



## BLUEPRINT for Social Justice

founded in 1948 by  
Louis J. Twomey, S.J.

◆  
BLUEPRINT is published  
monthly from September through  
June by the Twomey Center  
for Peace through Justice,  
Loyola University, Box 907  
7214 St. Charles Ave.  
New Orleans, LA 70118  
(504) 861-5830

E-mail • [bluprint@loyno.edu](mailto:bluprint@loyno.edu)  
Web • <http://www.loyno.edu/twomey>  
Publisher • Ted Quant  
Editor • Edward B. Arroyo, S.J.  
Printing • Joe Forte

ISSN # 0895-5786

Opinions expressed in BLUEPRINT are the  
authors' and not necessarily representative  
of Loyola University. There is no charge for  
BLUEPRINT, but tax-deductible donations  
are gratefully accepted. Please make checks  
payable to Loyola Twomey Center.



© 1998, Loyola University

# BLUEPRINT for Social Justice

---

Volume LII, No 3

November 1998

---

## The Social Responsibility of the Christian

Richard A McCormick, S. J.

In a truly remarkable document, one that deserves a place, I judge, among the great Papal statements on social questions, *Octogesima Adveniens*, a letter addressed to Cardinal Maurice Roy in Paris, May 1971, Pope Paul VI stated:

"It is to all Christians that we address a fresh and insistent call to action. It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crime, injustices, and other prophetic denunciations. These words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by the lively awareness of personal responsibility and by effective action."

Personal Responsibility and Effective Action — this insistent urging has fallen upon and continues to fall upon deaf ears. Why?

We have had in the past those in our midst who have been socially concerned. Furthermore, we have had a series of magnificent documents on social justice, from *Rerum Novarum* to *Centesimus Annus*, from *The Challenge of Peace* to *Economic Justice for All* and so on. But one has to wonder how deeply these charters penetrated the consciousness of what we may call the rank and file of the believing community. And until that happens we will have a dormant conscience.

### The Socially Dormant Conscience

When there is a socially dormant conscience where social awareness is concerned, injustices will continue and multiply and we will all suffer. Furthermore, and more importantly, there continues the split between articulated Christianity and lived Christianity. In other words Church leaders at all levels continue to call for social action in the face of injustices and their summonses are met with thundering silence and unconcern. Things go on from bad to worse.

Now, behind the dormant conscience I believe we can identify a mentality. When ordinary Christians — all of us — think of social responsibility, two things jump into our minds and they lead to paralysis.



The socially dormant conscience is the product of ignorance leading to inadequacy and ultimately to apathy

First, we imagine ourselves getting out into an inner city — any great city —, working for minorities, organizing the poor for better job and educational opportunities, protesting war — perhaps going to jail. In other words being directly involved with the immediate sufferings and deprivations of other human beings. Then, secondly, we think and reflect, “What can I do, after all I have a job, I have a family, a full time occupation. Furthermore, I know nothing about these things. How can I get involved? It’s absurd to ask me to abandon what I am already doing. I have a family, children to educate. Do you want me to become a social worker?” In other words social responsibility denotes, to at least very many, “Go, give up your job; give up the time your family needs, and come follow me and become a fisher of men in the pool of human misery.” And because that is absolutely impossible with the vast majority of us the quiet pall of unconcern settles in.

Now I believe that’s the way many good Christians react interiorly to the very notion of social responsibility. And it is important to identify this attitude because if we can identify the attitude we can isolate its components. And if we can isolate its components we can identify the opposite components and have the basis for a sound social policy. The components, I suggest to you, of a socially dormant conscience are the following: ignorance, inadequacy, apathy. Of these, ignorance is the most important. It leads spontaneously to inadequacy and then to apathy.

Ignorance — Now the intellectual roots of the dormant conscience, I think, are clear but subtle, and there are two. First of all there is a separatism or dualism of outlook or mentality. This is the rather complete discontinuity between this life and the after life, between piety and practice. Christianity is associated with prayer, preaching, Church attendance and domestic virtues. Politics on the other hand, and business, education, the professions — these are seen as earthly concerns, with no relation to the Christian thing and guided by their own autonomous dynamics. The ultimate symbol of this separatist outlook is the tycoon who builds a Church with the monies piled up through unjust landlord practices or graft.

The second intellectual root of the socially dormant conscience is individualism. By that I refer to the perspective which conceives social responsibility exclusively in terms of one-on-one relationships: I donate to Catholic charities or Christian charities and feel I have done what is expected of me. I hire an underprivileged secretary and feel racially at ease. A doctor does not charge a certain number of charity patients, and so on. The modern extension of that mentality is that I must go into the ghetto, to the urban fringes and become involved. Now these are

forms of social responsibility and I believe essential ones, but they don’t exhaust the notion. Nor are they necessarily the best, most enduring, or most appropriate for you or for me.

Even, I think, the Church’s ministry in the past has reflected a one-on-one bias. In the ministry to individuals, Catholic schools have taken in, for example, individual poor and deprived students. Hospitals have cared for individual sick and dying. Our charitable agencies have administered to orphans, immigrants, the aged. These must continue. But they are not adequate in themselves and therefore, are not an adequate understanding, I suggest, of social responsibility in our time. Contemporary Samaritanism is not content to pour oil on the wounds of the suffering. It wants to prevent that suffering and get at its causes. As the very controversial but effective American organizer, Saul Alinsky, has stated, when a moral matter is at stake and change needs to be brought about, the greatest immorality is to choose a means which will not work.

Therefore, when dualism or separatism and individualism combine in the face of contemporary social evils, they lead not only to inadequacy — some programs, I think, for the poor unwittingly maintain the institutions responsible for poverty — but to a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness and ultimate apathy. And when there is social apathy on our part the Christian message is literally incredible. So the socially dormant conscience is, then, the product of ignorance leading to inadequacy and ultimately to apathy.

Now if the above is a correct account of social apathy, then the socially sensitive conscience will be composed of the opposite characteristics. Against apathy, it will feel right; against ignorance, it will think right; and against inadequacy, it will act right. I believe these three can be employed usefully to lay out in greater detail the meaning of a socially sensitive conscience.

### Feeling Right

First, then, feeling right. This is a very difficult thing and a very delicate thing to explain — a very personal one, indeed. It involves one’s own sensitivity to the harm and the hurt and the deprivation of other people. Judgments of what is the moral ought, what I as a Christian should do, not originate simply in rational analysis, book learning or even sociological data. They have deep roots in our sensitivities, our dispositions, and our emotions. It is axiomatic, of course, that in dealing with the alcoholic it is rather easy to get conviction into the head; it is quite a different thing to get it to the elbow, into the heart. And developing one’s own sensitivities in modern life is

peculiarly hazardous and difficult. We live in a media culture where the hurts, the deprivations and the sufferings of others are served up to us frequently but mediately. By mediately, I mean that we learn of the sufferings and the starvation and the death of others several levels removed from the happening. Often enough, really, in a cosy chair, with a glass of standard swank Beefeater's ready to soften any overly severe blow and soothe our quivering ganglia.

Those of us who lived through the war in South Vietnam experienced a daily body count. This inevitably had the effect, I think, of chipping away at our moral horror at what was happening. Being surrounded by crime and violence and injustice, we get hardened to it. "Oh, just another rape" is a phrase which, God forbid, could become quite as common as a comment on the weather.

In other words I am suggesting that in contemporary Western society the feeling has gone out of it all. A horrifying manifestation of this is the don't-want-to-get-involved syndrome. Thirty people watching with curious blank stares as a woman is murdered in Central Park in New York, pleading for help. This gets extremely personal: our own sensitivities the source of our moral judgments and our moral concepts. Take war for example. I suggest that most of us became bored with that subject. I did. Not horrified or righteously indignant, just bored.

I've written on the subject, I read on it and I am bored with what I have written. Now if I am truly honest, it seems to me I will pursue the matter further at that very point, I will question my own sensitivities because if I do not I simply accept them and make them the criterion of what is right and wrong. I must come to grips with my own feelings. It's so easy to avoid this, so comfortable to avoid it and to accept these sensitivities as normative without recognizing their roots in my own sheltered experience. We need moral concern. We all use the term, we hear it, we nod assent to it, and then we go on. I can give a lecture on the morality of war, as I have done many times. It all stays quite cerebral, at a level which is totally uninvolved and totally unthreatened. I suffer nothing for my statements, no matter how they go. Now, how do we come to grips with that type of thing personally: my own existential non-involvement in the playing out of a human tragedy before my own eyes?

Now here is a dimension of human morality which is utterly real and utterly personal and I don't know how to deal with it frankly. Peace in war we pray for — I pray for it at Mass, yet I feel my prayers are vaguely aimed. I read about it daily, yet it really passes over me like a statistic.

I long for its end, and yet I wonder if I don't long for the end of this type of thing because it is publicly unpopular and economically disadvantageous. So in dealing with social responsibility, or any truly human moral concern, what is so often utterly lacking and so deeply desired now in our time is passion, real conviction. We love, so to speak, mechanically. Rollo May has pointed this out. Our married couples talk about affection and tenderness and read how-to-do-it books looking for an answer to the need for affection. The more they desire and crave passion, the more it escapes them. In a sense we can say we have become the clinicians of quality in an area where quality escapes the mere clinician.

We talk about the poor and their terrible human situation, yet we eat well and we drink well. I get clothes when I need them. And I fly where my community will take me. They have no community. Isn't it true - it's true of me, its probably true of many others — that we get angry at injustice only when it hits us or our family? Those who get angry when injustice hits others — the neighbor as the self, so to speak — we regard as marginal. We should be everlastingly grateful, I believe, for the presence amongst us of those with the moral passion that will take them to jail for their conviction. We celebrate liturgy, we shake hands, we give peace to each other and conclude that it all worked well and meantime the world is unconcerned with our little unities. It goes on facelessly, lonely, in fear of death, with a weekly pay check, trying to blot out the unperturbed Face that says, there is a kingdom. And all the while we theologians are standing on the sidelines, manufacturing terms like *Koinonia*, *Kerygma*, interpersonal encounter, eschatology — and the world goes stale and secular and cold.

What I am suggesting in many roundabout ways is that passion is the beginning of any true moral responsibility, and therefore of social responsibility. It's the inner identification of the individual with the downtrodden, with those who suffer, truly suffer incarceration for the Gospel or for freedom. Identification with men and women driven to liquor and to drugs and to suicide. It's that personal start-up which gets us off-center, self-center, and compels us to examine our consciences, our comforts and our priorities. Without passion there would be no moral responsibility.

Now the question then arises immediately: "How do we develop this in ourselves? Where does it come from?" I think there is no one way. It may be buried, I suppose, in the mysterious gifts of God — this we must beg for daily. But insofar as it depends upon our own doing, I have but a single suggestion: experience it, and see it. It's different seeing Dachau than just talking about it. I saw it and

Feeling  
right  
confronts  
apathy;  
thinking  
right  
confronts  
ignorance;  
acting  
right  
confronts  
inadequacy

walked away in awed silence, horror. It's one thing to read about New York City's Bowery — and every city has its bowery — and it's another thing to see it: the combination of getting sick to your stomach and having your emotions shattered at human degradation. It's one thing to talk about the poor and their housing problems; it's another thing to see the roaches and the rats. I'm suggesting, then, if we are to develop passion, which grounds social responsibility, our first step is to expose ourselves to the effects of poverty and injustice and suffering: to de-insulate ourselves long enough to be compassionate. This is the beginning of Christian social wisdom because compassion is the beginning of passion. We have to do this for ourselves and for our children, in our families and in our schools. Our schools have become, at least in America, very large institutions of insulation, not institutions of exposure. So our first task is to develop our own sensitivities; to feel right.

### Thinking Right

Secondly, we have the task of thinking right: The ignorance that I spoke about earlier, the misconceptions which generate ultimate apathy, are separatism and individualism. Now thinking right, it seems to me, means correcting these twin errors; not only in our heads but in our hearts. As against separatism of outlook, I believe the contemporary theological notion of liberation can help us emancipate ourselves from such a perspective.

This theology can, I think, be developed in a series of assertions; a kind of theology of social responsibility. Bear with me as I summarize them.

First, Christ came to liberate us from sin and death into the fullness of our humanity which will be realized completely, of course, only with the final coming of his kingdom, but which must begin now if it is to occur at all. He is, therefore, as Pope Paul notes, the liberator supreme.

Secondly, our enslavement is in a sense twofold: the selfishness of sin and the manifestations of sin. Our individual failings carry over into the social order. The structure and the institutions which oppress people, alienate them, deprive them of rights, are embodiments of our sinful condition. Or again, the sins of selfishness of one generation become the inhibiting conditions of the next. It is the root of other oppressions, the root of social injustice. Mylai, Dachau, Attica in New York, and other such instances of violence, oppression and injustice are the protruding and visible tips of the iceberg of people's deep sinfulness and selfishness. The impoverishment of the exploited embodies the selfishness of the exploiter.

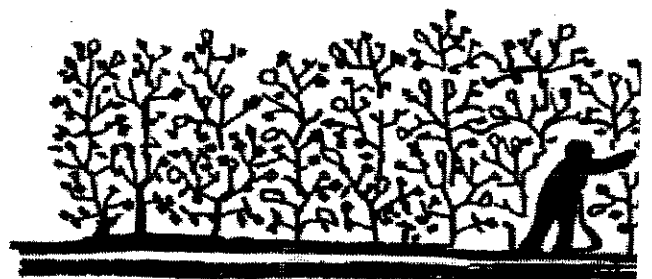
Thirdly, Christ's liberation is, therefore, twofold — from sin and from its expressions in our structures and

institutions. These are inseparable, because it is the whole human being who is liberated not just some dismembered spirit and the human person is both the soul of the body and the body of the soul.

Fourthly, the Church, the believing community, is simply a continuation of Christ's presence, a means and a sign of his presence among us, or, as we say, a sacrament to the world. Since Christ's work was one of liberation, this community should be for all people a sign of the liberating presence of the Lord. This is the principal mission of the Church: to manifest in its own life, its teaching and its activity, the gracious liberating work of the Savior. This liberation both continues the presence and work of Christ and anticipates our definitive salvation.

In summary, then, of this theology we may say this: if personal sin, our own personal sin, embodies itself in unjust and enslaving structures — and it does — if Christ is the Liberator Supreme — and he is — if the Church is the continuance of his liberating presence — and it is — then, clearly, the Church's main task is liberation; and this means from all enslavements, both the roots in sin and the appearance in unjust structures. Now just as there is continuity between sin and social enslavement, so there is continuity between personal conversion-and-liberation, and concrete social action.

Second, to think right we must move against a perspective of individualism. We must in other words see the scope, the true scope of the problem we as Christians face. Our one-on-one ministry of the past indicated that we didn't conceive the problem adequately. The sources of social enslavement are structural and institutional. For example, when in the United States blacks cry out against the inequities of a society built by whites and responsive to whites, what are they saying? When Chicanos resist an agricultural system which uses them but doesn't serve them at all, what are they saying? When our immigrant Puerto Ricans, jammed into the very oldest sections of our crumbling cities, squirm into the streets, what are they trying to say to us? Then, there are the ethnic, the middle Americans that we talk about, who are saying that they too are hurting and don't know who they are or what they are



Passion is  
the  
beginning of  
any true  
moral-  
social  
responsibility

about. What are youngsters, perhaps the most prominent eyesore of all, saying when they talk of oppression by parents, by school, by country, and seek solace in the never-never land of pot and acid, what are they trying to say to us as an adult community? The affluent, barricaded in the wealthy suburbs, when they speak of ennui, of lack of direction, what are they saying? I sometimes believe that in some sense these are our neighbor in greatest need because their pain is best disguised and blunted. But beyond any doubt the most eloquent protest, eloquent because it is hopelessly muted and silent, is from the elderly. They are the most alienated members of contemporary Western society, not yet ready for the world of the dead, not deemed fit for the world of the living, they are shunted aside. More and more of them spend the extra years that medicine has given them in homes for senior citizens and chronic hospitals, in nursing homes waiting for the end. It's terrible but we have learned how to increase their years but we have not learned how to help them enjoy their days. Now all of these instances were summarized, I think very accurately, by an American columnist, Thomas Wicker, when he put his finger on the pulse of the nation and wrote—

“There is a pervasive sense of crisis, a widespread feeling that something has gone wrong in America, with the economy, with the kids, with life in the city, with society generally, with the war that no one even tries to defend any more, with the way things are and the way people have to live in the most highly developed of all twentieth century societies.”

What all these people are saying, I suggest, is the system, the organization, the structure is wrong! Now, what does that mean? I think thinking right demands an analysis of this.

There are at least two types of structures in our society. The first I will call operational structures, and by that term I mean things like zoning, laws, welfare systems, tax systems, health care delivery systems, immigration laws, trade agreements. They are the concrete patterns of behavior that make up our environment. This environment is constituted by the interrelated sets of communities: political, social, economic, familial, reli-

gious. Our well being is, by and large, determined by the harmonious functioning of these various communities. Hence they are either liberating or enslaving operational structures.

Now when they are enslaving structures, they are enslaving because of a second type of structure, an ideological structure which stands behind them. When housing laws are enslaving, when health care delivery systems are enslaving rather than liberating, behind them stands an ideological structure, a value other than human persons, which becomes the organizing and dominating value. I say organizing, because patterns or actions, decisions, policies, reciprocal expectations between people are made in pursuit of this value. I say dominating, because the individual is subordinated to this value.

Now this process is not very often explicit, but that makes no difference: it's there, some value elevated above the human person. So these reciprocal expectations, decisions and policies, patterns of acting, are what we call structures of society, the established relationship of people. And when structures subordinate the good of individuals they begin to enslave.

Let me give you two brief examples. The first is an ecclesiastical example. It is possible for the Church as an organization to be enslaving. If, for example, authority is enshrined as an independent value, then Church policies, teachings, disciplinary decisions are made to protect and to promote this value. Instead of being in the service of the Gospel, authority is that which is served and maximized. A dominant concern for the prerogatives of office means, I think, a corresponding blindness to the goals authority is meant to serve. Threats to authority are seen as threats to the faith. Now what happens when authority receives an independent value in the believing community? We experience the controlled society and individual. We experience teachers who do not educate but control. We experience bishops who do not maximize the effectiveness of their flocks but control them. We experience priests who do not release the potential of their congregations but control them. We see theologians who do not aid others but dominate them.

And we know the symptoms of the controlled group; we have experienced some of them. In teaching, there is the dominance of the negative, the intolerance of pluralism; in administration there is conformism, fear of risk; the use of power is secretive. Such a society has its own personality traits: fear, anxiety, joyless security, rejection of risk, ultimate apathy. For the Church itself can be an enslaving institution. Thank God, it is not.

Another example, I think, closer to my own experience, is American business, the American way of life. I

The task of the contemporary Christian in the social sphere is to change structures



The use of power is a part of social responsibility, the only thing that works where changing structures is involved

think a single value structures this way of life and dominates it and everything else is subordinated to it: the good life, make money. In another culture the largest and most beautiful buildings were cathedrals. Now, they are banks. The gross national product is the index of our economic health. The Cadillac is the sign of social status — or at least it was, until the Arab world began to take a part in international affairs. Our boards of trustees in our major Universities on a careful scrutiny are made up by and large of men of money. They are the recipients of honorary degrees. In other words our culture rewards this and therefore educates to it and our Universities have fallen into line: they educate to efficiency.

Now this all means that in this form of life other values will be pursued and promoted only within that value priority. Thus, justice in education, housing, medical services, job opportunities, all these things are promoted within the dominance of the financial criterion: if we can afford it, where "afford it" means if we can retain the high level of consumership that we now enjoy.

Structures, therefore, enslave when they make some value the organizing and dominating force over and above human persons. I think our children, our youngsters are saying this to us in one way or another; they are not saying that they want, as it were, a piece of the pie; they are questioning the value of the pie itself.

So when large numbers of people are suffering, or are denied rights, human opportunities, look for a value which subordinates them and one which has been made a structure, the basis for reciprocal expectations, policies and decisions. If this is true, the task of the contemporary Christian in the social sphere is to change structures.

### Acting Right

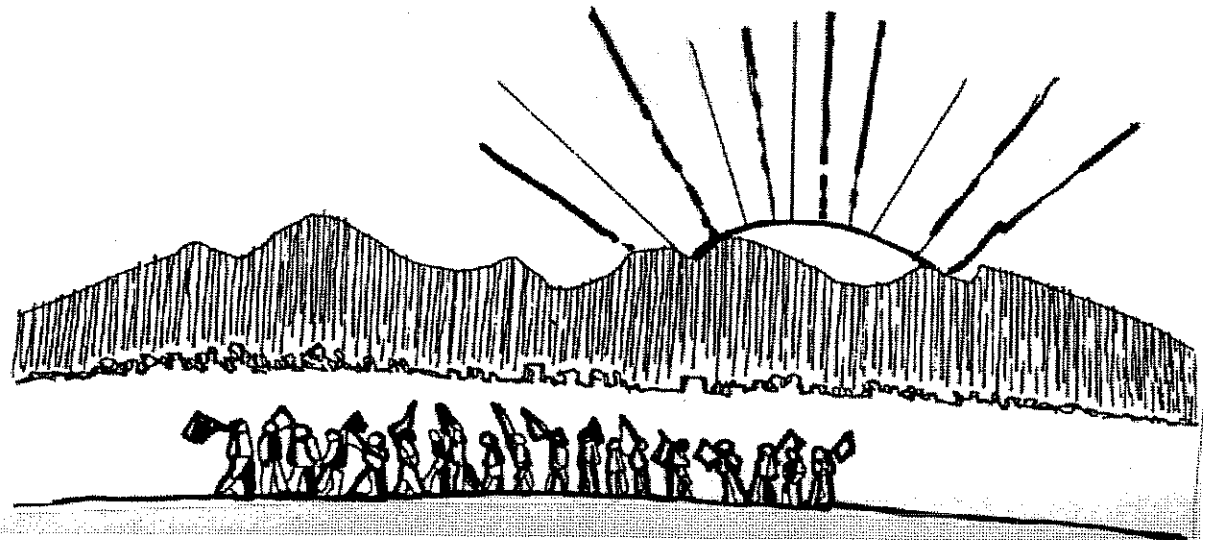
That brings me to my third point, which means that

we must, if we are to be socially responsible, in one way or another begin to act right. Here I think I can be brief.

In the past social responsibility often suggested one-to-one ministries, as I have mentioned, and was implemented in this way. Now we still need this. But it leaves the causes of misery operative and untouched. A further and different response, I think, is called for.

Since structures are the source of injustice and alienation, and since structures are really the values which organize decision making, and policies, then social responsibility demands action directed towards affecting government, community, business, Church, decision making. Structure-changing is changing decision making. I think in doing this we affect influentially the reciprocal expectations, the policies and the value priorities around which contemporary life is organized.

And this means to me the use of power. Power, of course, can mean many things, from the use of rhetoric to the use of a machine gun. Obviously I'm not suggesting the latter. I mean by power the use of corporate persuasiveness, organized corporate action on the loci of decision. The combination as it were of individual weaknesses becomes corporate strength. We have many examples of that. Somewhat ironically the peace movement was a use of power, the power generated through, by, public opinion. The same, I think, can be said for the American consumer advocate, Ralph Nader. He uses the power of the media and public opinion to get at the decision making mechanisms of the American corporate structure. Somewhat more modestly, the organizing of a small group in the Chicago area known as the Contract Buyers League is a use of power, the combining of many small powerless families to compel the re-negotiation of usurious housing contracts. Community organizing in a neighborhood can empower people to obtain their rights.



Shareholders' meetings can be the occasion for the use of power by little people like you and like me. A letter campaign to legislators is a use of power. There are many reasons why this succeeds, and I won't go into them here: suffice it to say that it does work and it is the only thing that does work where structures are involved. And if that is the case, it is a part of social responsibility.

Now, I haven't got one hundred, or ten, or five ways to change the world: your city, your family, your country, whatever it is. No one really has. So beware of prophets bearing certainties. Christianity does not tell us what to do in the face of structural inequality or how to do it: experience tells us that. Experience tells us that social change demands corporate effort, because it demands power. Now what form that will take depends entirely upon the situation. But this much we know in advance, that any corporate effort demands at least the following qualities of mind and of approach.

First of all a participatory attitude: of not leaving it to the pastor, or the mayor, or the government. The job of leadership in our time is not doing things oneself, but making it possible for others to do them. Secondly, it demands not only participation but process: an open, flexible, listening, experimental attitude, willing to learn by mistakes and from experienced hands. And, finally, patience — because changing structures by the use of power means changing values and reciprocal expectations that forge decisions — that means changing people's minds and hearts — lots of minds and many hearts — and that takes time and grace, and therefore patience. We know that it is easy to get people involved for a brief period, but when enthusiasm wears off the cause collapses. There is no surer way for enslaving structures to thrive than for good people, genuinely good people, to make only short-term efforts. And in this my confidence in contemporary youth is not supreme: their ability to commit themselves over a long period of time to anything is disintegrating.

We need, as Archbishop Helder Camara has said, abrahamic people: people who hope against hope. This, I think and I suggest to you, is the contemporary death of the Christian who patterns not only his personal, spiritual moral life, but also his social hopes on Christ. He knows in Christ that just as out of death comes resurrection, out of sorrow comes joy, so out of many discouraging set-backs will come ultimate success. Therefore, he remains at the sticking point. For as Christians, as genuine believers we know that the Christ towards whom we move is already here. We know that the kingdom that is to come, that is to be, is now aborning, somehow or other, mysteriously. We know it will be God's doing, but we know that He will not do it without us. Hence, I think we know, deep in our

persons, although we don't want to face it at times, we know that wherever we find the poor and the weak, the deprived and the lonely, the defenseless, the little ones, we find Christ urging the becoming of His Kingdom, urging us to feel right, to think right, to act right — to be socially responsible. For, where Christ is, there also is hope.

### About the Author

Fr. Richard A. McCormick, S. J., D.D. (Loyola University of Chicago), D.D. (Gregorian University, Rome) is currently John A. O'Brien Professor of Christian Ethics at the University of Notre Dame. He previously served as Rose F. Kennedy Professor of Christian Ethics at the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University. Past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Father McCormick is also a past recipient of the Cardinal Spellman Award as "Outstanding Theologian of the Year" and the Reinold Niebuhr Award for promotion of Justice. This lecture given at the University of Sydney, 23rd August, 1974, ©Australasian Catholic Record, Volume 52, (1975) pages 253-263, is adapted and reprinted here by permission of the publisher.

### RESOURCES

#### for Social Justice

Back issues of BLUEPRINT are excellent resources on social issues for schools and churches. Reprints of many back issues are available, postage included, for:

|                   |     |
|-------------------|-----|
| 1-10 copies ..... | 65¢ |
| 11-50 .....       | 60¢ |
| 51-100 .....      | 55¢ |
| 101-200 .....     | 50¢ |
| over 200 .....    | 45¢ |

Please include payment with order. Make checks payable to the "Twomey Center" and send to:

BLUEPRINT • Loyola University, Box 907  
7214 St. Charles Ave. • New Orleans, LA 70118

### MOVING?

Please let us know so that BLUEPRINT can reach you as quickly as possible. Send us your old mailing label along with your new address. Each undelivered or returned issue costs us at least 50 cents we could well use in other ways to serve you better.