

SYNOD OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF DURBAN

23 - 24 May, 1974.

ADDRESS TO SYNOD
on
SERVICE AND SHARING.

by

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*When did he
address the
Natal Council of
Churches?
on the same topic
Arch. Hurley.*

We move now to the theme of Service.

DIAKONIA.

Some of you are already acquainted with the project called DIAKONIA that I have been advocating for some time and about which I have spoken to the Senate of Priests, the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the annual general meeting of the Natal Council of Churches.

The idea of Diakonia came to mind on the occasion of a symposium organised by the Social Welfare Commission in June, 1973. It came, I think, as the result of a number of converging considerations, such as :

1. The need experienced by several commissions for full-time personnel if anything systematic is to be achieved. The more we experience of commission work, the more we realise that commissions and communities can debate and decide, but, unless there are people serving on such bodies or employed by them with time to attend to the implementation of the decisions, very little can be achieved.

The Justice and Peace Commission has emphasised this; so has the Social Welfare Commission, and it has also been emphasised by Father Sean O'Riordan, M.S.C., acting on behalf of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, in regard to what is known as community development, that is helping people in an undeveloped situation to form themselves into communities of self-help. Every other commission or committee feels the same about the need for people with time to do the work.

2. The second consideration is that, in the field of attending to human needs, everything overlaps. Broadly speaking, there are three principal categories of human need:

Saint Agustin

- (a) Welfare needs, which include mainly the requirements of deprived persons or families in an otherwise adequate community.
- (b) Development needs, which are the needs of a community not yet at the same level of development as neighbouring communities and, consequently, at a disadvantage.
- (c) Liberation needs, which imply that there are obstacles, political, economic or cultural, to development.

Though each category emphasises a different aspect of human need, in practice the categories overlap. Community development, for instance, is considered essential to social welfare; and there can be no true liberation which is not at the same time development.

The use of the word 'liberation' may cause misgiving. It sounds too politically activist, and for many may even connote violence. This is not the idea I wish to convey. The Church must be interested in liberation where there are obstacles to development; but the long and unhappy history of Church involvement in direct political action should convince us that the Church's role in liberation must remain indirect; that is, critical and educational, but not activist.

3. The third consideration is the one emphasised by our Ecumenical Commission, namely, that, whenever Christian action is undertaken, a church should never do alone what it can do with others. Christian service, diakonia, offers the best opportunities to the churches to engage in ecumenical collaboration. Where the ministries of word and worship have their problems in the ecumenical field, especially for Catholics, practical Christian service can offer opportunities for united action without reservation or hesitation.

4. The fourth consideration is that wherever a social problem exists, there are two sides to the question: the side of the 'haves' and the side of the 'have-nots'. The 'haves' may be totally unaware that in living their own life and running their own business they are perpetuating a situation in which the 'have-nots' remain deprived - deprived of basic necessities, deprived of opportunities for development, deprived of freedom to help themselves. This is one of the tragedies of human social situations, the blindness of the 'haves' to what they are inflicting on the 'have-nots', just by being what they are and doing what they think they have every right in the world to do. They must be made aware of the injustices and privations for which they are responsible. And the 'have-nots' must find opportunities for development and liberation.

Comprehensive services Diakonia

Taking all these considerations into account, it occurred to me that it might be useful to set up an agency which could give them all their rightful place in a Christian endeavour to meet human need: welfare, development, liberation, ecumenical collaboration, the need of the 'haves' to understand and of the 'have-nots' to achieve and acquire. Perhaps it is a pipe-dream to expect any one agency to attend to so many aspects of a human situation. Nevertheless, I think it is worth giving the undertaking a try. To this agency I would give the name DIAKONIA - service. It would be an endeavour to give direction and drive to the Church's duty to respond to human need according to the conditions and circumstances of the time.

The Church cannot escape this duty for it is the practical expression of Christian love which is the fundamental law of the Church. We read in the Acts of the Apostles how the Apostles chose seven deacons to attend to the needs of the poor because this was such an important task. (Acts 6: 1-4). We might even be justified in saying that the first men ordained to work in the Church after the Apostles themselves were not bishops or priests, but deacons to serve the poor.

We remember, too, from the history of the Church in the West, that from the Dark Ages right down to the Age of Revolution, that is, for more than a thousand years, practically all education and all welfare work were a monopoly of the Church. We also recall that the history of Christian missions is a history of service to people in education and welfare. Nor can we fail to be aware of the magnificent witness of Christian compassion given for over a hundred years by one of our best known lay associations, the St. Vincent de Paul Society. It is taken for granted that where there is a human need the Church should endeavour to meet it.

The Church can never abandon this responsibility. It belongs to her very nature. Human needs may change, but the responsibility of the Church to meet them never falls away. The difficulty of our times is that with the enormous growth of the human population in recent centuries, most human needs are no longer the needs of scattered individuals, they are social needs, the needs of entire communities, social problems, about which individuals working in isolation can do very little, problems that require corporate endeavour and an organised, specialised approach. A great many "deacons" with ability, training and time at their disposal are required in the Church to-day to give effect to what our Christian concern should be. It is probably correct to say that the relevance and significance of the Church in the modern world depends on how this concern is manifested.

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DIAKONIA IN PRACTICE

To bring all these considerations down to the practical level, a Diakonia agency would have to be limited in scope to a manageable geographical area, and this for two reasons: firstly, because to give a single agency too wide a field of operations would be to dissipate and frustrate its efforts; and secondly, because of the experimental nature of the project in its initial stages. By way of illustration I should like to propose the Greater Durban area for an initial experimental field. It has the population and the problems.

Focus
on
area

Community Development

Within the Greater Durban area there are many communities that could profit enormously from the application of self-help or community development. I understand that the basic principle in this field is to assist a community to identify its principal needs, to establish priorities and then assist it to discover the people who can help it to help itself. The main problem could be a housing problem at Wentworth, a problem of transport at Chatsworth, a problem of child-care at Kwa Mashu. I say it could be. I am not saying that it is; for to say this in advance would offend against the basic principle of getting the community to identify its own problems. Once a problem is agreed upon, the next step apparently would be to find people who can be of service to the community to ensure that the community itself works out the solution to it - a formidable task, no doubt, but apparently a realisable one if the proper methods are followed.

for the housewife

Information and Education.

That would be the basic approach of Diakonia to the 'have-nots'. In regard to the haves, the important consideration is that they should become aware of the situation of the 'have-nots'; of the privation and injustices under which they suffer, and for which the society to which they, the 'haves' belong, bears a large measure of responsibility. It can be quite a shattering experience to discover that the community to which one belongs, the society that gives one a good life, is guilty of the sin of oppression, preventing others from satisfying their basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, employment, wages, education, health care and political participation. This is the enormous need affecting the White population in South Africa, the need to know what it inflicts on others just by living the life it thinks it has a right to live and doing the things it thinks it has a right to do.

Diakonia's duty to Whites is to help them meet this need, the need to know and to act with Christian courage in the light of that knowledge. It must serve as a centre for information and education. It should be an agency able to provide White church members and congregations with knowledge about the social situation around them and opportunities for Christian action, about problems that have to be solved and solutions that are being tried, about projects and undertakings in which Christian people could get involved.

Diakonia would have a special duty to those in positions of power, the duty of bringing to their notice the privations and disabilities of people dependent on them.

Obviously the multiplicity of undertakings could not be tackled all at once. Priorities would have to be decided upon and a careful selection made of realisable undertakings.

Organisation.

(i) Diakonia should be built around a paid director equipped with whatever is necessary in terms of secretarial help, literature, education aids, transport and other help that may become necessary as the project develops and, hopefully, finance becomes available. One of the first requirements would be assistants able to specialise in certain aspects of the work, such as community development, adult education and social welfare. But this would require an enormous amount of finance and can only be dreamed about at this stage. A lone director and a secretary would have to struggle on manfully for the time being, and even that would require an annual outlay of about R12,000.

(ii) Board of Management.

The director should be responsible to a Board of Management consisting of representatives of the Churches. In the choice of representatives every effort should be made to ensure that a broad representation is achieved, not only of denominations, but also of race groups, men and women, laity and clergy.

(iii) Communication:

For effective communication between Diakonia and the participating Churches, each Church should be invited to set up an organisation to which its representatives could report regularly and from which they could receive expressions of opinion. The representatives should not be bound by such expressions of opinion,

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secretary
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but should obviously be guided by them in Board discussions. In other words, the Board should be autonomous but deeply conscious of its obligation to the Churches.

As regards the Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Durban, our contact organisation could be a committee representative of the Justice and Peace, Social Welfare and Ecumenical Commissions.

(iv) Funds.

These could be provided by participating churches in terms of an agreed formula, and by appeals to funding organisations.

When do we start?

Should all this be agreed to in principle, and I should like to have the matter fully debated before asking for such an agreement, the question that arises is: When do we start? My answer to this is: as soon as possible.

"As soon as possible" would, of course, be a matter of two or three years if the agreement of other churches to participation were to be obtained before the project is launched. I should not care to wait that long, and my proposal is that, if the Synod agrees, we start as soon as we can find a suitable director, and finance the project alone if necessary until other Churches see their way to joining us. The authorities of all Churches represented on the Natal Council of Churches have been informed about the project, and a general meeting of the Natal Council of Churches has voted in support of it. But, of course, this does not commit member Churches, and we have to wait for a specific reply from each of them. I do not think they would be adverse to our starting Diakonia, and I am sure that if they think it worthwhile they will participate in due course.

Conclusion

No one can guarantee the success of this venture. We cannot even tell if it is in keeping with God's loving design. We can only find out by experimenting. But the conviction grows in me, day by day, that the effectiveness of the Church in the world and the acceptance of its message of salvation and of its witness to Christ vitally depend on the Church being seen as a community of love and concern. I need not enlarge upon that. Jesus himself emphasised it beyond all possibility of doubt or misunderstanding. The strongest argument for the Church is its concern for those in need.

Perhaps we have overlooked this in the recent history of the Church - if not in principle, at least in practice; though not, obviously, in every aspect of practice. The Church has always inspired some form of concern, but the concern on which we have slipped up is the concern for those battered by the two most aggressive developments of Western culture, capitalism and colonialism: underpaid workers and exploited populations of colonised countries. The world is full of the victims of these two excesses. We can only regret that the Church has failed to play the role it should have in curbing them. We can only resolve to do our share now to make up for past and present failures. Diakonia, in one form or another, is destined, I think, to become as important a concern of the Church as the ministry of word and worship; for otherwise this saying of Jesus would have no meaning; "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another". (John 13: 35).

In the opulent world of the West the call to self-sacrifice and service could be just what is required to rouse Christian people from the paralysis of over-indulgence. Amid the poverty and privation of the Third World the challenge of a Christianity that inspires human development could be a great hope for the future.

This is the motivation behind the Proposal 3B on the agenda paper:

That this Synod favours the establishment of the type of ecumenical agency described in the Archbishop's address on Diakonia, and recommends that His Grace, with the support of the Senate of Priests and the Diocesan Pastoral Council, take all necessary steps, in collaboration with other Christian churches, to have the agency set up under the name of DIAKONIA or any other suitable title.