

# Along the track

## Who Are We? and Why Are We?

When we have children, whether as a parent, or a teacher or a carer, much of our time and energy is spent showing our children that they are loved, helping them to discover what they are good at, where their talents lie. Much of our time and energy goes into passing on beliefs and attitudes and values, providing positive and life-giving experiences. We want them to know that each of them is unique, each is gifted and talented in their own way. If we have faith, we want them to know that each one of them has an innate dignity, that they have been created by God who loves them, that in God's plan, each person is unique and irreplaceable. Our human dignity also comes from the fact that somehow we are an image of our Creator – in some way each of us is an image of the God who gave us life.

We want them to know that they belong to the human family, that we are interconnected and that our actions affect others. We want them to know that we share responsibility for our world and those who live in it. Each of us has a purpose in life and our actions go beyond today – we have an eternal destiny.

Our importance or dignity or worth then, does not simply come from what we do. It does not rely on achievement and success in order to feel good about ourselves. Yes, we do have gifts and talents and the parable (Mt 25: 14-30) reminds us of our need to use them but our best work ought not be motivated by our need to amass possessions and wealth or by our need to prove something (ourselves, our talents, our goodness) but also by our concern for others and for the world in which we live.

Most children are born into families or communities that socialise them, that teach them their basic values and beliefs, that assist them to understand who they are and what they are called to become.

But today the 'society' they enter has a very different message. Rather than having an innate dignity because of who we are, many governments today, especially in Western countries, regard us as Economic Units. Our worth comes from what we produce, from being competitive, self-reliant and economically productive individuals. We are producers and consumers. We contribute to the economy and, to put it bluntly, we are valued largely on the basis of our economic contribution. For example, it is not uncommon to hear that, as the population of elderly grow, the younger people have to carry them!! Nothing about what they may have contributed or what they may still be contributing to society in so many other ways!!!

Pope Francis, in his 2014 speech to the EU reiterated long held Catholic Social Teaching. Today there is too much emphasis on 'personal rights' rather than recognizing that 'we are beings in relation', he said. This emphasis on 'all about me' also brings about the most common disease today – loneliness. That can result in 'certain rather selfish lifestyles, marked by an opulence which is no longer sustainable and frequently indifferent to the world around

us, and especially to the poorest of the poor'. This loneliness also comes from a growing 'privatised mindset', the idea of people being isolated units, consumers, cogs in a production wheel, as items of consumption to be exploited.

In my view, one of the most common diseases in Europe today is the *loneliness* typical of those who have no connection with others. This is especially true of the elderly, who are often abandoned to their fate, and also in the young who lack clear points of reference and opportunities for the future. It is also seen in the many poor who dwell in our cities and in the disorientation of immigrants who came here seeking a better future.

We live in a "throwaway culture". More wealth, more possessions mean more success and often they are used as a transient cure for being disconnected, being lonely. Sadly that throwaway mentality is sometimes applied to people, especially those in need. Those who are no longer regarded as productive are often left behind.

The Pope reminded us that, what is needed from individuals and from governments is an attitude of generosity and tenderness (perhaps not a word much in use today), compassion and determination. In a culture that focuses on individual rights and freedoms, on being individual productive units, it is easy to demonise those who do not fit in, those who for whatever reason may not be self-reliant. They may be sick or, for a whole variety of reasons, cannot find employment, or those who seek asylum in our country. In today's privatised culture, it is not 'the done thing' to reach out and care for them, to take them on board. It takes a change of mindset.

When you look at it, Catholic Social Teaching is pretty much in accord with the UN Declaration of Human Rights. There are those who argue that this resource was used as the basis for it. The Declaration says that all in the human family have some essential needs if they are to flourish and grow and fulfil their destiny, they have a right to them - food and shelter, the right to feel safe and secure, to ongoing love and nurturing, to education, freedom of movement, speech and religion, protection by the rule of law. Our dignity as humans also includes the right to work so that we can raise our families and contribute to society and the world in which we live.

It is time that we joined Pope Francis and spoke up about this extraordinary treasure, this fundamental teaching that goes right back to the Gospels. We will all be the better for it.

Regards  
Jim Quillinan

Email: [jquillinan@dcsi.net.au](mailto:jquillinan@dcsi.net.au)