

The General Chapters and the Development of Preaching Justice

Ivan Attard

Preaching Justice is an integral part of the preaching ministry. A preacher has to proclaim the Good News is not something abstract, alien or detached from one's life. Neither it is simply the preaching of a set of notions and doctrines or an ethical system. The Good News is the proclamation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who saves and sanctifies. He, who is God, out of his love towards us, chose to become man, to partake in our human life, so that we, by

sanctified and to become an instrument of sanctification, as a member of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, to continue Christ's mission in today's world, here and now.

Attention to justice and peace is not only the duty of the Dominican Order, but of every Christian and any preacher. The Dominican Order through its spirituality, tradition and General Chapters offers to its members and to the whole

considered justice, the denunciation of personal and social sin, the call to repentance and conversion and the reconciliation with God, our Creator, through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, as inseparable in its preaching and prophetic ministry. The Order in these last General Chapters reaffirmed our duty and priority to preach justice in the world, to enlighten and to sanctify the social, political and economic context of our human existence, the place where we have to live our daily Christian life. The conversion of mind and heart to our Lord Jesus Christ will eventually generate a just social order, which will extinguish the social, political and economic structures of sin. Every form of injustice, oppression, exploitation and violence is a sign of the diffusion of sin in our personal lives, which manifests itself in the way how we organise our social, political and economic life.

Social and cultural background for the General Chapters

After World War II, certain privileged States experienced an economic boom. Other States, especially the newly formed States, due to the process of decolonisation, experienced poverty, injustices, violence, wars and other forms of misery. Moreover, two antagonistic ideologies affirmed themselves and divided the whole world, mainly in two blocs. On one side, we had liberalism, which in the seventies started to deform itself into neoliberalism. On the other side, we had communism, which imploded itself by the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties. During this period, humanity experience the cold war and was continuously threatened by a nuclear war. The fall of communism opened the way to the exponential growth of neoliberalism, with all its cultural, anthropological, ethical, social, political and economic consequences. In these last decades, humanity and the whole of creation were, and still are, in constant threat. The economic and financial machine is devouring

When I was appointed provincial promoter for justice and peace in our Maltese province, I wanted to understand what the Order has been proposing in the last General Chapters as guidelines for our ministry. As I was reading the Acts, I really found them very interesting, inspiring and stimulating. I discovered a treasure very often left aside and forgotten. I thought of gathering in one single book all those texts which regarded matters of justice and peace directly or indirectly, from Quezon City General Chapter (1977) till Biên Hòa (2019). I hope you enjoy reading this book and find it useful and inspiring in your apostolate to give witness to our Lord Jesus Christ, who cares for those who suffer injustices, misery, oppression and social exclusion.

fr Ivan Attard OP
Justice and Peace Provincial Promoter
Maltese Dominican Province – St Pius V



taking part in his life, we receive the grace to participate in his divine life, for our salvation and sanctification. The light of our Lord Jesus Christ has to enlighten our concrete and tangible personal and social experience of life. If we accept the Light, it brings to us salvation from every evil and from all sort of darkness. Therefore, no preacher can ignore what is happening in his or her socio-economic and political context. Every human-being is called to be

Church, a way of living the preaching ministry to the full, to be faithful to Christ, our Saviour and the Church, his Mystical Body.

Preaching justice in the Dominican Order

The Dominican Order didn't start to integrate justice and peace in its preaching simply after the General Chapter of Quezon City 1977. The Order, from the time of its foundation, understood and

everything it finds around it, in order to ensure its growth, where the rich and the powerful become richer and more powerful by impoverishing and weakening the rest of the world's population. Everything and every person became a commodity and an opportunity to exploit for profit and to sacrifice them for the false pantheon of neoliberalism. Surely not every person follows and adheres to this trend. Nevertheless, the economic machine needs it in order to function. Max Weber once said that market-economy follows the rational principle: maximum profit, with the minimum costs. Today's markets brought this principle to an extreme: maximum profit, by all means and at all costs, with the minimum expenses possible. To keep the machine going on, a lot of people and all the environment are being sacrificed to the false god, money and to its economic and financial system, which this idolatry generates, to ensure the interests of the greediest. This economic and financial system, to function properly, needs a particular culture, a certain vision of the world, a specific anthropological and ethical understanding, which serve its purpose: ensuring continuous economic growth, huge profits for the few at the expense of the most. In the years before the Quezon City Chapter, four main documents and events in the Church influenced the development of preaching justice in the world:

- a. the second Vatican Council (1962-1965);
- b. the *Populorum Progressio*, 1968;
- c. the second Latin American Episcopal Conference held in Medellin, Colombia, 1968;
- d. the Synod of Bishops held in 1971, on Justice in the World.

New and old ideologies were inspiring the social, political and economic organisations, which gave rise to various forms of injustices, exploitations, oppression and misery. On the other hand, various social and political movements were reacting and struggling to promote human dignity, human rights, freedom, equality, solidarity and justice. Some of these movements were inspired by the Christian faith, others by ideologies. Other movements were trying to build a bridge and join forces between those who were inspired by faith and those that followed ideologies.

The Church tried to give guidance, support and its contribution to ensure the common good of all people. The Dominican Order did its part also through its General Chapters to support its members and to guide them in preaching justice and peace in the world.

The contribution of the General Chapters

In the following paragraphs, I will try to indicate some aspects, which the General Chapters highlighted and promoted to help us preach justice and peace in the world, our common home.

1. Quezon City 1977

The General Chapter held at Quezon City will be remembered for the formulation of the four priorities, which we have to follow and keep in mind when we organise our apostolate. One of these priorities is preaching justice in the world. Inspired by the Synod of Bishops, 1971, the capitulars invite us to undertake a critical analysis of the origins, forms and structures of injustice in contemporary societies and to implement an evangelical practice for the liberation and integral promotion of man (15, 5). We Dominicans must engage in the field of justice and peace, moved by the evangelical spirit and not by some ideology, even though some ideologies can help us understand the social realities and the structures of injustice. It is the Sanctifying Spirit that must diffuse in the world and not the spirit of the world, which has to be spread in the Mystical Body of our Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Quezon City, asks from us: a) to engage ourselves in a self-criticism on the use of goods and the lifestyle that is adopted in our communities (19, 5, a);

b) and to develop a critical and evangelical awareness of political reality to denounce the injustices that oppress a multitude of people who are denied their fundamental rights (19, 6). Theological reflection, starting from the analysis of these structures of sin, must propose means to transform the world into the perspective of the Kingdom of God and make its contribution to promote a just economic system that ensures the common good (19, 7, b-c). The following Chapters developed and applied these guidelines according to

various social circumstances that developed by time.

2. Walberberg 1980

The capitulars gathered in Walberberg emphasised our responsibility of preaching justice. Such ministry requires that the preacher struggles to develop the virtue of humility and be moved by compassion for those who suffer injustices, especially the poor. These virtues have to come from our union with God. In this Chapter, the friars insisted on studying the causes of social evil and to propose a theological reflection on social justice, enlightened by the Gospel and the Church's social teaching, to inspire a new socio-economic order, which ensures the common good, according to God's will.

3. Rome 1983

This Chapter affirms the preferential option for the poor and preaching justice as constitutive of our preaching ministry (70). "Not to opt for the poor is to fall into the danger of making an option for the rich." (234, B, u). The capitulars recall our prophetic mission of denouncing, in the light of the Gospel, the structures of social sin, which are creating many injustices, oppressions and violence in many parts of the world. These perverse structures allow the rich to get richer and richer by depleting the rest of the world (234, A, e). This Chapter expressed the friars' concern regarding the threat of a nuclear war and invited them to contribute, in their native countries, to offer alternative solutions to ensure peace in the world (234, A, m; B, z).

4. Avila 1986

The Avila Chapter will be remembered for the formulation of the five frontiers where we have to preach the Good News. Two of these frontiers concern our commitment to justice and peace: a) the frontier between life and death: the challenges of justice and peace in the world, and b) the frontier between humanity and inhumanity: the great challenge of the excluded (22, 1-2). We have to opt for the poor, for justice and for peace in our apostolate (45). Since the friars, at that time, were experiencing the cold war, the capitulars focused mainly on peace. The capitulars reminded us for the need of

inculturation, to care for indigenous peoples (36) and migrants (37).

5. Oakland 1989

The Oakland Chapter reaffirmed what was already brought to light in the previous General Chapters. However, the capitulars added the care of creation, as another dimension of our preaching justice in the world. When our habitat and environment are destroyed, those who suffer most are the poor and the socially excluded (97). Thus, justice and peace and the care of creation are inseparable.

6. Mexico 1992

The capitulars in this Chapter tried to formulate certain challenges to our preaching ministry. One of these challenges is the phenomenon of migration, where people facing misery and death in their native countries escape and move to developed and prosperous countries with the hope of ensuring a better living. The fall of communism and wars in the Middle East brought an increase of migration towards Western Europe (66, 3). Moreover, this Chapter proposed some tools to animate us in preaching justice: a) it is the duty of every preacher and of every community; b) it has to be an integrated part of our formation; c) it has to reflect itself in our community life, prayer and liturgy; and d) it has to manifest itself in activities, which promote justice and peace, in collaboration with other members of the Dominican Family and other social movements. This Chapter insists that we administer our material goods in the service of the poor, the excluded and those suffering injustices. Moreover, the capitulars suggest that every province or vicariate has a community among the poor (66, B).

7. Caleruega 1995

The Caleruega General Chapter reminds us that as Christ took part in our human life, so we Dominicans are called to take part in the life of those who suffer injustices, by living close to them and answer to their needs (20.8). The capitulars reaffirmed the importance in our ministry to care for migrants, to listen to them, to understand them, to answer to their necessities and to build bridges through cultural and inter-religious dialogue (23). They proposed also

the formation of a Dominican NGO for human rights (24). Another important issue, raised in this Chapter, regards the external debt of developing and under-developed countries. “We require that every entity in the Order take into account questions of Third World Debt when choosing the institutions they appoint to handle their funds” (25).

8. Bologna 1998

The Bologna General Chapter reaffirmed mainly what was already promoted in the previous General Chapters, insisting more on collaboration in the Dominican Family (34, 9) and in our formation, especially in initial formation, the friars should be prepared also in matters of justice and peace (103).

9. Providence 2001

The capitulars gathered in Providence succeeded to present a very concise and synthetic analysis of the economic and financial globalisation inspired by neoliberalism or free-market fundamentalism. In this General Chapter, our Order took a critical stand and denounced the injustices and the social harm, that this socio-economic process is generating all over the world. In a second moment, the friars proposed how we can humanise globalisation, through the preaching of the Good News, in order to serve the common good.

10. Krakow 2004

In Krakow, the friars inspired themselves from God’s call of Moses to liberate his people from the Egyptian slavery (Ex 3, 7-10). Like Moses, we are called to be instruments of God to free his people from evil. This passage offers us the necessary guidelines to imitate God’s deeds: a) we have to see the affliction of those who are suffering; b) we have to hear and listen to their cry; c) in order to understand their sufferings; d) to descend among them; and e) to be the instruments in God’s hand to take action and free his people.

11. Bogota 2007

In this General Chapter, the friars emphasised the process of listening and dialogue. Our preaching ministry has to be preceded by listening to those, who suffer, in order to understand them. Compassion is only possible if we feel with them their life experience. Moved

by compassion we have to preach hope. Very often in front of evil, we are tempted to give up, to feel helpless and hopeless. We feel too small and insignificant. Our only hope is Jesus Christ, who is our true Saviour. Therefore, we not only have to be preachers of hope, but truly people of hope, who don’t give up but trust and have faith in God, who is above all forms of evil.

12. Rome 2010

Our religious life has to reflect what we preach. We cannot make compromises in administrating our material goods. Our poverty, which we profess has to reflect our detachment from consumerism and the rational principle of market economy (maximum profit, with the minimum costs). We have to adopt a lifestyle, which ensure justice, peace and the care of creation, inspired by the Gospel and the social teaching of the Church.

13. Trogir 2013

The capitulars gathered in Trogir reminded us of the Salamanca process and re-proposed to implement it in today’s circumstances, so that our preaching will be more effective and fruitful. This process does not regard only issues of justice and peace. The friars engaged with concrete life experience in their apostolate, have to work hand in hand with those friars engaged mainly in academic studies, as occurred in the 16th century between the missionaries in the New World and the friars of the Convent of St. Stephen in Salamanca.

14. Bologna 2016

In this General Chapter, the friars identified particular social challenges which we have to face in our preaching ministry, mainly, materialism, secularism, atheism, political polarisation, unsupportive economic development, marginalisation and indifference, individualism, social violence, racial discrimination, and threats to the institution of marriage and the family, extreme poverty, violence and war, abuse of human rights with impunity, religious fundamentalism, terrorism and corruption (74). Secondly, they gave a special attention to specific categories of people to whom we have to preach the Good News: migrants and

displaced persons; indigenous peoples; those who profess another religion; those belonging to other Christian churches or are indifferent to faith; the forgotten; the unborn, the young, and the elderly; the sick, prisoners, death row inmates, etc. (75). Our preaching has to be inspired by mercy and by the teaching of *Laudato Sì*, especially in matters of justice, peace and the care of creation.

15. *Biên Hòa 2019*

The friars reaffirmed that in our preaching ministry we have to show solidarity with the poor and those who suffer. This solidarity has to manifest itself even in the way we live our vow of evangelical poverty. The capitulars emphasised the preciousness of human life, from its conception till its natural death. Some get the impression that those, who defend life of the unborn from its conception, ignore and don't care for those, whose life is threatened by greed, exploitation, violence, human trafficking and other forms of injustices. On the other hand, those who defend

the socially and economically vulnerable, like migrants, indigenous peoples and other minorities, tend to leave aside the issues of abortion, marriage, family life and euthanasia. We have to harmonise our advocacy to defend the life of the unborn with our advocacy to defend the rights of minorities and those who suffer social injustices, material deprivation and social exclusion. Moreover, *Biên Hòa* Chapter insisted on the promulgation of the role of Justice and Peace Promoters at all levels. The Master of the Order with his council approved this promulgation on the 26th February 2020.

Conclusion

In our Dominican tradition and in these last General Chapters, we have a hidden treasure, that we need to rediscover. In these documents, we find the necessary guidelines, which inspire our Christian and Dominican life and to live our preaching ministry to the full. Our particular social and cultural context influence our understanding of preaching justice in the world. Unfortu-

nately, we tend to separate preaching the Good News from preaching social justice. Our Lord Jesus Christ in his public ministry preached the Good News to those who suffered injustices, social exclusion and were ill-treated by others. Even the Church teaches us that preaching justice is an integral part of our preaching ministry. Moreover, we tend to associate issues of social justice with certain political and economic ideologies, influenced by socialism. On the other hand, we associate preaching the preciousness of human life of the unborn, marriage and family values, with conservatives and traditionalists. We have to transcend these ideologies and acquire the necessary freedom to be faithful to our call. Our preaching ministry has to be inspired by our union with God and experience of Christ in our life. We have to offer our lives to God not to ideologies, to become his instruments of salvation, to continue Christ's mission to sanctify the whole world and the whole of mankind, as members of his Mystical Body.

