

Social Justice – new knowledge – new responsibility



Whether it be homelessness, refugees, domestic violence, poverty or environmental degradation, the call for justice and compassion has never been stronger in our nation. In this reflection Ron Rolheiser looks at the call for systemic justice and the challenge for us all to change the structures that keep people and the planet poor and exploited on many levels.

Former Jesuit superior general Pedro Arrupe was once asked why there is such an emphasis today on **social justice** when, in the past, many saintly persons and good spiritual writings appeared almost entirely to neglect this, at least in terms of an explicit development. He answered rather simply; "Today we know more!"

He is right. In the past, because we knew less, it was possible to be good and saintly and less involved in social justice, despite the fact the scripture and Christ's explicit teaching make the call to justice just as non-negotiable as the call to prayer and **private morality**. Today we know more, not just because modern communications daily show us the victims of injustice on our television screens and in our newspapers, but also, and especially, because we are less sociologically naïve. Put positively, this lack of naivete means that we understand better how social systems affect us, both for good and for bad – and social justice is really about how systems affect us, especially adversely.

It is very important that this be understood.

Although they interpenetrate each other and depend upon each other, social justice and social morality are distinct from private charity and private morality. Private morality is something that I do on my own. Other persons might guide me or inspire me but, in the end, I am moral and charitable on the basis of my own personal goodness and personal actions.

Social justice, on the other hand, has to do with the social systems I am part of and participate in. I can be a good person in my private life, churchgoing, prayerful, kind, honest, gentle, and generous in my dealings with others, and still, at the same time, be part of a social, economic, political, and even ecclesial system that is unfair in that it works for the benefit of some at the cost of victimising others. Issues such as war, poverty, violation of the ecology, feminism, native rights, abortion, and racism (to name just a few) are caused not simply, nor indeed any longer *primarily*, by individual persons acting in bad conscience and doing bad things, but by huge impersonal systems that are inherently unfair and are, to an extent, beyond the control of the individuals who participate in them.

Source: Rolheiser, R. (2001) *Against an Infinite Horizon – The Finger of God in Our Everyday*.

REFLECTION

> How can you work against unjust systems which victimise and harm others?