

Justice Conference

Sunday Homily: *October 8, 2000*

**Reflections:
Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.**

Morning Prayer

As we begin this final day of the conference, the reading of the call of the prophet Jeremiah invites us to reflect on our own calling and the new invitations that we have heard in the past three days.

Jeremiah was a young man living in a troubled land. Israel was caught between the two superpowers of the region, Egypt to the south and Assyria to the north and east. Rather than relying on the promised help of the Lord, the leaders of Israel tried to preserve its independence by playing off one superpower against another. The people of Israel were also divided between the wealthy few and the many poor. For many, the worship of the Lord had devolved into a formal civic religion which rarely challenged the way they exploited others.

Who would want to be a prophet to such a country? No wonder, then, that Jeremiah tries to decline as he voices the first excuse that comes to mind, "I don't know how to speak, for I am only a boy." The Lord brushes this aside and promises to be with Jeremiah and deliver him from those who will terrify him. The Lord has known him from the very beginning and consecrated him to be a prophet to the nations long before he had any credentials or eloquence.

For the next forty years Jeremiah bore the burden of prophecy, occasionally heeded, but most often ignored and derided by the powerful who would lead Israel to ruin. First they resisted the Babylonians who would destroy Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 and then the Egyptians who would crush what was left of Israel a few years later. This call would shape the life of Jeremiah into old age and stamp his spirit with weariness and frustration as he strove to speak truth to power. But those in power preferred false prophets who assured Israel that God endorsed the status quo.

Although it is likely that none of us have had such a dramatic call, the story of Jeremiah does have parallels in our lives. Most of us recognize a calling only in retrospect, as we look back over the course of our choices and discern a gracious pattern that we did not notice at the time. We had certain academic talents and leadership skills that led us to study a particular discipline which fascinated us. We came across mentors in our studies who encouraged and guided us. For a variety of reasons we came to teach in a Jesuit college or university and found that it suited us. Students of our own brought forth new energy and commitment from us and we plunged into research and writing about questions that nagged at us.

Was all this an accident? Was the convergence of talent and opportunity, of our skills and the needs of others, merely good luck? Perhaps if we experience gratitude for this history we would

rather call it a blessing. Through the eyes of faith, we may see that this history was even more than a blessing. It was a series of invitations from God, a calling to join Another in seeking the truth and helping others to find meaning in their lives. Not all of these invitations were welcome, any more than the call was to Jeremiah. He found that he could lament as well as be grateful to the Lord for the costly gift of prophecy.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola was convinced that God's Spirit works in just these subtle ways, that God's invitation is heard not only in moments of peak experience, but especially in human talents and needs, in specific opportunities and seemingly random requests. Ignatius favorite image of God was as "Director of Souls," the One who works subtly in all things but especially in the roots of human experience and community to heal the world and bring it into union with God. Ignatius also believed that God's call always leads to struggle against the powerful forces of riches, honors and pride that oppress the world in every age. Those who enter that struggle will find that Jesus Christ is the companion who struggles alongside them to free the world from sin and oppression. Intimacy with Christ is not found on the sidelines, but by those who plunge into the struggle because that is where He is.

What have we heard over the past three days? What ideas have sparked new hope? What conversations have made us imagine new possibilities? What stories have troubled us and stretched our usual expectations? These are the points where discernment begins, because these are the points where we may find an invitation and a promise which has unusual depth. We do not have the certainty of a burning bush or a mighty voice calling us, but there will be echoes of grace, intimations of blessing, if we will listen closely. Sometimes that invitation comes from unlikely sources, people and problems we would never have chosen, but who cry out to us.

The Psalm says that "the Lord hears the cry of the poor." The Lord also labors to get us to hear the cry of the poor. That cry is a technical term in Hebrew. It is not a cry of complaint or pain that evokes mere sympathy. It is a cry for vindication, a cry for justice. This is the cry that the Lord heard from the people enslave in Egypt, a cry for vindication from the One who had led their ancestors into Egypt. The "preferential option for the poor" is not an act of noblesse oblige; it is a response to those who claim their vindication and call us to act in responsibility and in solidarity with them. Does this mean that we are all called to be activists? Certainly some are, but most of us are called to integrate this call into our lifelong calling, to integrate the cry of the poor into our teaching and scholarship, into our university programs and policies. We serve the needs of the world by using the talents we have; it is that convergence of talent and perceived need that reveals the gracious invitation of God.

Faith does not give us certainty, and we know that some who act in absolute certainty in the Lord's name have done much damage. In discerning how to respond to God's call, modesty is called for. We may be called in a new direction and be unsure about the next steps to take. That is your task this morning, namely to meet with others from your campuses and try to figure out what you have heard and what practical steps can be taken in response. But every call that comes from God has a promise contained in the command, the same promise that Jeremiah heard,

"Do not say, 'I am only a youth';
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,

and you shall speak whatever I command you,
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." (Jer 1:7,8)