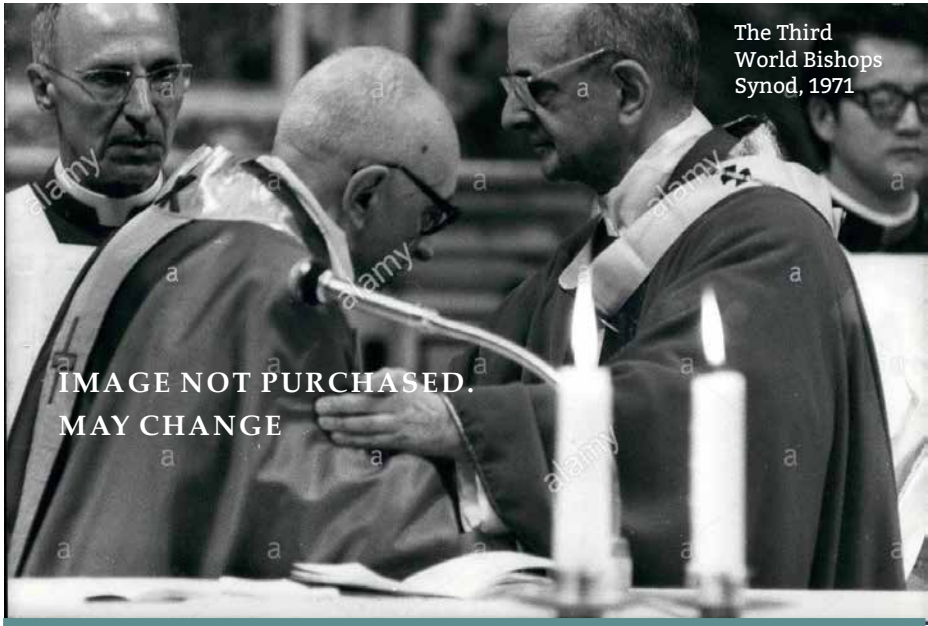


Justice in the World

Tony O’Riordan SJ, working now with Jesuit Refugee Service in Syria, traces the influence of the Synod of Bishops in 1971 on the work of justice in the Church.



On 13 November 1964 Pope Paul VI did an extraordinary thing. At the close of a solemn Mass, in front of 2,000 bishops from all over the world, Pope Paul descended the steps from the papal throne and placed his bejewelled, three-tiered gold and silver tiara on the altar and gave it to be sold for the benefit of the world’s poor.

The Pope had been moved to his symbolic act by discussions of world poverty during the then current session of the Second Vatican Council.

Many Catholics and others have long forgotten this powerful charitable and symbolic act of over fifty years ago, but it is worthy of recall and reflection.

Perhaps of even greater significance is the unique and historical teaching statement of the world’s bishops issued in November 1971, fifty years ago this year. Referred to in English as ‘Justice in the World’ it broke new and important ground. While Pope Paul’s gesture with his tiara was discretionary and charitable, the bishops gathered in 1971 issued with renewed clarity

Appealing to both the Old and New Testaments, the bishops assert that love of God and love of humankind are intimately bound together.

and passion the teaching of Jesus for contemporary times. In essence their teaching is that there simply is no sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ in the world of today if the commitment to work for justice is downplayed or eliminated.

That world injustice is evident and widespread and requires Christian response is behind the oft-quoted sentence that ‘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’. There is an emphasis on the mission of the Church being concerned not simply with personal conversion but with the social transformation of the world.

The bishops identify a ‘tremendous paradox’ in the modern world: never before have there been so many forces and resources available to promote human unity, yet the divisions and tensions within the human family appear to be increasing.

Appealing to both the Old and New Testaments, the bishops assert that love of God and love of humankind are intimately bound together. ‘Justice in the World’ offers a brief but powerful scriptural analysis emphasising God as liberator of the oppressed in the Old Testament and Jesus as preacher of justice for the poor in the New Testament (Nos. 30–33). It is in this section that ‘Justice in the World’ makes one of its strongest points.

‘Christian love of neighbour and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one’s neighbour.’ If I say I love my neighbour, then I want my neighbours’ dignity respected, I want their rights recognised, their development promoted, and an effective system of fair play for all.

Of note is the call for the Church itself to practice justice in both internal and external activities. This call for the Church to practice justice has acquired new focus and new urgency in light of what we now know about the crimes and abuses committed by clergy and religious and the unjust ways Church authority responded to the needs of victims. But the need for the Church to attend to internal matters of justice does not end with the issues of child sexual abuse.

Fifty years later the world’s ten richest men have seen their combined wealth increase by half a trillion dollars since the global pandemic began — more than enough to pay for a COVID-19 vaccine for everyone in the world and to ensure no-one is pushed into poverty by the pandemic. Fifty years ago the bishops of the world issued a call to action. Their statement of 1971 deserves to be recalled on this significant anniversary. The most appropriate way to mark this anniversary is to re-double our efforts to work for justice at home and globally. 