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Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator

Marquette University, agbonkhianmeghe.orobator@marquette.edu

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Faith Doing Justice in the Context of Postmodernism

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator SJ

Let me state my position clearly. I write this essay as a Jesuit theologian sympathetic to the perspectives and claims of postmodernism. I argue the position that a postmodernist approach expands our understanding and stimulates a fresh and radical interpretation of the service of faith and the promotion of justice, the twin foundations of the contemporary apostolic edifice of the Society of Jesus.

Attempts to define the constitutive elements of postmodernism court the wrath of a deconstructionist critique. Postmodernism defies and mocks “essence,” perforce rendering pretentious the philosophical quest to define its core values. To the average man or woman, the language of postmodernism might sound like an arcane discourse among eccentric thinkers gyrating within a nebulous space of neologism, deconstruction and impenetrability. “Understood” as such, the quest for what constitutes postmodern culture is best left to those who actually care or have the time to care about such things. Decree 2 of GC35, “A Fire that Kindles other Fires: Rediscovering our Charism,” and Decree 3, “Challenges to our Mission Today: Sent to the Frontiers,” leave Jesuits no such option. To quote Decree 26 of GC34, postmodernism, it seems, manifests a critical discontent “with the status quo, the known, the tried, the already existing” universal orthodoxies of morality, society, history, religion and politics.

The difficulty of defining postmodernism does not eliminate entirely the possibility of tracing its characteristic contours. Such a sketch would help to situate this reflection on its relevance for the mission of faith and justice in a clear context. Paul writing to the Corinthians makes a laconic declaration that the world as we have known it is passing away (1 Cor 7, 31). This Pauline declaration is music to the ears of postmoderns, for whom the world of knowledge as we have known it is crumbling under the scrutiny of a deconstructionist hermeneutics. The essential categories of truth, goodness, knowledge... are in constant flux, and subject to a limitless exercise of deconstruction. Postmodernism rebels against the inherited Cartesian criterion of rationality and being – cogito ergo sum. The immutability and universality of traditional categories, which form the bedrock of venerable essentialist metaphysics that stretch back to Aristotelian science, now stand perilously on the quicksands of feelings, emotions, conditions, difference, particularities, stories, contexts, discontinuities and circumstances. Nothing is fixed or absolute; no one thing, no one person is like the other. To Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini’s salutary warning that “to teach the faith in this (postmod-

ern) world is nonetheless a challenge,"¹ I would add that to promote justice in a postmodern world constitutes no less of a challenge.

The orthodox understanding of Christian faith appears to gravitate to a direction opposite to the one taken by postmodernism. While the latter celebrates the concreteness and limitedness of knowledge and the fall of past certainties, doctrinal and magisterial statements insist on faith in a definitive and universal revelation capable of redeeming humanity from its state of fallenness. In a similar manner, the Society of Jesus continues to insist on the imperative of justice as its preferred expression of faith. Briefly stated: Jesuits profess a faith that does justice. The keyword is "does"; it resists any attempt to understand faith outside a particular context that demands practical engagement in a personal and absolute manner. At the risk of sounding unduly polemical, I believe that faith doing justice lends itself to a postmodernist interpretation. This is a difficult thesis to substantiate against the backdrop of the history of the Society's mission. In the past, Jesuits have received specific missions from the Supreme Pontiff in response to a specific pressing contemporary issue. An example is the mission to counter the advances of atheism in recent history. More recently, Pope Benedict XVI has invited Jesuits to combat, among other things, relativism as a specific threat to the Christian message (see "Address of His Holiness Benedict the Sixteenth to the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus," n. 6). Some commentators would insert the postmodernist agenda at the interstices between atheism and relativism. Yet this construal of postmodernism, albeit partial, locates it as a new frontier, beckoning Jesuits who tenaciously maintain the inseparability of the service of faith and the promotion of justice as the core mission of the Society of Jesus.

In dealing with the questions raised by postmodernism for our mission, it is important not to locate them outside the ambit of the apostolic end of the Society of Jesus. Jesuits are men of their times and products of diverse cultures, including postmodernism. Rather than focus on the apparent incompatibility of purposes, we might recognise that postmodernist perspectives deserve a more intensive consideration because they confront us with a new set of conditions and possibilities for preaching faith that does justice. I will demonstrate how these conditions and possibilities function with regard to the history, context and meaning of faith doing justice.

The development of Jesuit mission from GC32 to GC35 clearly demonstrates that the context of the service of faith and the promotion of justice is anything but fixed (see GC35, D. 2, n. 24). Nor does it trace a linear trajectory. Deep changes and discontinuities (GC35, D. 3, nn. 8-11) exist in the personal and collective Jesuit story that stretches back over five hundred years. Within this story the promotion of justice as integral to our service of faith consti-

¹ "Teaching the Faith in a postmodern World", talk given at the 44th General Chapter of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Rome on May 3, 2007 (Editor's Note).

tutes the subject of an ongoing interpretation. Changing contexts determine the focus, nature and means of this mission. This is good news, precisely because it confirms the inseparability of discernment and the mission of faith and justice, provided we understand discernment as a contemplative and critical gaze on the signs of our times. In the context of GC35, this form of discernment is the gift of “understanding that the world could be seen in another way” in the light of “an ordered loving of God and of all things in God” (GC35, D. 2, n. 4; see also n. 6). Like St. Ignatius, it means knowing how to look at, appreciate and embrace “difference and new horizons” (see GC35, D. 2, n. 10 and n. 12).

The mission of faith doing justice adapts itself to diverse particular and local situations. Its meaning is neither fixed nor unchanging. Wherever humanity is threatened by socio-economic, political and religious ills, experiences of Jesuits portray the service of faith and the promotion of justice as an unfinished story. The adaptability – and perhaps, unpredictability – of this mission points to plural conceptions and experiences of what constitutes faith doing justice. Diverse apostolic initiatives embody the multiple meanings of faith doing justice. The plurality of options means that the scope of our apostolic actions is no longer confined to familiar models. I allude here to a certain decentralization of the meaning of faith doing justice, a decentralization informed by the experiences of Jesuits in various parts of the world. The key point is that, as Jesuits, diversity characterizes our ways of believing and living out the consequences of this belief in our apostolates.

The amplification of the mission of faith and justice in GC34 offers a useful example of the changing contexts and the decentralization of meaning inherent in this mission. General Congregation 34 effected an apostolic “turn” towards the other, construed as other cultures, other religions. In this turn faith not only does justice, but it also dialogues with diverse religious traditions and cultures in today’s world (GC34, D. 2, nn. 19-21). Dialogue with the personal or collective other represented in a plurality of cultures and religions is integral to our communal praxis of faith and justice. The “difference” embodied in the “other” becomes the condition of possibility for mutuality, communication and interaction. In the mission of faith doing justice other religions and other cultures are recognized and respected in their uniqueness, rather than ignored or excluded. This apostolic “turn” departs significantly from Eurocentric missionary meta-narratives that propagated and justified the violent conversion and assimilation of other religions and other cultures based on a narrow conception of the universality of the Christian message. Today the expanded mission of faith doing justice and dialogue allows us to hear genuine echoes and stories of faith from African, Asian and other contexts. This understanding of the Jesuit mission of faith doing justice demands that these stories be unfettered by colonialist impositions of the so-called universal Christian culture.

Talking about faith doing justice, postmodernism is often caricatured as a relativisation or loss of faith. This statement may not represent adequately the intent of postmodern thinking. I contend that postmodern culture represents not so much a relativisation of faith as a re-location of faith. Where I speak of re-location, postmodern thinkers may prefer “deconstruction.” Their claim manifests an intention to liberate faith from the sphere of dominant orthodoxies and dogmatically proclaimed discourses in order to “situate” it in the midst of present-day realities strewn with multiple forms of injustice. Before dismissing postmodernism as simply iconoclastic and nihilistic, it may help to see in it an undefined longing for something more than what contents us in our fallible, limited and flawed social systems and political regimes. It is a striving for a frontier, albeit risky, inchoate and undetermined (for such is the nature of a frontier!) – “for difference and new horizons.”

The loss of faith that is often attributed to postmodernist thinking applies primarily to totalizing and absolutist forms of knowledge and power. A cardinal tenet of postmodern culture is the refusal to put faith in meta-narratives. The distrust of totalitarian frameworks generates a turn to the local and the contextualized. Viewed from the perspective of faith doing justice, this approach redirects our apostolic focus on the marginalized and unstable worlds of the poor, the weak and the vulnerable. Postmodern culture’s loss of faith delineates the contours of “faith” expressed in the peripheries and margins inhabited by people ignored by standard narratives of knowledge, power, religion and politics. I perceive some resonances and echoes here of the Society’s option for the poor, which encourages Jesuits to enter into the concrete, localized and fragmented spaces of the poor, “the dry and lifeless areas of the world” (GC35, D. 2, n. 8) and challenges us to be “aware of God’s actions in places and peoples ... (we are) inclined to avoid” (GC35, D. 2, n. 12). To befriend the poor, in the sense of the Society’s preferential option, is to offer “a living narrative” capable of giving, not only “bread and water,” but meaning and focus to those excluded on account of their marginal status, fragmented existence and uncomfortable difference (cf. GC35, D. 2, n. 1). Faith doing justice in a postmodern culture means a personal and corporate re-location to spaces or “‘nations’ that today include those who are poor and displaced, those who are profoundly lonely, those who ignore God’s existence and those who use God as an instrument for political purposes” (GC35, D. 2, n. 22; D. 3, nn. 27-28).

In light of the foregoing, I hesitate to subscribe to the position that “the postmodern context considerably weakens the perspective”² that insists on the inseparable link between faith and justice. The opposite may be true. This fear of postmodernism is perhaps the result of a particular understanding of faith that does not satisfy the criteria of truth in postmodernist thought. In a postmodern milieu, far from being an assent to a set of revealed, timeless

² Etienne Grieu, “Remembering GC35”, *Promotio Iustitiae* 98-99 (2008/1), 39.

and immutable truths, faith unfolds as an ongoing quest, fraught with risks and surprises, but never detached from concrete engagements. In this understanding a postmodernist reading of faith would confirm a core tenet of the Jesuit commitment to faith doing justice. The postmodern man or woman may cringe from options offered by institutional religions, but he or she is not averse to modes of spiritual enlightenment adapted to his or her specific situation in life. This attitude opens a door to our oldest apostolic ministry – the Spiritual Exercises. The diverse ways of exercising this ministry today provide concrete evidence of how faith continues to be relevant in a postmodern culture. In this context, rather than practising this ministry as purveyors of an institutionalized spirituality, we serve the postmodern culture best as facilitators of a contextualized spirituality which, to paraphrase St. Ignatius, allows a free and liberating encounter between God as creator and the postmodern man or woman in search of a personally fulfilling, incarnate spiritual experience. Seeing our ministry of the Spiritual Exercises in this way implies a level of trust that should allow Jesuits to accept a simple truth that we no longer programme the outcomes of our service of the faith and the promotion of justice. The Spiritual Exercises offer tools and means to an end whose nature we can only hope would represent something of the desire for faith and justice (GC35, D. 3, n. 21). Consequently, other Jesuit ministries gain little from erecting barricades against postmodernism perceived as an external enemy. In particular, our intellectual apostolates need to face the challenges of postmodern culture through in-depth research and the practice of open dialogue. We cannot pretend to possess all the answers to the questions posed by the postmodern man or woman; the illusion of a tranquil possession of eternal truths will only drive a wedge between what we represent as Jesuits and what postmodernists seek.

Finally, postmodernism resolutely opposes conceptions of justice that allowed dictatorship to thrive. This opposition resonates with the Jesuit mission of faith doing justice. Far from merely seeking to satisfy the dictates of a disincarnate and disinterested reason, justice in a postmodern context means opposition to social systems and organizations that appeal to unchanging universal principles to foist “law and order” on the weak and the vulnerable of this world. The witness of many Jesuit martyrs since GC32 echoes the same opposition.

I began this essay with a disclaimer that as a 21st century Jesuit, postmodernism appeals to me, not just as an interlocutor, but as a condition that shapes how I “think and behave” (GC35, D. 3, n. 10). Jesuits need not settle for a sombre view of the postmodern culture. This culture serves as the context for the Jesuit commitment to faith and justice in a fragmented and unstable world. I perceive an encouraging affinity of interests here. My reading of GC35 inspires me to appreciate how postmodernist thinking may serve the Society’s fundamental apostolic project of faith doing justice. This view does not, as might be feared, amount to overlooking the differences. In

a postmodern world, knowledge, like faith, is not a disembodied theoretical discourse. It is embodied in context. According to the “living narrative” of Jesuits, faith is embodied, incarnated in justice and in dialogue with the other, here and now. Postmodernists understand this language.

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ
Hekima College

School of Theology and Institute of Peace Studies and International Relations
P. O. Box 21215 Ngong Road
00505 Nairobi - KENYA
<wadoghe@yahoo.co.uk>