Chapter 3

Justice and Peace in a New Caribbean Revisited

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The Joint Pastoral Letter of the bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference (AEC), *Justice and Peace in the New Caribbean*, November 21, 1975, was written in the tenth year after the closure of the ground-breaking Second Vatican Council (1962–65). The documents of the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín Document opened up fresh ways for the people of God to be Church, especially a Church of the poor. The rise of the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) throughout Latin America, especially in Brazil, gave a clear expression to the Medellín appeal for the Church to make a fundamental option for the poor. The opposition to the Church’s option for the poor took the form of accusing the Church of entering the realm of politics, a label that was difficult to deny as the Church’s social teaching had reached a watershed in Pope Paul VI’s 1967 encyclical, *Development of Peoples* (*Populorum Progressio*), and the Document of the Synod of the Catholic Bishops, held in Rome in 1971, *Justitia in Mundi* (Justice in the World).

Background

It is against this backdrop that *Justice and Peace in a New Caribbean* (JPNC) was written, dealing specifically with issues and challenges that were peculiar to the Caribbean, such as the racial tensions in Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Suriname; the Church and politics;
Socialism; or family structure and racial discrimination. Joint Pastoral Letters were not novel to the Catholic Caribbean dioceses. Before JPNC, the Antilles bishops had written a statement on Black Power in 1969, in which they “rejected a narrow type of racism based on a philosophy of hatred and violence . . . [and] welcomed a broad-minded approach that seeks to create a society where the cultural values of all are equally honored and respected and in which no one race will be placed in a position of advantage over any other” (JPNC, §50). (This letter has been discussed elsewhere in this volume.)

In 1978, Bishop Benedict Singh, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Georgetown, and Bishop Randolph George, the Anglican Bishop of Guyana, issued Joint Pastoral Letters to the Catholic faithful and men and women of goodwill in Guyana. At that time, the media was tightly controlled by the ruling party so as to serve its own interest. The only independent newspaper was The Catholic Standard, a small weekly of the Catholic Church, which dealt with the wider issues of the Guyanese society, while catering to the religious needs of the Catholic population as well (Morrison 1997?, pp. 66–76). The first of the shared Catholic-Anglican pastoral letters was a Joint Ecumenical Pastoral Letter, a ground-breaking initiative for these Caribbean Churches. This Joint Pastoral Letter dealt with the broad issues of the rights of the Guyanese people: to information, to free and fair elections, to a fair and just trial, to protection under the law from harassment and other forms of inhuman treatment meted out by the law enforcement authorities. All of this forms part of the background of the writing of JPNC.

This chapter, therefore, aims to help the readers to understand the significance of the issues and challenges raised in JPNC in light of the political, economic, and social reality of the Caribbean in general and Guyana in particular. In order to achieve this objective, I wish to address the following themes: meddling in politics, true development, shared governance, and family structure.

**Meddling in Politics**

In writing JPNC, the bishops were conscious that there would have been persons who would accuse the Church of meddling in politics. The AEC, therefore, rightly affirmed, quoting from the document *Justice in the World*, that “action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel . . .” (p. 29). Put simply, the bishops were saying you cannot separate “bread and justice,” that