

Red Dye #40, inaction and the plot of our lives

By Mary Kay Hunyady, RSCJ



A long time ago, I took a course with Peter Henriot, S.J., during his seventeen-year tenure at the Center of Concern in Washington, D.C. Toward the end of the class, he said something along these lines: “I know that Red Dye #40 is bad for us, so on Mondays I refrain from consuming anything with Red Dye #40. We are boycotting this particular company’s products, so on Tuesday I eat nothing made by that company. On Wednesday, I fast for the sake of being in solidarity with those in the world who have no food to eat. On Thursday ...” And so on. But, “On Sunday, I do whatever I want.” His point: there are so many things to be aware of, and so many actions that we could take to live a more simple or justice-oriented life, that it can be overwhelming and stop us in our tracks. We end up feeling powerless: “I am only one person. I can’t do much. Therefore, I’ll do nothing.” This Jesuit spoke of this reaction as the work of the “evil spirit” – the spirit that tempts us to be apathetic (I can’t care about one more thing), arrogant (I can’t do much, so I’ll do nothing), and individualistic (I can’t do much ...).

Each of us can work for justice in small ways or in ultimately big ways that can lead to imprisonment or death. The latter is the plot of the gospels. The former is the plot of each of our lives. Some of the range of actions/activities for justice are noted elsewhere in this magazine. It is important, though, to know first what is at the core of this work for justice; otherwise, it’s easy to act self-righteously.

In the Constitutions of the Society of the Sacred Heart, we speak about learning from the “dispositions of Jesus’ heart.” The confidence of Jesus’ disarming and gratuitous love, the knowledge that we are loved by the God who is the ground of our being, is the energizing force field that impels us to act for justice. Knowing that I am loved, imperfections and all, can

allow me to be bold and join with others to act for justice “in solidarity with those who are most vulnerable” (Chapter 2008). It helps to examine attitudes we carry in order to be aware of the temptation not to act.

An examination of attitude regarding how we treat other people in our imagination, in our speech and in our actions might unmask our own insecurities, yes; but at a deeper level, it might uncover that we don’t live by the principle of just or right relationship. We need to be rooted in that love that first called us into being and act from that place of love in our exchanges with others. There used to be a television show called Joan of Arcadia, the premise of which was that the main character, Joan, never knew when she might run into God. God could be the gardener in one week’s episode, might be the child at the grocery store in the next. Nancy Bremner, RSCJ, whose death is noted elsewhere in this magazine, spoke often and emotionally of the “indwelling of the Spirit” in each of us. What if we consciously and always acted from the space that recognizes that the Spirit dwells in the other with whom we speak or about whom we speak?

An examination of attitude regarding our use of the Earth’s finite resources can expose that we need to make some changes in order to live more in line with our value of wanting a just and equitable distribution of these resources. The temptation exists to feel that there’s just so much to change about our use of these resources that we end up making no change. Instead, what if we were to make modest monthly changes, decisions that over time add up to rather large changes in both use and consciousness? I recall making a retreat with a spiritual director who advocated that we go through our worldly possessions every six months; if we happen upon an item we haven’t used in that time, we should give it away. Imagine that.

An examination of attitude with regard to acting on behalf of justice might reveal that we unconsciously rank different actions people can take. It’s a personal call from Jesus Christ that is the foundation of any Christian’s actions for justice. We cannot all risk arrest for a particular issue, but maybe some of us can; we cannot all engage in an hour of prayer for peace on a daily basis, but maybe we can join the peace prayer chain for

***This is what Yahweh asks of you:
only this, to act justly,
to love tenderly
and to walk humbly with your God.***

—Micah 6:8, Jerusalem Bible translation

that one minute at noon. We take the next step that we can take, and there is always a next step.

In *Quest for the Living God*, Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, offers insight into the call to act on behalf of a just and peaceful world in solidarity with the Earth and with those who are most vulnerable:

“On the strength of [God’s eschatological] promise, dangerous remembering challenges modern society which tries to anesthetize people against the sufferings of others with a culture of consumerism, happy optimism, and breathtaking banality that irons all sympathy flat. In place of this trite form of life, it impels people of faith to a meaningful life through action that resists unjust, domineering actions that are creating a new generation of victims.”

We are called by the “good spirit” not to be too easily overwhelmed by the struggles for justice in this world and the steps that we might be called to take to contribute to a more just world. What I label “examination of attitude,” Madeleine Sophie would have called cultivation of our interior spirit. The precursor to right action must be self-knowledge. We listen to the Spirit within and follow that course. Your next step might be an act of civil disobedience. It could also be to conserve water, buy Fair Trade products or avoid Red Dye #40. What is your personal call? What is your next step? ❖



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