

The Year of Protest

by Sue Wilson csj

How surely gravity's law,
Strong as an ocean current,
Takes hold of even the strongest thing
And pulls it toward the heart of the world.

- Book of Hours, II 16, Rainer Maria Rilke

This past year has been called "The Year of Protest." Whether we're talking about the Arab Spring, Greek protests against government cuts, widespread strikes by workers in Britain, the global Occupy Movement against the growing gap between rich and poor, or protests against electoral corruption in Russia, there is a strong dissatisfaction in the air.

And it's not just people.

Earth is rising up in protest.

Earth, too, is rising up in protest against the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change. Consider the many extreme weather events of 2011. Through most of 2011 there was a severe drought in east Africa and then, starting in October, many of the same areas were overwhelmed with flood-causing rains. In East Asia, rainfall during the 2011 monsoon season was far above average, with Thailand and Laos most affected. In southern Pakistan, they experienced severe flooding for the second year in a row. In South America, in the mountains north of Rio de Janeiro, more than 200 millimetres of rain fell in just a few hours causing flooding and mudslides, while an incredible 1,513 millimetres of rain fell in Huizucar, El Salvador over a 10-day period. Canada saw an increase in intense rainfall events while the southern U.S. experienced extreme drought, especially in Texas.

There is a cry!

Protest is something with which people of faith are familiar. Walter Brueggemann explores the dynamic of protest at the heart of scripture's foundational Exodus story. The slaves are being exploited in Egypt and they reach the point where they can endure no longer: "There is a cry! [...] That is as close as we come in this narrative to prayer [...] The cry is not addressed to anyone. It is simply out there, declaring publicly that the social system of the empire has failed."¹

The cry is simply out there, declaring publicly that the system has failed. It is also a fitting description of the many protests around the world over this past year. On the surface, the democracy protests in the Middle East don't seem directly related to the Occupy Movement, the protests against austerity measures, or extreme weather events. Just as some were quick to criticize the Occupy Movement for identifying too many (seemingly unrelated) issues, there is a tendency to see the various protests as separate events. But we need only go a bit below the surface to see some links, to see how the "system of the empire has failed":

- The growing gap between rich and poor undermines democracy by giving the 1% too much access to the corridors of political power and too much say in determining the direction of government policies. It echoes the poverty concerns that underlie much of the democracy protesting in the Middle East.
- Globalization has fueled the expansion of systems of production, consumption, trade and finance that are economically, socially and ecologically unsustainable. The growing gap, as well as climate change and other forms of environmental degradation, point toward the unsustainability of the systems. Moreover, the consequences of these failures fall disproportionately on people living in economic poverty and on earth.
- Unbridled exploitation underlies the growing gap, climate change and environmental degradation. And such exploitation fuels unsustainable consumption by 'those who have'.
- Links between climate change, environmental degradation and the growing gap between rich and poor illustrate the inadequacy of evaluating our economic growth by looking at the Gross Domestic Product (GDP—the total value of all of the goods and services that are produced *for money* in the economy). GDP includes many activities that are destructive, such as the production of weapons, and excludes many activities that are nurturing such as families taking time to clean park areas. By contrast, an Index of Wellbeing, measures our overall quality of life, including such aspects as health, social cohesion, economic participation and the wellbeing of earth community (among many other measurements—see www.ciw.ca). In part, an Index of Wellbeing tells us whether enough of the GDP is being channeled toward the common good through public programs and care of the earth.
- Solutions to the problems of climate change, environmental degradation and the growing gap require new economic models, models that link care of the earth with the eradication of poverty. This is the basis of sustainability.

So, the protests are many and they are linked. These links create the outline of a narrative of protest; a narrative that is not unlike the Exodus story.

Brueggemann also identifies a critical second dynamic that accompanies the protests of the Exodus story: "The cry of abused labour found its way to YHWY [...] because YHWH is a magnet that draws the cries of the abused."² Now here is a phrase that wants to draw people of faith to a deeper consciousness: God is 'a magnet for the cries of the abused'. God, who is Truth, Compassion and Justice, *takes hold of even the strongest thing* and pulls it toward the heart of God, drawing in the abused, transforming suffering through solidarity.

As people who desire to walk with God, what would it mean for us to be a magnet for the cries of the abused? What might this mean in terms of our response to the many protests around our world today?

The Word of God comes to change and renew the world

A teaching from Martin Luther suggests a way forward: "The Word of God, whenever it comes, comes to change and renew the world."

In the person of Jesus Christ, Christians believe that the Word of God becomes flesh. In Jesus Christ, we see that the authentically human person is one who is attuned to God's presence and activity within one's self and in the wider world, and one who lives and acts in fidelity to this divine impulse which is characterized by patterns of truth, compassion and justice.

In Jesus Christ, the power and presence of God's communion with all creatures are made visible in his turning toward the excluded, his channeling of God's transforming impulses upon the systems that create injustice and his shaping of new relational patterns that are characterized by truth, compassion and justice. So it is that, in and through the Eucharist, Christians celebrate our being and becoming Communion and, in the process, we deepen our consciousness of the sacramental character of solidarity.

The gap between rich and poor has reached its highest level in over 30 years

The economy is one of the systems in which we are meant to live out our relationships of solidarity. But it's not happening. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an international organization that helps governments tackle the economic, social and governance challenges of a globalized economy. Its 2011 report, *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising*, finds that the gap between rich and poor has reached its highest level in over 30 years. Across the OECD countries, the average income of the richest 10% of people is now about **9 times** that of the poorest 10%. Canada is worse than the average, with the richest 10% having incomes that are **10 times** higher than the poorest 10%, but not as bad as Israel, Turkey and the United States where the ratio is **14 to 1**.

The Secretary-General of the OECD, Angel Gurría, observed that "the social contract is starting to unravel in many countries. This study dispels the assumptions that the benefits of economic growth will automatically trickle down to the disadvantaged [...] Without a comprehensive strategy for inclusive growth, inequality will continue to rise."³ In addition, the report urges governments to use tax and benefit systems to reduce market-driven inequalities.

Earth community is groaning for a new economic model

The Year of Protest affirms the findings of the OECD report and reminds us that all of earth community is groaning for a new economic model, an economic model that is situated within the wider context of social and ecological values and that is bound by the bio-physical limits of Earth. Earth community longs for a sufficiency-based economy in which all Earth's inhabitants are respected and basic goods are equitably shared among all people.

Paradoxically, it seems that the liberation of "the many" is to be found by taking the "free" out of free markets. Governments are being called to serve their people and all earth's inhabitants by regulating market activity.

Possible instruments include:

- putting a cap on carbon emissions and taxing these emissions
- demanding that labour markets provide a living wage to workers
- creating a financial transactions tax that will moderate the financial markets and raise money to eradicate poverty and address climate change
- creating a maximum level of executive compensation (in relation to the bottom-level of pay at the company)
- putting terms on corporate charters which require a process of renewal in which corporations have to prove their benefit to society and the wider earth community.

*God is a magnet that draws the cries of the abused.
The Word of God comes to change and renew the world.*

Jesus Christ is the Word become flesh. In Jesus Christ, the power and presence of God's communion with all creatures are made visible in his turning toward the excluded, his channeling of God's transforming impulses upon the systems that create injustice and his shaping of new relational patterns that are characterized by truth, compassion and justice.

May we awaken to the sacramental character of solidarity by releasing our collective power to be agents of non-violent change.

May we urge our governments (through symbols, signs, words and actions) to ensure that our economy is restrained by the values of equity, dignity, truth, compassion and justice.

May we do all that we can to ensure that that the Year of Protest is followed by a Year of Hope and Justice.

In this way, gravity's law might take hold of "even strongest thing" and pull it toward the heart of the world, toward God's communion.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 10.

² *Ibid.*, 10

³ www.oecd.org/els/social/inequality

Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph of Canada—Office for Systemic Justice
485 Windermere Road, P.O. Box 487, London, ON N6A 4X3; Fax (519) 432-8557
Joan Atkinson csj Tel (519) 432-3781 Ext 422 E-mail jatkinson@csj.london.on.ca
Sue Wilson csj Tel (519) 432-3781 Ext. 402 E-mail swilson@csj.london.on.ca