

INTRODUCTION

JIMMY A. BELITA AND ROLANDO A. TUAZON

*Woe to those who make unjust laws,
to those who issue oppressive decrees,
to deprive the poor of their rights and
withhold justice from the oppressed of my people,
making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.
What will you do on the day of reckoning,
when disaster comes from afar?
To whom will you run for help?
Where will you leave your riches?
Nothing will remain but to cringe
among the captives or fall among the slain.
Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away,
his hand is still upraised.*

Isaiah 10:1-4

In the national scene where laws are turned into weapons to destroy certain groups, where widows and orphans form part of the collateral damage, Isaiah's statement is timely. Many of the dead husbands and fathers mostly came from the margins and have left survivors who in turn remain in the margins. St. Vincent School of Theology has as its theme for this year: Faith Seeking Action, Believing in Hope for a 'Pure Religion' (James 1:27). Its interdisciplinary journal, Hapag, true to its vision for the wellbeing of those in the margins of society, presents this year's issue on human rights.

This series with that theme in the context of religion and church might suffer credibility at the outset. Let's face it! The

history of religions and of the church has apparently left a wake of devastation and, worse, violation of the basic human rights to live and to believe. What with the Psalmist's exhortation to "smash babies against a rock" (Psalm 137:9), the Crusaders' deadly crusade against non-Christians, the screams of those tortured in the Inquisition. We can multiply examples of lapses against basic human rights by those who claimed to have a mission from God. After lamenting those tragic moments of our history, we can revisit attempts in the bible and in the Church in believers' own struggles to uphold those rights.

Jimmy Belita's brief and sketchy article on widows and orphans as the subjects of "pure religion" sets the tone and mode of the journal. His article is immediately followed by a more detailed and analytical essay of Dave Capucac on the relationship between religion and human rights as the key to developing a human rights culture that is conducive to peace. Belita revisits James' "pure religion" as the assistance given to widows and orphans, the most vulnerable people in biblical times; their victimhood was caused most likely by the death of the respective husbands and fathers in many wars the causes of which they had very little to do with. This article plainly records the absence of the concept of human rights in the Old Testament for these widows and orphans. However, Judaism had an alternative: their special protection from Yahweh, who was represented by the monarch. Whether he fulfilled this God-designated role is another story. The paper admits that the ruler's responsibility could sometimes take form in arbitrary actions, left to the whimsical mood of the ruler. There is a more lasting solution to that possibility: human dignity creates a responsibility on those who have the power. Belita's research on the Jamesian "pure religion" also leads us to an insight given in the New Testament, that ultimately all religions believe that worship of God is not complete without concrete actions that would benefit the needy.

Dave Capucac in his well-documented work argues that human rights is a needed component in pursuing peace and social justice in a multi-religious and multi-cultural society; here, religion has an important role to play. In fact, the author concludes that the solid foundations of human rights consist of "mutuality, deep

respect for others, tolerance, recognition,” values held dearly by religions. The author inputs a Catholic specificity by reminding the readers “that ‘rights’ come hand in hand with responsibility” contributing to the common good (GS 30).

Recognition comes with a profound respect for the specific reality and rights of any given group of people, especially those who are minorities. This is especially true for people with disabilities (PWD). Kristine C. Meneses who has had a long pastoral journey with deaf communities describes the injustice that this particular sector of PWDs has suffered. They have been marginalized in different aspects of life as they are misrepresented and labeled pathologically and medically from the perspective of the “hearing” population both in the Church and in society. Enhancing Rabbi Julia Watt’s Belser’s inclusion paradigm from the perspective of Jacques Derrida’s ethic of hospitality, Meneses reframes the concept of hospitality and argues for a revisioning of the discourse of inclusion that gives way to a form of disability justice.

Another sector that demands serious attention and care are children. This forms part of the call to respond to the needs of “pure religion” and to make it an important component in the process of building a just and humane world. The works of Annemie Dillen and Anne Antenita Lambert respond to the needs of this too often forgotten sector of society: the children (not necessarily orphaned as in biblical times). “Children have been a large group of people who has been invisible for theologians for many centuries” one of these contributors says. Due to so many emergency-related events, including sectarian wars, migration, poverty and food shortage, children can become separated from their parents or caregivers. Dellen purports to talk and do theology “for the sake of the children” but she also admits that “there are far more frictions and complexities involved in practices with and theologies about children.” Two things to avoid with regard to children: romanticizing them and overburdening them.

Lambert deals too with children’s rights but with a more specific historical topic: the war-affected children in post-war Sri Lanka. She admits that her work deals directly with “the plight and concerns of the war-affected children.” According to her, the work of caregivers and care-takers is very crucial in the psychological and

social upliftment of the children but that the pastoral approach to these often traumatized victims is equally important. In short, the religious dimension cannot be neglected. In essence, for her it is important to link “pastoral counseling to the community-based model” for “a holistic education for children’s growth and transformation.”

When society is subjected to the tragic episodes in human history which prevent people from realizing their potentials, but are instead violated fundamentally in their dignity as human persons, the Christian response may be done in the most radical way. The experience of the holocaust remains to be one of the most tragic dramas of human insanity. The systematic annihilation of the Jews and of other groups of people made Dietrich Bonhoeffer opt for a radical response. He paid for his life as his participation in the attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler went awry. That was the last-resort response of a Lutheran pastor and theologian who thought well enough what he was doing as inspired by the gospel. This is adroitly discussed by Gunter Prüller-Jagenteufel in his article, “Following Christ in Contemporary Times: A European Perspective Drawing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer.” The weaponization of the law among the Nazis provoked Bonhoeffer to denounce the unjust Nazi laws. This is called the Bonhoeffer moment. Unfortunately, according to Prulier, this can be used by homophobes and pro-lifers to justify violence against abortion clinic doctors and same-sex marriage supporters. Bonhoeffer’s option, that is, putting Hitler to death, is really last resort and, in the long run, would not bring about the effect what the gospel is meant to do: to “convert” the violent. The author is of the opinion that a dialogue that *Evangelii Gaudium* exhorts might work better.

War is hardly fair to anyone especially the innocent victims. Wars, in fact, have caused refugee problems and have literally marginalized them from the gravy train of progress. Rex Fortes in his article tries to tackle the consequent moral issue with its basis from the New Testament, which only a scripturae scholar can do. The paper adopts the Social Identity Approaches to inquire on the socio-ethnic identity of the Hellenes in the Fourth Gospel (Jn 7:35, 12:20). Taking the high moral ground, the author addresses “the migration problem within the inclusivist outlook of

the Johannine Jesus and ingroup” that strongly critiques “the politicized polarization of the society between the insider-citizens and the outsider-refugees.”

Guiding us on the re-reading of the important sources pertinent to the theme of human rights and the marginalized are two authors: Johan Verstraeten and Danilo Franklin Pilario. Verstraeten in his article, “The Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, and Pope Francis’ Contribution to Catholic Social Discernment,” regards the Pastoral Constitution as a key document to be read for the development of official Catholic social teaching. He also points out that the perspectives opened by such teaching have been radicalized by Pope Francis in the “structural analysis and action for justice.” According to Verstraeten, “the pastoral constitution shifted the focus from social doctrine to social discernment in view of the Church’s participation in the creation of a society in which every citizen can live a dignified life.” Is that not what it means by “scrutinizing the signs of the times” and “interpreting them in the light of the gospel?” (GS 4)

As we keep on dealing and talking about human rights, Pilario seems to hint that anthropocentrism becomes inevitable. In this anthropocentrism, one sector of creation has been marginalized: the non-human beings. In the bible, humans traditionally have been considered of more value over and above anything else in creation. When this notion is applied to ethics and human rights, it is revolutionary. However, this can also be the cause of an anthropocentric approach to the environment. This article reminds us that everything is interconnected and that ecological concern is not a zero-sum game, that is, to care for the earth is not to diminish our care for people, and vice versa. In the long run to care for the earth is to care for people, especially those who have been marginalized as a result of earth’s overexploitation. But, here, as Pilario suggests, we need a paradigm shift. According to him, the “environmental justice paradigm” has failed to take into account “the unjust relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world.” Can it be the source of the ecological crisis? So, there is a need to go beyond the “stewardship paradigm rooted in environmental justice” for an “ecological justice framework in the rereading of some crucial Christian texts.” The end product of the

author's argument is "an ecological hermeneutics aimed at ushering an ethical agenda for a fairer world, not only among men and women, but also among humans and the whole earth community."

In this regard, then, it might be theologically correct to claim that being created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) is not just limited to human beings but to nonhumans as well.

For believers in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, being the *imago Dei* is the basis of human rights. How about those who do not subscribe to the bible as a guide to life? There might be a common ground in The Universal Declaration on Human Rights, enshrined by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. It holds that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world." It echoes what Belita said in his article that the Catholic Church in its recent social teachings has shifted its emphasis from humans as object of God's mercy and compassion to humans as having an inherent dignity that no one can take away from them. Accordingly, recognition of the "human dignity" as the source for all human rights for both believers and non-believers can be the common ground for practical collaboration. We would like to end this introduction from a Pauline statement that in the context of love right is inseparable from responsibility.

*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;
only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,
But through love become slaves to one another.
For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment,
"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

Galatians 5:13-14

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