At War with Creation
New Horizons for Catholic Social Teaching

Lee Cormie

The developments of Catholic teaching on peace and justice at the time of Vatican II were a great achievement in their day. However, major societal transitions, new paradigms of knowing and truth, and the collapse of the modern Western project demand new ways of thinking about peace.

We hope for a new world order that offers a future to humankind and the planet.

Our wars are now wars of the worlds, because it’s now the makeup of the cosmos that is at stake.

—Bruno Latour

A remarkable series of documents in the 1960s from Pope John XXIII, Vatican II, Pope Paul VI, and the Latin American Conference of Bishops forged new horizons for Catholic social teaching concerning development, justice, violence, and peace. However, the world has also changed profoundly in many ways since the 1960s. Social justice, eco-justice, and peace movements have erupted around the world, multiplying voices, disclosing suffering and injustice, and calling for many kinds of changes. In this new context, authentic hope for the future, as it did in the time of Jesus, involves radical conversion from the allure of power and privilege in modern civilization and the re-creation of modes of relating to one another in community and to nature. This article traces the vision set out in those remarkable documents, then analyzes the epochal changes that we are experiencing today. Out of these challenges and opportunities comes the summons to a new way of thinking about peace by envisioning a new world order. It requires profound

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faith in the Holy Spirit in the tumultuous processes of transition to a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1).

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Here it is possible only to identify—and celebrate—key aspects of the extraordinary breakthroughs in Catholic social teaching in the 1960s, especially in Pope John XXIII’s encyclicals *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963); Vatican Council II’s *Gaudium et Spes* (1965); Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967); and the Conference of Latin American Bishops Medellin documents (1968). In stark contrast to suspicion and hostility in pre-Vatican II documents to developments in science, technology, and modes of social organization associated with the modern world, these documents reflect deepening appreciation for the vast changes sweeping the world—expanding human capacities to act, deepening confidence in addressing them, and renewing the church to face the challenges and possibilities of this new context.

In the words of Pope John XXIII, “The progress of science and technology in every aspect of life has led, particularly today, to increased relationships between nations, and made the nations more and more dependent on one another” (*Mater et Magistra*, no. 200). In the words of Vatican II: “The human intellect is also broadening its dominion over time: over the past by means of historical knowledge; over the future, by the art of projecting and by planning” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 5). Further, the council bishops noted, as human agency expands, the further our “individual and community responsibility extends” (no. 34). And the conviction grows that “it devolves on humanity to establish a political, social and economic order which will growingly serve man and help individuals as well as groups to affirm and develop the dignity proper to them” (no. 9).

These documents are infused with a sense of expanding human agency at the heart of great changes sweeping the world and with great optimism for the future. But there is also deepening awareness of the growing gaps among people and the possibility of nuclear war with catastrophic consequences:


> Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world’s citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy. . . . [P]olitical, social, economic, racial and ideological disputes still continue bitterly, and with them the peril of a war which would reduce everything to ashes. (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4)

As the decade proceeded, though, the risk of nuclear war receded, and the growing gulf between North and South moved to the center of attention; in the
words of Pope Paul VI: “. . . the needy nations grow more destitute, while the rich nations become even richer” (Populorum Progressio, no. 57). There was growing clarity that violence included not only the violence of war—horrible as that is—but also what came to be seen, especially in the Medellin documents of the Latin American Conference of Bishops, as structural violence, that is, deaths that could have been avoided with other priorities and modes of organizing social life. The suspicion grew that poverty is not always natural and inevitable, but rather it is the fruit of choices in the construction of social order. In this light, peace is redefined, not only as the absence of organized violence, but as a fruit of justice. And hope for peace is reconfigured as depending on overcoming the gaps within nations and among them. Indeed, more just and fully human development becomes “another name for peace” (Populorum Progressio, nos. 76, 83).

These developments signaled great shifts in the horizons of Catholic social teaching, of hope and faith more generally, and a profound recentering of the mission of the church. In the words of the world synod of bishops in 1971:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation. (World Synod of Bishops, no. 6)

The spirit of Vatican II, along with new possibilities for communication and transportation, launched waves of missionaries from the North to the South, expanding Catholic participation in social movements, the proliferation of new justice and peace centers, and vast expansions of social ministries. And together they launched a new stage in wrestling with vast expansions of human agency and the contradictions and possibilities of modern civilization.

In many ways, the insights and concerns of these documents remain remarkably relevant today. But the world is also changing in many fundamental ways and so are the horizons of hope and faith. This raises new questions, challenges, and possibilities for the future.

A Chorus of New Voices from the Margins

The 1960s were dominated by the ethos of progress—especially in Europe and North America—including modest reforms and continuing development leading to societies of high mass consumption and personal freedoms for all. But in the midst of the celebrations of this emergent global social order, choruses of “new” voices erupted around the world in civil rights, liberation, feminist, social
justice, racial justice, ecology, and peace movements. They have given voice to the sufferings and hopes of historically marginalized peoples, their standpoints, perspectives, and concerns. And in the process they challenged reigning cultural and religious, ethical and political discourses in countless ways—disrupting categories, frameworks, and horizons; historically expanding participation; and transforming the character of dialogue and debate in every area.

They diverged in many important ways. But they converged in protesting the idealization of post-World War II forms of social order in the Western—“first”—world and the promises of development for the “third” world. They condemned its contradictions and limitations (named in terms of neocolonialism, dependency and capitalist world system, class divisions, racism, patriarchy, and militarism). They demanded the right to speak for themselves and to have a voice in the centers of decision-making power. Many Christians asked: “What possibilities remain for Christian faith if Christians have no possibilities of changing their history?” (Assmann, 300). They insisted that social order is not simply God-given or natural, but that societies have choices. They dreamed of a different future and called for changes that go to the roots—“radical” changes—in personal relationships, in established ideologies, institutions, social structures, decision-making processes, and outcomes.

In the churches these voices found expression in liberation and contextual theologies, like Latin American liberation theologians, Minjung theology in South Korea, and theology of struggle in the Philippines. In the 1980s these “new” voices were joined by “newer” voices yearning for peace, protesting the arms race and the deepening shadows of nuclear Armageddon. To these joined those seeking to speak on behalf of the earth, pointing to the ecological crises of industrial civilization and to the need for conversion to another path of development.

Throughout the 1990s still “newer” voices arose: African American womanist and Hispanic/ Latina mujerista theologians; gay, lesbian, and transgendered people; disabled or differently-abled people; Asian Canadian, Asian American, and other identities. These voices further expanded global dialogues. In the early years of the twenty-first century the choruses of old, new, and newer voices continue to multiply, reflecting ever growing recognition of the plurality of people’s experience.
Many have worried that the profusion of voices speaking from their own standpoints, experiences, and traditions threatens every notion of truth and authority, leaving only relativism and confusion in the face of so many problems and threats. It is true that these historically unprecedented eruptions of voices and expansions of public dialogues do radically undermine older notions of truth and authority. They have certainly complicated the development of church social teaching and moral theology by introducing new perspectives, issues, and rereadings of the Bible and church tradition. Often they challenge current teachings, church structures, and modes of authority.

These debates involve many important issues that we cannot address here. But apart from details of specific debates, it is also possible or—in Gospel terms of the option for the poor and marginalized—necessary to see this chorus of new voices as a sign of new hope for the future. Aided by global communications, these new voices and movements are participants in an unprecedented expansion of dialogue across the gaps, differences, and divisions historically dividing peoples.

These movements are helping to forge new possibilities for knowledge in every direction. They show that systems of knowledge are socially and historically conditioned, too. A growing body of historical studies is clarifying that, along with liberal appeals to “science,” conservative appeals to “tradition” were forged initially in Europe only in the nineteenth century, along with the discourse of fundamentalism in the United States. Indeed, the production of traditions—liberal, conservative, and radical—is a distinguishing feature of the cultural and ideological dynamics of modern states. And in recuperating the voices, traditions, and discourses of so many other peoples, these dialogues are expanding horizons of reality, (re)discovering lost stories, indeed turning “the’ past into a plurality of worlds” (Schäfer) and charting multiple possible futures.

The boundaries of science and other traditions of knowledge are being reconfigured. In the process these dialogues are undermining linear notions of history as progress that undergird ideologies of development and globalization (Nandy). They shed new light on the dynamics of how civilizations develop and collapse, and they reaffirm the openness of history.

Social justice, eco-justice, and peace movements around the world have benefited from these discoveries. Through global encounters like the World Social Forum and elsewhere, they are forging profound respect for diversity and more inclusive perspectives, broader solidarities, bigger coalitions, and more effective collaboration.
They are witnessing in myriad concrete ways to hope that “another world is possible” (Cormie).

And, in the church, these new voices are vastly expanding dialogue and enriching the discourse of hope and faith. They are transforming it, like Joseph’s coat, into a rich, multicolored fabric, helping to incarnate the church’s vocation to universality and to reconfigure social teaching in the face of epochal challenges and possibilities.

**Epochal Transitions**

Familiar theological, ethical, and political horizons are being disrupted by the sheer scale, magnitude, and pace of change sweeping the world as well. Historical research shows that there have been dramatic transitions in the human past. Advances in knowledge, technology, and modes of social organization expanded human agency, extended the scope of social order, and redrew boundaries between humanity and nature.

The first of these historic transitions occurred 35,000–40,000 years ago. An explosion of cultural creativity, probably associated with breakthroughs in capacities to use symbols and language, clearly marked a shift from the patterns of discrete and intermittent innovation that characterized the human species since its origins in Africa 150,000 years earlier. These innovations resulted in the emergence of social worlds of mobile, relatively egalitarian, hunter-gather bands. They were also linked to complex arrays of social mechanisms—including speech, marriage, gift-giving, trade, raiding, and warfare—that both shaped the development of each group and expanded its interactions beyond its own immediate context (Buzan and Little, 112).

Then, from 11,500 years ago, the transition to agriculture occurred, contributing to the establishment of more sedentary modes of social life providing new social bases for more sustained interaction and creativity. With these developments, “the runaway process of making history sets in” (Cook, 21). Shortly after, the first cities emerged—southern Mesopotamia (3200 BCE), Egypt (3100 BCE), northern India and China (1000 BCE), and Mesoamerica (1000 BCE)—and then city-states and empires or civilizations. These developments mark a quantum leap “from personal relations to impersonal power, and from power over things to power over people” and over nature (Christian, 248). These dynamics reached a new degree of integration in the time of Jesus with the emergence of a single Roman religious-military-political empire inspired and integrated through the cult of the emperor (Horsley).

Following a period of conflicts and defeats, another major transition began in 1500 CE, or symbolically 1492 CE, with the European voyages of discovery, conquest, and incorporation of other empires, lands, and peoples in increasingly global webs of interaction. These developments inaugurated the modern era of enlighten-
ment with the expansion of the authority of science; liberal revolutions in culture, ethics, and politics; and religious reformation and counter-reformations. This is the era of industrial revolutions, new modes of capitalist production and market exchanges, and new modes of governance with the apparatus of the modern state. The era also marks the development of diplomacy, colonization, and imperialism; the emergence of international state-system or world-system; and the first attempts to create modern alternatives—socialism and fascism.

We are familiar with the latest developments in this story: the defeat of the classic modern alternative of socialism; accelerating and intensifying information explosions and knowledge revolutions; and (unevenly) expanding cultural and religious, political and economic links around the world. In the intensification of global civilization, a new threshold is being crossed, one with deepening planetary significance.

**Myth of Progress**

In conventional, or Eurocentric, history and social science since the nineteenth century, all human history has been cast as the straight line of progress leading naturally and inevitably to modern Western Europe, and, after World War II, to the United States. This perspective is reflected in the discourses of development, modernization, and neoliberal globalization. But doubts about this doctrine of progress are multiplying. Clearly, in some important respects knowledge, technologies, and scales of social organization do evolve. But, it is increasingly clear, developments proceed along multiple paths. Different groups of people interpret them differently, assess their benefits and costs differently, and make different choices, influencing the course of history in different ways. From the beginning of the modern world system many peoples have resisted, struggled for liberation, and sought other paths of development (Dussel). Contemporary developments in knowledge, technology, and modes of social organization are opening horizons of possibility on previously unimagined scales. Humans have already become major geological, biological, environmental, climatological, and ecological—as well as global political, economic—actors. We humans are becoming “the planet’s most potent evolutionary force. Far greater in impact than anything in history, except perhaps the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs . . .” (Palumbi, 10).

There are two contrasting accounts of these developments, one of progress and the other of apocalypse. On the one hand, announcements of great progress fill the news every day, new scientific breakthroughs, medical miracles, communications marvels. Grander visions of a glorious new golden era in human history—indeed the history of the solar system, perhaps the history of the cosmos—continue to appear. On the other hand, radically different, apocalyptic visions of catastrophe and transition to an unknown but radically different future have moved to the
center of discourses of the future. Perhaps the most powerful apocalyptic discourse today is that of Armageddon, reflected in the discourse of the U.S. religious right and echoed in policies of the Reagan and G. W. Bush administrations. Other constituencies see different apocalyptic signs: environmental and ecological crises; pandemics killing millions of people; deepening social divisions; wars with highly destructive biological and dirty nuclear weapons; runaway biotechnologies, nanotechnologies, and artificial intelligence; and the thousands of species being swept into extinction. In this narrative, the prospect of the extinction of the human species looms on the horizon, with perhaps cosmic implications.

The scope, scale, and pace of these changes, and proliferation of radically divergent possible futures, have overwhelmed previously established categories, frameworks, and horizons of possibility everywhere: in cultures and religion, in the sciences and social sciences, as well as in Christian theology and social teaching. But they are also provoking new rounds of spiritual, theological, and ethical questioning, new revelatory experiences and insight. Many features of life are less God-given than we had imagined.

The challenges of wide-ranging historical transition have been faced before in our traditions. One thinks of the defeat of Judah by Babylon in 597 B.C.E., the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., and the beginning of the modern era. But the prevailing notions of religious truth as absolute and unchanging inhibited a recognition of the magnitude of these changes, the wisdom forged in negotiating new ways forward in history, and centrality of creativity at the heart of fidelity to tradition. In dialogue with others from many different traditions around the world, we are learning again how to follow the Spirit in the profoundly destructive and creative processes of expanding human agency and epochal transition.

**The Violence of Development**

In the 1970s, in response to the challenges and opportunities of the new voices and new technological and emerging global horizons, elites in the United States were born again as neoliberals and neoconservatives. Central to their agenda was becoming allies and financial supporters of conservative, restorationist, and fundamentalist Christian organizations. With elite allies elsewhere, they articulated a new global project and promoted it widely in corporately owned media. They established it in the centers of global power like the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization and enshrined market fundamentalism as the new orthodoxy that was zealously promoted through free trade agreements and structural adjustment policies, among other ways. They were so successful that this project came to be known simply as “globalization,” as if it were simply God-given or natural, inevitable, and good for everyone in the long run—despite the sacrifices poor and working people and the Earth must bear in the short run. Only in the
late 1990s did alternative movements of “anti-globalization”—more accurately alternative globalization—emerge to advocate for large-scale resistance and offer hopes for alternatives.

Rereading history from other standpoints and experiences makes the violence of modern development agendas clearer:

Over the last fifty years, millions have been uprooted from their homelands, communities have been destroyed, and the environment has been desecrated in the process of transforming “traditional” or “peasant” economies into “modern” economies. (Rajagopal, 16)

The turmoil of “development” has done little to reduce historic sources of conflict, and has fueled competition, tensions, chaos, and wars killing 231 million people in the twentieth century alone. Police forces, counterinsurgency, and war have multiplied in efforts at killing hopes for alternatives. Even as the incidence of overt wars declined at the end of the twentieth century (the good fruit of peace movements, arms control agreements, U.N. peacekeeping efforts), deaths from structural violence due to poverty and environmental distress that result in malnutrition, contaminated water, and disease have risen to twenty-five million victims annually. By conventional measures global wealth is rapidly expanding. But gaps between rich and poor are also rapidly expanding, and with them growing chasms in possibilities for the fullness of life. Wealth and power are being concentrated in increasingly narrow circles, triggering widespread crises in democracy and deepening senses of alienation, powerlessness, and despair.

As their predecessors have at other moments of historical transition, elites are appropriating the marvelous advances of science and technology for making war in defense of the current (dis)order. In the process they are profoundly skewing the development of science and technology and other major aspects of life. The seeds of chaos and violence are being widely sown. With the emergence of the imperial Project for the New American Century and institution of the global war on terror by the G. W. Bush administration, war-making dominates as never before. Indeed, war is being extended into the heavens in the Strategic Defense
Initiative and in turning the most basic Earth processes like weather into weapons of war.

It is increasingly clear that the latest civilizational project is failing even its own terms. And growing choruses of voices are concluding that the war on terror is failing in its own terms too, multiplying terrorists, making the world less secure, and sowing the seeds of further conflict and war.

Though the ranks of terrorist resistance are growing, many more people around the world have concluded that terrorism and violent struggle offer no hope for progressive change—indeed they only intensify the spiral of violence. They are convinced that terrorism can only be contained and defeated in the long run, in the words of one African American activist and scholar, by stopping the violence of racism and class inequality. To struggle for peace, to find new paths toward reconciliation across the boundaries of religion, culture, and color, is the only way to protect our cities, our country, and ourselves from the violence of terrorism. Because without justice, there can be no peace. (Marable, 14)

In the spirit of the 1960s, Catholic social teaching documents that have been deeply chastened by subsequent experiences, a radically different path of development is the new name for peace.

New Heaven and New Earth

In more ways than we know—or the architects of Catholic social teaching in the 1960s could have imagined—we are caught up in processes of re-creating civilization and nature. We are literally in a “fierce struggle to re-create the world” (Santiago).

On the margins and in the interstices of global (dis)order across the South and North, “life continues, reborn and organized even in the displaced, persecuted, blocked and exterminated people . . .” (Continental Movement of Christians for Peace and Dignity). In the shadows of apocalypse, new visions of hope are flowering, involving truly radical conversions from blind faith in the progress of science and technology, market fundamentalism, and the temptations of middle-class consumerism with its endless production of new needs and desire. More and more people are advocating “returning” to smaller scale communities that are locally centered, more fully democratic, and ecologically responsible. These communities are being linked in various mutually beneficial ways in a multicentered, globally networked planetary civilization that is centered on the values of “sufficiency,” “enough,” “austerity,” “subsistence,” and freely chosen “simplicity” and “poverty” (Sobrino).
Many local communities, movements, churches, synagogues, mosques, and other places of worship are having an experience of Pentecost in these times of epochal transition. These are powerful new experiences of the Spirit, poured out across the differences, gaps, and barriers that have traditionally divided people in the different tongues, accents, and dialects. These experiences call people of many cultures, languages, religions, and politics to repentance and conversion. The new experience of Pentecost inspires deeper respect for differences and broader solidarities and points the way forward together in this time when the whole creation is groaning in the labor pains of new birth (Rom 8:22).

References


