

Aiming to be a Fairtrade Diocese

“We are a rich nation while others are poor. But there is more to it than that . . . part of our prosperity is due to the fact that people in developing countries are not getting a fair deal.”

Those words from the mandate of Trócaire, the Catholic agency for world development for the last thirty-five years, are perfect for my purpose – promoting Fairtrade. We have been promoting Fairtrade in the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois for more than a year, our objective being to receive recognition as a Fairtrade Diocese.



In our campaign it is relatively easy to involve people who themselves seen men – and more often women – in boiling heat harvesting tea and coffee for a pittance in wages. But the number of Irish people who have seen this for themselves is relatively small, since our tens of thousands of holidaymakers rarely see this side of life, even when staying relatively near to such workplaces on their holidays.

Other ways of getting the message out are needed. If the Fairtrade cause is to take off, motivation of big numbers of people is essential. It is my hope that through the written word I can reach a wider audience who will respond to the case for this kind of global partnership between ourselves and people much less fortunate than we are.

I could follow many lines of argument to make a case for Fairtrade. It should come as no surprise that I look to the teaching of Pope John Paul II, who was very passionate about human rights. In his letter on the dignity of work, *Laborem Exercens*, he makes the point, better than anyone before him, that work has its dignity not because of the work done but because it is a person who does it.

The woman who labours on a tea farm, putting in long hours picking the green shoots from the tea plants, gives dignity to that menial work. If by promoting Fairtrade we can help to ensure that she receives a more just wage, we have recognised and enhanced her dignity.

There is another argument that is at the root of the Church’s stand in support of the poor of the world. This is most often stated in words from the last of the major documents which came from the Second Vatican Council, on *The Church in the Modern World*. “God destined the earth and all it contains for all humankind and all

peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all of humankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity.”

To many farmers in the developing world these words should bring great hope, if they could believe that we really accepted them as true. Sadly, history shows that they have been treated in a very different way. Think, for example, of the many countries in Africa that have been literally robbed of rich mineral wealth by colonisers?

Fairtrade is bringing hope where it is needed most. An example of how Fairtrade can turn a particular kind of farming from near extinction to one providing a good livelihood is found in the banana trade in the Windward Islands. Next time you see a bunch of bananas with the FAIRTRADE Mark think of the banana farmers there who were being forced out of business until their fortune was changed by the that label. The fruits of their part of our earth are shared more fairly and they are back in business.

Fairtrade concentrates mainly on food products, but is not exclusively concerned with the produce of the earth. This brings me to point out another justice issue which should be of concern to us. Some of the manufactured goods that we buy cheaply cost so little because those who make them are poorly paid for their work. Designer labels, which decide choices for many people, are not a guarantee that those who make what we buy are well treated. As more items with the FAIRTRADE Mark become available we will be better placed to make good choices that benefit workers.

One of the fruits of the campaign for fair payment and better working conditions in the developing world is a keener sense of justice within ourselves. To ‘act justly’ is an important component of the life of a Christian. I see the Fairtrade campaign as a means of establishing in the community a desire for justice for all.

Even if we were not to achieve all the success for which we aim, there will be good reason to rejoice if the young people in our schools become passionate for justice and the traders in our towns and villages respond to the requests for Fairtrade products. While people in places we will never see will be financially better off, we will be better people because our hearts have been touched by the cry of the poor.

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