

**Conference of the European Forum of National Laity Committees in Saarbrücken, May 23-28, 2006. Conference theme: Justice in the sight of God**

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Justice is a profound personal truth. The sins we commit against our fellow human beings victimize not only our neighbors, but also ourselves. Moral decisions should never be cold and calculating; they should never be spawned by our selfish egos. The presence of another human being presupposes limits on our actions, and requires us to act justly.

St. Thomas of Aquinas said: "Justice is a virtue that one has in relationship with others;" ("iustitia est ad alterum"). This simple statement has far reaching implications. Justice can only take root if people begin thinking about justice and their obligations toward their fellow human beings. In fact, we are all connected to each other, even though we may sometimes believe differently or wish it were otherwise. But that's the order of things. It's God's will. For when things are any other way, the life of the collectivity and the individual are thrown out of balance. This is the inexorable logic of life. And of justice.

But logic alone is not enough. It is not enough to simply assert that invisible bonds of justice connect us to each other. For if we want to act justly toward our neighbor, it is incumbent upon us to respect him. And thus the precondition for justice is love. If love is lacking, then justice is as cold as a mathematical equation. We cannot of course love everyone with abandon. But we can apportion a just measure of love to each and every human being, including those who are alien or unfamiliar to us. For just action is the direct expression of the love we owe all of our fellow human beings. But unfortunately we often encounter justice from which love is conspicuously absent.

**1. Justice against the backdrop of history**

The Christian church today counts among its adherents former Communists, as well as individuals that were persecuted under Communism. For example, a person who spied on his neighbor; or a headmaster who spied on one of his teachers, and if he caught a staff member going to church, gave him more than his share of work to do, in keeping with the tenets of Communist ideology. Some of our current priests and ministers were at one time willing to carry out their pastoral duties at the risk of imprisonment; or were simply forbidden to carry out their duties at all. But there are also priests and ministers that collaborated with the Communist regime, whether openly or in secret, out of weakness, a desire for power, the belief that it was necessary to do so, or even with the best intentions in the world. And then there are also men of the cloth who for years patiently and courageously looked after their parishioners under trying conditions and suffered the consequences of agonizing personal decisions. Today's Christian churches also count among their members the long-term unemployed, as well as businesspersons that support charitable or Christian organizations with tainted or illicit funds. But now we're all members of the same church, we give each other the peace sign, and we all sit down at God's table together. Is this situation acceptable when it comes to human justice? On a purely moral and personal level, there is only one possible answer: "I'm sorry but I find this unacceptable, I can't look such people in the eye, but I refuse to sit at the same table with them." But if we are to be truly and fully human, we must respond otherwise. Only in the light of justice in the sight of God can we accept this reality in the spirit of God's infinite love. Only when we view the actions of our fellow human

beings in terms of Christian values, and look beyond our own personal vision of good and evil, can we genuinely reach out to others. Who am I to judge the actions of other? For I can know little or nothing of their past or present circumstances.

The interplay between justice and love is no mere abstraction, for it pervades our daily lives, both as individuals and as a society. Justice alone is not enough, and can even be a destructive force unless it is accompanied by love, and unless this admixture of love and justice is our daily bread.

## 2. Justice today

When Europeans try to explain poverty, they blame it either on the poor, or on our socioeconomic system and the arrangements engendered by it. Each of these views has held sway at some point in the past, but the tension between them is still very much with us today. In my country, Slovakia, radical reforms were implemented during the last legislative period. A 19 percent unitary income tax was adopted, the social welfare model was modified, a pension reform law was passed, and a revamped healthcare system was implemented. It's hard to say whether these reforms will lead to the betterment of society, or to a more just society. But be that as it may, we are always obligated to share what we have with those in need, and to help those that are unable to help themselves. This is why personal commitment to our fellow human beings is an essential part of life, and why solidarity with others is a component of every society's social model.

A number of social initiatives in Slovakia embody and foster social consciousness and a sense of social obligation.

For example, the "socially oriented work" committee of FKI (Forum of Christian Institutions) is a platform for communication, coordination and networking for social activist Christian non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This past February, the members of FKI attended a conference that centered around social activism, and made a presentation on their work. This event provided FKI's members with an excellent opportunity for networking and dialogue.

The Christian Institute of High Priests in Zakovce ([www.ikv.sk](http://www.ikv.sk)) is doing exemplary work in northern Slovakia with social outcasts. This work was initiated by a charismatic priest named Marian Kuffa and was made possible by support from the diocese of Spis. Although at first the organization's work was for the most part ad hoc, this work has evolved into an exemplary systematic and long term solution for the integration of social outcasts. The organization currently provides a home for approximately 100 men who were either homeless persons, prison inmates, or simply men in need. The Christian Institute of High Priests also operates a unit that assists disabled persons. All of this benevolent work is realized at the organization's proprietary farm, where some of the men are also employed. The other men construct houses in the environs of the farm with a view to providing housing for single parents with children, as well as for new families that have come into existence at the organization's farm. Father Kuffa, who has a congregation of his own in Zakovce, does physical labor alongside the men, shares their lives and is one of them.

We have a number of "superheros" in Slovakia, including the men and women that work for our Catholic workers' movement; the "Yes to life" movement, the Catholic Union, the Federation of Christian Workers, the Franciscan associations, and numerous other organizations that embody justice through the work they do on behalf of others. They take care of their brethren in a breathtaking number of ways.

### 3. Worldwide justice

Many people in Western Europe think that Slovakia is in bad shape. And admittedly Slovakia does face numerous problems today. And Western Europeans tend to say: why should we care about problems beyond our own borders, in places like Africa and Asia? These places are so far away and their problems should be solved by people who have more wealth than they know what to do with – or at least more than we have. But fortunately, Slovaks' attitudes toward such problems are nothing like this.

According to an opinion survey that was conducted in May 2005, 50 percent of all Slovaks feel that Slovakia should provide development aid, and that this aid should mainly go to African nations. The reasons respondents gave for this were as follows: to help people in need, it's our moral obligation, to prevent hunger and disease, to help children, and to fight poverty. Moreover, 50 percent of the respondents said that development aid makes sense and is effective. The survey also found that approximately 75 percent of all Slovaks are willing to contribute their time and money for development aid.

Slovakia's NGOs have established a very good and effective development aid platform that integrates numerous youth organizations and that allows aid to be provided in an intelligent and purposeful fashion. The youth organization Erko is particularly active in the development aid arena and has supported a number of highly productive initiatives over a period of years. This year, children in the Slovakian caroling association "Good News" raised nearly 15 million crowns (375,000 euros), which is used for the direct support of specific projects, most of them in Africa. Participation in these activities teaches the children to share, and they also learn about specific ways that they can be of assistance to others.

### 4. Justice in Europe

The process of European integration confronts us time and time again with the issue of justice. I myself am particularly concerned about the issue of illegal workers. Many Slovaks work illegally in western Europe, and in Slovakia we have many illegal workers from Ukraine. Is this a problem? If so, what kinds of solutions could be implemented? Or is this perhaps an intractable problem? I feel that this is an issue that our organization could readily address. Perhaps as Christians we could make a contribution here, in the spirit of justice in the sight of God.

I'd like to give you a concrete example of how illegal workers find jobs. Let's say you're an ailing Austrian pensioner whose monthly pension payments don't cover the cost of hiring a caregiver. So what do you do? Slovakia has agencies that will find you a Slovakian caregiver at a cut-rate price. Your caregiver will stay with you for two weeks at a time, and after that a car will deliver his or her replacement to your home, and the first caregiver will go back to Slovakia for two weeks. And so on, in alternation. Some of these workers have contracts, and some don't, but they earn quite a bit more than they would doing the same work in Slovakia. And they only have to work two weeks out of every month. The Slovakian caregiver earns enough to hire an au-pair to take care of her children back home while she works abroad. Basically this is a win-win situation: everyone's happy with it. Is there really any need to try to combat these practices? Is there any problem here at all?

I think there is. For one thing, neither the worker nor the employer benefits from any of the usual social or legal safeguards that would be built into a statutory employment relationship.

For another thing, taxes and the like go unpaid. Moreover, Austrian workers' wages are driven downward and/or their jobs are jeopardized, since they're competing with – or replaced by – low wage eastern European workers.

Illegal eastern European workers cannot command the same wages as workers in the host country for the same type and quality of work.

It is unjust that the government and the competent authorities look the other way simply because that's the only solution they can think of.

Is labor market liberalization fair?

Is it fair to liberalize the European Union's labor market in the way in which it is now being liberalized?

My intention here is merely to make a few observations and raise the relevant issues. I have no answers to these questions.

But I do feel that this is a problem that should be of concern to us all. And perhaps as Christians, we have an obligation to speak out on these issues, but only if we do so from the perspective of justice in the sight of God, rather than in terms of our own personal values.

As the Bible says, "You shall not pervert justice, either by favoring the poor or by subservience to the great. You shall judge your fellow countryman with strict justice." (Leviticus, 19:15).