

Are we our own worst enemies?

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Introduction

CCJD seeks to promote development, but to do so justly. The Catholic Church in the Pacific recognizes the legitimate desire for economic and human development. We do not urge people to cling blindly to the past and forgo all that modernity offers. Yet we are also aware of the risks that economic development brings, especially the danger that not all will be allowed access to a better life. So it is that we must equally emphasize justice as a companion to development. In its simplest sense, justice means rendering to everyone their due, letting everyone enjoy what is rightfully theirs

Nonetheless, we see all too many examples of development without justice in the Pacific today. Where abuses occur, it is normally not because we hate others or set out to wilfully defraud others of what is rightfully theirs, but because we are too narrowly concerned with our own personal welfare. Many are interested in nothing more than taking care of themselves, even at a cost to others.

Let me illustrate by saying a few words about some of what I see as the main justice issues as they affect our island nations today.

The new elite

After years of living under the flags of foreign powers, most of our islands have achieved political independence and full self-government. As independent countries, we are now no longer forced to subordinate our own interests to those of a foreign power.

*This is the text of a speech delivered September 16, 1995 in Western Samoa by Bishop of the Caroline Islands Amando Samo. The occasion was a meeting of the CCJD (Conference on Just Development). Samo is the first Micronesian (from Chuuk) to be a bishop in the Catholic Church.

Unfortunately, events in the years since independence have shown that we can not blame all injustices on transnations, trade inequities and First World nations richer and stronger than ourselves. We must admit that we islanders are just as capable of perpetrating injustice against one another as are the outsider who once ruled us or even today enjoy economic superiority.

With the growth of what has been called the New Elite over a generation and more, island leaders have risen to new heights of power everywhere in the Pacific. Unfortunately, some of them have taken advantage of their position to enrich themselves at the expense of the people they claim to serve. It is, sadly, all too common to hear of an islander selling away his country's interests for personal gain. This happens when an official accepts bribes from a fishing or logging company in exchange for granting tax breaks or turning a blind eye to abuses. It happens when a legislator uses his position to enact laws that will further his personal interests but which are detrimental to the nation. It happens when a government leader appoints his own cronies, however inept they may be, to important national positions. Such persons betray the trust their people have placed in them in order to enrich themselves and their families.

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Marginalization and modernization

Although our traditional island societies were never egalitarian, everyone was given an opportunity to participate to some extent in the political and social processes of the community. The variations in status were great and depended on blood line, gender and other factors, but the community was consulted on important decisions in various informal ways.

The irony is that today, in an age that preaches the importance of equality, our societies seem to be moving toward greater inequality. Let's take a few examples.

- Land is being increasingly concentrated in the hands of entrepreneurs and those with the money to buy land. Heads of families often claim lands for themselves and their children that was intended to benefit the entire extended family. We watch the growth of a landless segment of society

- As people move from the villages to urban areas, many are without the basic land and housing they once enjoyed in the village. The living standard of these people is declining rather than improving. All too often they are bereft of the political support they once enjoyed in the village.
- Women, who never held public political power, used to exercise certain "hidden" influence and enjoyed responsibilities in their own extended families and communities. Now they are stripped even of these, while they are sometimes denied access to new positions in modern society.

We ought to examine the plight of these "forgotten" and marginalized groups, not in the name of democracy (which is still a new form of government in most of our islands), but to assist them in reclaiming some of the voice and influence they once enjoyed in our traditional societies.

Foreign workers

In today's modern economy, with the pressures that it puts on individuals to earn and countries to industrialize, there is a growing demand for jobs at various skills levels and for workers willing and able to fill these jobs. The result is a flow of the workforce from one part of the Pacific to another, and from Pacific rim countries to our islands and back. Kiribati, which lacks jobs, has been sending labourers to Nauru and other places; Samoans and Tongans have left in great numbers for New Zealand and the United States, Cook Islanders, Tokelauans and Tuvaluans, among others, have emigrated in search of jobs. On the other hand, Asians (especially Filipinos, Chinese and Koreans) have been brought in to take skilled jobs that cannot be filled locally or to do work that no one else wants.

My own country, the Federated States of Micronesia, has felt the tidal pull of migration in both directions. Since the compact of Free Association with the US in 1986, thousands of our people have left for Guam and the Northern Marianas for employment they could not find at home. Meanwhile, our nation has recruited doctors and nurses, accountants, fishermen and labourers from the Philippines and other Asian countries to take vital jobs.

The treatment shown to foreign workers, whether our own people abroad or those who come to our islands, is not always just, not to say loving. There are cases of defraudment of wages, threats of violence and physical mistreat-

ment. Such cases aside, foreign workers commonly feel a hostility or resentment towards them by local people.

The church in the Pacific need not encourage the recruitment of foreign labour. Hiring foreign workers should be a temporary strategy which we resort to only until we have developed the skilled workforce to provide for our own needs. But while foreign workers are employed, they should be shown the respect and dignity to which they are entitled. This is equally true of our countrymen who go abroad and those we bring in to fill jobs in our islands.

Ecology: avoiding resource depletion

Nearly every day we hear cries of alarm about damage to the environment: global warming, the destruction of the ozone layer, the vanishing forests, and the extinction of animal species. We may recognize the danger, but our first reaction is often a feeling of powerlessness in the face of these global problems.

If these dangers were just the result of a cosmic breakdown, we might be able to shrug them off as unfortunate but inevitable. But the truth of the matter is very different. Much of the damage that is occurring to our environment is brought on by our contemporaries' selfishness and blindness to the needs of the future generations. I mention this as a justice issue because human beings today, in the Pacific and other parts of the world, are depriving our children and grandchildren of what should be rightfully theirs in years to come. We are making life a little more comfortable for ourselves at the expense of our descendants.

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When we destroy forests without replacing them, we are cheating those who will follow us. The same is true when we destroy the reefs that nurture the fish that will feed future generations or delight the tourists that support our descendants. The same can be said of the pollution of needed water resources and the reckless

disposal of waste products. We may get by today, but we are denying our heirs the good things that we once enjoyed. Isn't this injustice?

Not everything done in the name of development is justifiable. Fortunately, today we have added the adjective "sustainable" to remind us that life goes on long after we are gone and that we have obligations to those who follow.

Weapons testing

The last issue I would like to mention is one that is a throw-back to older days. It's an issue, unlike the others I've brought up, that does not seem to be within our power to remedy. Yet, it is one that deserves mention here.

The Pacific has served as battleground for world powers in the past. The memories of the horrors of the war fought in these waters and on many of our islands fifty years ago are still vivid for some of our people. Having tasted the bitterness of war, we in the Pacific would like to be the standard-bearers of peace.

The sad fact is, however, that our islands are still being used to test nuclear weapons and the means of delivering these weapons. Over the protests of nearly all our governments as well as PCC and CEPAC, the French continue to test their nuclear weapons in Mururoa. But the French are not the only ones to defy our aspirations to make the Pacific a community that lives up to its name. The US government continues to use Kwajalein as testing ground for the delivery of nuclear warheads. The Republic of the Marshall Islands is also entertaining offers to convert some of its islands into a

radioactive garbage dump, in spite of all the ecological and health risks that this entails. We cannot put the entire blame on France and the U.S. Our own islands are compliant with these foreign powers because of the profits they stand to reap from these arrangements. Ecological concerns and the mission of peace that Pacific nations would like to embrace are secondary to the immediate gain they would receive from these powers.

Conclusion

This brings us back to where we began: a broad sense of justice. A justice that looks to the good of the entire region, not just a few nations or a handful of individuals within the nations. A justice that looks to the good of those who will follow us and will have to live off the resources they inherit from us. It is this broad definition of justice that I suggest we adopt, for only such a notion of justice is adequate to see to the welfare of all God's children.

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References

References are available from the author. □

