

The Degradation of the Worlds and the Renovation of the Earth

by Dom Hélder Câmara

Message to the Mani Tese [Outstretched Hands] youth movement, at the climax of its 1972 march, Plaza Michelangelo, Florence, Italy, November 7, 1972. Spanish version appears in *Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud*, ed. Benedicto Tapia de Renedo, Pedal. 64 (Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 1976): 199-204. Original Portuguese version appears in Dom Hélder Câmara, *Justiça e paz: viagens 1972-1973*, Servicio de Apostillas 36 (1973). Translated from Spanish by Maria Markovich and Dr. Gerald W. Schlabach, University of St. Thomas (Minnesota), strictly for the purposes of classroom use. Professor Schlabach (gwschlabach@stthomas.edu) asks to be notified if better translations exist, or if copyright recognition is due.

1. The footsteps of this march should wake us up

When thousands of young people in a nation march in order to better understand what it means to be *global citizens*, their footsteps should wake us up. They are a wake-up call. Woe to the nations that don't understand the warnings of their youth!

Tonight we take up the topic that the Mani Tese ("Outstretched hands") youth movement has so appropriately chosen: citizens of the world. What world are these young people talking about? As we will see, this world has degraded into "worlds."

- Let's take a look at the first world, the capitalist world, and have the courage to see the extremes to which capitalism is reaching.
- Let's look at the second world, the socialist world, and face the sad distortions that the socialists superpowers Russia and China present to us.
- Let's look at the third world, the developing countries, and we will discover the shocking sight of a fourth world arising in its midst. This is not only due to the selfishness of the first two worlds, but also due to third world countries. Some of these, we will see, are adopting a despicable and mistaken attitude towards their brothers and sisters living in misery and sub-development.

Still, our gathering is not taking place under the banner of discouragement and desperation. We children of hope! Without doubt, the face of the world will be renewed, through the inspiration of God's Spirit, but also through human work. For the Creator and Father of women and men has entrusted to them the task of dominating nature and completing the work of creation.

2. The wasting of the worlds

a. The extremes to which the capitalist world is reaching

The capitalist world is reaching extremes that will (hopefully) open the eyes of their most lucid representatives, especially in the nuclei of decision such as the capitalist superpowers: the USA, Japan and – sorry, but I must add – the European Common Market.

With no other motive besides fraternal cooperation, I wish to highlight some of the signs that seem especially meaningful to me.

Notice what the statistics say, even the official statistics from the United Nations that are beyond suspicion. The Italian young people who marched all the way to Florence had impressive data available for them to examine and discuss.

Here is a small paragraph from the booklet of the Mani Tese march:

When we pay 2.000 or 3.000 liras for a kilogram of Colombian coffee, the Colombian producer receives only 200 or 300 lira. The rest goes to the Italian supplier, importer and state, and a small part of it is paid to the Colombian exporter.

The booklet goes on:

This problem does not just concern products from third world countries: How much are Italian peasants paid for a kilogram of lettuce or cauliflower? And how much for a kilogram of apples or pears?

The young people found out that while products from poor countries continuously lose their value, the price of products from rich countries continuously rise. Here is an example presented to young people at this march:

In 1963, a banana producer in Jamaica received a penny per kilogram; on the other hand the expense for a pickup truck was 210 British pounds. In 1972 the same producer received one penny for a half of kilogram of bananas, and the pickup truck was not 210 but 1200 British pounds.

Still, beware of statistics! One has to know how to interpret them. Sometimes they present information that covers up the hard facts.

Among the material distributed by Mani Tese, there is the copy of an absolutely reliable speech from Robert McNamara, who was the U.S. Secretary of Defense and who is currently the president of the World Bank. Using concrete examples, McNamara denounces the way in which a statistical index such as *per capita income* fails to express the economic development level of a country, since it fails to show how income is really distributed among the population.

McNamara recognizes that in the world of today there are sad realities that the statistics are unable to describe. In one paragraph of his speech he asks,

What are we to say about a world where hundreds of million of people are not only poor in the statistic sense, but also face daily privations that wound their own human dignity to a degree that no statistic can describe?

The president of the World Bank continues:

There is a world still in development where children under five years old – who barely represent 20% of the population – simultaneously represent that 60% of the mortality rate. It is a developing world where two-thirds of the children who survive will

experience an abnormal physical and mental development due to the lack of food. It is a developing world where there are 100 million more illiterate people than 20 years ago. In summary, it is a developing world where death and illnesses cause endless fatalities, where the possibilities of education and employment run short, where poverty and misery predominate everywhere and where the opportunity to reach for full self-realization is limited.

The descriptions of the world that we have presented are only sad fragments, which we could easily multiply. In this world, macro-multinational companies are the finely tuned creation of capitalism, keener, more capable and quicker to take advantage the old “trusts”.

Now, these multinationals don't arise with foreign names. The multinationals that come to work in Italy, in the petroleum sector for example, all *appear* to be Italian – Esso-Standard Italy, Italian Shell, D.P. Italy, Mobil-Oil Italy, Chevron-Oil Italy, Fina Italy, and Amoco Italy. The same holds true with your own multinationals (such as FIAT, Pirelli, Olivetti, Montedison, SNAI, etc.). In each country of operation, they too cover themselves by using national names.

The multinationals are not so imprudent as to work only with only one specific product or in only one area. An example is your own powerful FIAT. Citing only typical cases, FIAT is associated with the IFI (Istituto Financiero Industriale), and therefore with the SAI (Societa Assicuratrice Industriale); it has thus acquired a 15% stake in Citroen, which puts it in contact with Michelin and the Banque de Paris et des Pays Bas, which controls 20% of the capital from the Campagna Generale di Electricita, which puts it in contact with the General Electric, where it it participates with La Pirelli, Alitalia, Oliveti, Cinzano, the Marie Brizard, in newspapers such as La Stampa de Turin, and on and on. A complete list would be even longer!

Nowadays, the multinationals are conglomerates, linking empires. They tend to control the military and political power, technical and cultural power, and the very powerful media. Who can ignore the fact that by the year 2000, less than 300 multinationals will control our planet?

All these companies would be a wonder of technique and organization, worthy of enthusiasm, if only these super empires were not providing their services to increasingly restricted and closed groups, and if they were not playing a decisive role in the proletarianization and sub-proletarianization of poor countries, as well as poor areas within rich countries.

b) Distortions of the socialist superpowers

What is the role that Russia and China really play in the face of those excesses of ambition and blindness that the capitalist world is reaching? Are the socialist superpowers an alternative for creating a more human situation – more generous, with less ambition, less indifference, less selfishness?

Russia and China are seriously compromising their own claims to a superior, socialist form of humanism, as we see in the following comparisons:

- The capitalist world only enjoys a counterfeit freedom because the economic powers utilize sophisticated means in order to impose what they want, while eliminating or neutralizing the actions of those who dare to act in a different way. There is no more eloquent evidence than a presidential election in the United States.

Nonetheless, the socialist superpowers impose their unique model in more direct and brutal ways. There is an atmosphere of suspicion, accusations, forced self-critique, internal exile, and forced labor, all of which gives Russia and China the distinction the 20th century's inquisitors.

It is true that intelligence and information services of the capitalist superpowers adopt more and more methods of suspicion, self-critique, and even torture, always with pharisaic precautions to preserve the image of legality and democracy.

- The capitalist world and the socialistic superpowers both have their own satellites. They drive the arms race. They have launched a space race with the same overwhelming concern for strategic domination. They maintain the same attitude of ambition and empire toward poor countries, which provide them with raw materials.
- The capitalist and socialist superpowers are behind all the wars by which small countries destroy and kill one another. So far, it is impossible to guess who will decisively win that shameful war in Vietnam, in which the US, Russia and China all measure their forces and experiment with their weapons. However, what is already beyond doubt is suffer defeat: Whoever the winner is, the heroic nation of Vietnam will be defeated, and when all is said and done it will not enjoy the conditions for reunification.
- The capitalist and socialistic superpowers attempt to distribute the world comfortably between one other, and nowadays they have even divided outer space. This leaves some naïve people from both sides with the impression that they are irreconcilable enemies who only make the reluctant sacrifice of mutual understanding during moments of crisis, just to save world peace....

c) The weaknesses and divisions of the third world facilitate the domination of the first and second worlds

Our most serious challenge is that the third world – the world of poor countries, providers of raw material – presents weaknesses and divisions that facilitate domination by the first and second worlds.

If I am not mistaken, these are the major ones:

- In poor countries, there is often a sad tradition of privileged families who practically own their nations, and who maintain their own wealth, dominion and empire of life and death, at the cost of misery among their own fellow citizens.
- In general, these privileged families are the ones who dominate national policies. Representatives to international bodies are chosen from this very group, and appear in assemblies such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which facilitates maneuvers by the superpowers and links them with these national elites. The multinationals also find ideal allies for dominion and exploitation in these privileged minorities. And so continues the same sad history: Yes, for centuries, African slaves were sold to Latin America, not only because people were willing to buy them, but also because people were willing to sell them....

- In consequence, it becomes very difficult for poor countries to understand and act upon their own need to cooperate and complement one another. Rivalry is commonplace, easily fomented the powerful, who have a stake in division and in-fighting among smaller nations. One of the saddest forms of manipulation that the large powers use is to pick out a somewhat more developed nation and use it in a region, as an underling and enforcer....

3. Renovating the face of the earth

At first sight, the situation of this world suggests despair. For Christians, however, the last word is always hope.

Despite everything, we have no use for a misleading or alienating hope that looks only to eternal life – as though eternity didn't start here and now, because it is here and now that we built an eternal life.

Regardless of our race, religion, nation, or professional setting, if each one of us looks around, we will discover that along with the prudent and conformist bulk of society, and along with that elite minority which is a embarrassment for its own class, there is another minority that is willing to work – even sacrifice – for a more just and human world.

Would it not be possible for us to find the way – in each tiny community, then each neighborhood, each province, each nation and each continent in all the world – to unite all those minorities until they number in the thousands upon thousands? ... Would it not be possible for these minorities to agree upon three or four concrete points, which demand immediate action?

The first and very important point would be to start with each of us asking ourselves whether or not we are at peace with justice or whether we are committing injustices. After all, it is not enough to contemplate human misery and ask for charity; we must achieve justice as a condition for peace. Then let us begin by confronting local injustices together with neighbors and friends who are people of good will. No one confronts global injustices who does not start by facing the injustices in their own community.

Another indispensable step would be this: whoever has faith and is linked to a particular religion should frequent their religious group. Then, in union with brothers and sisters of good will, demand of your religious group that it never separate the love of neighbor from love of God; demand that it speak out against all those injustices that should never exist among brothers and sisters who are children of the same heavenly Father.

Sometimes, when a person demands justice in the name of his or her faith, it is all too easy to paint that person as a rebel or communist. But on that day when we all demand of that our religious groups that they denounce injustice and work strenuously to make the world a more life-giving place for all [literally: breathable], those who labeled every defender of justice a communist are simply going to look ridiculous.

Let's take the case of Italy. Imagine what would happen if the thousands upon thousands of young people who marched to Florence – all the while thinking about the injustices of this world – would not stop marching but would continue, vigilant and demanding, at home, at school, at work, at church, refusing to settle for band-aid solutions, but instead would demand justice as a condition of peace.

Still, in order for all of us to actually move from theory to practice and not settle for good intentions – in order to finally start the reformation of the structures that we have talked so much about – we need more. Inside of us, around us, as a positive portent and sign of the deep changes that we must achieve at the national, continental, and then global level – we need even more than the force of an idea. We need a touch of grace, an impulse from on high.

Perhaps that impulse from on high, that touch of grace, will be the coming to life of Christ's word: "Wherever two or three of you gather together in my name, there will I be among you."

And we not just two or three; we are thousands upon thousands. Maybe some – or maybe many of you – think that you don't have any religion or faith. The truth is, we are and we will be with Christ even though we don't know it, and even though we seem not to want it. For he will be with us, to the degree that our hunger and thirst for justice, truth, and love is honest.

Let them laugh who will. Goliath once laughed at the young David.

For God, who is love, will not let selfishness, ambition, and hatred, dominate the earth forever....