

Tui Motu

InterIslands

monthly independent Catholic magazine
March 2011 | \$6



holiday reflection

my critical question

Andrew Dakers

Holidays provide an opportunity for us to detach from the normal day-to-day demands and reflect on life. Over the last few weeks my reflection has been on the question, what is really important and real in our rapidly changing world, and where should my God-inspired efforts be best directed? My question was prompted by the recent discussions around the introduction of the new English translation of the Mass.

theological underpinnings

There are a number of us who believe that Gospel values and our love for God call us to not only care for and love one another, but to also practise non-violence and social justice, walk gently on the earth, care for our ecological systems and use the earth's resources responsibly and sustainably. One should receive strong support and encouragement from the official church bodies and faith communities in this endeavour, but my experience is that we don't.

facts and figures

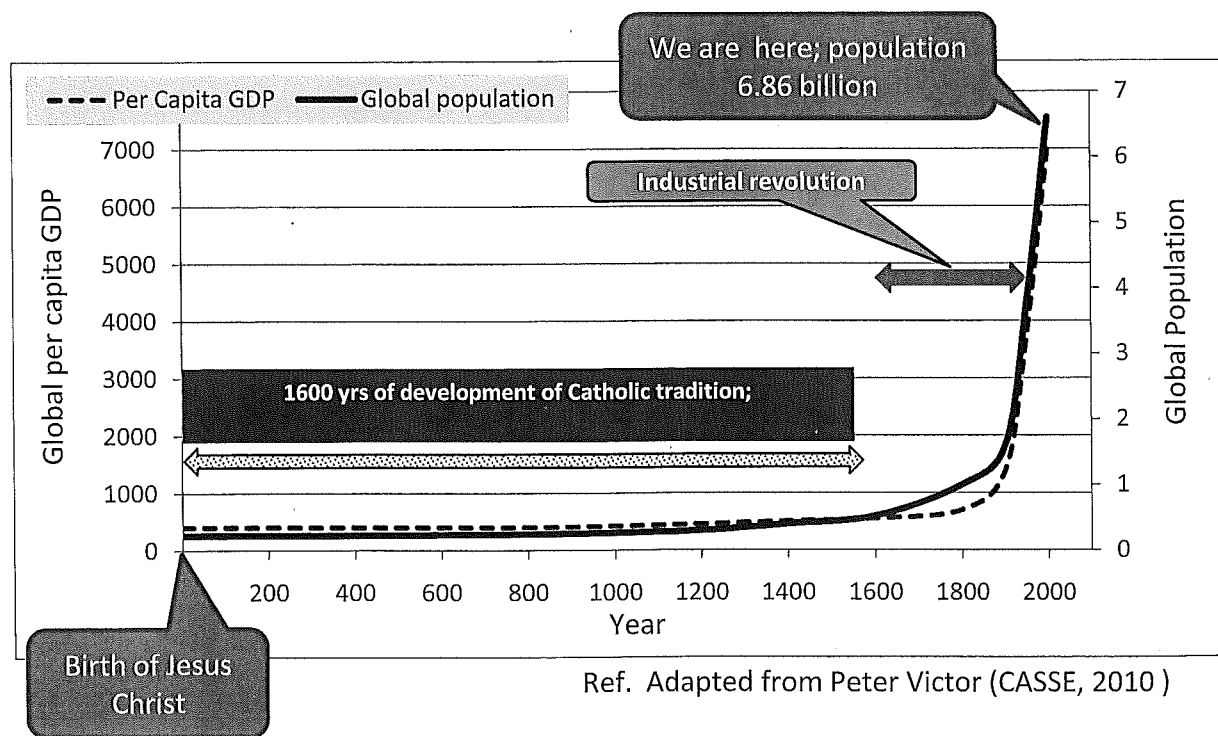
On 19 June 2010 a conference was held in Leeds on Steady State Economy. It was organized by the Center for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy (CASSE), and the report titled *Enough is Enough* resulted from this conference. The following figure has been adapted from a paper presented at this conference by keynote speaker, Peter Victor, York University.

The graph in Figure 1 plots the average global per capita GDP and human population from the time of the birth of Christ to the present time. Both the GDP and population illustrate a dramatic increase over the last 200 years. Between 1900 to 2006 world population increased from around 1.5 billion people to 6.5 billion – a fourfold increase. At the same time, average per capita GDP increased from \$1200 to \$7300 per person – a sixfold increase. Peter Victor notes that the result is that the world GDP increased by an astounding factor of 24 over the last century, from \$2 trillion to 47 trillion.

Victor explains that economic activity is closely tied to energy and resource use. Humanity now uses 11 times as much energy and eight times the weight of material resources every year as it did only a century ago. The vast majority of this increase has occurred during the last 50 years. Victor notes the global economy is now so large that it is undermining the natural systems on which it depends. The result is a wide range of global environmental problems: climate change, biodiversity loss, stratospheric ozone depletion, deforestation, soil degradation, and the collapse of fisheries. The list goes on.

There are many other indicators in addition to GDP and population growth that would show equally dramatic and unprecedented growth and change patterns since the Industrial Revolution.

Victor refers to a paper by Johan Rockström and colleagues (*Nature*, Sept 2009) who identified the specific areas in which the economy is placing an excessive burden on the biosphere.



Why are these excellent church documents not being vigorously presented and promoted to the Catholic communities to guide us through our currently challenging times?

Rockström et al analysed a set of nine “planetary boundaries”, each of which defines the safe operating space for humanity on the planet. The nine boundaries relate to the following earth-system processes:

- climate change
- biodiversity loss
- nitrogen and phosphorous cycles
- stratospheric ozone depletion
- ocean acidification
- global freshwater use
- change in land use
- atmospheric aerosol loading
- and chemical pollution.

exceeding planet's safe limits

According to the detailed analyses of this team, three of the above processes (climate change, biodiversity loss, and the nitrogen cycle), are now exceeding the planet's safe operating limits, and by a large margin in some cases. The potential consequences are severe: the authors warn that transgressing one or more of the planetary boundaries could lead to catastrophic environmental change at the continental to planetary scale.

After painting this disturbing picture Peter Victor discusses the question of whether technology can save us. He provides clear arguments as to why it won't. Technology has not reduced the demand on global resources in the past and is unlikely to in the future.

call for change

The Victor paper is just one of several presented at the Leeds conference supporting the call for a change in culture, attitude and traditional behaviour to one of 'enough is enough'. The challenge is to move to a sustainable economy in a world of finite resources and one in which there is economic justice for all.

There are many thoughtful, objective, well researched and authoritative

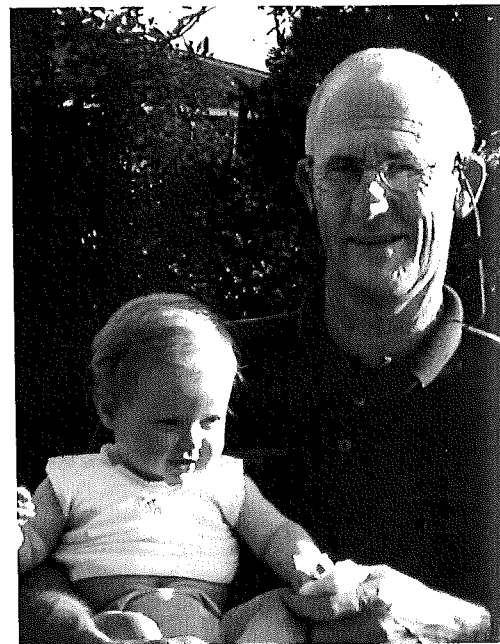
reports on humankind's relationships (material and spiritual) with the ecosystems within which communities are embedded. These same reports are particularly concerned for the sustainable and equitable well-being of present and future generations. The over-riding conclusion of the writers is that we all face unprecedented challenges in our relationship with the ecosystems within which we live. These writers are not doomsayers. Figure 1 is real and unprecedented in the history of humankind.

It is clear that neither technology nor prayer on their own, or both together, will save us and future generations from the ecosystems and resource crises that humankind is heading towards. What the CASSE conference delegates are clearly calling for is a different form of economy, different ways of doing things, different ways of relating to each other, different consumption patterns. They are talking in terms of the urgent need to transition away from growth.

significant culture change

A significant culture change is therefore required. Culture change is very difficult and slow to achieve and requires a substantial shift in personal and collective values. This surely is where the Church has a very challenging and critical role to play. Can the Catholic Church, and particularly its leaders, meet this challenge? It is not difficult to find the official words that would support some of the issues identified above. Some of the recent social teachings and encyclicals issued by Catholic leaders have been notable in identifying many of the key contemporary social and environmental issues. Why are these excellent Church documents not being vigorously presented and promoted to the Catholic communities to guide us through our currently challenging times?

What is lacking is the commitment,



The author with grandchild

leadership and resourcing that turns fine words into action in the real world – the sort of commitment and action that was executed to implement the revised language change of the Mass.

revised mass changes

Late last year *The Press* (26 Nov, 10) published an opinion piece by Fr John O'Connor, on 'New translation revives Mass of old'. The article set out to justify the effort and resources (about 10 years of study and consultation according to this article) that the Catholic Church committed to revising the translation of the Mass. According to this article the reason for doing this was to ensure that the mass was more “dynamically equivalent” to the Latin version and to ensure a robust and theologically rich translation, that was more consistent with other translations (French and Spanish were mentioned). Fr O'Connor lamented the diminishment of the language of the Mass as a vehicle for the traditional doctrine and theology of the people of God. It would appear that the desired outcome of the Catholic leaders was that we as Catholics are drawn nearer to God through the language of the Mass. This language, the article tells us, has been updated to reflect more precisely the tradition of worship of the Church's ancestors.

As I reflected on the article in the context of the Fig. 1 showing GDP and population growth, it was very clear that the most formative phase of the development of Catholic tradition occurred in the pre-industrial age which is at least 80 percent of the total Catholic/Christian history. The social, cultural, technological and economic circumstances in which Catholic traditions originally evolved were very different from what we and future generations are having to deal with. For example, levels of education of the average citizen, social and hierarchical structures, longevity of life, information technology and work place conditions are hugely different today for many in Catholic communities, than they were when Catholic "tradition" was being moulded in the hands of, and imposed by, a few elite Catholics – predominantly men. We face very real challenges and responsibilities that our ancestors could not even imagine let alone experience. As is very clear in Fig. 1, in the last 100 years humankind has experienced dramatic and rapid changes in which the process of learning new ways is essential to enable us to cope. It is equally essential to unlearn some of our old ways. Some traditional attitudes, behaviour and values are inappropriate and sometimes obstructive.

'free thinking' to blame

The article in *The Press* accuses "free thinking" of throwing out our grandfather's old oak kitchen table for a modern formica table that is unmarked with memories of family stories and traditions. It is not uncommon to embellish our ancestors with undeserved wisdom and goodness. Some of the actions and attitudes of our Catholic forebears are much better forgotten. The article concluded that the revised language of the Mass will bring us to a better appreciation of the timelessness of faith, wonder and the presence of God. We also clearly understand that God is 'timeful'. In every place and in every moment of time, we can experience God as time-in-action. Every single aspect of our

living world is crafted by time, from the big bang to now; and every language is crafted by time.

For example, we are beginning to understand the term "sustainability", a word not used in the traditional Church language but common in today's language. It is the sustainable processes, from the planet's first moment to now, that have made life possible. For me "sustainability" is a spiritual connection to all that is, incorporating the dynamics of time and scientific discovery in our present living world, providing a sense of permanence, purpose, place and mutually enhancing relationships in our social, cultural, economic and ecological world.

It is blatantly clear we need strong, informed, enlightened moral guidance to move to a new responsive and relevant culture

We are called to use our personal gifts and talents as responsible, free thinking, loving citizens in the real world of today – anything else is at risk of being pretence and mind manipulation.

The ten year effort by the official Church to get the language of the Mass right in the context of the issues we are being called to respond to has been a very disappointing failure on two significant fronts.

First, it has failed to embrace inclusive language. This must have been a very conscious decision by those in authority. To many of us this is a very significant statement in itself. Nearly every other organisation, profession, social group that I know has been required to adopt gender inclusive language. It is the norm for most of us. So why is Catholic leadership so obstinately opposed to its adoption?

Secondly, the revised language of the Mass is not only a tragic loss of

opportunity to move forward but also directs us backwards to a culture that has been surpassed by the signs and urgent needs of the times. It is blatantly clear we need strong, informed, enlightened moral guidance to move to a new responsive and relevant culture. I imagine that Fr Thomas Berry C.P., well known author, historian, ecotheologian and leader in the tradition of Teilhard de Chardin, would ask that the language of the official Church, in its role as teacher of the faith (including the language of the Mass), guides us to the new ecologically and socially aware era in communion with God.

Using time-crafted tools (such as language) to bring us closer to a timeless God would seem to me to be a very complex task. If it can be done, then I am in no doubt that the timelessness of faith, wonder and presence of God can only be communicated by a language that is fully inclusive, responsive to both the signs of the times and the burning questions and concerns deep within us all. In my view the revised new translation of the Mass has failed in this respect. This missed opportunity by Catholic leaders to translate living Gospel values into a very challenging and changing 21st century is a huge disappointment if not an abrogation of responsibility – the failure to take up values that could be, and certainly need to be, the transforming and sustaining spirit and power that would lead us to a mutually enhancing human presence on the planet – an idea of Thomas Berry.

I will continue to contemplate my original question. What is really important and real in our present rapidly changing world, and where should my God-inspired efforts be best directed? ■

Andrew Dakers is a consultant ecological engineer based in Christchurch with a concern for the future well-being of his six grandchildren

Center for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy (CASSE):

<http://steadystate.org>