



In the later Middle Ages where religious wars and disputes came to dominate history, there was a considerable development in the area of freedom of conscience and religious tolerance in response to the turmoil of those crises. It was in the late eighteenth century with the advent of republicanism and liberalism that full expression <sup>of</sup> ~~the~~ ~~human~~ rights of ~~the~~ citizens began to take political form. We have the Bill of Rights of the State of Virginia in 1776 which makes a catalogue of ~~these rights~~ <sup>them</sup> and in 1789 with the French Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man was proclaimed by the French National Assembly with much emphasis on equality and freedom. We all know the far-reaching consequences of that Declaration right up to our day as it became the guiding light for the drafting of national constitutions and the division of the State into the Judicial, Legislative and Executive branches. ~~the~~ Democratic government represented a big advance in that its basis was considered to be the <sup>WELFARE</sup> ~~welfare~~ of all citizens. ~~With the protection and defence of their rights.~~ However its focus was very much an individualistic one with economic and social rights almost ignored and the right to life ~~and~~ scarcely considered, in the sense that death sentences could be meted out very easily.

We come then to the Universal Declaration which incorporates rights ignored almost up to that time. In that sense, the contribution of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries was to underscore precisely those rights such as work, education, health. The Western countries emphasised freedom, property rights and political participation. The list of rights which the Declaration deals with, is a long one ~~and~~, some twenty or more

spread over the thirty paragraphs and they cover almost every aspect of life from the family to children, discrimination, slavery, all of course in a very succinct but clear way.

"The present Universal Declaration of Human Rights has a common ideal which all peoples and nations should strive to attain so that both individuals and institutions inspiring themselves constantly by it, will promote through teaching and education respect for these rights and liberties and secure through on-going measures of a national and international character, their recognition with universal and effective application both among the peoples of member states (of the UN) and among the territories under its jurisdiction. "

This opening paragraph of the Declaration presents a hope and a challenge which tragically has not been as yet met in our world. Human rights are trampled on without any scruples by governments almost everywhere, so their commitment to the cause is a mere formality. The dictates of power and greed become dominant.

The problem is that very little can be done to punish such offenders. If we commit a serious offense we go to jail for it but governments can brutally oppress their peoples and get away with it. The only sanction is really public opinion.

The move then over the last years has been to make the Universal Declaration more binding on governments. That was one of the reasons why the so-called International Pacts of Human Rights were adopted and a type of watch-dog group set up to observe compliance with those commitments (~~the Group is~~) titled the United Nations Committee for Human Rights. Similiar measures have been adopted in certain areas such as torture, racial discrimination and I am participating in a campaign organised by the Latin American Federation of Families of the Disappeared (FEDEFAM)



to get the UN to approve similar action in the <sup>Matter</sup> ~~case~~ of disappearances. W

However we are a long way away from the constitution of a World Criminal Court whereby any known torturer or violator of human rights could be tried and condemned. ~~Now~~ I believe ~~that~~ decisive steps must be taken in that direction if human rights are ever to be implemented in the world, at all. Those who abuse human rights must be made to pay the price. →

In the Church of course it was Vatican II that really brought us up to date on all of these questions. During many previous generations such matters were regarded with a good deal of suspicion as they seemed an integral part of modern humanism which in many instances was also atheistic. To speak of men and women having ~~inherent human~~ rights to conscience, freedom, equality seemed to our ancestors as going on a collision course with the rights which God has over every human being.

Going back to the sources of Christian Theology, Vatican II unhesitatingly affirmed the dignity of the human person as the product of Divine Creation. The Creator could not be at variance with the created so in honoring humanity we are honoring God. That works the other way around <sup>as well</sup> in that we honor God we dignify humanity. With this break-through, there could be no more questioning of the validity of Christian Humanism in the Catholic understanding of things.

During the last twenty years this basic teaching has been enriched <sup>with</sup> ~~in~~ pastoral experience and theological reflection so much that the struggle for justice and human rights were considered in 1974 by the Synod of Bishops as a constitutive part

of the Christian message.

Obviously in affirming the transcendent and spiritual nature of the human person we as Christians have even more reason to endorse the message of the Universal Declaration. It should be unthinkable for any believer that a child of God could be abused of in any way. So we know that when we are defending human life and dignity we are protecting God's Creation and in a very real sense carrying out a redemptive role assigned to us by Christ. The recent Synod of Rome on the Laity has, I believe much to say on the importance of that work.

The greatest danger which I think we as Christians can fall into in the whole area ~~(human rights)~~ is that we become so tied up in a religious perspective that we begin discriminating. Those who are not like us because they are Jewish, Arabic, unbelievers or have a different political ideology or moral code become easily classified as sinners, atheists or inferior people. Our own faith, which should really lead us to consider all humankind our brothers and sisters, becomes a selfish excuse for inflating our egos and looking down on everyone else. Once that attitude settles in, it can be very easy to condone any misfortune which may befall <sup>OTHER</sup> ~~those~~ people and even go further and trample on their rights. Communists can be shot in Latin America and Catholic or Protestants in Northern Ireland, and some so-called Christians feel good about it. Certainly Christian Faith can never be invoked to justify the violation of human rights and if there has been instances where it has happened it has been a gross distortion of Christianity.



Northern Ireland, Latin America, South Africa, United States are all examples of where that is happening and certainly in the area of discrimination the Churches have still a lot of cleaning-up to do. And even though we may pride ourselves of our defence<sup>C</sup> of the right to life, I often ask myself when I see figures for violent deaths: "How many of the assailants would claim ~~some~~ to be good Christians?" I am of course referring principally to members of the security forces in many Latin American countries.

But all is not negative, the Universal Declaration presents us with a positive challenge no matter what walk of life we may have: Education, Health, Business, whatever area we may be most active in. People should be educated not to get jobs but because they have a right to literacy, knowledge, culture as indeed they have to basic food, health-care, housing, work etc. We build up humanity when we become aware and fully develop<sup>ed</sup> our own rights and those of others.

Salvadorean theologian Jon Sobrino wrote a very interesting essay recently in a Peruvian theological journal speaking of the 'sanctity' of the struggle for human rights. His thesis may seem exaggerated to us <sup>MANY OF</sup> but I do think that he is underlining something very important and indeed as Father Sobrino himself explains, one of the reasons for his coming to such a conclusion <sup>the</sup> is <sup>is</sup> testimony of so many people who sacrificed ~~some~~ their own lives in the cause of human rights. We remember of course Archbishop Oscar Romero but he is not alone. We have Martin Luther King, Bishop Enrique Angelelli (Argentina), Father Luis Espinal (Bolivia) and the list goes on. Their immense sacrifice represents a true case of martyrdom whose example should be known and, I would add, followed.

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The Universal Declaration presents us with a challenge which  
no-one can ignore if we are concerned about making the world a  
better place to live <sup>in</sup>. In a nutshell, to work for human rights  
is to respond to Christ's own invitation <sup>AND</sup> ~~which~~ will be the  
measuring-stick on the Final Day <sup>(Kingdom)</sup> for our own contribution to His  
'Come, you blessed of my Father.....'

For I was hungry and you gave me to eat ...."

Patrick Rice