

DIGNITAS HUMANA

Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace

Christchurch Diocese, July 1999

What's Happening with Our Gun Laws?

There was a Review of Firearms Control in 1997. It was carried out by a retired High Court judge, Sir Thomas Thorp. It made a number of recommendations aimed at ensuring a higher degree of control and accountability for firearm possession and use in New Zealand. The Commission for Justice and Peace has given careful thought to them and judges them to be moderate, effective and socially desirable. In our own country, we have had the experience of massacres at Aramoana and Raurimu. Recently, in America, there has been the tragedy at Columbine High School, near Denver. Firearms are proliferating in New Zealand, with as many as 14,000 imported each year. Already, 210,000 licensed gun owners possess an estimated 700,000-1,000,000 guns.

We have a long history of legitimate and harmless gun use in New Zealand. Rifle clubs, hunting, pest control and farm use account for much of this and none of these would be affected or curtailed by the recommendations proposed by Judge Thorp. What are they? The major recommendations are these. To individually register each and every firearm, as well as the owner. To neutralise all military-style semi-automatic weapons by buying them back, and to disable restricted weapons, such as privately owned machine guns. To exclude from the law the purpose of self-defence as a legitimate reason for acquiring a firearm. To replace the 10 year licence with a 3 year licence, and to make each licence specify its gun so that ammunition sales for concealed and unregistered guns would not be possible. To establish an authority to monitor enforcement of, and compliance with, the gun laws.

In Church teaching, one of the foundational notions for a society in which persons can live cooperatively and companionably is that of the common good. It refers to all the conditions in society that enable all citizens to flourish in every dimension of the human personality. One of the elements of the common good is the peace and security of society. This is now being threatened by a rising rate of violent crime, and by the ready access of anyone at all to firearms, including

persons with personality disorders and criminal records. We think that society would be made safer if the ownership and use of firearms were more strictly controlled in the ways set out in the Thorp Report. We report that these measures would not infringe any legitimate rights and uses but would make the abuse of these weapons less likely.

Electricity Reform

South Island winters have many things to be said for them, but one constant requirement is an adequate heating source for the home. Whether the winter is hard or mild, adequate supplies of fuel for home heating are a necessity. Adequacy of supply includes availability and affordability. Christchurch provides a further element to the home-heating issue. A long-running campaign to reduce smog gained added urgency last year with the publication of a report which targeted the home heating open-fire as the major contributor of smoke pollutants to the atmosphere. The City Council will ban all such home-heating as soon as the law allows and already provides some financial incentives for home owners to move towards alternative forms of heating. At this point, when some have made the change, and thou sands of others are being cajoled into doing so, the Government-forced electricity reforms are taking effect. Designed to increase efficiency and reduce the cost of electricity to all consumers, they appear to be having the opposite effect. Prices are rising substantially. The Commission wrote to the Minister of Energy last year when the Bill implementing the reform had been introduced into Parliament. We argued that adequate access to affordable home-heating fuel was vital for health and comfort able living in Christchurch, and that any increase in electricity prices would affect most those on low incomes, because of the campaign to eliminate the open fire, in which low priced fuel could be used. This adequacy of supply of fuel is an element of the common good of society, which enables everyone to have access to what is needed for life that is truly human. He assured us that the reforms would guarantee this desirable state of affairs. It is still early days in the reformed electricity market but, already, the Minister has indicated that he is prepared to intervene in the market, to introduce regulations to prevent

consumers from being ripped off by prices that are too high. In terms of Catholic teaching, this is good news. The role of those in public authority is to defend and promote the common good of society, its citizens and intermediate bodies. If the free-market forces don't promote the common good, other measures are demanded.

Social Teachings about Refugees

Over the last few months the first of 600 refugees from Kosovo have started arriving in New Zealand. Over several decades about 750 refugees have been accepted into New Zealand annually as part of the United Nations resettlement programme for refugees who have fled their home countries and are living in refugee camps. Although this number seems small, New Zealand, relative to its population size, has accepted a significant number of refugees compared to many other countries. What should our response be to these newcomers in our society? The Church's social teaching about care for aliens and strangers is clear. The strongest possible moral imperative comes from the Book of Exodus:

You shall not oppress a stranger. You well know how it feels to be a stranger since you were once strangers yourself in the land of Egypt (Ex 23:9).

The Church considers refugees from the standpoint of Christ who died to rehabilitate the marginalised and to bring close those who are distant in order to integrate all into a life that is not based on ethnic, cultural or social membership, but on the inalienable, transcendent God-given human dignity of each person.

It is our Christian responsibility to welcome refugees with compassion and hopeful expectation. In each refugee we see Jesus, recalling His words addressed to those who would be his disciples: *I was a stranger and you took me in (Matthew 25, 35).*

It is at this time that we need to be very aware of the Church's social teaching on the principle of the universal destination of created goods. It is the right of refugees to enjoy and share in the benefits of the earth. Let us reaffirm our conviction that the world and its blessings are meant for all.

A Justice and Peace Commission survey of all parishioners in Our Lady of Fatima Parish in May 1997 found that there is considerable parishioner involvement in the incorporation of immigrants into the local community. Nearly half the

parishioners (49%) have been involved personally in helping new immigrants feel at home in the community. Set alongside this favourable commitment of parishioners to welcoming strangers in their midst, is the realisation that many refugees are largely left to fend for themselves shortly after arriving in New Zealand. Although New Zealand is one of the few countries in the world which has a formal refugee resettlement programme, it is very limited. Refugees usually spend their first six weeks in New Zealand (only one week in the case of the Kosovars) at the Mangere Refugee Centre in Auckland. The Orientation is very basic and includes health services and English language classes. After the six weeks, on-going incorporation of refugees is done voluntarily at the local level. Here, the Church's social teaching of subsidiarity comes to bear upon the situation. The government of our country, as a community of a higher order, has the responsibility to put measures in place immediately for refugees which will enable parish, as well as other lower order communities, to pursue the principles of the Church's social teachings.

Refugees provide us with the opportunity to embrace fellow human beings with that self-giving love which is the cornerstone of lasting justice and peace.

What's Wrong with Racism?

Racism is contempt for a person because of his or her race. It is based on the idea that one race is innately superior to others and results in practices of exclusion and aggression towards those who belong to the so-called inferior race. Frequently, this racist prejudice is broadened to affect persons whose appearance, language, culture or religion makes them different. The exclusion and aggression that result from such prejudice can range from discriminatory practices in the work place and housing market, to street brawls between teenage gangs, to the more private opinions and nick-names that individuals cling to and apply in a generalised way to everyone who belongs to some group that is 'different'.

Racial prejudice has been worked out in history many times. Our own century has seen it in the shoah, Hitler's attempt to eradicate the Jewish people. It was given political and legal expression the apartheid structuring of society in South Africa. Fiji has just emerged from a similar social experiment. Something of the same contempt for man, woman and child belonging to a different

group underlies the so-called ethnic cleansing of Kosovo and other parts of the Balkan region. At home, here in Christchurch, that same contempt for a group underlay some of the objections to the kura kaupapa school being constructed at present in Spreydon. A leaflet circulated last year, voicing opposition to the proposed school used arguments that were based on racial prejudice.

Beneath all racism, and the prejudices that resemble it, lies the refusal to accept that all human persons share a common and equal dignity. Such prejudice has its beginnings in the bias that we all have towards our own identity, and the groupings to which we belong, but this bias becomes sinister when it refuses to recognise 'others' as equally human persons. In physical, educational and moral powers, not all persons are equal, but Catholic faith tells us that God is at the origin of every person. All are endowed with a rational soul and all are created in God's image. All are of the same nature and origin. All are redeemed by Christ and enjoy the same divine calling and destiny.

In Catholic thought, it is this bond between the human person and the Creator that provides the basis for the intrinsic, unchanging and inalienable dignity of every person. From this dignity flow fundamental rights so that no individual, society, State or human institution can reduce a person to the status of non-person or object. This innate dignity of human person radically critiques every attempt to manipulate society or construct ideologies to the detriment of those without influence.

To deliver ourselves from racist temptations, the Church encourages us to broaden our minds by association with people of other cultures, languages, and customs so that we are enriched by ways other than our own of being human.

Third World Debt

During the 1980s many of the world's poorest countries borrowed heavily from richer states and international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to finance development projects. Very often the money borrowed was misused by governments or diverted by corrupt practices. Even where the loans were used for economic development, the projects frequently had adverse effects on the living conditions of the people in the borrowing country and on their environment.

Like loans to individuals, loans to countries also require interest to be paid on the principal. The result of high interest rates has meant that poor countries have been unable to pay the interest on debts, let alone repay the original loan. This has meant that poor countries have found themselves deeper and deeper in debt as the interest accumulates. Unlike individuals, however, states cannot declare themselves bankrupt and pay their creditors a few cents in the dollar; they remain liable for the full amount owed.

Because poor countries, mainly in Africa, Asia and Latin America, have to struggle to find money to pay the interest on their loans, they have little left to apply to social spending or development. Health and education are usually the first areas to suffer as borrower states try to cut back expenditure to meet their debts.

This might seem like a very technical and abstract issue for the Commission for Justice and Peace to be concerned with. These countries are a long way from ours, and there seems to be little we can do to help. Despite this, we must listen to what His Holiness John Paul II says in the Apostolic Exhortation *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*. He says, 'In the spirit of the Book of Leviticus (25, 828), Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the Jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not cancelling outright, the international debt, that seriously threatens the future of many nations'.

The remission of debt to celebrate the Great Jubilee is not only in keeping with the precepts of the Old Testament, it also engages a number of important aspects of the Church's social teaching. These are that we must act in solidarity with our poorer neighbours in order to advance the international common good, that is, to create the social conditions in which all people can fulfil their potential. The forgiving of debt is also an aspect of commutative justice which stops the poor from being punished because of actions taken by their own and lending states' governments. It also shows preferential love for the poor and is calculated to enhance the dignity of individuals within borrowing states.

The Commission has written to our Government about this issue exhorting it to do what it can to advance the cause of the cancellation of Third World debt. Bishop John Cunneen has also joined other Christchurch religious leaders and Mayor

Gary Moore in signing a petition asking the world's richest states to forgive Third World debt. This adds our voices to those of other groups in New Zealand and around the world who are calling for a more just international economic order. Of late these calls seem to have been yielding some fruit. Meeting in Cologne, Germany in June, the G7, the world's seven richest nations, agreed to a package to reduce Third World debt. As yet, however, it is too soon to say whether this will be either sufficient or timely,

East Timor

For many years the Commission been watching the situation in East Timor with a critical eye. Since the invasion of the territory in 1975 by Indonesia, there have been serious violations of human rights by the Indonesian armed forces and a denial of the right of the people of East Timor to determine their own political destiny. The fear and suffering under which the East Timorese have laboured since 1975 has been an affront to their dignity.

During this time, Bishop Carlos Belo, the Apostolic Administrator of Dili, has stood as a beacon of hope for many people in the territory. He has always spoken out against human rights violations and condemned the indignities perpetrated against the people of the territory, often at the risk of his own wellbeing. His concern about these violations and indignities has always been inspired by the message of the Gospels and the Church's social teaching. In 1996, Bishop Belo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize along with his fellow countryman Jose Ramos Horta for his work to bring about a peaceful resolution of the conflict in East Timor.

In March this year, the Commission was privileged to host a visit to Christchurch by Bishop Belo. Not only did the Bishop meet with Bishop John Cuneen and the Commission, but he also spoke at a public meeting at Villa Maria where his themes were of peace, reconciliation and healing in post-conflict societies. These are gifts which will be needed in abundance as events continue to unfold in East Timor.

Since Bishop Belo's visit there have been a number of developments in the territory. In May this year, the United Nations brokered an agreement between Portugal (the former colonial ruler of East Timor) and Indonesia, in which Indonesia agreed to hold a referendum asking the East Timorese whether they wish to have either greater autonomy or independence from Indonesia.

This referendum was to be held on 8th August, but has now been delayed because of the violence being perpetrated by pro-Indonesian militia members who have reportedly been armed by the Indonesian army.

The Commission has written to our Government to ask it to do what it can to help secure a peaceful referendum and a violence-free transition to greater autonomy or independence based on the properly expressed wishes of the people of East Timor. It has also asked the Government to render whatever assistance it can to help facilitate the reconstruction of civil society in the territory after the referendum. Both these requests have been met with a very positive response from the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Don McKinnon.

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(Latin for the dignity of the person) is the name of this newsletter because it expresses the cornerstone principle of the Church's teaching about society and social justice. Every human person has an intrinsic and unchanging dignity, conferred by God the Creator. 'The human person is and ought to be the principle, the subject and the end of all social institutions'. (CCC, No. 1881.)

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