



A reflection by Peter Thomas, JPIC Team

From 1984 to 2012 Peter was an International & Pacific Board Member and Vice President Unda, International Catholic Assoc. for Radio & Television and subsequently Vice President of SIGNIS, the International Catholic Association for Communication.

Keeping Social Justice on the Public Agenda

“It’s a murky world to many church people.... some of it profit-driven, electronically generated, unashamedly secular and cynical about anything sacred. Media is seen as an alien environment!”

Those words of John Bluck, then Communication’s Director, World Council of Churches and later the 14th Anglican Bishop of Waiapu in New Zealand, I first read thirty years ago. John also acknowledged loud and clear in most of his writings that media, and today that would include social media, have taken over many of the social roles held by the church. He wrote a great deal about the media’s role, including television as a way of keeping religion and social and human rights issues on the public agenda. And so it was that in the depths of Melbourne’s winter I sat in front of a computer screen in my spare bedroom cum office watching some of the finest examples of television documentary.

It was a challenging task to pick a winner but that was the job we were given by SIGNIS the international Catholic Organisation for Communication who annually present a special award at the Prix Italia film, television and radio festival. Together with colleagues from Hong Kong, Belgium and Italy I was privileged to be a jury member selecting from over 60 documentaries that dealt with universal social or human rights issues produced by public broadcasters around the world. Because COVID 19 prevented me from travel I watched my 30 allotted documentaries on line and communicated with my fellow jury members via Google Meet.. I’ve been fortunate to have been a

jury member at other international festivals but this year at Prix Italia I was heartened at the quality and quantity of productions.

Let me give you a flavour of the documentaries on offer. From Spanish television, ‘The Legacy of the Caliphate’ looking at the repercussions of the fall of the caliphate of the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

“Born in Auschwitz”, a French Canadian documentary with a story about the only Jewish child to survive being born in the extermination camp. “Grooming”, addressing the issue of sexual harassment of Argentinian young people on the Internet. “The Man Who Loses Hope” an outstandingly

beautiful Russian film about maintaining hope. “I Am Greta” a German made documentary that presents a portrait of Greta Thunberg and her fight to have her voice heard by bureaucrats and politicians. “The Cave”, the courage and resilience of health workers being bombed relentlessly in Al Ghouta in Syria. ‘The Hidden Tracks of Our Money’, a Belgium documentary that shows an investigation that uncovers the truth about some banks claims to invest funds ethically but instead invest in coal, armaments and tobacco. ‘Stop Filming Us’ a documentary from the Netherlands that dissects the mechanisms underpinning the dominance of Western perspectives on developing countries. It argues that countries must show their own reality in



response to colonial, one-sided Western dominated perceptions.



Our jury were unanimous in awarding the SIGNIS prize to “Push” a documentary from Sveriges (Swedish) Television that investigated how local working and middle class people have become unable to afford housing in major cities across the world. It showed how people were being pushed out of their homes. What follows is the summary we presented to the Prix Italia judges....

We applaud this documentary for raising the issue of a ‘David & Goliath’ situation in which wealthy Hedge Funds and other investors trade housing as assets, in much the same way as they would trade a commodity such as gold, without regard to the displacement of tenants many of whom are poorer people, immigrants, the elderly and refugees. Swedish Television has excelled in showing us that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provision that adequate housing is the right of every child, woman and man, everywhere, is flagrantly ignored by unbridled capitalism, a position that numerous countries legally endorse in spite of its intrinsically amoral nature. The filmmakers are to be commended for raising in such a powerful manner an issue of universal concern.

In addition to choosing “Push” for our special prize we chose “Eine Klinik im Untergrund” (The Cave) produced by German Television for a Commendation. The following is the summary we gave to the organizing group at Prix Italia....

The futility of war is the over-arching and effective message of The Cave; the human cost and the horror of suffering and loss. The courage of the health workers as they were constantly bombed by Russian and forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad was brilliantly captured by a crew from German TV who took extraordinary risks to obtain this fly-on-the-wall look at this nightmare situation. We also commend this documentary for highlighting the accounts of misogyny as the female

Doctor/Manager battled with prejudice because of her gender and for offering the viewer a slither of redemption in the form of a quote from one of the doctors that, ‘hope shines in the darkest places.’

In making our decisions about these outstanding documentaries SIGNIS has established a set of criteria.

1. Programs should have high production values. As a jury we take into account the artistic talent and technical skill manifested by the producers.
2. Programs must be judged from a gospel perspective reflecting human dignity and rights; or stimulate ethical debate; or portray values in the spirit of the gospels; or raise audience consciousness of the transcendent dimensions of life.
3. Programs must give attention to themes relevant to Christian responsibility in a modern society.



In assessing which documentaries met these criteria the jury was spoilt for choice as almost all in their own way were prophetic.

Media has a vital role in keeping human rights and social justice issues on the public agenda, a position the church has promoted energetically in the last 50 years. It recognizes that communications, in this case television and cinema documentaries have a most important part to play in forming public opinion. As early as the 1970s in a document titled ‘Mass Media – A Pastoral Instruction’ from the Vatican’s communication’s office these hopeful lines resonated with those of us working in the media.

‘The People of God walk in history. As they, who are, essentially, both communicators and recipients, advance with their times, they look with confidence and even enthusiasm to whatever the development of communications may have to offer.’ (sec.187)

PLEASE JOIN US IN PRAYER

We cannot merely pray to you, O God, to end war,
For we know that you have the world in a way that people must find their own path to peace
within themselves and with their neighbours.

We cannot merely pray to you, O God, to end starvation,
For You have already given us the resources with which to feed the entire world,
If we would only use them wisely.

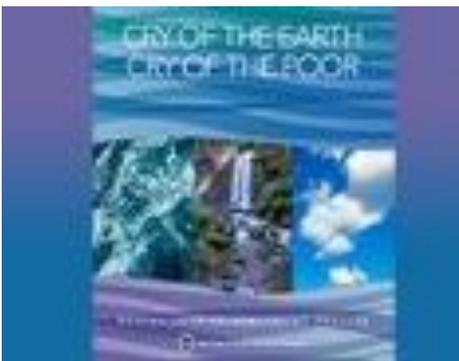
We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to root out prejudice,
For you have already given us eyes with which to see the good in all people,
If we would only use them rightly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end despair,
For you have already given us the power to clear away slums and to give hope,
If we would only use our power justly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God to end disease,
For you have already given us great minds with which to search out cures and healing,
If we would only use them constructively.

Therefore, we pray to You instead, O God, for strength, determination and will power,
To do, instead of just pray,
To become, instead of merely to wish.

Social Justice Resource Centre, Jack Riemer.



Social Justice Sunday August 29, 2021 ... **Social Justice Statement: *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor***

In their Social Justice Statement the Australian Catholic Bishops say, “the signs of the times are clear - we know that we human beings need a change of heart, mind, and behaviour”... It draws from Scripture, from the theological tradition, from Catholic Social Teaching, and from the wisdom of the world, including the insights of the First Nations.

In the Statement, the Bishops invite the whole Catholic community to join them in taking up Pope Francis' invitation to a seven-year journey towards total ecological sustainability, guided by seven Laudato Si' Goals. These Goals are: response to the cry of the earth; response to the cry of the poor; ecological economics; sustainable lifestyles; ecological spirituality; ecological education; and community engagement and participatory action.

Plenary Document Reflection *Instrumentum Laboris* **(<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/fanthefflame/>)**

93. At the turn of the millennium, Pope John Paul II spoke prophetically of the Church's need for an “examination of conscience”³² and for acts of repentance in the light of historical failures by Church members to live according to way of the Gospel. The starting point for a renewed mission must be a communal “purification of memory” and a request for forgiveness from those injured or alienated by the words, attitudes and actions of Church members.³³ As the Second Vatican Council put it: “the Church is not blind to the large gap which exists between the message which it delivers and the human frailty of those who are entrusted with the Gospel”.³⁴

106. It is particularly in relation to the desire for a Church that heals wounds and warms hearts, that we are confronted with the tragic history of sexual abuse of minors within the Church. The shame, disillusionment and anger of so many members of the Church was evident in the submissions to the Council. The damage inflicted on those who have suffered this abuse continues to impact on their physical, emotional, social and spiritual well-being.

