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Where was God at Copenhagen?

Sean McDonagh | Dec. 21, 2009 NCR Today

Irish Columban Missionary Fr. Seán McDonagh sent this report on Saturday from Copenhagen:

"Columban missionaries like myself who worked in Mindanao, Phillipines, in the 1970s and 1980s will remember that, at many of our heated meetings on issues such as peace, social justice and concerns with the behavior of the army or the police, one well-known Columban would ask: Where is God in all of this?

I am not sure whether there was much God-inspired love for the poor, future generations and the planet itself, in the formal negotiations, as nations put their own immediate economic future before long-term concerns for the poor of the world or future generations.

Once again at COP 15, there were presentations by scientific institutions such as The Hadley Centre in Britain. Warnings from them and their companions in the scientific community are becoming more apocalyptic each year in terms of telling us how quickly climate change is happening and how much more destructive the consequences will be if no serious remedial action is taken within the next decade.

In that sense the failure to reach a comprehensive, ambitious and legally binding successor to the Kyoto Protocol is tragic.

On Dec. 13, 2009, many of the participants at COP 15 attended a Ecumenical Celebration For Creation at The Church of Our Lady, the Lutheran Cathedral of Copenhagen. During the introductory procession, three symbols of climate change were brought to the altar. These included; A stone from Greenland which was uncovered as the glaciers melted, a dried up maize plant from an area in Africa which is experiencing drought as a result of climate change, and a bleached coral from the islands in the Pacific where the increase in ocean temperature is killing off the corals. The hymn sung during the procession was the well-known , ?All Creatures of Our God and King? based on the Canticle of the Sun by St. Francis of Assisi.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu read from Psalm 136. Sr. Anna Mirijam Kascher the Secretary General of the Nordic Conference of Catholic Bishops, read the second reading from 1 Corinthians 12: 12 ? 26. This was followed by the hymn, Here I am Lord, by Dan Schutte. The final reading from was Romans 8: 18 ? 25. It was read by Mads Christoffersen, Secretary General, The National Council of Churches in Denmark.

The sermon was preached by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams. It was one of the most memorable moments for me of my two week stay in Copenhagen and captures the mood of the COP very well.

Here is his sermon:

?Perfect love casts out fear?. It?s a well-known biblical text; in its original setting, it?s about how we learn to have the proper kind of confidence in the love and forgiveness of God. And this kind of confidence, St John says, comes from understanding that we are ? miraculously ? able to stand in the same place as God himself. ?In this world we are as he is?. Our own confidence, our fearlessness, is built on seeing love at work through us ?

not our personal warm feelings or positive emotions or even kind actions, but the love that really sets people free and brings something new into the world: God?s love, dealing with the deepest tangles and knots of our situation, the love that was the essence of Jesus? life and death and resurrection.

And the deepest religious basis for our commitment to the environment in which God has placed us is this recognition that we are called to be, and are enabled to be, the place where God?s love for the world comes through. We have to flesh out in our lives that fundamental biblical conviction that when God looks on the world he finds it good. We have to show in our lives some echo of the delight God finds in creation, recalling the astonishing image in the Book of Proverbs of God?s eternal wisdom playing and rejoicing in the whole span of the universe.

Love casts out fear. If we begin from the belief that God wants us to rejoice and delight in the created world, our basic attitude to the environment will not be anxiety or the desperate search for ways of controlling it; it will be the excited and hopeful search for understanding it and honouring its goodness and its complex, interdependent beauty. If there is any ?fear? around here, it should be fear of spoiling the heritage given us, of forgetting the overwhelming scale and depth of the gift and of our responsibility and care for it, fear of forgetting that we are called to show consistent and sacrificial love for the created world as we must show towards our fellow-human beings. And, as we should have learned by now, the truth is that we cannot show the right kind of love for our fellow-humans unless we also work at keeping the earth as a place that is a secure home for all people and for future generations.

But there is another kind of fear we have to think about, a fear that should prompt us to get in touch again with the love that made us and sustains us. At the present moment, we are faced with the consequences of generations of failure to love the earth as we should; and we are also faced with the choices that might make those consequences less destructive than they would otherwise be. Each of us as an individual, each international business concern, each national government ? all of us have choices. We are not doomed to carry on in a downward spiral of the greedy, addictive, loveless behaviour that has helped to bring us to this point. Yet it seems that fear still rules our hearts and imaginations. We have not yet been able to embrace the cost of the decisions we know we must make. We are afraid because we don?t know how we can survive without the comforts of our existing lifestyle. We are afraid that new policies will be unpopular with a national electorate. We are afraid that younger and more vigorous economies will take advantage of us ? or we are afraid that older, historically dominant economies will use the excuse of ecological responsibility to deny us our right to proper and just development.

There is, in a word, no shortage of excellent excuses for turning away from decisions that will mean real change. But at least let?s be honest about where they come from: it is fear ? not necessarily irrational fear, not even necessarily purely selfish fear, but fear all the same. And so long as that dominates our calculations, we are stepping back from love ? love for the creation itself, which we must look at as God looks at it, love for one another and for the generations still unborn, who need us to do whatever we can to guarantee a stable, productive and balanced world to live in ? not a world of utterly chaotic and disruptive change, of devastation and desertification, of biological impoverishment and degradation.

Love casts out fear. The truth is that what is most likely to get us to take the right decisions for our global future is love. The temptation is to underline fear so as to persuade one another of the urgency of the situation: things are so bad, so threatening, that we have to do something. And indeed there are moments when we might think, rather bitterly, that the human race is still not frightened enough by the prospect of what it has stored up for itself. But this is to drive out one sickness by another. That kind of fear can simply paralyse us, as we all know; it can make us feel that the problem is too great and we may as well pull up the bedclothes and wait for disaster. What?s more, it can tempt us into just blaming one another or waiting for someone else to make the first move because we don?t trust them. We need more than that for lifegiving change to happen.

And that is what we are here to say today. We meet as people of faith in the context of this critical moment in human history; and so we are not here just to plead or harangue, let alone to encourage panic and terror. We are here to say two simple things to ourselves, our neighbours and our governments.

First: don?t be afraid; but ask how the policies you follow and the lifestyle that you take for granted look in the light of the command to love the world you inhabit. Ask what would be a healthy and sustainable relationship with this world, a relationship that would in some way manifest both joy in and respect for the earth. Start with the positive question ? how do we show that we love God?s creation?

Second: don?t separate this from the question of how we learn to trust one another within a world of limited resources. In such a world there can be no trust without justice, without the assurance of knowing that my neighbour is there for me when I face insecurity or risk. How shall we build international institutions that make sure the resources get where they are needed ? that, for example, ?green taxes? will deliver more security for the disadvantaged, that transitions in economic patterns will not weigh most heavily on those least equipped to cope?

Love casts out fear; and the promise that makes sense of all this is the promise we heard in the reading from St Paul?s letter to the Romans: if we allow God to teach us trust and if we learn to live in trust and confidence, the whole created order feels the effects. The ?slavery? imposed on the created order by human sinfulness and selfishness gives way to liberation; human freedom and the fulfilment of the destiny of the world around are manifested together, and the result is glory.

In this season of Advent, we renew our confident hope that such a future is possible. We give thanks for the Christmas gift that has broken through our selfishness and begun the work of our liberation. We reaffirm our conviction and commitment in the name of love; and we say ?don?t be afraid? to all who stand uncertainly on the edge of decision. Don?t be afraid; act for the sake of love.' "

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