

ZE10110202 - 2010-11-02

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-30819?l=english>

Social Justice and Evangelization (Part 1)

Interview With Cardinal Peter Turkson

By Jason Adkins

ST. PAUL, Minnesota, NOV. 2, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The challenge of serving as the Benedict XVI's voice on matters of "justice and peace" must be overwhelming. It requires applying time-tested principles to a vast quantity of issues in many different geographical, political, and cultural milieus.

Often, solutions to difficult problems that may make sense in one context may strike others in different parts of the world as imprudent or ill-conceived.

But according to the new head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, we must strive to understand difficult terms and ideas from the speaker's point of view. In other words, we must ask what the speaker trying to communicate to her chosen audience.

Adopting this point of departure can also foster a profound learning experience within us, says Peter Kodwo Appiah Cardinal Turkson, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, a post to which he was appointed by Benedict XVI in October 2009.

Turkson, 62, was born in Nsuta Wassaw, Ghana, and is the archbishop emeritus of Cape Coast, Ghana. He attended the St. Anthony-on-Hudson Seminary in New York and later studied at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, where he received a doctorate in sacred Scripture.

Ordained in 1975, he was appointed archbishop of Cape Coast in 1992 and named a cardinal by Pope John Paul II in 2003.

On a recent trip to Minnesota, Cardinal Turkson sat down with ZENIT to discuss, among other things, difficulties understanding and applying Catholic social teaching, the importance of solidarity, and the vital work of the Holy See at the United Nations.

Part 2 of this interview will appear Wednesday.

ZENIT: As head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, you have to be conversant in a lot of different issues from economics to the environment. What are the primary sources of inspiration for the manner in which you approach this task?

Basically, there are three main influences. The first one is Pope Benedict himself. He, of course, is the reason I am in Rome.

I have asked him what his vision and goals are for the office, because the nature of my work is to support the vision of the pope.

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The second is my work as a pastor. Before coming to Rome, I was a pastor. My pastoral experiences have been a reference. It is a particularly rich source for my work.

I find myself coming into the office with a lot of sentiments as a pastor. I must be creative, innovative, and show initiative in whatever situation I encounter.

The third source of inspiration is my own training in scripture. Everything ultimately about our faith in action is ultimately derived from scripture. I find that a very useful preparation.

I was not a particularly privileged student of the Church's social doctrine—I did not make an academic study of it, just what I needed for my work as a pastor. Thus a big support for my work is the scriptural basis of everything that happens.

ZENIT: What is Benedict XVI's vision for your office?

Cardinal Turkson: My appointment happened after the synod on Africa.

At the synod, the Holy Father said that in our work, we must distinguish between pastoral action and political action. Everything we do must be in line with pastoral action.

For example, in the African situation, all of the important issues concerning human development in some way involve government, but we need to think about the pastoral situation.

The approach to political solutions must be in consonance with our understanding of the Church as a family of God.

Anybody who knows about the life of a bishop or priest in a mission country is that it's not just being a pastor, or administrator; instead, he wears many hats -- architect, economic advisor, planner.

That means we as pastors need to develop a keen sense of innovation, creativity and initiative. Our work at the council must be the same.

The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace is one department among many in the Vatican and thus must be in line with the pope. You must speak like the pope would speak when you represent the pope.

ZENIT: In the United States, there is much confusion over the term "social justice," with some acting as though it were a virtue, or a general humanitarianism, and others who believe the term should be abandoned altogether because it has been distorted and hijacked by left-wing political activists. Can you clear up some of the confusion and define just what exactly social justice means?

Cardinal Turkson: At the end of the day, social justice is a function of the Church's own faith and doctrine.

A group of scholars from America recently came to Rome to visit with us and talk about the recent encyclical.

It became clear very early in the discussion that certain terms such as solidarity are not appreciated by Americans, and difficult to translate.

But there is a certain learning experience that is helpful.

Just as we do in any study of literature, it is always good to consider the author and his point of departure.

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We need to understand the author's point of view and what the author brings to the table. Certain terms and concepts may not be appreciated unless we view them from that vantage point.

When it comes to social justice, it was an expression we used in the African synod a lot.

We must first look at the term justice, and then add the adjective of social and see where it takes us. I think it is useful to get a sense of the expression itself.

Justice can be thought of as the need to respect the demands of any relationship in which we stand.

When I respect those relationships, I can be sure to be just. That is true about the relationship between me and God, and it is true about husband and wife, student and teacher, owner and worker.

The demands of any relationship when they are expected between the parties constitute justice. If that is the case, if we refer to this in any way as social, it just means we see a set of relationships and expectations between the members of society.

Thus, it is not conservative or liberal. Let us consider the demands of certain relationships we are involved; that is in the cause of justice.

We have to be careful not to make it too theoretical. There is a relationship between lawmaker and citizen, between carpenter and worker, between bosses and business workers that must be carried out and respected.

Social justice is not so much about distribution or making the higher people in society help the lower.

The point of departure is to recognize the sense of justice in relationships and be guided by it. When we are guided by it, it helps us remove some of the difficulties in understanding the term.

We must look at social justice in terms of relationships.

ZENIT: In the United States, there is much polarization in the way politically active Catholics interpret and apply the Church's social teaching. For instance, some believe that practically all social problems should be solved by private individuals, organizations, and non-governmental actors, while others believe the state should have a hand in practically every problem facing society. Ensuring that all citizens have access to basic health care is just one example. What do you think accounts for this polarization?

Cardinal Turkson: There could be a small disconnect between the Pope's own teaching and the reality of the particular situation in the United States.

I'm not sure whether the health care debate is an attempt to implement the pope's thinking in this regard.

The situation can probably be related to the two political camps within this country. It may, as it will, have its own hermeneutics.

If we are thinking of the communitarian character of the teaching of the Holy Father, it is based on the Christian anthropology of the person. The person is created to be a part of a family. The family is the point of departure of the Holy Father's understanding of the person.

People belong to a family. Fraternity is a concept that is not understood well here.

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Being members of a family, we are all brothers and sisters in a way. It is this communitarian point of departure. We may pursue individual initiatives, but the original point of departure means we must be conscious of not leaving a brother or sister back.

The Holy Father's logic of gift applies here.

We don't leave a brother or sister behind because of a recognition of what the person is: a being created in the image and likeness of God. Our solidarity with them is an expression of God the Father's own love of each of us.

The person must imitate the love of God for others. We must become love or gift to other people.

The sense is that the human person must belong to a family. Solidarity is the basic point of departure -- the brotherhood of men under the fatherhood of God.

I'm not sure whether the political discussion in American society has the same point of departure.

Thus, making that understanding of the human person and the need for solidarity the point of departure becomes the mission. We must use the Church's social doctrine as a means of evangelization. We must share this with non-Christians.

Any legislation that gets adopted must be an expression of solidarity, an expression of the nature of God's love and gratuitousness with which God loves and deals with us.

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