



Mercy Advocacy

Struggle and Contemplation

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Here is an offering of *three readings* where we can begin with a powerful look at working for justice from different perspectives.

In the first we listen to an Australian nurse living in Ethiopia who is directly in the midst of the pain of the struggle where the oppression of the people is very close. She explains why she is driven to strive for justice.

In the second, at a 1977 Assembly of Sisters of Mercy, Patrick O'Sullivan sj reflects on our own personal world, that of religious life. How do struggle and contemplation belong together?

The third is a worldview from Pope Benedict XVI at the time of the global financial crisis in 2009 - "Caritas in Veritate" (Charity in Truth). He tells us straight why, as Christians, love demands of us this struggle and prayer.



Australian nurse, Valerie Browning (Maalika) lives in one of the harshest places on earth – the desert of northern Ethiopia. She is married to Ismael, a clan leader of the nomadic Afar ethnic group. Together they bring education and life-saving medical aid to the nomads. The Afar are an oppressed group suffering neglect and rejection under the Ethiopian government, especially in times of crisis such as famine. She has risked her life many times for justice.

Now I might as well ruffle a few more feathers and talk about the Church. Christ associated with prostitutes and lepers. He was right in the midst of these people showing them the love of God. So, the Church has got Christ to follow. If the Church doesn't stand for the people who haven't got justice, then what is the Church? If the Church is just running around cooking cakes and eating cucumber sandwiches, then I don't know what it's there for. We can all be nice and smiley and chatty-chat-chat but, at the end of the day, if we are an island surrounded by a sea of poverty and suffering and we shut our eyes, then we should shut the Church.

God made the world without poverty, in balance, so there doesn't have to be poor and rich. There's enough food in the world for everyone, but some people have taken twice what they need.

I was sitting next to an American man at a meeting recently. He remarked that North America was eating 80% of the world's food. "What do you think about that?" he asked.

Well, what can I think about it? I come from Ethiopia. Ethiopia doesn't have a say. It's pathetic my saying anything. It's about time *he said* something, because if he's not 80 per cent of the world's population yet he's eating 80 per cent of the world's food, what are the rest of the people getting. It's just utter greed. And that's what the Church should be fighting against.

A big concern right now is that the region is slipping into famine. The rains, which usually come in June, have not arrived in Afar. Famines here are not like those famines you see on TV. Afar hunger is different from highland hunger. Highland hunger, as I saw in Alamata when I first went to Ethiopia, and again in the 1984 famine, kills en masse. Afar die alone. They don't come to the roadside, or form into camps; they just quietly starve to death in the desert without the world hearing anything about it.

As I write this, I have 52 health workers combating an outbreak of 'acute watery diarrhea' down near the Awash River. We didn't have the money to pay for a treatment campaign, so I held a meeting and asked my colleagues what we could do. I said, "Will we just listen to the reports of the deaths? Is that what we'll do?"

They said, "No, we can't do that, Maalika. You'll have to send some people in.' We pulled out all the budgets, and took a little bit of money from here and a little bit from there. We can't send health workers out on empty stomachs. They have to have food and they have to be paid; they have families and responsibilities like everyone else.

The Afar region is now graded as having the highest level of rural poverty per head of population in Ethiopia. This is not just an economic problem; it's a political problem. The Government doesn't have their interests as a priority. I sometimes can't help thinking that in their eyes, the Afar are expendable, and that's another battle we have to fight. It's a desperate fight, very exhausting and frustrating.

Recently someone asked me why I didn't just let all these problems slide by once in a while. The need for justice is a very big thing for me. It's a bit like if you were living in a tall apartment in Sydney and could see into someone else's kitchen. In that apartment lives an old lady. She's a little bit blind, a little bit slow and not good on her legs. You see that her gas stove is on and the kitchen

curtains have caught alight. What are you going to do? Are you going to pull your blind down and imagine that it never happened? Are you going to yell out the window and say, 'Hey, granny, wake up the kitchen's ablaze', or are you going to help her? You have to make a decision. You can make that decision about something very particular like this old lady, or about something as big as the future of a whole race. If we see, if we know, then we have to do something.

So many Europeans have asked me why I don't burn out. I don't know about this burnout. I think burnout is when you are the one who failed. You've finished, you've failed, you've made a mess. You took all the responsibility on your little shoulders and it didn't work out, so you can't continue. Well, I don't do that. I can be a cog in a wheel but I'm not the whole machine.

There are plenty of other players, and if I go, there'll be plenty coming behind. Nobody's indispensable. Everyone's obsessed with individual achievement in the west. Here, the community is the thing – where are the Afar going? I mean, who gives a damn where I'm going, that's not important. The question is, where is the community going?

The faith background of this woman challenges us. A Christian of Anglican background, married to a Muslim, she is sustained by her Bible when there is often no church. And her favourite prayer is that of St Ignatius of Loyola:

*To give and not count the cost
To fight and not heed the wounds
To toil and not seek rest
To labour and not ask for any reward
Save knowing that I do your will.*



Second reading: Patrick O'Sullivan sj

The way I have understood this topic "Struggle and Contemplation" is in the context of connecting our prayer with the social dimension of the Gospel. So many religious these days are seeing their Mission as the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an integral part.

As far as the social dimension of the Gospel is concerned, I don't think we need any convincing about that, but the particular emphasis I would like to give is to emphasise that redemption, the unfolding of the Kingdom, is essentially a community event.

So wherever individuals or groups of people are called out of fear, oppression, ignorance, to share together a common life through being awakened as persons,

there you have redemption, there you have the spirit of Jesus. It may not be called that, but in reality is what is going on.

So that social dimension of the Gospel is, as we all know, an integral part of the Gospel message. Jesus died an individual, he rose as a community. And so the struggle we are all engaged in is to create that sort of community in which people are welcomed, acknowledged and encouraged to become persons.

Now, ideally, that is what the Church is all about, that is the sort of community the Church is meant to be. The Church is a sign that that sort of community, the Kingdom of Jesus, is both possible and true. And even more emphatically, you might say, religious life is also intended as a sign that the Kingdom is possible and true; that the fullness of life that Jesus promised is a reality.

That reality, I think it is rather obvious, has not yet been achieved. For it to be achieved, at least for it to unfold in some realistic way, I think the only power that can accomplish that is the power of love. (Mercy Assembly 1977)



Third reading: Pope Benedict XVI

1. Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity. Love – *caritas* – is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace.
2. Charity is at the heart of the Church's social doctrine. Every responsibility and every commitment spelt out by that doctrine is derived from charity which, according to the teaching of Jesus, is the synthesis of the entire Law (cf. *Mt 22:36-40*).

It gives real substance to the personal relationship with God and with neighbour; it is the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic, political ones).

For the Church, instructed by the Gospel, charity is everything because as John teaches (cf. *Jn 4:8, 16*) and as I recalled in my first Encyclical Letter, "God is love" (*Deus Caritas Est*): *everything has its origin in God's love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it.*

Love is God's greatest gift to humanity, it is his promise and our hope. (From Introduction pp7-8 *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009)