

Title: SODEPAX: An Ecumenical Approach to Global Poverty

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Abstract:

There are already feasible projects in the social area which can be the object of a joint/common ecumenical praxis, even at the global level ... I am well aware that there are historical, cultural and social obstacles. But it would be sad if purely confessional interests, questions of power or prestige or national or economic pressures prevented the churches from fulfilling their duty to humankind at critical points like this where their joint witness could have a decisive weight.

—José Míguez Bonino¹

Although written almost two decades ago, Bonino's words are as relevant today as they were when originally written. The effects of economic globalization and the ever-increasing gap between rich and poor impel humanity to seek powerful, unified voices to defend the dignity and rights of all people. One of these voices should be that of the Christian Church. While today there is no unified Christian voice speaking to the challenges of the global economic system, this has not always been the case. In 1968, the Committee on Society, Development and Peace (SODEPAX), a joint venture of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC), was created with the mandate to "arouse [people] everywhere to a sense of responsibility for the problems of social injustice in the world."² Unfortunately, even after making significant progress in the articulation of a theology of development, SODEPAX was disbanded in 1980 due largely to circumstances beyond its control. In this presentation, I humbly seek to "resurrect" the SODEPAX experiment and propose to participants at the Baylor Symposium on Faith and Culture that it can serve as a model for contemporary ecumenical cooperation on approaches to global poverty.

The presentation is divided into two sections. The first offers an overview of the joint committee's ecumenical nature and highlights its specific accomplishments in the areas of economic development. The second section demonstrates how the lessons learned from the joint committee (both positive and negative) can be used as a model to address contemporary social challenges, particularly those posed by global poverty.

¹ José Míguez Bonino, "Social Doctrine as Locus for Ecumenical Encounter," *The Ecumenical Review*, 42 (October, 1991), 400.

² From George H. Dunne, SJ's introduction to *Church Communication Development: A SODEPAX Report* (Geneva: SODEPAX, 1970), 5.

The topic of ecumenical collaboration is particularly relevant for the Baylor symposium for two reasons. First, SODEPAX offered a concrete example of Christian mission in the world. While the nature of the joint committee was academic, both its consultations and its published findings were always based in practical reality. SODEPAX members - who came from many nations around the world - recognized that in addition to being grounded in the Christian theological tradition, their work had to speak from, and to, the reality of the world as it existed in order to be relevant to those it purported to serve. Second, SODEPAX was a grassroots organization. It was never an "official" organization of either the RCC or the WCC so its members were free to discuss contemporary social realities "as they were," and also offer concrete recommendations from the reality of their own geographic contexts. In fact, SODEPAX provided one of the very first opportunities for Christian ethicists and social scientists to come together and discuss the myriad challenges facing the world community. The genius of SODEPAX was that it did not speak for any particular church or group of churches. Instead, it maintained an advisory role and sought to articulate practical, theologically-based responses to pressing economic issues. In other words, SODEPAX never sought to impose "top-down" solutions, but always maintained a "bottom-up" approach.

Finally, I also submit "SODEPAX: An Ecumenical Approach to Global Poverty" because the value of ecumenical collaboration has been a sorely neglected topic in the study of global poverty. This is a situation that needs to change. As will be demonstrated through this presentation, SODEPAX offers the contemporary Christian churches a model through which they can claim (or reclaim) their unified voice - one that demands dignity and justice for all people.

In fact, the social teachings of the RCC and the WCC would carry more weight if both organizations were to reexamine the history and accomplishments of SODEPAX and then apply the lessons learned from it in order to offer unified, ecumenical responses to contemporary social challenges.

"SODEPAX: An Ecumenical Model for Contemporary Social Ethics" is submitted for consideration to *New Wine, New Wineskins* as an argument for further ecumenical collaboration in the area of Christian social ethics. SODEPAX (the Committee on Society, Development and Peace), a joint venture of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC), was created in 1968 with the mandate to "arouse (people) everywhere to a sense of responsibility for the problems of social injustice in the world, especially those arising out of war and poverty." Although structural and political difficulties caused the joint committee to be disbanded only twelve years after it was created (1980), its early years were characterized by a true ecumenical commitment to combat the social and economic problems of the late 1960s-early 1970s. It was this ecumenical commitment which demonstrates the possibility for SODEPAX to act as a model for contemporary collaborative social action.

The paper draws heavily from SODEPAX publications, presentations from prominent church officials and statements of the first two SODEPAX directors are consulted to gain insights as to what each hoped the joint committee would accomplish. These insights provide a mix of both

fact and opinion that are otherwise not present in official statements of either the RCC or the WCC.

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