

4. VALUES

“Few can doubt that we have been in a period of economic transition. The financial collapse has shown that many aspects of the ‘new economy’, so widely praised just a few years ago, are unstable and unsustainable. For years we were told that we had entered a brand new world of unlimited financial possibilities, brought about by sophisticated techniques and technologies, starting with the internet and the information technology revolution, spread through the world by “globalisation” and managed by ‘financial engineers’ who, armed with the tools of financial derivatives, could eliminate risk and uncertainty. Now we can see that the new financial structure was a house of cards built on sand, where speculation replaced enterprise, and the self-interest of many financial speculators came at the expense of the common good.

While there were many factors that contributed to the financial meltdown of 2008, they start with the exclusion of ethics from economic and business decision making. The designers of the new financial order had complete faith that the ‘invisible hand’ of market competition would ensure that the self-interested decisions of market participants would promote the common good.” (Clark and Alford, 2010).

In Ireland we regularly hear the questions; “Where did the wealth go?” “When we had the resources what did we as a society fix?” We are conscious of much fear, anxiety and anger in our communities. Today, more and more of society are questioning how the policies and decisions of the past decade could have failed Irish society so badly.

These reflections brings to the fore the issue of values. Our fears are easier to admit than our values. Do we as a people accept a two-tier society in fact, while deriding it in principle? The earlier chapters of this review document many aspects of this two tiered society. This reality is made possible by the support of our value system. This dualism in our values allows us to continue with the status quo, which, in reality, means that it is okay to exclude almost one sixth of the population from the mainstream of life of the society, while substantial resources and opportunities are channelled towards other groups in society. This dualism operates at the levels of individual people, communities and sectors.

Christian Values

Social Justice Ireland's concerns in this area are deeply rooted in Christian values. Christianity subscribes to the values of both human dignity and the centrality of the community. The person is seen as growing and developing in a context that includes other people and the environment. Justice is understood in terms of relationships. The Christian scriptures understand justice as a harmony that comes from fidelity to right relationships with God, people and the environment. A just society is one that is structured in such a way as to promote these right relationships so that human rights are respected, human dignity is protected, human development is facilitated and the environment is respected and protected (Healy and Reynolds, 2003:188).

As our societies have grown in sophistication, the need for appropriate structures has become more urgent. While the aspiration that everyone should enjoy the good life, and the goodwill to make it available to all, are essential ingredients in a just society, the good life will not happen without the deliberate establishment of structures to facilitate its development. In the past charity, in the sense of almsgiving by some individuals on an arbitrary and ad hoc basis, was seen as sufficient to ensure that everyone could cross the threshold of human dignity. Calling on the work of social historians it could be argued that charity in this sense was never an appropriate method for dealing with poverty. Certainly it is not a suitable methodology for dealing with the problems of today. As recent world disasters have graphically shown, charity and the heroic efforts of voluntary agencies cannot solve these problems on a long-term basis. Appropriate structures should be established to ensure that every person has access to the resources needed to live life with dignity.

Few people would disagree that the resources of the planet are for the use of the people – not just the present generation, but also the generations still to come. In Old Testament times these resources were closely tied to land and water. A complex system of laws about the Sabbatical and Jubilee years (Lev 25: 1-22, Deut 15: 1-18) was devised to ensure, on the one hand, that no person could be disinherited, and, on the other, that land and debts could not be accumulated. This system also ensured that the land was protected and allowed to renew itself

These reflections raise questions about ownership. Obviously there was an acceptance of private property, but it was not an exclusive ownership. It carried social responsibilities. We find similar thinking among the leaders of the early Christian community. St John Chrysostom, speaking to those who could

manipulate the law so as to accumulate wealth to the detriment of others, taught that *“the rich are in the possession of the goods of the poor even if they have acquired them honestly or inherited them legally”* (Homily on Lazarus). These early leaders also established that a person in extreme necessity has the right to take from the riches of others what s/he needs, since private property has a social quality deriving from the law of the communal purpose of earthly goods (*Gaudium et Spes* 69–71).

In more recent times, Pope Paul VI said *“private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute and unconditional right. No one is justified in keeping for his/her exclusive use what is not needed when others lack necessities.... The right to property must never be exercised to the detriment of the common good”* (*Populorum Progressio* No. 23). Pope John Paul II has developed the understanding of ownership, especially in regard to the ownership of the means of production. One of the major contributors to the generation of wealth is technology. The technology we have today is the product of the work of many people through many generations. Through the laws of patenting and exploration a very small group of people has claimed legal rights to a large portion of the world’s wealth. Pope John Paul II questions the morality of these structures. He says *“if it is true that capital as the whole of the means of production is at the same time the product of the work of generations, it is equally true that capital is being unceasingly created through the work done with the help of all these means of production”*. Therefore, no one can claim exclusive rights over the means of production. Rather that right *“is subordinated to the right to common use, to the fact that goods are meant for everyone”*. (*Laborem Exercens* No. 14). Since everyone has a right to a proportion of the goods of the country, society is faced with two responsibilities regarding economic resources: firstly each person should have sufficient to access the good life; and secondly, since the earth’s resources are finite, and since “more” is not necessarily “better”, it is time that society faced the question of putting a limit on the wealth that any person or corporation can accumulate. Espousing the value of environmental sustainability requires a commitment to establish systems that ensure the protection of our planet.

Interdependence, mutuality, solidarity and connectedness are words that are used loosely today to express a consciousness which is very Christian. All of creation is seen as a unit that is dynamic – each part is related to every other part, depends on it in some way, and can also affect it. When we focus on the human family, this means that each person depends on others initially for life itself, and subsequently for the resources and relationships needed to grow and develop. To ensure that the connectedness of the web of life is maintained, each person is meant to reach out to support others in ways that are appropriate for their growth and in harmony with

the rest of creation. This thinking respects the integrity of the person, while recognising that the person can achieve his or her potential only in right relationships with others and the environment.

Most people in Irish society would subscribe to the values articulated here. However these values will only be operative in our society when appropriate structures and infrastructures are put in place. These are the values that *Social Justice Ireland* wishes to promote. We wish to work with others to develop and support appropriate systems, structures and infrastructures which will give practical expression to these values in Irish society.