

Caritas Social Justice Week 2014

This year's Caritas Social Justice Week theme is Catholic Social Teaching, sometimes called "the best-kept secret in the Catholic Church". For Pax Christi members, it brings to mind a very specific and special item in the list of leading pronouncements on social teaching, Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical, "Pacem in Terris" (Peace on Earth).

This comprehensive work has had particular significance for Pax Christi in its members and organisation and has become over the years its "charter for peace". Cardinal Angelo Roncalli, who became Pope John XXIII, had a considerable influence on the direction of the new Pax Christi movement when he was Papal Nuncio in Paris. He took a great interest in its activities and in many ways was responsible for its development from a pilgrimage of prayer to a movement based on Prayer, Study and Action. This approach to social action was specifically promoted in John XXIII's earlier encyclical, "Mater et Magistra" but its methodology is also behind the call to action in "Pacem in Terris" and Pax Christi's peacemaking work.

Prominent among the many issues covered in "Pacem in Terris" are human, economic and social rights, a range of freedoms, issues relating to migrants and political refugees, the role of women and relations between states. Towards the end, Pope John addresses the issue of world peace and specifically the arms race, the need for the operation of right reason and negotiation in the solving of conflict and above all, the need for the world to be rid of the threat of war.

"Nothing" he says "is lost by peace; everything is lost by war". He draws our attention to the need to read "the signs of the times", including many of the social, political and economic changes then taking place and puts great emphasis on the importance of the United Nations as a forum in which negotiation and dialogue can address issues which might otherwise lead to violent conflict. Perhaps his most notable "sign of the times" is apparent in this statement: "In an age which boasts of its atomic power, it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair the violation of justice".

Among the many insightful comments in this most significant contribution to Catholic Social Teaching, this latter one speaks most strongly to the present day when we are still to find the moral strength to put aside the tendency to call on arms to solve the increasingly complex issues arising from incomplete attention to the unresolved problems of the past. As Christians, we have still to heed Pope John XXIII's call to us to heal the cleavage between what we believe and what we do. We say we believe in Christ's peace, which rests on belief in human dignity and love for all but we have not yet learned to put our trust in our capacity to make that belief guide us into action for the common good of all people and of Creation itself without resort to arms or some other form of force. Social Justice Week gives us another opportunity to do so.