

Session: Challenging Affluence, Overcoming Poverty

Caesar D'Mello

“Before all else, I would restate my conviction that a world economic system that discards men, women and children because they are no longer considered useful or productive according to criteria drawn from the world of business or other organisations, is unacceptable, because it is inhumane. This lack of concern for persons is a sign of regression and dehumanisation in any political or economic system.”
Pope Francis.

The underlying reality of Affluence is that Poverty is not an accident.

Welcome to the Asia-Pacific region, or, as is now becoming fashionable, the Indo-Pacific region. This is a massive region which includes several of the major world economies, and carries more than 60% of the world's population of 7+ billion. A defining feature of our societies is they are marked by striking disparities in the distribution of income, resources and opportunities. The eyesore of the extreme wealth of a few, and the many near and below the poverty line continues to be with us despite the much ballyhooed UN Decades of Development. In the '60s, Swedish economists Gunnar and Alva Myrdal highlighted such a state of affairs in their classic, *The Asian Drama*. In 1975, a Canadian theologian, Ralph Dickenson, wrote a landmark analysis, *Many Poor Making Few Rich*, for the World Council of Churches Assembly in Nairobi that gave a profound insight into the phenomenon of the affluence of a few.

Fast forward to today, and the *Panama Papers* and *Paradise Papers* expose how the very well-to-do are able to arrange their financial affairs with the assistance of tax havens to minimise, if not eliminate, their payment of tax in their countries of domicile. When the World Economic Forum met in Davos earlier this year, Oxfam presented research which showed that, globally, the wealth of some 60 or so individuals is equivalent to that of half the entire world's population! Some such individuals live in Asia Pacific.

There are many ways to amassing disproportionate levels of wealth, mostly aided by ineffective legal systems, close relationships between the privileged and the political and economic leaderships, weak governments, corrupt and/or powerless bureaucracies, and, sadly, a feeling of hopelessness of large segments of the population. The French economist, Thomas Piketty, in his massive work *Capital in the Twenty First Century*, has shown that the powerful and the well-connected benefit from the strategic exploitation of a taxation system that structurally favours their interests, enabling them to avoid their fair share of taxes, and, even any tax. In a whole variety of business and economic sectors ranging from agriculture to tourism the decision-making advantage the privileged with an open door access to the opportunities available that may not be enjoyed by the common people. When the lion's share of income, resources, and other forms of power is enjoyed by a minority, many are left to share what remains. Poverty is no accident – it is the result of the many deliberate and public choices made in society. Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize winning economist, describing such a situation in America says it is *'government of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%'*! Inequality is rife in our region. Even the World Bank has come around to the view that inequality reduces growth and productivity in society. This is obvious even from a superficial observation.

In Australia, as far back as 1992, after extensive research the Australian Catholic Bishops issued a major statement, *'Common Wealth for the Common Good'*. It stressed the fundamental Christian value of

inclusiveness, with the economy serving all members of society, not just the elites. Since then, Australia has enjoyed uninterrupted growth, just having overtaken Netherlands as the country with the longest recession-free period: 25 years! Nevertheless, over the same period, the richest 20% have increased their wealth by 28 % as opposed to just 3% by those at the bottom. In Australia the ever unquenchable thirst for more and more wealth, the unstoppable acquisitiveness, and the accompanying spike in ostentatious consumption are facetiously grouped under the phenomenon of *Affluenza!*

The impact of Affluence does not end just at the economic border. Those who exercise it can and do shape society. We expect all citizens to have an equal influence and say in government policies and decisions. This would provide the grounds for an ideal economy. However, research has shown – as in the United States – that policymakers are influenced greatly by the expressed or intuited preferences of the economically advantaged. There is often a correlation between the preferences of the elites and policy outcomes supposedly arrived at by a democratic process (in democratic countries) or through autocratic say-so's. In other words, affluence often goes hand in hand within a dispensation coloured by economic and political assumptions, calculations and structures that reflect and benefit the interests and agendas of the powerful as opposed to the excluded. As we increasingly appreciate and adopt the values of sustainability, such affluence is unsustainable as, within the operation of a neo-liberal system, it is based on the exclusion of many. In the interests of ensuring the steady flow of benefits emerging from the prevailing dispensation, beneficiaries of such affluence could either be supportive of or disinterested in or indifferent to policies arising in that very dispensation that negatively impact on others in the community. The desire for an exploding personal or corporate bank surplus is a powerful motive to let sleeping dogs lie.

Pax Christi Australia

Pax Christi Australia is deeply conscious that Australia is part of a rapidly changing world: globalising yet tribalising, increasingly vulnerable, struggling with growing inequalities of power and wealth as a global power shift is occurring. It is a challenging world wherein, especially in the First World, political and public life is less attuned to ethical discourse. Recently I came across the title of an international Church/ecumenical consultation that best encapsulates our call: *'An Unchanging Mission in an Ever Changing Generation'*.

As we look to the times ahead, we take encouragement from and will build on the charisms Pax Christi has brought to its work for peace over more than forty years. Worth noting, as Dr Joe Camilleri, one of the founding visionaries, has identified, are

- 1) In a spirit of inclusiveness pursuing our peacemaking vision *ecumenically*, and through deepening our *interfaith* connections. A further evolution into *inter-belief dialogue* (with people of goodwill who have a deep commitment to justice and peace but no religious affiliation) may now be an appropriate next step to complement but not replace the ecumenical and interfaith aspect of our work. We have to ask whether unfettered affluence is an obstacle to peace and justice.
- 2) Striving to *speak truth to power* respectfully, clearly and faithfully. We have been willing to say the uncomfortable things whether it be in the church or secular arena.
- 3) Regarded *respectful dialogue* as the key to peacemaking.

4) ***Coalition building***: developing insights and experience along the way on how to build and maintain coalitions and keeping them on track.

Underpinning the above four charisms is the Pax Christi International approach of ***study, prayer and action*** which has been adopted by Pax Christi Australia, and provides a basis for on-going innovation. As multicultural Australia continually keeps evolving, and the community is faced with an assortment of challenges, deemed unimportant or ignored within an economic template that grants little priority to the lives of those impacted by the decisions and predilections of those in power who are *delivering on good economics*, the Pax Christi playbook looks varied indeed.

Pax Christi maintains its focus on peace through educational and other activities by drawing attention to the destructiveness of war as opposed to peaceful methods of conflict resolution. It was gratifying to learn a few weeks ago that ICAN – the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, now a network of 130+ NGOs worldwide – was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 2017. ICAN was pioneered in Melbourne, and Pax Christi Australia has been its constant supporter from the very beginning. It is a matter of regret that, while our Australian government is lock step with the US government and many of their positions as a way *to achieve a stable and prosperous world*, it has not acknowledged the achievement of ICAN, committed as it was to not supporting the 100+ countries at the UN who agreed to ban nuclear weapons. We wish to support ICAN and others in pressuring the Australian government to sign the treaty banning nuclear weapons. Despite the present dangerous international situation, there seems to be little urgency or awareness about this in the community or in the church. It may be our task to raise awareness at least within the faith community.

The ANZAC Centenary commemorating the landing of Australian and New Zealand forces in Gallipoli, Turkey in 1915 has provided us with points of , in collaboration with other peace networks and likeminded groups, to reflect with the community along the lines of *Whither Australia?*, *Who are we?*, *Who might we become?*, *Can we change directions?* For instance, much effort was invested in a Pax Christi National Conference on *A World Without Weapons. A Vision and a Challenge*. Every ANZAC Day since 2015 we have conducted ANZAC Day Services of Lament, Repentance, and New Hope at St. Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne. We will have another one in 2018. We often collaborate with the well regarded Medical Association for the Prevention of War (MAPW), as for instance, in Hiroshima Day Vigils.

For some time now, we have been paying particular attention to supporting Muslim communities. We are concerned that Australian Islamic Communities continue to be under increasing pressure from right wing politicians and their followers. Some of you might be aware of the negative influence exercised by Pauline Hanson who inspires a slice of the community in the mould of a Marine le Pen et al. There is a widespread anxiety and hostility towards Muslims in the Australian Community, including within our churches. We are using our opportunities to help and encourage Muslims to promote a positive image, to build positive relationships and to combat the rising tensions. Some good outcomes and relationships have emerged and there is potential to develop the contacts we have made and to do more. The Open Mosque Day offers great potential, including through engaging some Christian congregations via an Open Church Day. The forum on Muslim Women was an outstanding event. It is also clear that that we are in for the long haul. While we can develop friendly relations with other faith communities, we are a long way from developing real understanding between faiths and comprehending where we are each coming from.

The horror of refugee asylum seeker detention does not go away. As the Australian government continues to be wedded to the principle of 'we will determine who comes to our shores and the circumstances of their coming', refugees are treated abominably despite the conventions and protections provided by the UN and international law. Manus and Nauru are monuments to such attitudes. Our attempts to support Dr Fiona Hill's efforts to bring a Syrian family to Australia were unsuccessful, despite a well structured support system in her community in South Gippsland. An exciting new initiative was taken to bring Pax Christi into the Western suburbs of Melbourne. An excellent forum was organised to look at issues faced by the South Sudanese community. South Sudanese leaders took part and we had a good gathering which included local clergy, teachers and community workers. We have participated with Muslims for Progressive Values in Palm Sunday Refugee Marches.

We collaborate with Theresa Joseph from India in her work – including through Women's Courts - among women and girls, many of whom are escaping forced marriages. We are painfully aware of some of the personal pressures she is under and we have been able to organise some support for her. Attempts were made to contact church, NGO and legal individuals and groups to seek help in resolving the situation she and her loyal supporters face. It is instructive that once details were shared, no one wished to take the matter further. We believe that this may be because of the prevailing climate in the country. Valentina and Tom's initiative in visiting Theresa during their trip to India, bringing back a deeper understanding of what she is doing and what she is up against, was very much a worthwhile one, giving us a focus for an Agape on *'Has India Lost it's Soul?'*

A few months ago, Pax Christi in Victoria conducted a retreat on the Spirituality of Peace. Also, the bi-annual Pax Christi National Meeting took place in Sydney. Getting together with Pax Christi in Sydney and Brisbane is always rewarding as it helps towards building a sense of a national movement in a country that is famously known as suffering from *the tyranny of distance*. The outcome of the Asia Pacific Consultation will assist us in this regard.

'Disarming Times', the Pax Christi Australia journal, that attempts to throw light on the varied ways in which the powers and arrangements that govern affluence and poverty impact on the vulnerable in our midst, is now heading for its 43rd year.

Caesar D'Mello is a consultant on Third World 'development' and equity concerns, including climate change and tourism. He organised and co-edited 'Deconstructing Tourism: Who Benefits? A Theological Reading from the Global South'. He relates with numerous ecumenical, interfaith, and peace and justice advocacy groups. He is Consultant to the Asia Pacific Assembly of the YMCA's' Global Alternative Tourism Network (GATN). He was formerly national director of Christian World Service (CWS) Australia, the aid and development agency of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), and of the Ecumenical Coalition On Tourism (ECOT) when it was based in Thailand. He is contactable at caesarmdm@gmail.com