

Is it Time?

Dare to be Different

While recently facilitating a retreat in a developing African country I met Bishop Peter Latenda (his real name is withheld for his protection). He sat opposite me and told me of a meeting to which he personally invited all political leaders, along with those involved in civic-social-justice programs in his country. All political parties attended except the current ruling group. The meeting began with the NGO and Human Rights Groups stories of aid and development, their future plans and degree of commitment to assisting the poorest of the poor. While these presentations were being made, there was overt tension among the political parties present, as each party was invited to do a short presentation after lunch outlining their policies for reform of the economic and social system.

Lunch was unexpectedly delayed resulting in the leader of the most influential of the opposition parties being invited to the microphone to begin the political presentations. Instead of delivering the expected rousing address, he invited spontaneously the leader of a breakaway factional group to come forward. The 500 delegates present sat in deathly silence in anticipation. Slowly the factional leader stood and walked to the podium. He was embraced as a true brother. The whole hall broke into whistles, clapping and dancing. History will judge the consequences of this leader's capricious action. One remarkable outcome of the gathering was an invitation by all political parties to the Christian leaders to chair subsequent political meetings to ensure issues were dealt with in a spirit of collaboration and openness.

Radical Disciples

In this story Bishop Peter dared to step outside the traditional role of pastor of his community, by engaging with the very volatile political world of his country. He realized that the old order was passing away so the 'new wine' was ready to be served and tasted (Rev 21: 4). It was a moment of conversion for him as he took the initiative to turn the world, as he had lived in it, upside down. He overcame his fear of stepping out of his safe and secure zone of living and connected, through his action, his personal spirituality and social action for justice. It was the call Jesus gave some Galilean fisherman and one replied, 'Wow! We have left everything and followed you.' (Matt 19: 27) This is *shub* (Hebrew) which is used over 1000 times by Jesus to describe conversion or becoming a 'new wine person.' It is a turning from what your family and community may see as the right way to live life and to a radically different way – 'the old has gone, and a



new order has already begun' (2 Cor 5: 17). So conversion occurs within history, in our ordinary daily lives. It is a move from private to public awareness that leads to action according to the new charter for action – The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5: 7).

'The Way'

The first community of Christians was referred to as 'The Way'. This 'Way' involved regular silent meditation and sharing of the God-experience of daily life; it meant living in right relationships with those racially and religiously different, it meant taking the poor into one's home and it meant the sharing of economic resources recognizing that when one's family had sufficient the rest belonged rightly to those who had little. To live this way Jesus had said would make them salt and light for society. They learnt that to live 'the way' was very different from what their families had generally taught them – to be ambitious, competitive, associate only with those from good backgrounds, get a good job to make money and so be independent and secure, and believe implicitly that the Christian way was the only path to God. So this kind of discipleship had clear social results for the individual and the Christian community. Just listen to any news broadcast and see the results of this way of living.



As Aristides describes the early Christian community to the Roman emperor Hadrian: 'They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him/her home and are happy, as though he/she were a real sister or brother. They don't consider themselves sisters/brothers in the usual sense, but sisters/brothers in the Spirit.'

'The Way' for Today

Recently, an indigenous person stood up at a gathering of Christians for 'Social Justice' and said 'Let's pretend that you are all Christians. If you were



Christians you would not longer accumulate. You would share everything you had. You would actually love one another. And you would treat each other as if you were family.' His eyes searched the audience and asked 'Why don't you do that? Why don't you live that way?'

Our conformity to the accepted consumerist, acquiring culture has generally made 'The Way' invisible to those who are looking for a path through the violence and divisions of our world community. The story of Zaccheus shows when one is 'converted' to 'The Way' then the immediate response is reparation to the poor. He acted to restore justice to those he had wronged in the way he had lived his previous life. Zaccheus had recognized his social sin, turned from it, and sought to repair the damage he had done. We may than come to understand what John Chrysostom meant when he wrote to a community of middle-class Christians 'Don't you realize that, as the poor person withdraws silently, sighing and in tears, you actually thrust a sword into yourself, that it is you who receive the more serious wound?'

Daring to be Different

The call to action has been made, by the Congregation Leadership Team, to those who would dare to take up the challenge of being the new Edmund Rice/Jesus people for today. It has been heard as 'Dare to be Disciples: Passion and Possibility'. No matter where we find ourselves we are asked to begin to think, talk, write and engage with this call to radical conversion - to dare to be a Bishop Peter or a Zaccheus. The enterprise is always within the context of our time in history and within our immediate community of family, friends and associates. We need to begin asking the 'daring questions' and know that it is in a 'questioning community' that we come to see God in the other. It is in this kind of community that we see our own emptiness filled up. It is community that calls me beyond the pinched horizons of my own life, my own country, my own race, and gives me the gifts I do not have within me. (adapted from Joan Chittister)

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{Reference: Wallis J (2005) *The Call to Conversion*. Harper, San Francisco}

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