

# On the SOCIAL APOSTOLATE\*

Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.

Dear Fathers and Brothers, the peace of Christ!

1. A few weeks after the opening of the Holy Door, I would like to recall that the Great Jubilee of 2000, like every jubilee, is a summons on the part of our Creator and Saviour to re-establish lost harmony and to advance in **social justice**. The loud trumpet – the *yôbel* – which sounded to open the holy year,<sup>1</sup> called every injustice into question and gave hope to the poor! When Jesus begins to preach the good news, his anointing and mission are “to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”<sup>2</sup> Now Pope John Paul II has reactivated the age-old purpose of the jubilee to restore this social justice. “The social doctrine of the Church, which has always been a part of Church teaching and which has developed greatly in the last century, particularly after the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, is rooted in the tradition of the jubilee year.”<sup>3</sup>

2. To be converted to this **social dimension** of faith, which pervades the biblical tradition and the Gospels, God our Father also calls the Society of Jesus anew. From its very earliest origins, the preferential option for the poor, assuming various forms according to times and places, has marked the whole history of the Society. With his powerful *Instruction* of fifty years ago, Father Jean-Baptiste Janssens oriented the Jesuit social apostolate “to procure for as many men as possible, or rather, in so far as conditions permit for all men, an abundance of both temporal and spiritual goods even in the natural order, or at least that sufficiency which man of his very nature needs that he may not feel depressed or looked down upon.”<sup>4</sup>

Father Pedro Arrupe took up this apostolic orientation passionately and based it solidly upon the thoroughly evangelical relationship between social justice, as well defined by his predecessor, and the new commandment of love – so new as to need a new word, namely, *agape*. A social justice integrated with the great commandment of love is always intended by the General Congregations. “The social justice we are called to is part of that **justice of the Gospel** which is the embodiment of God’s love and saving mercy.”<sup>5</sup>

Pope John Paul II, also asking if justice sufficed by itself, gave this response: “The experience of the past and of our own time demonstrates that **justice alone** is not enough, that it can even lead to the negation and destruction of itself, if that deeper

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\* Available from the Social Justice Secretariat in English, Chinese, Czech, French, Indonesian, Italian, Polish, Slovak, Slovenian and Spanish.

<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 25:9.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:16ff.

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994), n.13.

<sup>4</sup> "Instruction on the Social Apostolate" of 10.10.1949, AR XI, 714; *Promotio Iustitiae* 66 (1997), n.7.

<sup>5</sup> GC33, D.1, n.32; cf. GC32, D.4, nn.28,31.

power, which is love, is not allowed to shape human life in its various dimensions.”<sup>6</sup> Father Arrupe and the recent General Congregations, echoing the Holy Father’s concern, acknowledge, on the one hand, how charity can be abused when it is a mere cloak or subterfuge for injustice but that, on the other hand, “one cannot act justly without love. Even when we resist injustice we cannot prescind from love, since the universality of love is, by the express desire of Christ, a commandment that admits of no exceptions.”<sup>7</sup>

3. Authoritatively synthesising the progress of the four General Congregations after Vatican II, the Complementary Norms affirm: “**the contemporary Jesuit mission** is the service of faith and the promotion in society of that justice of the Gospel which is the embodiment of God’s love and saving mercy ... This mission is ‘a single but complex reality, which develops in a variety of ways’”<sup>8</sup> in the very varied fields and works and activities in which Jesuits are engaged throughout the world. Despite the considerable difficulties and our many failures, we look back with gratitude to the Lord for the gifts received on this “journey of faith as we committed ourselves to the promotion of justice as an integral part of our mission.”<sup>9</sup> The Society has evolved to the point where GC 34 voted unanimously in favour of the decree *Our Mission and Justice*, and the vast majority of Jesuits have integrated the social dimension into our Jesuit **identity** and into the **awareness** of our mission in education, formation and social communications, in pastoral and retreat work. In many places the concern for justice is an essential part of our public **image** in both Church and society, thanks to those ministries of ours which are characterised by love for the poor and the marginalised, defending human rights and ecology, and promoting non-violence and reconciliation.

4. Directly out of this contemporary mission with its integrating principle of faith and justice comes the social apostolate and its specific focus, as the Complementary Norms explain. “The social apostolate, like every form of our apostolate, flows from the mission; in the planning of our apostolic activities, in fulfilling today’s mission of the Society in the service of faith, it should take its place among those having priority. Its goal is to build a fuller expression of justice and charity into the structures of human life in common.”<sup>10</sup> In each Province and Assistancy, this **social apostolate** incarnates the social dimension of our mission, concretely embodies it in real commitments and renders it visible. In different places and in varying circumstances, the social apostolate takes multiple forms: social research and publications, advocacy and human development, and direct social action with and for the poor.<sup>11</sup>

The Jesuit social apostolate today exhibits some noteworthy **positive elements**. Above all, it faces very different challenges in all corners of the world with dedication, energy and creativity. There are countless examples of Jesuits involved, collaborating with others, in projects and movements to bring greater justice and charity to society. Moreover, the social apostolate keeps showing the capacity to attract gifted and

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<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Dives in misericordia* (1980), n.12.

<sup>7</sup> Pedro Arrupe, S.J., *Rooted and grounded in love* (1981), n.56.

<sup>8</sup> GC34, D.2, n.3 (quoting GC33, D.1, n.32) and NC 245 § 2; *loc.cit.* (quoting *Redemptoris Missio*, n.41) and NC 245 § 1.

<sup>9</sup> GC34, D.3, n.1.

<sup>10</sup> NC 299 § 1; NC 298.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. NC 300, § 2.

generous co-workers, as well as candidates to the Society. As if to confirm the mission of faith and justice, God has providentially granted the Society the mysterious gift of martyrdom in recent years.

5. At the same time and paradoxically, this awareness of the social dimension of our mission does not always find concrete expression in a vital social apostolate. On the contrary, the latter manifests some **troubling weaknesses**: There seem to be ever fewer Jesuits available and less prepared for the social apostolate, while those already in the field are sometimes discouraged and scattered, somehow lacking in collaboration and organisation. Factors external to the Society are also weakening the social apostolate: The times are marked by unforeseeable and very rapid socio-cultural changes, not easy to read and even harder to respond to effectively (e.g., globalisation, the excesses of the market economy, drug traffic and corruption, mass migration, ecological degradation, outbreaks of brutal violence). Formerly-inspiring visions of society and broad strategies for structural change have ceded to scepticism or a preference, at best, for more modest projects and restricted approaches.

Thus the social apostolate risks losing its vigour and momentum, its orientation and impact. Were this to happen in a given Province or Assistancy, then for lack of a vital and well-organised social apostolate, the essential social dimension would also probably fade away bit by bit. Such a process of **erosion** would inevitably reduce *Our mission today* (GC 32) and *Our mission and justice* (GC 34) to a few obligatory but rhetorical phrases in the discourse of the Society, leaving our option for the poor and our promotion of justice hollowed out.

May we not find ourselves ever less capable of being present – or even of hearing the call to go – “wherever in the Church, even in the most difficult and extreme fields, in the crossroads of ideologies, in the front line of social conflict, there has been and there is confrontation between the deepest desires of man and the perennial message of the Gospel,” in the ringing words of Pope Paul VI addressing the delegates of GC 32 and of Pope John Paul II addressing those of GC 34.<sup>12</sup>

6. So it seems of vital importance to keep striving to translate our social awareness, identity and image into effective, evangelically meaningful service to the poorest and most suffering of God’s people. It is a matter of continually **re-discovering** and **re-discerning** – *in situ* – the demands and challenges which the recent General Congregations pose to our social action in today’s societies, cultures and religions. In “the dialogue of action,” for example, we are to collaborate with others, rooted in their own religious traditions, for the integral development and liberation of people.<sup>13</sup>

For, as we are increasingly aware, the **structures** of human life in common are of different kinds, not only economic and political, but also cultural and religious; all of them condition human life, all of them can weaken or destroy it, and all of them are capable of being impregnated by the Gospel and of embodying a greater justice and charity. So it is worth paying unflinching attention to the different aspects of the

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<sup>12</sup> Allocutions of 3 December 1974 and of 5 January 1995.

<sup>13</sup> GC34, D.5, n.4b.

**contexts** in which we find ourselves, lest we end up oblivious of the changes developing or out of touch with them.

7. These are some reasons why, after GC 34, the social apostolate began a world-wide **examen**. It was deemed necessary to organise the 1997 Naples Congress in an effort to give new impetus within the Society to the social apostolate as a sign of our full commitment to the social dimension of our mission. Among some promising results of the process, programmed for 1995-2005, the following seem especially significant.

One is the importance of elaborating the **characteristics** of the social apostolate at the level of the universal Society and of adapting them at the local level. Such characteristics provide the framework for continually discerning, in creative fidelity to the social dimension of our charism, what the Spirit calls us to in the ever different poverties and injustices of the world. Some of the many insights and questions needed in this sense find expression in the working draft *Characteristics of the Social Apostolate*. Since the current draft is taking much longer to revise than foreseen, everyone is encouraged to send in comments and suggestions towards a definitive edition of these *Characteristics*, after study and discussion in communities and groups.

While each commitment can and must be very specific, we need to keep in mind the various levels of action and reflection which are involved, as the well-known expression “**local/global**” suggests. These levels go from the apparently simplest contact with and service to the poor at the grass-roots, through every sort of human development and promotion, to working for far-reaching change in structures nationally and internationally.

As we keep working at different levels, we also want to become aware of and remain up-to-date on how complex and changing are the injustices and the socio-cultural structures in today’s world. This requires bringing a **plurality** of viewpoints to bear on problems and employing multiple ways of reading society and doing things there.

Finally, experience has taught us to ground our social commitment squarely upon the foundation of our Ignatian **spirituality** and our Jesuit **tradition**, both of which “place us joyfully with the Son and with those among whom the Son wants to be, the poor and neglected of the earth.”<sup>14</sup> We recognise that it is not possible to call oneself a companion of Jesus if one does not share His love for those who suffer.

8. These same elements suggest the direction in which to continue going and indicate some concrete measures to support the process currently underway.

An endless pluralism of approaches and variety of methods and organisational models constitute, without a doubt, an enormous richness of the social apostolate; but, in order to fulfil this potential and grow as an apostolic body, it very much needs adequate **co-ordination**. Accordingly, we need to make good use of the forms and structures of co-ordination already available and indeed strengthen them. I would like every Province, Region and inter-provincial body like Conferences of Major Superiors to have a co-

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<sup>14</sup> GC34, D.9, n.18.

ordinator of the social apostolate, supported by an appropriate commission, and with sufficient capacity, resources and time to play their role.

At the same time, a greater flow of useful and up-to-date **information** is needed in the social apostolate within Provinces and beyond them. Such exchange of information should encourage those involved, propose questions or instruments of reflection, and help networks to grow and function effectively. Much greater benefit can be drawn from the Church's social teaching and the social apostolate's experience accumulated since the *Instruction* of Father Janssens. I count on the Social Justice Secretariat at the Curia to continue its work of co-ordination and to strengthen communications throughout the social apostolate.

Compared with the work of other groups and organisations active in the social field, the social apostolate of the Society is notable for its presence at all the various **levels** from the grassroots to international bodies, and in all the various **approaches** from the direct forms of service, through working with groups and movements, to research, reflection and publication. In this typically multiple presence, a great but little-realised potential of the universal Society lies hidden, which we owe it to the poor and to the Church to make better use of. Let us actively look for ways of combining competencies in social analysis and theological reflection, with experience of closeness to the poor and work with those who suffer injustices of every sort, and of better exploiting all the possibilities that are given us as a universal and international apostolic body.

Finally, the perseverance and the development of the social apostolate cannot take place without the availability of qualified Jesuits and co-workers. Therefore, I encourage Jesuits involved in the social apostolate and those responsible for **formation** to co-operate in setting up well-designed programmes, within a Province or inter-Provincially, such as GC 34 asks: "Young Jesuits should be in contact with the poor, not just occasionally, but in a more sustained manner. These experiences must be accompanied by careful reflection as part of the academic and spiritual formation and should be integrated into training in socio-cultural analysis."<sup>15</sup> The normal formation should provide scholastics and brothers with the social studies and apostolic experiences that will help all to grow in social-mindedness, allowing some to encounter in the social apostolate the sector in which they can fulfil their own personal and priestly vocation to the Society.

Our non-Jesuit **co-workers**, too, should be assured really good access to the Society's spiritual heritage and apostolic experience, wherefrom they can draw as they integrate their personal background and gifts. Opportunities for learning, reflection, prayer and on-going formation need to be offered our co-workers with, always, the greatest respect for their religious convictions. Some experiences already show the Characteristics to be a useful resource for these purposes.

9. "Christ came to unite what was divided, to destroy sin and hatred, and to reawaken in humanity the vocation to unity and brotherhood."<sup>16</sup> The crying needs of the poor, the

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<sup>15</sup> GC34, D.3, n.18.

<sup>16</sup> John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2000*, n.19.

radical demands of the Gospel, the insistent teaching of the Church, and the prophetic calls of our General Congregations, leave us far from complacent with our response. “The commitment of the Society to a radical life of faith that finds expression in the promotion of justice”<sup>17</sup> has been, is and will be **a great grace** for us all. Much fine work is already being done and much renewal is already underway. With profound gratitude we appreciate the work done in the name of the whole Society by social works great and small, by the Jesuit Refugee Service and many Jesuit Volunteers.

These few pages suggest why and how to strengthen the social apostolate, locally and beyond, so that the social dimension of the Society’s universal mission may find ever more concrete and effective expression in who we are, what we do, how we live. “How much the Society will accomplish” – declared Father Janssens at the end of his *Instruction* – “if only we unite our forces and, in a spirit of oneness, gird ourselves humbly and resolutely for the work before us!” May the Lord Jesus, with the intercession of Mary our Mother of the Magnificat, enlist us ever more fully and radically as servants of His mission.

Fraternally yours in Christ,

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<sup>17</sup> GC34, D.2, n.8.