

The Changing Shape of Our World

(an extract from the Columban General Assembly Document, 2000)

Globalization

What we, in broad terms, refer to as globalization is the increasingly evident economic integration of the whole world in a manner which refuses to recognise that our planet has physical limits. This process, which operates largely without political control, is destroying the political structures of nation-states. Of the one hundred largest economies in the world today, over half are not nations but corporations. An economic system operating free of political control cannot avoid promoting savage inequalities which tear apart the social fabric of the human community. Millions of people are turned into insecure economic migrants each year by the speculation of those who move enormous amounts of capital around the world, free of political constraints and without concern for the social effects.

The global economic system raises the imperative of constructing a political order capable of matching in scope and structure the new world market. This is Urgent because the global system is forcing existing political structures to be at the service of the global economy rather than the real needs of the people they were meant to serve. Today we have an unprecedented economisation of cultures. There is an attempt to reduce all values to market values and to privatize and treat as a personal option fundamental values which are neither negotiable nor marketable. This economisation of cultures undermines all true value by its insistence that the system

of exchange be placed beyond community control. This is a factor, which vitally affects matters of belief, practice, and identity today.

Contradictions in Globalization

Urgent ecological issues forced world leaders to recognize the need for environmental summits. The contradictions of the global economic system are now forcing people to reluctantly recognize its serious, indeed fatal limitations.

Some of these can be named:

- a. The contradiction within nation-states themselves, where national governments reorganize their economies in accordance with the norms and demands of the global system. Since all economic development now strengthens the international basis of economic life, this makes the political structure of the merely national state increasingly irrelevant.
- b. The contradiction within the global system where those who promote it speak of freedom and personal identity in an open world. The "freedom" is to choose from the limited options offered by the market in a closed system.
- c. The contradiction between the driving principles of the global system which presumes the possibility of almost endless expansion and the fact that our planet has limits. Theoretically what is being offered is a First World consumer lifestyle for all. Our planet cannot support ten billion human beings living this kind of life. We have to decide how we are to live together in our limited world – or die separately. Questions about the future development of China and other highly populated countries bring this issue into focus.

d. The contradiction in the lives of each of us individually is between what we as consumers demand and what we as producers must reject. We are conditioned to consider ourselves only as consumers but we are producers more than consumers. While people can see the need to produce in order to be able to consume, they are often unaware of themselves as producers of meaning and life. Our needs as producers differ greatly from our needs as consumers. These needs revolve around long-term interests such as:

- i) sustainability or the question as to whether we are protecting or destroying the possibility of a worthwhile future for later generations.
- ii) solidarity or a concern to act justly towards those with whom we are in economic relationship.
- iii) the need to fulfill our obligations towards the natural world, towards others and towards ourselves.

e. Our world is a closed system. Within it a particular country may make itself wealthy, but only at the cost of increasing competition and forcing other countries into a poverty, which will threaten the cohesion of the whole system. At the extreme, the poor can be expected not simply to laugh at the environmentalism of the rich, but to turn in desperation to arms in the search for a solution.

How Globalization affects us

We are all involved in this one global economy with its many contradictions. To know ourselves truly, we need to understand the relation between the global and the particular, because it is here that the contradictions within the world-system are being played out. But too much in our cultural world of false consumerist identities is an obstacle to such understanding. Omnipresent

market forces tell us incessantly that all our desires can be met. They blind us to our relatedness to other humans in the globalised web of production. Yet that relatedness is what defines our actual identity as historical persons. It defines us as persons whose economic activities now embrace all human beings, but who are unaware of the remoter links in the chain of which our economic decisions are a part. In such a world, the only morally acceptable answer to the question Who are we? is We are future citizens of a world we are being challenged to create.

The Challenge and the Hope

A basic principle of our own faith is the conviction that all areas of human life must be reached by the Good News and can be bearers of it. Another basic principle is that things really are what they are seen to be in the light of the Gospel. We acknowledge that we ourselves belong to the system we have described. Our challenge is to understand it and then accept the obligations, which this understanding imposes.

Globalization presents new and radical challenges to Christians, who in every age, are asked to give a reason for the hope that is within them. In the post-Vatican II era, when the Church began to embrace more readily the values of modern society, many of these same values were already being questioned and undermined. Communities became more fragmented and religious faith more privatized. A globalised monoculture, at the service of consumer priorities, filled the vacuum left by this monoculture's destruction of other values. While the effects are perhaps more clearly seen in Western cultures, few if any countries or religious traditions have remained untouched.

One response has been fundamentalism. Sometimes this is an effort to preserve identity and insist on the links between the religious and the social. More often it reflects a faith unwilling to engage the risks and ambiguities of daily life.

While there is much scepticism today about institutions of every kind, including the Church, there is also evidence of a sincere search for meaning and truth. People, particularly those among the followers of the great religions, are re-engaging with their own traditions in search of a creative response to the challenges of globalization. Evidence of this search can be seen among groups and individuals within the Church and in others who have no contact with formal religious institutions. These are signs of the presence of the Spirit.

On Mission Sunday 2000, while the General Assembly was in session in Sydney, Pope John Paul II addressed the largest gathering of missionaries ever to congregate in Rome. Speaking about the necessity for missionaries and the context in which they work he said:

"Lawless competition, the desire to dominate others at all costs, discrimination exercised by those who consider themselves superior to others, the uncontrolled quest for wealth are the origin of injustice, violence and wars."

The Pope urged, "We must never lose the hope of contributing to the birth of a more fraternal world. "

The Columban Response

Columbans are challenged to respond as a small prophetic community to the call of mission within the context we have outlined. We are sent to give witness to the truth that liberates and to question the claims to validity of those caricatures of the human good which are molded by the priorities of consumerism. We see that in this system hundreds of millions of people simply have no place. We are urged to unmask the idolatrous nature of an economic model, which tends to reduce all values, even that of human life itself, to market values. Within this system even life forms which have always been seen as a gift in the care of the human race are now being monopolized and patented.

We are called to be disciples, to be missionaries. It is an extraordinary gift. Our mission is to journey with people on the road to freedom and fullness of life, to encourage resistance to whatever hinders this search, and to promote life-giving alternatives. The memory of Jesus, the one who calls us, is one of crucifixion and resurrection. It invites us to make a radical response of resistance to evil, to take the side of the crucified ones of our own day.