

Rooting the Catholic Social Thought Perspective in the National Consciousness and in the Development of Social Policy: An Irish Experience

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40 Years Later**

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This paper outlines the experience of one organisation, CORI Justice Commission, to root the Catholic Social Thought perspective in the national consciousness and in the development of social policy in one country, Ireland. In doing this we outline

- The socio-economic context in which Ireland finds itself.
- The Justice Commission's rationale for social engagement which is based on Scripture and the Catholic Social Thought tradition.
- How the Commission links theory and action.
- The social partnership process in Ireland in which the Commission, as a recognised social partner, negotiates and signs national agreements on a range of issues that are central to the CST tradition.
- The strategies the Commission uses in its work.
- The impact the Commission has had in specific areas - we provide some examples.
- How the Commission tries to institutionally embody its work.
- The essential requirements for credibility in this work, as identified by the Commission.

Because of the limited length of this paper many issues are presented in summary form and only examples are provided. The authors would be very glad to receive any comments readers may have on this paper and we would also be glad to supply any information that readers may seek.

One of the groups concerned about the growing divisions in Irish society in the closing decades of the twentieth century was the leadership of Religious Congregations in Ireland. The CORI Justice Commission was established in 1981 by the 135 religious congregations who make up the Conference of

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Religious of Ireland (CORI). The Commission engages in areas of social justice and public policy on behalf of these religious congregations who have more than 11,000 members in 1,300 communities throughout Ireland, north and south. In the years since its foundation the Commission has studied the direction of Irish society, the decisions that were shaping the society, and the arenas in which these decisions were made. It has set itself the task of trying to influence these decisions from a Catholic Social Thought perspective.

A Changing Socio-Economic Reality

The contrasts between the Ireland of 1987 and of 2005 are dramatic. In 1987 the national debt was above 115 per cent of Gross National Product (GNP). Unemployment was in excess of 15 per cent. The annual inflation rate was above 15 per cent. The corresponding numbers for 2005 are below 30 percent, 4 percent and 2 per cent respectively. These are impressive changes. But they do not tell the whole story.

Between 1993 and 2001 the annual real growth rate of the Irish economy was twice the average recorded over the preceding three decades (8 per cent compared to 3.5 per cent). Since then it has averaged about 5 per cent a year. Over the past decade the Irish economy has significantly outperformed the EU average and continues to do so.

Side by side with the decline in unemployment there was a dramatic rise in the numbers employed. While the numbers employed remained more or less constant in the EU and grew by about one per cent in the USA, in Ireland they grew by 45 per cent since the end of the 1980s. Women's labour force participation rate rose to close to the EU average. Involuntary emigration declined while immigration grew dramatically as Irish agencies went to many countries across the world in search of a labour force to take up the positions becoming available in Ireland as part of the economic boom.

In average terms Ireland's living standards rose dramatically. Ireland's per capita income rose from being two thirds of the EU average to being substantially in excess of the EU average. The proportion of the population living in 'consistent' poverty fell, although it has to be acknowledged that this has been a much contested category as a measure of real progress on poverty reduction. Budget deficits became budget surpluses. Recession became a thing of the past. Pessimism gave way to optimism.

The contrasts between 1987 and 2005 are dramatic. This is a good story in so many ways. But it is not the whole story. While income per capita is above EU levels there are major problems with infrastructure and social provision that are far below the EU average for the most part.

The proportion of the population at risk of poverty has risen to a point where more than 20 per cent of the population lives in households with income equivalents below half the average individualised household income. For a single person this poverty line is about €182 a week in 2004. While this amount is very basic, the lowest social welfare rate for a single person is only €148.80 in 2005. The constantly repeated strategy of politicians that "a job is the best poverty fighter" doesn't seem to make much sense in a society where 60 per cent of those in poverty live in households headed by a person who is not in the

labour force. These households are headed by people who are ill, retired, 'on home duties' or have a disability. A further 25 per cent are in low-paid employment. Only 7 per cent of those at risk of poverty live in households headed by a person who is unemployed.

Housing provision has also become a major problem. In 1993 there were 28,624 households on the waiting list. Today, there are close to 50,000 households on the same lists. The average cost of a house puts house purchase far beyond the capacity of large numbers of poorer or even middle-income people. Yet the level of social housing provision is totally inadequate to meet the need.

There are major, documented problems in a wide range of other areas ranging from adult literacy to rural exclusion to healthcare provision. The gap between the better off and poor people has been widening dramatically and at an accelerating rate. There are serious problems in assimilating refugees. Asylum seekers are denied the right to work and, at the same time, accused of "sponging" off the state. There was a substantial rise in the proportion of births outside of marriage but this has now levelled out. There are many questions being raised about the institution of marriage and official attitudes towards addressing possible disincentives to marriage in the tax and social welfare codes.

This is not meant to be a comprehensive overview². However, it is broad enough to illustrate the fact that in economic and social terms the past eighteen years in Ireland have seen much progress, quite a few deepening problems and some major outstanding questions concerning the development model being followed and whether or not it can deliver fairness, real and lasting progress, social equity and sustainability as well as substantial economic growth. This socio-economic reality is the context within which the CORI Justice Commission works to influence public policy.

Justice Commission's rationale for social engagement based on Scripture and the Catholic Social Thought tradition (CST)

CORI Justice Commission 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 seen in terms of relationships as proclaimed in Christian scriptures where justice is understood as a harmony that comes from fidelity to right relationships with God, people and the environment. The Commission works from the understanding that 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.

The Commission's analyses and reflections have led it to the conclusion that the society of today is not the kind of society envisaged in the Scriptures and the Catholic Social Thought tradition. The Commission does not accept the

² For much greater detail on a more comprehensive overview cf: *Priorities for Fairness: Choosing policies to ensure economic development, social equity and sustainability*, CORI Justice Commission's annual socio-economic review, April 2004.

divisions it sees. Like many others it wishes to work for a society where the hungry are filled with good things (Luke 1:53). Taking inspiration from the Beatitudes it seeks to work with Christ and all who share His values, for the coming of the Kingdom where the poor will be happy because they have sufficiency, where those who hunger and thirst for what is right will see their vision concretised in the structures of society, where the gentle (or 'the lowly') will be guaranteed their right to a part of the earth's resources (Matthew 5:4). With St Paul the Commission is conscious that the entire creation is groaning in one great act of giving birth (Romans 8:22). It strives to play a positive role in this great act of giving birth to a future society based on Christian values.

The Commission is challenged, energised and encouraged by this Scriptural vision as it is carried forward in the Catholic Social Thought (CST) tradition. From Pope Leo XIII who began the call for major changes in the socio-economic order to the present day, the Church is calling us to transform society. Pope Paul VI called for bold transformations, innovations that go deep³. His exhortation, that it is not enough to point out injustices and to utter pious words and denunciations; such words lack meaning unless they are accompanied by responsible political and social action⁴, directs the Commission's agenda. The Synod of Bishops (1971) echoed this appeal when it asserted that action on behalf of justice and the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel⁵.

More recently Pope John Paul II called for a complete analysis to reveal unjust structures so that they may be examined and transformed to build a just earth⁶. It is not possible to transform society until the present "form" is known. This requires a rigorous social analysis to scrutinise the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the Gospel⁷. Secondly it is necessary to articulate a vision of the transformed society that is in keeping with Christian values. This vision needs to engage the imagination of others and so involve them in the debate. It also needs to be sufficiently practical so that people can envisage new structures to bring about the new reality. This is a process of empowering people to be transformers of society so that they have reasons for living and hoping.⁸

Later Pope John Paul II talked about the virtues needed to be involved in this transformation. To destroy such structures (of sin which impede the full realisation of those who are in any way oppressed by them) and replace them with more authentic forms of living in community is a task which demands courage and patience⁹. He also alerts us to our responsibilities to change the structures that cause destruction of the environment. Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone...there is an order in the universe which must be respected...the ecological crises is a moral issue¹⁰.

³ Pope Paul VI, 1967, *Populorum Progressio*, no. 32

⁴ Pope Paul VI, 1971, *Octogesima Adveniens*, no. 48

⁵ Synod of Bishops, 1971, *Justice in the World*, no. 6

⁶ Pope John Paul II, 1981, *Laborum Exercens*, no. 2

⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II Council, 1965, Orbis Books, no. 4

⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II Council, 1965, Orbis Books, no. 31.

⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 38

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, Message of January 1, 1990.

Structural analysis and working for structural and systemic change are cornerstones of the agenda of the CORI Justice Commission. 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 good will to make it available to all, is an essential ingredient 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 alms-giving 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 a sufficient method for dealing with poverty. Certainly it is not an adequate methodology for dealing with the problems of today. As world disasters consistently show, charity and the heroic efforts of voluntary agencies, which are very admirable and inspiring, cannot on their own, solve these problems on a long-term basis. Appropriate structures are required to ensure that every person has access to the resources needed to live life with dignity, and to give long-term protection to the environment.

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 come¹¹. 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 or the land exploited.

Interdependence, mutuality, solidarity, connectedness are words which are used loosely today to express a consciousness which is very Christian. All of creation is seen as a unit which 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 only achieve his or her potential in right relationships with others and the environment. All of this implies the need for appropriate structures and infrastructures to ensure that every person and all people¹² have access to the resources needed to enjoy fullness of life (John 10:10). The compelling conclusion from studying Catholic Social Thought and in particular *Gaudium et Spes* is that Catholics are called to be involved with the socio-economic and cultural reality of their time.

In summary then the Commission understands its role as a call to analyse reality, to take action to transform what is destructive and dehumanising and to cooperate in building structures that promote the reign of God.

Catholic Social thought has a range of themes that provide a coherent focus for the Commission's action. These include:

¹¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II Council, 1965, Obis Books, no. 69.

¹² Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967, no. 14

- Dignity of the human person¹³
- Human rights and duties¹⁴
- Social nature of the person¹⁵
- The common good¹⁶
- Relationship, subsidiarity and socialisation¹⁷
- Solidarity¹⁸
- Option for the poor¹⁹.

As can be seen from the footnotes, each of these themes is developed and expanded on in *Gaudium et Spes*.

Linking theory and action

The Commission believes that if these themes are to be actualised in the real world then various outcomes must be realised for all people on the planet. This would require, among other things, that every person have:

- Sufficient income to live life with dignity,
- Meaningful work,
- Appropriate accommodation,
- Adequate healthcare,
- Relevant education,
- Cultural respect, and
- Real participation.

This is not an exhaustive listing but it identifies key aspects of any future that would be consistent with a Gospel-based vision. These and related issues also place a series of responsibilities on individuals, on governments and on society as a whole. They have implications for what is expected of individuals and of how these conditions are to be secured.

As a result, the Commission is involved in addressing the policy and implementation dimensions of a wide range of issues crucial to securing this future for all. These include:

- Poverty,
- Income distribution
- Work, unemployment and job-creation
- Housing and accommodation
- Taxation
- Sustainability
- Public services
- Education²⁰
- Healthcare²¹

¹³ cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 12, 13, 16, 19, 21, 23, 25-26, 28, 32, 40-45, etc.

¹⁴ cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 29, 31, 41, 65, 71, 73, 75, 87-88, etc.

¹⁵ cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 53, 54, 56-61, etc.

¹⁶ cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 26, 59-60, 69-71, 74, 78, etc.

¹⁷ cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 6, 25, 75, 82-86, etc.

¹⁸ cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 65-71, 85-88, etc.

¹⁹ cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 66, 67, 69-70, 85-88, etc.

²⁰ Within CORI work on education is led by the CORI Education Commission

²¹ Within CORI work on healthcare is led by the CORI Healthcare Commission

- Rural and regional development
- Participation
- Third World Aid
- Migration
- Social exclusion

Again, this is not an exhaustive list of the issues addressed by the Commission.

CORI Justice Commission has believed from its inception that initiatives based on on-going action and reflection were crucially important if change was to come and if the Justice Commission was to be credible. The themes already identified have provided a framework to underpin its agenda. Talking about solidarity is not enough. It is crucial that action is taken to generate the necessary change to build solidarity. The Commission understands that building the reign of God involves doing what we can to move the present reality from where it is towards the Gospel vision of a just society. This provides the Commission with a context and a framework for its work. This involves the Commission in:

- *Identifying what the present reality really is.* Much of the Commission's work is underpinned by detailed social analysis. In doing this work the Commission follows a relatively standard approach in trying to identify the economic, political, cultural, social and historical reality. In doing this it also draws on and engages with the work of Ireland's major research institutes and providers of statistical data.
- *Developing some awareness of what alternatives to the present situation are viable or possible.* From the perspective of faith, the Commission believes that if it is to play a role in moving the world from where it is towards a future consistent with the Gospel vision, then it is essential that it seek alternatives to what is being offered in the present reality. From the perspective of the wider world which is experiencing so much change the Commission believes it is also important to seek alternatives to the vision guiding current policy. Consequently, the Commission puts a lot of work into seeking out alternatives, re-imagining the way things might be and assessing what could be both desirable and viable.
- *Discovering which of these are closest to the Gospel vision.* The Commission also puts a great deal of effort into assessing the various possibilities and deciding on which, if any, to promote or support. In doing this it has developed a series of mechanisms including 'round tables' and 'conversations' involving theologians, social analysts and people working on the issues or areas being addressed, together with Commission members, in a process of analysis, reflection and discernment to discover what the Gospel might be calling them to do in the situation being considered.
- *Taking action to move towards these alternatives.* Following on the preceding steps the Commission seeks out models of good practice that could lead towards the desired alternative or involves itself in designing action to reach such a goal. This results in the Commission being involved in a range of activities that must be addressed if the 'vision'

issue is to be treated seriously by others who are sceptical or threatened. In practice this has involved the Commission in a wide range of activities ranging from piloting programmes to researching issues to organising conferences and seminars and workshops to advocating positions. As in other stages of this process, a wide range of people and organisations are involved.

- *Recycling the process on an ongoing basis.*

In practice the CORI Justice Commission develops its work through four major programmes:

- Public Policy
- Enabling and Empowering
- Spirituality
- Advocacy and Communication

Within these programmes the Commission has more than twenty projects.

In the public policy area the major projects include:

- involvement in national Social Partnership (cf below);
- an integrated Budget project that provides a detailed analysis and critique (from a Gospel and CST perspective) of the Irish Government's annual Budget.

In the enabling and empowering area the projects include:

- Development of an MA in Social Justice and Public Policy fully validated and accredited by Dublin City University.
- Anchoring of four national networks involving substantial numbers of people in addressing issues of social justice and public policy from a CST perspective.
- Under the heading of 'spirituality' the Commission's projects include:
- 'Spirituality for Social Engagement' which involves conferences, seminars, publications and local groups focused on this issue.
- Development of a series of 'conversations' on this topic involving a range of people from different disciplines in various locations across the country.

In the area of 'advocacy and communication' the Commission's projects include:

- Production of a range of publications annually which include three books, five policy briefings and a regular newsletter.
- Ongoing implementation of a media strategy that includes regular coverage of the Commission's positions on a range of issues.

In all of this the Commission seeks to involve people from all strata in society in debate on the issues of concern. It recognises and acknowledges that it does not have all the answers. Rather, it is always struggling to get more accurate answers to the questions it asks and trying to seek out and develop better alternatives to what is already available. It offers its analysis and vision and proposals for action to the wider society for comment and critique on a regular

basis. It seeks an ongoing dialogue on these issues with the wider society as well as with those who share its Faith.

Social Partnership

Social partnership as it is structured in Ireland today emerged in the late 1980s when Ireland's economic and social development was in dire straits. There was deep recession, falling living standards, declining employment, very high unemployment levels, large-scale emigration, huge exchequer borrowing requirements and a debt/GNP level that was unsustainable. O'Donnell²² concluded that "by the mid-1980s, Ireland's economic, social and political strategy was in ruins, and its hope of prospering in the international economy was in considerable doubt".

Social partnership emerged from a concerted effort by Government, trade unions, employers and farming organisations to address this reality. The National Economic and Social Council (NESC), of which all of these sectors were members, produced a strategy document which, in turn, provided the basis for a three-year national agreement entitled The Programme for National Recovery.

Following this programme there have been five further national agreements each covering, about a three-year period. In this process the various social partners did not give up their own goals, objectives or tactics. However, they did agree "an inclusive overview of options, challenges and trade-offs, in the period covered by each of these strategy reports" according to McCarthy²³.

Three pillars negotiated and agreed the first three programmes with Government, namely, the business community, the trade unions and the farming organisations. During that time CORI Justice Commission frequently pointed out that a large section of society was not represented in this process but was affected by the decisions made. Among the (overlapping) groups identified by the Commission as not being represented in their own right were poor people, unemployed people and women. Eventually, the Government decided to add a fourth pillar to the process representing the Community and Voluntary sector. A number of groups, including CORI Justice Commission, were invited to be social partners in 1996. Since then the Commission has been one of the social partners that negotiated and signed three national agreements each of which covered a three-year period.

Strategies

Social analysis and vision building

In its various programmes and projects and especially in the social partnership arena CORI Justice Commission has approached its work from the perspective already outlined. Social analysis is the Commission's basic tool. The stance taken in approaching this analysis is the perspective of securing the human dignity of poor and excluded people. The Commission updates this analysis each year. On the academic side the Justice Commission engages with the many pieces of analyses produced by a number of reliable and credible

²² O'Donnell, R. (1998) *Ireland's Economic Transformation*, University of Pittsburgh Centre for West European Studies.

²³ McCarthy, D. (1997)

research institutions both State and private. This analysis is also tested 'at the coal face' against the experience of people who are excluded from the benefits of decision-making and by our many members who work with these groups.

Communication and dialogue

It has regularly articulated and shared its analysis of the present situation, its vision for the future and its ideas of how the Irish situation could be moved towards this vision. It has been involved in an ongoing dialogue with all the various actors in Irish society involved in these processes. It has sought to involve as broad a range of Irish society as possible. In conducting this ongoing dialogue with those who share its Faith and with the wider society it has developed the bilingualism required to ensure these dialogues are fruitful.

Gospel reflection

As outlined above, the Commission is very careful to ensure that its work is rooted in the Gospel and draws on the Catholic Social Thought tradition. It conducts an ongoing dialogue with the community of faith at every level of its activity. It also seeks to translate this perspective into a language that can be understood by the wider society that does not share its faith and uses all modern means of communication to share this perspective with as wide an audience as possible.

Negotiation and management of programmes and projects

As a recognised Social Partner the Commission is involved in negotiation, monitoring and implementation of national agreements with Government. Within its four core programmes, as identified already, it manages twenty projects on an ongoing basis. These are aimed at ensuring that its work is thorough and reliable, that it maintains its position as a credible actor in the arenas in which it works and that the Gospel perspective is articulated and has impact on a wide range of issues that are central to the CST tradition e.g. human dignity, human rights, the common good, right relationships and the environment.

Impact in specific areas

In its efforts, from a CST perspective, to engage with various disciplines and impact on Government, Social Partners, others involved in various public policy arenas and the wider society, CORI Justice Commission has been involved in a wide range of issues in recent years. We list some of these below, together with a key impact the Commission has seen emerge from its work. In each case the Commission:

- Produced an analysis of the issue (sometimes updated on an annual basis).
- Identified the problems as seen from the Commission's values-based; perspective as outlined above;
- Articulated an alternative or series of alternative initiatives or courses of action that would see the issue addressed to produce a situation more in keeping with a Gospel-based view of the world;
- Provided the research to support its position;
- Communicated its position on the issue in a wide range of arenas including public media;
- Developed an advocacy campaign on the issue;

- Conducted an ongoing dialogue with those involved in policy development (politicians and others) to test and/or advocate its proposals;
- Revised its proposals in the light of the responses it received if the critiques provided were seen as valid.

In some cases the Commission had to pilot its ideas (e.g. on turning welfare payments into paid jobs for many people) or produce original research (e.g. on issues related to Basic Income) to convince a wider audience of the viability or validity of its proposals.

Below we list the impact, or otherwise, we had in the following areas (the indent under each subheading outlines the Commission's impact):

ISSUE	IMPACT OF JUSTICE COMMISSION
Income	Got agreement that the lowest social welfare rates should be set at 30% of gross average industrial earnings. This was a huge improvement on the previous situation and was necessary as 60% of those at risk of poverty in Ireland are not among the unemployed. They are outside the labour force (i.e. elderly, ill, caring, disabilities) and depend on social welfare payments. The Government has committed itself to reaching this level of payment for the lowest social welfare rates by 2007. It is currently on target to reach this goal.
Work	Promoted the recognition of unpaid work, much of it done by women in caring roles in the society. This issue is now on the national policy agenda. There is a growing recognition of the need for work/life balance as it is called in Ireland. The major challenge is to ensure that people will have sufficient income to underpin the emergence of such a balance. The need to provide some form of basic income for people in this situation is being progressed slowly.
Housing and Accommodation	Played a key role in having Government accept that social housing should be a major priority in policy. Targets have now been accepted for the first time that should lead to the elimination of 'waiting lists' for social housing, a reversal of the trend of the last two decades when the number of households on these lists grew steadily. Implementing these new targets will require very substantial financial investment. The outcome will have a huge impact on people's access to appropriate accommodation - a basic requirement if human dignity is to be respected.
Migration, refugees, asylum-seekers and racism	Highlighted the need for an integrated migration policy that encompassed migrant rights, refugees, asylum seekers and racism. Government has now taken a

	number of key initiatives towards developing such an integrated policy. The Commission is directly involved in this policy development.
The issue of what constitutes 'progress'	Challenged the generally accepted measurement of progress and sought to broaden it from GDP/GNP to encompass a wide range of other issues. The Commission succeeded in having Government introduce a comprehensive list of progress indicators and these are now measured on a regular basis and the results are published. The Commission also contributed to the work being done by the OECD to generate a standard set of progress indicators to be measured by all countries.
MA in Social Justice and Public Policy	Developed, and continues to play a major role in, a Masters Degree programme that integrates the study of social justice and public policy. This MA programme emerged from the Commission's internship programme, implemented over a ten-year period, where all the modules were originally developed.
The 'Lisbon' Agenda	Sought to ensure that the EU did not promote competitiveness and growth at the expense of social inclusion and social cohesion. Despite much work in this area there is little evidence as we write that the Commission has been successful in this regard. It has, however, succeeded in putting it on the Irish Government's agenda.
Third World Aid	Played a leading role in the grouping of organisations that convinced Government to commit to meeting the UN target for Third World Aid (0.7% of GNP) by 2007. While there has been a significant increase since the commitment was made the target will not be reached on time. The Commission's focus now is on getting the Government to meet the target by 2010.

These are just a number of the issues addressed. There are many more that could be listed and elaborated. The Commission has not always been successful in its efforts. However, any fair evaluation of the past two decades would acknowledge that the Commission has addressed many difficult issues, has developed widespread credibility across the spectrum and has had a substantial impact on a wide range of issues that promote the CST themes identified already in this paper.

Institutional Embodiment

Reflecting on the experience of the Justice Commission in its various projects and efforts to influence the shape of society a number of conclusions emerge.

- The Commission is now deeply embedded in the policy-making process in Ireland particularly through its recognition as a Social Partner and its involvement in the negotiation and implementation of national agreements.
- The Commission is represented in a wide range of other policy-making arenas that flow from its involvement in social partnership. For example, it is currently a member of the Board of COMHAR, the national sustainable development agency. Since 1992 it has had a seat on the National Economic and Social Forum. Since 1997 it has been elected to membership of the National Economic and Social Forum. It is also a member of the National Strategy for Women Review Group. It is, or has been, a member of a range of working groups addressing issues such as housing, taxation policy, poverty and social exclusion, equality, Travelling People, Third World Aid, etc.
- The Commission produces about fourteen publications a year. These publications form part of the landscape of policy development and are widely used by a range of actors in the various policy making arenas.
- The Commission has good working relationships with all political parties who have elected members in the Dail and Seanad (Ireland's parliament).
- Both Government and Opposition parties are met on a regular basis, briefings are supplied and issues discussed. These meetings are sought and welcomed by the political parties.
- The Commission also meets from time to time with civil and public servants who are dealing with the various issues it seeks to have addressed.
- It is involved in enabling and empowering a wide range of other organisations and individuals to play an active part in promoting the issues it addresses. This involves training, mentoring and a range of other activities.
- Its annual Budget project is recognised as a comprehensive, competent, timely body of work on which a large number of actors in policy-making arenas draw. This project includes research, publications, meetings, media interventions and a range of other work before and after the Government produces its annual Budget each year. In this range of activity the Commission provides an analysis of issues that should be addressed in the Budget, proposals for Government that are costed and situated within responsible fiscal parameters and, within a matter of hours of the Budget's publication by Government, it provides a detailed analysis and critique of the Government's decisions and their impact.
- The Commission has developed links and a structured, ongoing dialogue with a wide range of other actors in civil society.
- The Commission is well-known across the media covering the electronic and print, the national and local. Throughout the period of bad publicity surrounding the child abuse scandals the Commission maintained a solid and positive profile despite the attempts of some to undermine its position because of these scandals.

Being Credible

Developing and maintaining credibility is crucial if a Church body such as the CORI Justice Commission is to have an ongoing impact and is to institutionally imbed its work on policy development. From our experience with the

Commission we suggest a Church body must meet the following seven requirements if it is to be a credible actor in the economic, political, cultural and social spheres. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list but these seem to us to be especially relevant given our experience in the social partnership and related contexts of Ireland at the start of the 21st century. The seven we suggest are:

- *Social analysis*

For the most part there is no one, clear, obvious, unambiguous reading of reality. However the Justice Commission seeks to underpin its work by detailed and objective as possible social analysis.

- *Dialogue - the issue of conversation*

This involves dialogue with the Commission's own membership and constituency, with the wider society and with the policy-making process.

- *Being bilingual*

Dialogue involves the Justice Commission in two different 'conversations' going on all the time. These dialogues or conversations are with those who share our Faith and with the wider society. The conversation the Commission conducts with the wider society is deeply informed by the conversation it conducts with those who share our Faith. The stance taken in the wider society stems from the conclusions being reached in the Faith conversation.

- *Vision-building*

The Justice Commission believes that if we are to be serious about the reign of God then we must be serious about this issue of vision-building. We need to be willing to envisage alternatives that are attainable. This is especially important in the Irish context, as much of Ireland's development is dependent on the wider world providing a positive environment.

- *On-going action*

The Commission seeks to design actions that could lead towards reaching that alternative future. This results in the Commission being involved in a range of activities that must be addressed if the 'vision' issue is to be treated seriously by others who are sceptical, threatened or comfortable with the status quo.

Being prophetic and resisting the temptation to be absorbed by the status quo

The more one is involved in the wider reality the greater the danger that one will be absorbed by the status quo. Instead of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and working for a world that is closer to its core message, there is a temptation to accept the dominant core meaning underpinning the status quo. This must be resisted.

- *Realising credibility comes through involvement*

Credibility never comes by 'speaking from on high'. Involvement is essential for credibility to be present. Being a voice is not enough. One must also be involved in action. Talk alone is not enough. If the Commission is to be credible in the economic, political, cultural and social context then it is crucial that it be involved in a real way.

Ongoing Challenge

The Justice Commission always offers its analysis, critique, vision, alternative ideas, and activities etc. as contributions to the public debate on the specific issues addressed. It seeks responses to its positions. It realises that dialogue and conversation with the wider reality are crucial aspects of seeking the truth. It is also aware that it must be open to change in response to what emerges in the dialogue. Too often positions emanating from Church bodies are presented

in an unintelligible language and/or depend for their credibility on claims that they are emanating, even if indirectly, from God. This is not a credible position for a minister of the Gospel in these arenas in the twenty-first century. The Scriptures and our Christian tradition provide us with a rich heritage from which to draw our inspiration and our direction in our engagement in the political, economic, cultural and social issues of our time.

‘The future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping’ (Gaudium et Spes 31)