

XII. General Chapter SVD (1982)

**The Promotion of justice and Peace  
in Solidarity with the Poor  
in the Light of the Constitution 112**

January 1983

## **The promotion of justice and peace in solidarity with the poor in the light of constitution 112**

"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel." Thus the Synod of Bishops in 1971 concluded its opening statement in the document *Justice in the world*. Since then many other documents of the church have increasingly clarified the profound links between the gospel requirements of the church's mission and the widespread commitment to the advancement of peoples and the creation of a worthy society (see "Religious and Human Promotion" Vatican City, 1980 p 7).

In the light of these statements the Twelfth General Chapter affirms that our own participation in the mission of the church as a religious missionary society also involves "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world". Therefore the chapter by way of c 112 calls on all members of the Society to show a more determined commitment to the promotion of justice and peace in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. It makes this appeal after a serious reflection on the challenge of the situation of the world today in the light of sacred scripture and of our religious-missionary calling.

### **I. The Challenge That Faces Us Today**

#### ***1. The World Today***

1.1 The world today is plagued with massive poverty, social inequality, economic exploitation and political oppression. Traditional cultural structures that continue to foster racial, sex and class discrimination are being increasingly complicated by more modern economic and political structures that bring about exploitation and oppression. International corporations take advantage of and exploit natural resources and cheap labor: of less developed countries all over the world. Repressive military regimes supported by vested interests of developed nations often use force to further such exploitative ventures. Consequently in the name of national security, workers' rights are repressed, justified dissent is suppressed and human rights are violated. The enormous build-up of conventional and nuclear arms divides humanity further and threatens the world with war that can lead to the extinction of the human race. This senseless arms race drains resources urgently needed by all nations to overcome poverty, starvation and suffering.

1.2 This is the situation of the world today, reflected in faces of millions who are poor, exploited and oppressed in countries where we work: undernourished and starving children, peasants in favelas, slum dwellers in cities, refugees and minorities, the unemployed and underpaid, political prisoners and "desaparecidos". Social analysis shows that the root cause of this worldwide misery is a socio-political world order, in which decisions affecting millions of lives and many nations are made by a few largely on the basis of profit and power, a world order where the rich get richer at the expense of the poor who get even poorer (see John Paul II: Opening Address Puebla, 1979, III, 3).

1.3 The message of God's kingdom of justice and peace unmask this situation as sinful and unjust. Therefore ignorance of the gospel allows many grave injustices to prevail in the world. Conversely their prevalence is one of the principal obstacles to

the acceptance of the gospel. Today more than ever the gospel message needs to be preached, a message which when read and interpreted in the light of the present situation, must be prophetic and liberating.

## ***2. Sacred Scripture***

2.1 The Old Testament stresses that the most disastrous consequence of sin is the destruction of a world that God had created good and just. God first revealed himself to his chosen people as the God who hears the cry of the oppressed and has decided to come and set them free from their oppressions (see Ex 3:7-12). Exploitation, oppression and class distinction in the time of the prophets showed how deeply sin had permeated the social, political and economic relationships among people. The prophets, often seething with anger, unmasked the social and political. Structures of Israel as abominable and sinful in the eyes of Yahweh (see Is 1:11-17; Jr 22:13-17; Am 5:10-14; Mi 3:9-12). They stood openly on the side of the oppressed and exploited and proclaimed that Yahweh himself takes the side of the poor. Their proclamation contained the promise that he would restore the world to justice and peace through his Spirit-filled Messiah, the "Prince of Peace" (see Is 2 and 11).

2.2 Jesus himself in line with the traditions of the prophets was convinced that God hears the cry of the poor. Through his criticism of the rich he fought for the restoration of the rights of the oppressed. He therefore addressed the proclamation of the good news particularly to the poor and underprivileged (see Lk 4:18). Although he did not propose concrete programs of social reform in this time, he nevertheless criticized religious practices and social relationships which enslaved the human person and identified himself with the marginalized to offer them God's preferential love.

2.3 The early church interpreted Jesus correctly when it, identified him with the least of the brethren (see Mb 25:31-46). His kingdom message, which means that God turns with unconditional love to all and with preferential love to the poor, became the moving force that likewise enabled his disciples to turn unconditionally to their neighbors (see Lk 6:36) and give their lives for their brothers and sisters (see 1 In 3:16). The community of disciples that emerged after Easter was deeply concerned with the poor in their midst (see Ac 4:32), a community in which all class distinctions had disappeared on the basis of their new unity in Christ (see Ga 3:28).

## ***3. The Mission of the Church and Our Religious-missionary Calling***

3.1 The church on various occasions and at all levels has seriously reflected on the situation of the world today in the light of sacred scripture. More and more the church has come to realize that faithfulness to Jesus' kingdom message and his preferential love for the poor entails an active involvement in transforming unjust structures and promoting justice and peace. Consequently the church's mission of proclaiming the gospel today implies participation in creating a new world order that better reflects the kingdom of God already present in the world (see Evangelii Nuntiandi 8 and 30).

3.2 As an international religious-missionary Society, our participation in the mission of the church today necessarily implies a commitment to promote justice and peace

in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. In fact our special charism as missionaries demands that we proclaim the gospel especially at the frontiers of human society, where the struggle for justice and peace is most acutely felt. Likewise our specific vocation as religious calls us to exercise prophetic ministry in the church by being particularly sensitive to the signs of the time expressed in the people's aspirations for justice and equality. In a situation where the will to dominate, disordered sexuality and the desire to possess are often the roots of injustice and oppression, our vowed life is a privileged means of effective evangelization and a true witness to justice (see *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 69).

3.3 In one form or another concern for the poor and the underprivileged has always been at the center of the efforts of SVD missionaries. But it gains new meaning and urgency in the light of the present world situation. Today it calls for an active participation in efforts not only to care for the victims of poverty but more specifically to eradicate its causes by transforming unjust structures and promoting justice and peace. Our religious-missionary calling therefore challenges us today to move out of entrenched positions in the church into new socio-political situations. In this way we may offer the believing community as a whole new models of what it means to be church in these changed situations (see "The SVD in Mission Today", Rome 1981, 5.2).

## **II. Our Response to the Challenge**

### ***1. Prerequisites for Our Response***

our response to the challenge to promote justice and peace in solidarity with the poor requires us first of all to examine our lifestyle and traditional apostolic commitments.

#### **1.1 Conscientization and Insertion into the Life of the Poor**

The personal background of some of us and the education we have acquired very often insulate us from the poor. Our commitment to promote justice and peace will never be real if we continue to live in a world where we feel secure and comfortable. Only a constant process of conscientization and a critical analysis of the sociopolitical situation in which we live and work can open our eyes to the plight of the poor and oppressed. Therefore we should make use of every opportunity to share more closely, at least for a time, the misery, insecurity and frustration that is the lot of so many today (Cf. *Witnessing to the Word* 7, 1981, III A + Q c 209. 1).

#### **1.2 Our Personal and Communal Lifestyle**

The demands of our apostolate are sometimes used to justify our personal and communal lifestyle, which often does not reflect the poverty we have vowed. We can give witness to our preferential option for the poor only if our personal and communal lifestyle is marked by simplicity, generosity, hospitality, genuine concern for the poor in our surroundings and justice to our employees.

#### **1.3 Our Relationship with One Another**

Despite the internationality and clerical-lay character of our Society we do not always overcome discrimination in our communities. Our commitment to the promotion of justice will be meaningful only if the barriers of race, culture and status

among us are transcended by the spirit of love and respect for one another (see Ga 3:28).

#### **1.4 Our Complicity in the Structures of Injustice and Exploitation**

As a large-scale institution that has to provide necessary means for its apostolate, we set up support enterprises that are often caught up in structures which cause much injustice and exploitation. Nevertheless our commitment to promote justice demands that we critically and honestly examine our complicity in these structures and whenever possible dissociate ourselves from them. We should also seriously try to find other ways of securing means to support our apostolate (see "The SVD in Mission Today" 4.2 c + d).

#### **1.5 Our Institutions of Learning**

Although most of our educational institutions began as mission schools for the poor, some of them in the course of the years have developed into schools that cater to the rich or the middle class. Our commitment to the promotion of justice should become visible in these institutions by making them places where people are educated in the gospel values of justice and charity and awakened to their Christian responsibility towards the poor and oppressed in society- This holds true for all our institutions irrespective of whether they are in the first or third world (see "The SVD in Mission Today" 4.4.b). Likewise our preferential option for the poor demands that our schools be open as far as possible to those who have no access to other institutions of learning. We should seriously consider closing down those which do not achieve these goals (see "The Pastoral and Missionary Slant of Our Schools", Rome 1981, II. 6; c 109.3).

#### **1.6 Our Publications and Communications Apostolate**

Publications and the mass media have always played an important role in our task of proclaiming the gospel as a missionary society. Our involvement in the mass communications apostolate should complement our preferential option for the poor by focusing on justice and peace issues. In this way we set ourselves up as the voice of the voiceless (see *Witnessing to the Word* 4, 1979, I - H; "The SVD in Mission Today" 4.4a).

### ***2. Direct Apostolic Options***

Our response to the challenge of promoting justice and peace in solidarity with the poor calls us to engage more directly in apostolates for and with the poor. However, since problems of injustice and oppression take on various forms in different parts of the world, our response may have to vary from one province to another. Nevertheless we can delineate the following as the main types of activity our commitment may take:

2.1 relief services directed towards immediately ameliorating abject conditions of poverty brought about by natural calamities or social upheavals;

2.2 social projects aimed at helping the poor, who nevertheless remain for the most part simply passive recipients of aid (e.g. dispensaries, orphanages, etc.);

2.3 development programs directed towards organizing the poor into self-reliant communities where they become the principal agents of their own liberation and development;

2.4 conscientization or the process of awakening the poor to their own needs and potentialities, accompanying them in their struggle for equality and participation in the decision making processes that affect their lives and awakening the rich to realize that structures which protect their interests are very often the cause of misery for the poor;

2.5 speaking out publicly against actual cases of human rights violations and abuse of power or in favor of specific measures that promote justice and defend human rights;

2.6 participation in and support of peace movements that protest against the misuse of national and international resources for building up conventional or nuclear armaments, or that work for disarmament and the promotion of peace;

2.7 a more radical presence among the poor by adopting their lifestyle as fully and completely as possible in a more or less permanent way (see *Witnessing to the Word 7, III – A + C; c 209.1*).

### **III. General Principles**

#### ***1. Practical Guidelines***

Whatever form it may take, our response to the challenge of promoting justice and peace in solidarity with the poor should be directed towards their true welfare and separated from proselytizing. The primary purpose of all our efforts should therefore be to foster self-reliance. This idea should be constantly present in all our decisions even when it cannot be realized immediately (*Witnessing to the Word 7, III - C*). To achieve this goal the following can serve as practical guidelines.

1.1 Projects should be designed to meet the real needs of the poor as felt by them rather than as perceived by us. Moreover we should always respect their human dignity and never exploit their misery and suffering in our efforts to secure means to help them.

1.2 Projects will meet the real needs of the poor only if they are preceded by a careful social analysis of their situation, and if they themselves participate in the planning and implementation of these projects. Any form of paternalism will only keep them imprisoned further in dependency.

1.3 Projects should take into account and develop available local resources in such a way that their continuance can be guaranteed even without outside assistance. Projects should also take cognizance of existing and potential problems of the physical environment (*Witnessing to the Word 7, IV - A*).

1.4 Our own involvement in these projects should be such that local leaders can emerge and be trained to eventually take over the responsibility of these projects. This will demand patience and adaptation to the rhythm of the people. Nevertheless the training of local leaders should be one of our main concerns.

1.5 All our efforts should be accompanied by the process of conscientization, by which the poor and oppressed are awakened to their own possibilities of directing their lives and shaping their future.

1.6 Since we are not the only ones committed to promoting justice and peace, we should be prepared for critical collaboration and dialog with existing organizations that work for justice and peace (see "The SVD in Mission Today" 4.3).

1.7 In our dealings with civil authorities, our attitude should always be in accordance with the spirit of the gospel and our prophetic charism (c 314). However taking into consideration the concrete circumstances of the country, we should also make them understand through personal dialog and honest discussion that the gospel we proclaim demands respect for human rights and promotion of justice. This way we show due respect to the office entrusted to them.

## ***2. Theological Principles***

Our involvement in promoting justice and peace in solidarity with the poor should constantly be based on the conviction that the kingdom of God is a call to transform the structures of this world in order to keep alive the hope for a "new heaven and a new earth", where justice and peace will ultimately and definitively triumph (see Rv 21:1). Our preferential option for the poor should therefore be thoroughly animated by the spirit of the gospel.

2.1 Our commitment to the promotion of justice and peace should never be a function of any ideology but flow from Jesus' own predilection for the poor and marginalized

2.2 Even if our involvement may require a choice of a concrete socio-economic program of reform, our support of and collaboration with such a program should always be critical insofar as no historical socio-economic system can ever be identified with the fullness of the kingdom.

2.3 In the face of the destructive violence of oppressive and unjust structures, our involvement in promoting justice can easily tempt us to overcome violence with violence. Although a few extreme situations may justify its use (Populorum Progressio 31), we should however always choose the gospel principle of overcoming evil with good (c 112.3).

2.4 The preferential option for the poor brings us into extremely complex realities that call for enlightened responses on our part. Our praxis in the promotion of justice and peace will be effective for people and meaningful for us only if it is constantly accompanied by genuine theological reflection and apostolic discernment.

2.5 Solidarity with the poor in the light of the kingdom demands a spirituality deeply aware that the human liberation we seek is not only a task but also a gift. If it were only a task, our involvement could easily lead to bitterness, cynicism and despair. But since it is also a gift, we can then persevere in faith and hope. Understanding that, God's kingdom is already operative in the present enables us to radiate joy in the midst of situations which humanly speaking may appear utterly hopeless.

## **IV. Conclusions**

1. Since it is a demand of our common religious-missionary calling, all of us should manifest a definite commitment to promote justice and peace in whatever kind of apostolate we may find ourselves engaged in. Some of us, however, may feel called to a more active involvement in it. This should never be allowed to divide our communities. A constant process of communal discernment and open dialog should bring about understanding and respect for one another despite a legitimate disagreement on particular issues. We should likewise be ready to support a confrere who decides to take on a more active role even when we do not share his particular views and convictions.

2. Our commitment to the promotion of justice and peace in solidarity with the poor entails the risk of becoming controversial, being labeled leftists and subversives, or seeing benefactors reduce or completely stop their financial support. This, however, should never be a hindrance to objective assessment and evaluation of the social situation and to prayerful discernment of an appropriate response in the light of the gospel (see *Witnessing to the Word* 4, I - H). In some cases noninvolvement may not be prudence but acquiescence to an unjust, situation.

3. The promotion of justice and peace is not an easy commitment to make. It demands a constant process of conversion to him who became poor to make men rich through his poverty (c 207). It was because of his poverty that Jesus could take his stand with the poor. Similarly it is only in solidarity with the poor that we too can perform the prophetic role entailed in our religious-missionary calling. But if we decide to take our role as prophets seriously, we must also be prepared to share the fate of the Crucified One. Ultimately perseverance in this commitment rests not on the premise of success for our efforts but on lively confidence in the grace and power of the Risen Lord.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Resolutions Passed by the Twelfth General Chapter on November, 1982.**

1. The Twelfth General Chapter adopts in principle the paper "The Promotion of Justice and Peace in Solidarity with the Poor in the Light, of Constitution 112" as an appeal to the members of the Society to show in response to "Witnessing to the Word" 7 (Introduction) a more determined commitment to the promotion of justice and peace in solidarity with the poor. By doing so the chapter offers this paper as a point of departure for reflection and discussion on this issue on the provincial and local levels.

2. The Twelfth General Chapter encourages the appointment of a coordinator for the social apostolate on the provincial level in order to guarantee the implementation of the first resolution.

3. The Twelfth General Chapter mandates the general council to coordinate and foster the efforts of confreres in the promotion of justice and peace through a secretariat or coordinator for the social apostolate at the generalate.