

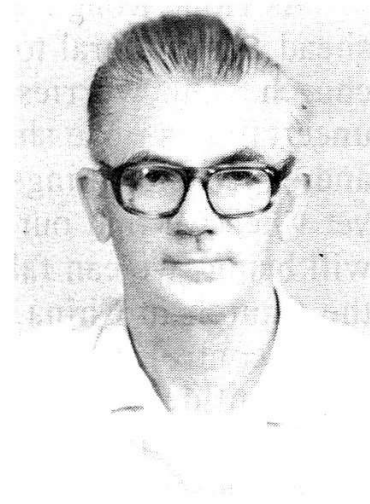
Social Involvement: The Experiences of One Parish

by James Hurley, S.J.

Introduction

Christ the Worker Parish came into existence in 1967. No one knows for certain the exact day or month - even the official records for this event have been lost! The name of the parish is significant. It reflects the spirit of the Vatican Council which had just ended - a desire to dissociate the Church from any suggestion of triumphalism, and instead strongly associate itself with the more marginalised members of Hong Kong society. And according to its first Parish Priest, Fr. Howard Trube, 90 per cent of the parishioners were ordinary workers who lived and toiled at the mercy of factory bosses. Labour legislation at that time was still minimal. In addition, memories of the 1967 riots, sparked by a labour dispute, were still fresh in the minds of all. And so the name of the new parish, especially its Chinese translation, was regarded as quite daring.

I was assigned to this parish in the early summer of 1978. Originally I was to spend one year there deputising for a priest who was on study leave. However one year became eleven years, and for seven of these I was the Parish Priest. This was my first experience of pastoral work in a parish. Before that my main work had been as chaplain to university and post-secondary students. But I was chaplain during the eventful, and often stormy years, of the student movement. This experience deepened my commitment to social justice and human rights. Shortly before going to Christ the Worker parish I had spent two periods as a worker priest, and in fact had seriously thought of permanently committing myself to this mission. However after a period of prayer and discernment I felt that this was not for me.



Early Days

Being in a completely new situation I was determined to observe, tread warily, bide my time, and not rush into things. However early on I had to make a difficult decision. 1978 was the year of the World Cup, and it was being held in Argentina. At that time the human rights record of the Argentine was very low. Under an oppressive government there were flagrant abuses of human rights, and torture was common. Amnesty International - of which I was a member - had mounted a campaign under the slogan "Football yes, torture no". On the Sunday of the final match should I preach about this? The vast majority of the parishioners could by no means be considered as progressive where questions of social justice and human rights were concerned. I wrestled with this problem and finally decided to take a calculated risk. I carefully selected examples which focused on Church people as victims of human rights. I survived. As far as I know there was no unfavourable reaction.

Some months later I was asked by the local branch of Amnesty International to write a letter to El Salvador in connection with a raid on a retreat house, and the killing of some of the retreatants. I asked a friend in the parish whom I knew to be interested if he would co-sign the letter. He agreed, and moreover suggested bringing this matter to the attention of the whole parish. I reflected, but felt the time was not yet ripe. Some days later, in the course of a casual conversation with the parish priest, I mentioned this matter. His reaction was strong and positive, and felt the matter should indeed be brought to their attention. I did so the following Sunday at Mass. The situation was explained, and they were invited to sign a letter of support. To our very great surprise almost 150 people signed. Quite beyond our expectations! That Sunday's approach also gave us ideas for the future.

All along I had been discreetly searching for people interested in joining a possible Justice and Peace group. By November 1979 we were ready, and at one of the Sunday Masses we formally proclaimed its existence. It was a small group, just four people. However, over the years it grew to about ten. It has had its moments of crisis and, at one point in its first year, we had to declare a "cooling off" period. However it survived. It even matured in the process. Eventually, the group became

quite closely knit, and could be called a "basic Christian community".

Two events stand out in those early years. In March 1980 Archbishop Romero of El Salvador was shot dead while saying Mass. Our group responded promptly. We had in our possession a photo of the Archbishop addressing a group of people. This was blown up to an appropriate size, and was placed in a prominent position for the following Sunday Mass. At this Mass we spoke about the Archbishop's life, his conversion to social justice, and his subsequent strong and unambiguous sermons in defense of the poor and oppressed in El Salvador. We also prepared a letter and asked the parishioners to sign. The response was excellent; over 400 people signed. This letter was then sent to El Salvador.

The second event was related to the declaration of martial law in Poland and the arrest of Lech Walesa, the founder of Solidarity. Again a letter was prepared, and signed this time by over 700 people. Cardinal Glemp himself replied thanking us for our support. This letter from the Cardinal was for many years among the most treasured possessions of Christ the Worker Parish.

Developments

In its early years our Justice and Peace group had been to a great extent concerned with issues outside of Hong Kong, but later on we began to link up with other Hong Kong groups committed to Hong Kong problems. One of these problems was the question of representative government and direct elections to the Legislative Council. Our parish group played an active part in these campaigns, participating in rallies and marches, issuing statements, and conducting surveys among the parishioners. During those years "green papers" were issued by the government soliciting the views of people. We exhorted our parishioners to participate. One Sunday, I exhorted them to read a particular "green paper" and offer their comments. I said jokingly that, for the immediate future, penances in confession would be based on this paper: for a venial sin a penitent would be obliged to read one chapter, and for a mortal sin, the complete booklet. I did not notice any decrease in the number of people going to Confession as a result of this statement.

Our group also began to focus on *neighbourhood* problems. One of these concerned a cinema almost on our doorsteps which specialised in Category 3 films. It was widely felt that its advertisements sinned against even the relaxed standards set by the Government. One member of our group, after consultation with his wife, regularly took photos of these offending advertisements. These were then sent to local Councillors and the relevant Government departments. Pressure was brought to bear on the owner of the cinema, and although he was never convicted in court, on one occasion at least, police confiscated material from his cinema. It must have been a somewhat unnerving time for this proprietor. The parish had hoped to mobilise all the parishioners, and others in the area, to confront this problem. However the campaign never got off the ground. Eventually the cinema had to close its doors, but our Justice and Peace group can by no means claim the sole credit for this.

In the early 80's another socially orientated group came into existence in the parish: *Amnesty International* (AI). For some years we had been looking around for people who might be interested in joining such an organisation. When we felt the time was ripe the group was formally set up. But soon there was a crisis. The young man we looked upon as the pillar of the group declared he was not genuinely interested, and withdrew. A shock! But once again we managed to survive. Very soon AI became responsible in the parish for the commemoration of prisoners of conscience in October; the celebration of human rights in December, and a Lenten Stations of the Cross for victims of human rights. It also adopted a prisoner of conscience from the Philippines, with whom we regularly corresponded. Later on, one of our enterprising members made a copy of the AI symbol: a lighted candle surrounded by barbed wire. We used this in our liturgies, and found it a very powerful and compelling symbol, a most effective homily in its own right. One AI sponsored activity stands out. Anthony Rogers, a LaSalle Brother working in Kuala Lumpur, and Vincent Cheng, Executive Secretary of Singapore's Justice and Peace Commission, had been arrested and detained. Christmas was approaching. A girl teaching in our Sunday school and also a member of AI, organised a competition among the children for the designing of a Christmas card. At our Human Rights Mass in early December the children with the winning designs were presented

with their prizes. The parishioners were then invited to sign their names on these winning cards and send their best wishes and Christmas greetings to Anthony and Vincent. This was a very imaginative approach to human rights. It also involved children, and brought about cooperation between two parish organisations.

In the second half of the 80's a new *parish council* was formed. According to the constitution of this Council one of the Executive Committee members would be entrusted with responsibility for coordination and development of social involvement in the parish. But much more important, this new Parish Council was not merely consultative; it exercised real authority. The parish priest was a member with one vote, but no veto powers. Because this went beyond the present Code of Canon Law, there was consultation with the Diocese. It was decided to experiment for one year before coming to a final decision. The year's experience was positive, and at the end of the year it was decided to make it permanent.

Later on in the year the parishioners were given the opportunity of exercising genuine democracy. There was a proposal to change the times of the Sunday Masses. On one particular Sunday this was explained to the people. They were invited to spend the following week reflecting on this, praying about it, and even discussing it in their homes. It was emphasised that their vote would be genuinely decisive. On the following Sunday the vote was taken. A big majority voted in favour of the proposal, but a significant minority voted against. In retrospect I appreciate the process rather more than the actual decision arrived at.

Patterns

In those early years we could be described as groping for ways to express a commitment to social justice and human rights. However, over the years certain patterns and fixed activities clearly emerged; some of these have already been mentioned.

In January we had a Justice and Peace Sunday. During Lent one of the Friday night Stations of the Cross was offered for those struggling for human rights or languishing in prison because of this struggle. On Good Friday we added an appropri-

ate prayer for justice to the already existing intercessions. The first Sunday of May was Labour Sunday. In October we prayed for prisoners of conscience. In November we prayed not merely for the dead in general, but in particular for those who had died in the previous year because of their commitment to justice and human rights. In December we highlighted Human Rights, and at Christmas we made a collection for poor students in the Philippines.

Some of these events were celebrated very simply. One example, the October commemoration of prisoners of conscience was just the communal recitation, before the final blessing, of the beautiful prayer for this intention. Other events were more elaborately celebrated. A Mass with special readings, prayers, and hymns, was composed for the occasion. Our Mass Centre was appropriately decorated, and these decorations conveyed a message. Moreover, we always insisted on some action, however simple. That action was generally the signing of some letter composed for the occasion. Its contents were made known to the parishioners before the end of the liturgy. A moment of quiet was then provided during which they were invited to make up their minds about signing. Their response was always positive, but of course sometimes it was more positive than others. The letter was then forwarded to the appropriate agency or organisation.

A special word about *Labour Day*. On the Sunday nearest to May 1, Christ the Worker Parish was determined to emphasise its devotion to its patronal name and its commitment to the workers of Hong Kong. Needless to say this was an occasion for one of these special Masses which I have already described. All of the priest workers in Hong Kong did at some time or other preside and preach at this Mass. On other occasions a young worker gave testimony. A tenth of that Sunday's collection was put aside for some worker organisation, generally YCW and its formation programmes. A statement asking for some improvement in the welfare of workers was prepared, read out, and subsequently signed by the parishioners. One particular memory about these Masses comes racing back to my mind. We were preparing the readings. I suggested chapter 5 of St. James, a passage where the apostle vehemently denounces the rich and those who oppress the poor workers. The members of our Justice and Peace group looked up this passage and came to

the conclusion that it was too strong. However, a year later they were ready to use it.

In addition to these set activities we tried to respond to *special cases*. An example: on one Sunday the Second Reading was from St. James where he speaks strongly about equality; apartheid was then a very hot issue. So we sent a letter of support to Archbishop Tutu in South Africa. Some months later the question of economic sanctions against the South African government arose. Many groups in Hong Kong took up this issue. That Sunday, a member of our Justice and Peace group, described the economic and political situation in South Africa. The presiding priest then followed with a Gospel reflection: a beautiful exercise in co-responsibility! Later on it was pointed out that the Bank where we deposited our parish money had close links with this apartheid regime. Should we withdraw our money? Alas, this question was never seriously tackled. Maybe this was a failure and a refusal to look at the full implications of our action.

Frequently we helped *individual* parishioners in matters related to justice. I recall helping an elderly lady who had been permanently but not seriously injured in an industrial accident. This involved my visiting hospitals, Government Departments, lawyers, and finally the Courts. It was a long, tedious, and often highly exasperating process, but I saw the realities of Hong Kong first hand, and am deeply grateful for the experience. On another occasion one of our parishioners, the father of a family, was killed in an industrial accident. We offered our help, but the family declined. The Bishop, on one of his pastoral visits to the parish, called on the family, and consoled them. This was greatly appreciated.

When I arrived in the parish there were three *Social Service Teams*. One had already ceased to operate, and soon died; another was active for a while and then faded out. Almost all the members of the third Team were non-Catholics, but very highly motivated. This Team went from strength to strength. Its most noteworthy project was a wide ranging sociological survey of the Ngau Tau Kok area. They published their findings in a booklet which was released at a press conference, the first press conference ever called by a parish organisation. For days afterwards the phone kept ringing with people and organisations asking for copies of the booklet. No such demand had been

anticipated, and very soon the supply was exhausted. The parish did manage to salvage one copy for its own records.

Reflections

Eleven exciting, and exhilarating years! Much activity. But what about results? At the end of the day what had we to show for it all? We did have letters from Philippine students thanking the parishioners for the financial help without which they would have been unable to continue their studies. We had Cardinal Glemp's letter thanking us on behalf of the people of Poland for our support. We also treasured the letters we received from the Philippine prisoner of conscience. We know that our letters strengthened and supported him, and probably helped towards his final release. Other examples could be given. But we cannot claim any credit for dramatic changes in unjust world structures. However changes did take place in the members of these socially oriented groups. Their commitment to justice was deepened and enriched. All were very well informed, and some were excellent at social analysis. But what about the ordinary parishioner? Their social awareness was more basic and fundamental. But it was genuine social awareness. I recall one example. At Mass on Friday morning we usually said the prayer for prisoners of conscience, but for some reason it had been omitted over a period of weeks. Imagine my surprise and joy when one morning an elderly lady asked why we hadn't been saying this prayer. Though this lady may not have been able to give a coherent definition of a prisoner of conscience, her "reproof" did reveal a definite awareness on her part. Also, the many statements of our Justice and Peace Group were always published in the *Kung Kao Po*, and our group became very well known in the Hong Kong Church. Whenever I had to introduce myself at some gathering the invariable reaction was, "Christ the Worker Parish, the place where they have that very active Justice and Peace Group". However these words of praise must be qualified. The Diocesan Convention of 1971 had asked that a Social Concern group be set up in each parish. But in the period covered in this article not more than twelve of our almost 60 parishes had such groups, and some were just "one-man buses."

In two areas we were *weak*: spiritual formation, and follow up. Each meeting did begin with a reading from Scripture, and

most of these readings were related to justice. The reading was followed by quiet, and then by prayer. This process though helpful was not enough. More could have been done. We should have paid more attention to the formation of our catechumens. Surely, it is in the catechumenate that the foundation for social awareness must be laid. And follow up? I can recall many letters sent out e.g., to Government Departments. These Departments always replied, but the matter generally stopped there. We let them off the hook altogether too easily.

Liturgical purists may look askance at, e.g., composing Masses for special occasions. We must emphasise that these liturgies were exceptional. There was a genuine loyalty to the annual liturgical cycle. Moreover, we had consulted a highly-respected Asian theologian about this. The Church has often said that liturgies must express a commitment to social justice and human rights. But, in fact, in some countries the liturgists and social activists seem to move along parallel lines. There is yet no genuine dialogue, no meeting of minds and hearts. Happily, Hong Kong has begun to take its first steps in this area.

The role of the *priest* is still of major importance, and without his active support these groups will not flourish. However, one may ask if this is a desirable situation? Perhaps it points to a Church which is not yet fully adult and has yet to come of age.

To build up social awareness in a parish we need vision, courage, daring, and a resolute spirit. But we also need:

- patience: social awareness isn't like "instant coffee".
- sensitivity: we must challenge but not alienate.
- a large heart, so that mistakes, which are inevitable, can be accepted and made an occasion for growth.

Conclusion

This is a subjective account of one parish's commitment to social justice. Hopefully, other parishes will also write up their experiences. This would give a more objective and comprehensive view of what is happening in the Church of Hong Kong and make planning for the future more realistic and effective.

In his Pastoral Letter, "March into the Bright Decade", Cardinal Wu speaks of the "servant and prophetic roles" of our Church. Let us resolutely commit ourselves to the building up of this servant and prophetic Church.