included:
- * Use the *livesimply* promises (see website) with the Youth Club
 - * Organise a 'loaves & fishes' picnic in the summer
 - * start a local initiative such as visiting Wandsworth prison
 - * Have someone give a talk in the

parish (Mark is willing to visit)

- * Join Christian Ecology Link as a parish, they have lots of ideas for sustainable living
- * take on a parish promise
- * give out some of the literature at Masses, hand out flyers
- * put the leaflet questions on a sheet to give out for parishioners to reflect upon
- * get involved in some of the J & P campaigns i.e. Unearth Justice
- * put 'snippets' from Pop. Progressio in the weekly newsletter (copies were available or contact the office)
- * look out for the new Progressio campaign in the summer (around GM technology)
- * take up the 90% challenge

Responding to people who felt that it was not going to be easy to promote the *livesimply* challenge, Mark said that the *livesimply* pack did have some ideas, including a talk that could be given at Mass which he felt would help - and that he would be happy to help out if people contact him!

There was just time for a round of thanks to all the speakers who had made the day such a rich and fulfilling one, a special thanks to the Friars for making us so welcome, for a quick 'advert' for the next Assembly on **Saturday October 20th** at Amigo Hall and a thanks to all the agencies for coming. Then it was time to finish with the *livesimply* prayer (see below) before Fr Michael wished everyone a safe journey home.

Compassionate and loving God
you created the world for us all to share,
a world of beauty and plenty.
Create in us a desire to live simply,
so that our lives may reflect your generosity.
Creator God, you gave us responsibility for the earth,
a world of riches and delight.
Create in us a desire to live sustainably,
so that those who follow after us may enjoy the fruits of your creation.
God of peace and justice,
you give us the capacity to change,
to bring about a world that mirrors your wisdom.
Create in us a desire to act in solidarity,
so that the pillars of injustice crumble