

ACSJJC SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION GUIDE: *Octogesima Adveniens (A Call to Action)*

In 1971, Pope Paul VI issued the Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* for the 80th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. The Letter appeared six years after Pope Paul's Encyclical *Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples)*. In the Letter Pope Paul draws attention to emerging social and political problems, discusses the ideological conflict between Marxist socialism and liberalism, and challenges all Christians to play a role in the search for justice and peace.

A changing world

Pope Paul, like Pope John XXIII ten years earlier, was confronting a radically changing world torn by conflicting ideology and emerging social movements.

In particular, Pope Paul points to 'flagrant inequalities' (# 2):

... while some regions are heavily industrialised, others are still at the agricultural stage; while some countries enjoy prosperity, others are struggling against starvation; while some peoples have a high standard of culture, others are still engaged in eliminating illiteracy. From all sides there rises a yearning for more justice and a desire for a better guaranteed peace in mutual respect among individuals and peoples. (# 4)

The Pope's message is that Christians must seek just solutions to these challenges in the light of the Gospels, which have remained as relevant today as when they were written. It is up to Christian communities 'to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed' (# 4).

Pope Paul discusses a number of emerging problems, including:

- **urbanisation** as rural poor move to cities to seek a better life, weakening agrarian life and worsening overcrowding and inequality in the cities (# 10–11)
- **youth**, finding their own aspirations and responding to insecurity about the future (# 13)
- **the role of women**, who are seeking for 'a way to establish relationships of equality in rights and of respect for their dignity' (# 13)
- **workers' rights**, particularly the right to work and to receive just wages (# 14)
- **'victims of change'** – workers displaced by technology and lack of education, people with disabilities, mental illness or age-related conditions, and others on society's fringes (# 15)
- **immigrants**, who struggle for acceptance in a new society 'in spite of their real participation in the economic effort of the country' (# 18)
- **the influence of the media**, whose power and influence were increasing
- **the environment**: humanity is 'suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it' (# 21).

Conflicting beliefs

Pope Paul discusses two conflicting ideologies of the time.

Socialism may seem to have much in common with Christian belief. It is easy to idealise it as 'a will for justice, solidarity and equality' (# 31), but, Pope Paul says, it would be 'illusory and dangerous' to accept Marxist analysis 'while failing to note the kind of totalitarian and violent society to which this process leads' (# 34).

By contrast, **liberal ideology** purports to defend the individual against the power of organisations and 'the totalitarian tendencies of political powers'. But at the root of liberalism is the idea that individual liberty makes a person completely independent and without obligation (# 36).



Bureaucratic socialism, technocratic capitalism and authoritarian democracy are showing how difficult it is to solve the great human problem of living together in justice and equality. How in fact could they escape the materialism, egoism or constraint which inevitably go with them? (# 36)

Other people look to utopian communities. Yet others place their faith in human sciences, which do make valuable additions to our knowledge of humanity and society but may offer only a limited view of their real nature and purpose.

These sciences are a condition at once indispensable and inadequate for a better discovery of what is human. They are a language which becomes more and more complex, yet one that deepens rather than solves the mystery of the heart of man; nor does it provide the complete and definitive answer to the desire which springs from his innermost being. (# 40)

‘Widening the horizon through Christian teaching’

In our search for a meaningful and just way of life, we are accompanied by the social teaching of the Church, which

develops through reflection applied to the changing situations of this world, under the driving force of the Gospel as the source of renewal ... (# 42)

Pope Paul stresses again the need for justice worldwide, based on the free will of each nation without influence from outside:

There is a need to establish a greater justice in the sharing of goods, both within national communities and on the international level ... But, as we have often stated, the most important duty in the realm of justice is to allow each country to promote its own development, within the framework of a cooperation free from any spirit of domination, whether economic or political. (# 43)

One source of undue influence is the rise of powerful multinational enterprises, which ‘are largely independent of the national political powers and therefore not subject to control from the point of view of the common good’, and ‘can lead to a new and abusive form of economic domination on the social, cultural and even political level’.

Humanity’s yearning to ‘free themselves from need and dependence’ starts with the interior freedom that men must find again with regard to their goods and their powers; ‘they will never reach it except through a transcendent love for man, and, in consequence, through a genuine readiness to serve’ (# 45).

It is for the laity, Pope Paul says, to take the initiative for justice and to infuse a Christian spirit into their communities. We cannot simply draw attention to injustice: we must take action ourselves (# 48).

Today more than ever the World of God will be unable to be proclaimed and heard unless it is accompanied by the witness of the power of the Holy Spirit, working within the action of Christian in the service of their brothers. (# 51)

For reflection and discussion

Can we still see ‘flagrant inequalities’, such as Pope Paul mentions at the beginning of his Letter, in Australia and its region?

Which of the emerging problems that Pope Paul discusses are still present in today’s society? Are any of them no longer so prevalent?

Towards the end of his Letter, Pope Paul reminds the laity of its obligations to work against injustice. How can we do this as citizens and members of a community? Is that enough, or do we have obligations as individuals?

Documents

The Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* can be found at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens_en.html

Pope Paul VI’s Encyclical *Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples)*: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html