

*Living Faith Through Justice*  
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**Keynote Address: “Living Faith Through Justice: Old and New Frontiers”**

*Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ*

**Preliminary and introductory remarks**

To us Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the conjunction of the words “faith” and “justice” appears as normal as it would, perhaps, have sounded strange to Christians of a different era. Both terms have survived centuries of definition and distortion. Whereas in the golden era of Scholasticism the former found sublime expression as an assent to a set of dogmatic propositions, under the influence of modernist thinkers the latter had been reduced to a matter of just desserts. In our day and age, the greatest threat, I believe, remains the attempt to reduce both concepts to mere theoretical formulation or individualistic predilection, in which case, faith would be a matter of what a person chooses to believe and justice an optional extra. Such an attitude not only distorts the meaning of faith and justice, but, more significantly, desecrates it – for many are the women and men – in the long history of Christianity – whose witness to faith was borne out by heroic and prophetic deeds of justice and for which they made the ultimate sacrifice. From Ignatius of Antioch to Oscar Romero; Joan of Arc to Ita Ford; Ugandan martyrs to Salvadoran martyrs, justice has always been *via eminentiae* for living the commitment to Christian faith radically and authentically.

In the narratives of the prophets of old, as documented severally in the Hebrew Scripture, commitment to justice served as the preferred pathway and manifestation of righteous living and covenantal relationship with God. To quote the 1971 Synod of Bishops on “Justice in the World,”

In the Old Testament God reveals himself to us as the liberator of the oppressed and the defender of the poor, demanding from people faith in him and justice towards one's neighbor. It is only in the observance of the duties of justice that God is truly recognized as the liberator of the oppressed (no. 30).

Nowhere is this “demand” that connects religious devotion, ritual observance and obedience of faith with just living, love and mercy made more visible than in the treatment of the defenseless the widow, the vulnerable orphan and the displaced stranger. In the context of the Old Testament, the imperative of witnessing to faith through justice on behalf of this category of the poor of Yahweh was established as a matter of divine injunction that superseded ritualistic ostentation and legalistic orthodoxy. Theologically speaking, and more importantly, this injunction was established as a defining characteristic of Israel’s God: “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing” (Deut. 10:17–18).

In the context of the New Testament, whether in the action of Jesus of Nazareth or in the accounts of New Testament writers, “Faith in Christ, the Son of God and the Redeemer, and love of neighbor constitute a fundamental theme” (“Justice in the World,” no. 33). The Synod on “Justice in the World” expatiates this idea of the inseparability of faith in Christ and love of neighbour:

According to the Christian message, therefore, our relationship to our neighbor is bound up with our relationship to God; our response to the love of God, saving us through Christ, is shown to be effective in his love and service of people. Christian love of neighbor and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbor. Justice attains its inner fullness only in love (no. 34).

Speaking as a Jesuit – and I do so with much humility – the conjugation of faith and justice is not only native to but constitutive of the entire apostolic edifice of the Society of Jesus, theoretically if not always practically. Since the last quarter of the last century, Jesuits have tenaciously maintained the inseparability of the “service of faith and the promotion of justice” as the core mission of the Society of Jesus. The 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (2 December 1974 –7 March 1975) gave a definitive formulation to the symbiosis of faith and justice:

To the many requests received from all parts of the Society for clear decisions and definite guidelines concerning our mission today, the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation responds as follows. The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of

which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement. For reconciliation with God demands the reconciliation of people with one another.

On the strength of this formal declaration of the mission of the Society of Jesus, “faith that does justice,” “faith seeking justice,” or “faith doing justice” have become mantras and criteria of the apostolic preferences of the Society of Jesus. To this day, the Society of Jesus continues to insist on the imperative of justice as its preferred expression of faith, albeit it has added other dimensions such as dialogue with cultures, engagement with other faith traditions and responsibility for ecological integrity. Briefly stated, from an apostolic perspective, the Jesuit ideal is embodied in a faith that does justice. The keyword is “does”; it resists any attempt to understand faith outside a particular context that demands engagement in a personal and practical manner. Faith can be characterized as a “living” entity only when manifested in deeds of justice.

To stay a little longer with the Jesuit example, the development of Jesuit mission from its 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation in 1975 to its 35<sup>th</sup> General Congregation in 2008, clearly demonstrates that the *context* of the service of faith and the promotion of justice is anything but static (see GC 35, D. 2, no. 24). This implies that the promotion of justice as integral to the service of faith constitutes the subject of an ongoing interpretation. Changing contexts determine the focus, nature and means of this mission. Thus, ongoing discernment is central to the call to live faith and through justice. No single act exhausts the meaning of faith and the medium for living an authentic faith requires discernment, understood as a contemplative and critical gaze on the signs of our times.

To sum up my main point here, the mission of faith doing justice adapts to diverse particular and local situations. Its *meaning* is neither fixed nor unchanging. Wherever humanity is threatened by unjust socioeconomic, political and religious systems, there believers are called to give expression to their faith through action on behalf of justice. Diverse apostolic initiatives embody the multiple meanings of faith doing justice. The plurality of options means that the scope of action available to a believer is no longer confined to familiar models of disembodied piety and devotion.

In light of the foregoing considerations, I would like to consider three frontiers that present particular challenges to the conjunction of faith and justice in our contemporary context. I preface this with a brief comparative review of the status of faith in Africa and in Europe.

## **Between Africa and Europe**

Historically, the relationship between Africa and Europe has been a checkered one. It is not my intention in this presentation to dwell on the vexed historical events and lingering questions that characterize this relationship. I deal with this relationship to the extent that some aspects of it continue to raise questions for the subject under consideration, namely faith and justice.

It would seem a fair assessment to maintain that in the respective contemporary contexts of Africa and Europe, faith and justice, taken singly or in combination, do not mean the same thing. Considering the present situations on both continents, and speaking in general terms, the expression “living faith” would seem to be more accurately predicated of Africa than of Europe. Whereas, in the former, statistics attest a phenomenal resurgence and effervescence of Christianity, in the latter, grim statistics and demographics of religious practice generate a palpable sense of obsolescence and putrescence. If Christianity and the concomitant manifestation of faith is rising in Africa, the reverse is the case in Europe. Although the present explosion in the demographic fortune of Christianity in Africa owes its origin to the missionary movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this fact alone does not account for the impressive growth of Christianity in Africa. Africa, as we know, is home to some ancient traditions of Christianity, specifically in Mediterranean Africa (Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria), Coptic Africa (Egypt and Nubia) and Orthodox Africa (Ethiopia). The present demographic situation has deep historical roots in Africa.

Paradoxically, however, on the evidence of prevailing conditions, whether in the context of religious growth, as is the case of Africa, or of decline, as is prevalent in Europe, religion broadly speaking faces particular external and internal threats. For example, while Europe is haunted by despair, Africa flirts with complacency. Each of these two attitudes affects the link between faith and justice. There are, however, graver threats that potentially undermine the link between faith and justice, namely secularism in Europe and sectarianism in Africa.

As Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly demonstrated, rightly or wrongly, secularism maintains an unholy alliance with relativism and atheism to attenuate if not eliminate completely the pertinence and viability of faith in a post-modern context. On the other hand, the instrumentalization of religion evidenced by growing faith-based insurgency and sectarianism

constitutes a significant threat for the practice of faith in some parts of Africa, for example, in Kenya, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Somalia, Nigeria, Egypt, Mali, CAR and Niger.

Again, speaking somewhat generally, I am convinced that secularism does to Europe what sectarianism does to Africa. Whether one is starved of faith or the other is saturated with it, the difference it seems to me is the same. As an ideological option that relies on a philosophical system to argue God out of existence, secularism is the flip side of sectarianism, for the latter seeks to foist a particular understanding of God on people. The danger, however, lies in the realization that neither system can serve as the basis or firm foundation for a notion and practice of justice that is human and humanizing. In extreme circumstances, secularism reduces justice to a matter of the rule of law; sectarianism projects a caricature of justice as an excuse for pietistic lawlessness.

A further internal threat to the symbiotic relationship between faith and justice is the phenomenon of the gospel of prosperity – prevalent in Africa – that spiritualizes concrete challenges, thereby reducing them to the realm of personal shortcomings and misfortune, instead of acknowledging and challenging structural injustice at the root of socioeconomic and political malaise. I am convinced that if faith in Africa does not seriously address the concrete issues that matter to Africans, it risks falling prey to the marauding intent of secularism, thereby losing its relevance in the wider socioeconomic and political sphere. There is empirical evidence that “Africans generally rank unemployment, crime and corruption as bigger problems than religious conflict” (“Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa,” The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, April 2010). As I see them, these concerns have roots in unjust structures in society. In such situations of structural injustice, I believe that to dilute their threat and the urgency of a viable response by merely appealing to the strategies of prosperity gospel constitutes a greater act of injustice. As I have already demonstrated, on the evidence of the Gospel, faith is never detached from the concrete reality of people’s lives. Even when Christianity lays emphasis on the primacy of “the interior castle,” such spiritual edifice is never a place of escaping the reality of the material world. In the finest traditions of Christian faith, contemplation and prayer are never detached from action and work.

The threats to faith apart, there are specific aspects of the relationship between Africa and Europe that deserve serious consideration from the perspective of faith and justice. My position

is that such issues constitute old and new frontiers for the question under consideration, namely living faith through justice.

### **Migration and the globalization of indifference**

In Europe the thorny question of migration has become a huge bone of contention. Whereas political expediency generates a rash of rhetoric and policy measures designed to stem the tide of migrants from Africa and elsewhere, some critical voices have rebuked the formidable barriers erected to fortify Europe against the surge of migrants as a negation of the ethical principle of solidarity. Whether in Lampedusa or Malta, the consequences of such lack of solidarity have become intensely dramatic and horrifying. When almost a hundred immigrants perished off the coast of Malta in August 2008, Emeritus Pope Benedict called for solidarity between Africa and Europe to deal with the crisis. He declared:

Migration is a phenomenon that has been present from the dawn of human history, and it has always, for this reason, characterized the relations between peoples and nations. The emergency that migration has become in our times, nevertheless, calls out to us and, while it solicits our solidarity, demands, at the same time, effective political answers.

Five years later, on 3 October 2013, after the fatal tragedy off the shores of Lampedusa that claimed the lives of 360 immigrants, Pope Francis echoed a similar concern, precisely on the lack of solidarity as symptomatic of a culture of indifference:

The culture of well-being, that makes us think of ourselves, that makes us insensitive to the cries of others, that makes us live in soap bubbles, that are beautiful but are nothing, are illusions of futility, of the transient, that brings indifference to others, that brings even the globalization of indifference. In this world of globalization we have fallen into a globalization of indifference. We are accustomed to the suffering of others, it doesn't concern us, it's none of our business.

Between the concerns articulated by the two popes, we can detect a moral imperative predicated on faith in regard to the complex phenomenon of global migratory and refugee flows. The issues at stake include sale of arms, detention and treatment of asylum seekers and immigrants, political opportunism, and xenophobic reactions. Clearly, responsibility for this crisis lies on both sides of the divide. As the Bishops of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) stated, following the Lampedusa tragedy, "The drama of migration, with

a growing number of young people who risk their lives to leave Africa, reflects the depth of the malaise of a continent that is still dragging its feet to provide favourable conditions such as employment, education and good health." Yet, as the Jesuit Provincials of Europe and the Middle East and of Africa-Madagascar made clear in their statement, "Europe must accept its share of responsibility for global migratory flows. Many European states or their corporations supply arms to Africa, often covertly. These arms supplies fuel conflicts, which, in turn, fuel migratory flows. Our world is so interconnected that we cannot place the border of our concern at the Mediterranean."

It is not my intention to engage in polemics or the assignment of blame. My point is simple: the matter of global migratory flows represents a challenge for how we live faith and practice justice in Africa and in Europe; it calls both continents to embrace tenets of Catholic Social Tradition, such as mutual solidarity and hospitality, and to engage in a process of mutual interaction and learning.

### **Ecology: called to be "stewards of Providence"**

If it is not already clear, let me reiterate my conviction that the projection of faith beyond the realm of isolated individual actions to the level of socioeconomic and political systems or structures is constitutive of Catholic Social Tradition. However, the structures that serve as locus for the nexus of faith and justice are not exclusively socioeconomic and political. I hold the position that, in the context of today's world, the most critical locus of living faith through justice lies in the area of the integrity and care of the environment. Ecology is the new frontier of faith that does justice.

As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently reported, concerning the state of the global climate, a preponderant percentage of anthropogenic activity and influence accounts for the ecological devastation and environmental pollution that have triggered adverse climate change. We are aware that such conclusive scientific evidence has failed to convince the naysayers; yet, we cannot suppress the inconvenient truth – to speak in Pauline terms – that, due to the influence of human beings on nature, the world as we know it is passing away. The catalogue of shocking evidence of the causal link between our actions and the state of the earth spans the entire globe: visibility-reducing smog in China, mega-blazes in Australia, deforestation in DR Congo, drought in Ethiopia and Somalia, flooding in India, increasingly devastating

storms in Asia and North America, melting polar ice, vanishing snow cap on the Kilimanjaro.... In the face of such situations we must ask the question, “What’s faith got to do with it?” Everything!

Although there are multiple interpretations of the meaning of the biblical command to “subdue the earth” (Genesis 1:28), from a faith perspective, care of the earth constitutes an injunction of divine provenance that is antithetical to an exploitative relationship with nature. However we interpret Genesis 1:28, we cannot circumvent the truth that the resources of the earth are as limited as the climatic changes are irreversible. Therefore, if we accept the ethical principle that the resources of the earth are destined for the common good of the entire human race (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2402), justice demands that we confront and denounce any system that disproportionately appropriates the goods of the earth and carelessly depletes its resources. In this line of thinking, ecological justice represents the new way of living the faith. What makes the underlying ethical imperative most compelling is the fact that ecology touches on the fate, not only of millions of impoverished people, but also of the entire global population for generations to come. In this sense, faith calls us to approach the question not only from theoretical and technical perspectives, but from the perspective of our shared destiny that is now threatened by man’s inhumanity to nature. As I see it, the degradation and exploitation of the earth represent an affront to faith that does justice.

Speaking more personally, my faith as an African teaches me to see a vital connection between human beings and their immediate environment and to show “a religious respect for the integrity of creation” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2415). The fate of the one is linked to the survival of the other. Thus stated, a moral category that is uniquely African may offer us useful resources for dealing effectively with the challenge of anthropogenic ecological degradation. I speak of the idea of *Ubuntu*. As a moral category – and, therefore, akin to the tenets of Catholic Social Tradition – *Ubuntu* calls our attention to the simple truth that our survival as a human race is intimately linked to the survival of the earth. We are because the earth exists and for us to continue to exist, the earth ought to become the object of our special care and concern.

On this critical issue of the integrity of creation, as people of faith, whether lay, religious or clergy, we are confronted with the challenge of living our faith in a manner that is prophetic. In regard to the ecological concerns under consideration, I would argue that *living faith* is



embodied not in lofty declamations on the integrity of creation, but most importantly in a radical change in our lifestyle individually and collectively. Confronted with so great a challenge, the starting point of faith lived through the medium of justice is an honest and critical self-examination: *What do we take from the earth and how? What are we giving back to the earth? If planting a tree constitutes a modest contribution to the survival of the earth, how many trees can we individually claim responsibility for? To what extent do we “think, eat, save” in order to avoid food loss and food wastage? How committed are we to the simple formula to reduce, reuse and recycle?* Lack of commitment in such mundane areas of a just relationship to the earth puts into question the authenticity of our faith and the credibility of our actions on behalf of justice.

### **Between service and servitude**

A third and final consideration or frontier concerns the question of gender. In Europe or Africa gender has always been a factor of faith and belief, on the basis of which the role and participation of women and men were socially defined and doctrinally codified in church and society. There is ample material evidence that significant advances have been recorded in the public sphere on the matter of gender equality. According to a recent survey by the World Economic Forum, there have been improvements in economic equality and political empowerment for women, but there is still no country on earth where women and men are equal (*Global Gender Gap Report 2013*). However, when we direct our attention to the church, we find a community that continues to struggle against a perception from its history that represents it as an inherently patriarchal and misogynistic institution. It is my considered opinion that on the matter of gender equality the church still lags behind. In the words of the Second African Synod, “unfortunately, the evolution of ways of thinking in this area is much too slow” (*Africae Munus*, no. 57).

Notwithstanding positive indicators, such as those contained in the World Economic Forum survey, the catalogue of gender-based challenges that women face across the globe defy belief: rape, not only as a criminal act, but as a weapon of war; the use of women and girls as sex slaves in the theatre of violent conflict; the exploitation of child labour; the lack of equal opportunities of education, as we see for example in South Sudan, where less than 1 per cent of girls of school-age actually complete primary school; the recalcitrant practice of female genital cutting; the menace of early marriage, and the attendant problem of maternal mortality; domestic

abuse; the targeting of homosexual women through the odious means of so-called “corrective rape” .... And we may not overlook the systemic links between poverty, disease, illiteracy, etc. and gender. I make this list not to simply shock our sensibility but to demonstrate the scope of issues that faith cannot ignore if it makes any credible pretention to justice as its preferred mode of expression. On some of these issues, as in other areas that I have discussed, the axis of Europe and Africa connect – one obvious example being the phenomenon of human trafficking, especially of women and girls, of which Africa remains a net exporter to Europe.

As I see it, the continued existence of structural, cultural, religious and ideological barriers that impede the participation of women in all walks of life constitutes a stark manifestation of injustice. And let us not point fingers at social and political institutions outside our church: there is incontrovertible evidence of gender gap in our church. As the Synod of Bishops on “Justice in the World” poignantly reminds us, “anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes” (no. 40). In other words, justice begins at home!

I recall the words of Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens, then archbishop of Malines-Brussels, Belgium, at the third session of the Second Vatican Council. On the occasion of the debate about whether or not to admit women auditors to the Council, he made an incisive remark: “Women,” he quipped, “I believe make up half of humanity.” If the reality of the denial of the gifts, talents and contributions of half of humanity is morally repugnant, it does not of itself constitute the only basis for transposing this issue into the realm of justice. Faith teaches the equality and dignity of the human race – that all are created in the image and likeness of God. As I see it, the implications of this act of faith are momentous, both for church and for society. To put it simply, it is either we believe that women are created by a just God or we are devotees of a lesser god. There are no other options.

Thus, as a locus of living faith through justice, gender transcends mere rhetoric, of which there is no shortage in the copious official documentation and declamations of the church. It is reassuring that Pope Francis has recently focused attention on the question of gender roles and participation in the church and reminded us of the injustice of confusing and conflating “service” and “servitude” in regard to the role of women in the church and interposing ourselves judgmentally between God and homosexuals. However we approach this concern, we may not reduce it to mere definitional considerations. While the images we have of God can determine

the quality and tenor of the social relationship that we construct in church and society, the theological modification of this image is not sufficient proof or cause of a more just gender relationship. The challenge that we face relates to the need for a radical deconstruction of the bases of gender inequality and the concomitant reconstruction of a more just arrangement – a task for which personal and institutional conversion remains a fundamental prerequisite.

## **Conclusion**

Over four decades ago, the Synod of Bishops on “Justice in the World” (1971) categorically proclaimed the inseparable link between faith and justice:

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, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation” (no. 6).

With words such as these, the Synod demonstrated that the credibility of faith is measured by the consistency of our actions on behalf of justice. “For unless the Christian message of love and justice shows its effectiveness through action in the cause of justice in the world, it will only with difficulty gain credibility with the people of our times” (“Justice in the World,” no. 35). Here is what I consider as the key implication of this axiomatic conjunction of faith and justice: we are either Christians living our faith through active participation in the transformation of the world or we are charlatans using the rhetoric of faith as fig leaf for our righteous hypocrisy.

I would like to conclude this reflection on living faith through justice with the words of Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, that action speaks louder than words: “Modern man or woman listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he or she does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (41). I am convinced that action on behalf of justice remains the most authentic witness to a life of faith.

I thank you for your kind and patient attention!