

EXPLANATION FOR WITHDRAWAL FROM AMNESTY AND ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BENENSON SOCIETY

It is with regret that St Aloysius' College, together with Loreto College, severed their long-standing association with Amnesty International, following confirmation at its international meeting in Mexico that Amnesty was abandoning its long-held policy of neutrality on abortion. St Aloysius' College had raised its concerns with Amnesty a year ago and had canvassed the arguments subsequently in the media, including *Eureka Street*, *The Age* and *The Australian*. Ultimately, our position was that an institutional link by a Catholic body, such as Catholic schools, with Amnesty had been made impossible by Amnesty's change of policy.

From the beginning, we had indicated our disappointment with the consultation process which seemed more akin to that of a political machine than to a human rights body giving primacy to conscience. Claims were made that external stakeholders have been consulted (for example, in Amnesty's letter to Archbishop Hart). Although 500 Catholic schools in Australia had Amnesty groups, no discussions were held with them. I do not believe free and open discussion was encouraged by the process, which was only confirmed by the very disappointing and secretive way in which the policy change was released, which seemed to be aimed at presenting as small a target as possible through the controlled release of information. The consultation process and the policy release, to my mind, lacked transparency. It was a concern echoed by members of the organisation here in Australia who spoke to me. It was also a concern stated by Bishop Michael Evans, the author of the Amnesty Prayer, in his resignation statement.

The reaction of Catholics from the left to right has been almost unanimous in rejecting the need for Amnesty to go down the path it has. The anti-war activist and poet, Daniel Berrigan SJ resigned in protest at Amnesty choosing to go down the path of supporting violence. Bruce Kent in the UK, head of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, is campaigning against the decision but is remaining a member. Many bishops' conferences, including Australia's, have spoken out against the change and some have urged Catholics to leave the organisation. Catholic schools in Australia, Canada, Scotland, Ireland, England and the US have left the organisation.

The stated aim of many in Amnesty for the change in policy referred to the tragic issue of rape being used as a weapon of war in Darfur. With a policy of neutrality, individuals could still have campaigned on issues such as Darfur. Catholic groups, such as the Jesuit Refugee Services, have teams in Darfur in harm's way working for the victims of the violence there.

The policy, however, goes beyond a concern for the women of Darfur, and reflects a wider agenda for Amnesty that has been in the works for a number of years. For example in 2005 in Beijing at the United Nations conference of women's rights, Amnesty stated:

The US proposal sought to restrict the scope of the Beijing commitments by stating that these did "not create any new international human rights" and in particular that they did "not include the right to abortion". Amnesty International views this not only as an attack on sexual and reproductive rights as enshrined in the Platform for Action, but also more generally as an attempt to stifle the evolution of the human rights framework.

Amnesty has been treading down such a path for some time, and from this perspective the change in policy was a logical one. There is no shortage of advocacy groups in the abortion debate, but strong voices in Amnesty are committed to such an agenda, and indeed there are those who would argue that abortion should be recognised as a human right. My understanding is that this was to be on the agenda at Mexico until the present change in policy created such a reaction. Some sections of Amnesty such as its biggest section, the US, appear to see the new policy itself as mandate for promotion of abortion rights. In her press release on the policy change, Widney Brown made it clear Amnesty International was not backing abortion as a "fundamental right" for women **only** because that approach was not supported by international human rights laws. It is somewhat disingenuous for Amnesty spokespersons to argue that Amnesty is not endorsing abortion, and the actual framing of the policy shows no sensitivity to the concerns of pro-life supporters or to any acknowledgement of an issue of conflicting rights of the unborn. There is no acceptance even of the desirability of lowering abortion rates as proposed by Bill and Hilary Clinton with the principle of "legal, safe and rare". Amnesty's position looks more hard line than say Hilary and Bill Clinton .

Thus the Amnesty policy goes well beyond a concern for the situation of women who are raped in war, and that the agenda of many Amnesty sections is exactly so. In many countries such as Australia, the phrase "risk to a woman's life" has essentially come to mean abortion on demand. The explanatory note that the American section of Amnesty distributed seems to acknowledge this point precisely: *"The scope of this policy will depend very substantially on the choice of options in paragraphs 8 and 9. If the broader options are chosen in both cases, then AI will be in a position to call for access to legal and safe abortions in almost all cases since the courts and medical practice in many countries have recognized that very many factors (ranging from fetal abnormalities to socio-economic pressures) can adversely affect a woman's mental and physical health."* It is difficult to see how the framing of the policy could allow any society to ban partial birth abortions, abortion of the disabled or on the basis of gender, or indeed of late term abortions. It is hard to have confidence in the claims of spokespersons for Amnesty that the organisation has not moved to a position that fundamentally sees abortion as a right. This would also seem to be consistent with the fact that the policy's formulation made no concession to people's concerns about abortion, even if they don't believe in it being criminalised.

We have argued that by changing its policy, Amnesty potentially weakens its ability to speak on many issues because it will be seen increasingly as a voice of the secular left. Indeed a spokesperson for Amnesty here wrote that *"the project of human rights is a secular one"*. Now there is a world of difference between correctly saying that Amnesty is not a religious organization and claiming that the work for human rights is a secular one. As the world watches the monks of Burma lead the resistance to military tyranny there, I wonder again at this view of history. It is a disturbing understanding of human rights advocacy and the role of people of faith that seemingly expects people of faith to leave their faith at the door when working for human rights.

Peter Benenson's own project in starting Amnesty was influenced by his religious experience. The first Amnesty campaign in 1961 highlighted the fate of six prisoners of conscience: Angolan anti-colonialist poet and resistance leader, Agostinho Neto; the Greek Communist Toni Ambatielos; Archbishop Josef Beran of Prague and Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty of Budapest, both imprisoned by Communist dictatorships; Reverend

Ashton Jones, a campaigner for the rights for blacks in the US; and the Romanian philosopher, Constantin Noica.

Later in his life, Benenson founded the Association of Christians Against Torture. In his history of Amnesty, Keepers of the Flame, Stephen Hopgood writes that “*The Amnesty movement was to be a spiritual awakening that would stimulate moral change in members own societies as well*” (p.57). It is striking how many of the key early figures of Amnesty had strong religious connections – Quaker, Jewish, Protestant and Catholic. Far from being a secular project, one could argue that Amnesty itself has its origins in the religious commitment to justice. It seems that increasingly our society is developing collective amnesia about the influence people of faith have had in shaping much of our modern world.

Many people will argue that Catholic schools should remain inside Amnesty, because of the overwhelming good that it does. Indeed, some of the strongest proponents of the change were counting on this sentiment prevailing. What is different about abortion, unlike, for example, promotion of gay rights, is that this policy explicitly excludes some of the most vulnerable members of society – the ‘unborn human’ – from its campaigns for human rights. This goes right to the core of Amnesty as a human rights organisation and as a body that gives primacy to conscience. It strikes against the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child which states that every child “*needs special safeguards and care, including legal protection, before as well as after birth.*” This is surely a crossing of the Rubicon, a qualitative difference to other points of disagreement within an organization. Consequently, we feel we have no choice but to leave Amnesty.

Amnesty has weakened itself by becoming exclusive in a way that will harm its work. Amnesty has had an almost unique position in the depth of its membership in being able to attract conservative and liberal, religious and secular support, for issues around freedom of conscience and political rights. Its decision means that for many people of faith, membership will no longer be possible. The big tent that is Amnesty has become smaller and it runs the risk of becoming just another secular left voice. Amnesty is not a Catholic or religious organization. We were not seeking to impose a Catholic line on Amnesty nor to demonise others. Some 500 Australian Catholic schools have Amnesty groups – schools pay teachers to mentor such groups, Religious Studies textbooks in Catholic schools often encourage membership in Amnesty and provide links to Amnesty on the internet. These groups often help raise funds for Amnesty. All that has ended now - and for what advantage?

St Aloysius’ and Loreto College were determined not to abdicate a role for our students in promoting human rights. We are very appreciative of the commitment of our student members of our Amnesty group, who like hundreds of other groups were never consulted, or even informed, by Amnesty of the change in policy. We have moved to establish a society at our Colleges that will allow our students to continue to have an involvement in the promotion of human rights through the raising of awareness of violations of these rights and through lobbying of governments for prisoners of conscience, the end of torture and the death penalty, and the rights of all to basic freedoms. The society will not be a specifically religious or Catholic body, and will maintain a policy of neutrality on public policy towards abortion.

The society will be called the Benenson Society, after Peter Benenson, the Catholic lawyer who founded Amnesty, and will hopefully embody something of the spirituality,

as well as idealism, that led to the formation of Amnesty. The Benenson Society will have as its symbol a stylised white rose. This symbol draws inspiration from the White Rose Society, a group of Catholic and Protestant students and teachers at Munich University, who opposed Nazism with letters and pamphlets, with nine paying the ultimate price of being guillotined for their stand for human rights.

The aim of the Benenson Society is to provide students with the opportunity to be involved in the promotion of human rights through the raising of awareness of violations of these rights and by lobbying governments on behalf of prisoners of conscience, for the end of torture and the death penalty, and asserting the rights of all to basic freedoms. The Society is open to all those of whatever religious faith or belief, or none, who accept the fundamental rights of all human beings.

Membership will be open to students through forming chapters in schools, colleges and universities that sign on to the Charter of the Benenson society. Associate membership may be held by teachers and others interested in supporting the work, as well as by members who finish their studies and wish to remain associated with the Society.

It is envisaged at this time that the Society will have a rather loose structure and organization so that it is best suited to the needs and opportunities in each school, college or university, in which there is a chapter. A chapter may use the name Benenson Society, and the symbol of the white rose, simply by signing on to the charter. Please see the accompanying file on the Charter of the Benenson Society.

It is hoped that chapters would assist each other through group email lists and other forms of communication. Joint action on various cases could be thus promoted and resources shared. Initially the chapters at St Aloysius' College, Milsons Point, and Loreto, Kirribilli, will coordinate such group lists. Amnesty International Australia has indicated that it is willing to cooperate with the new group and we are looking to establish similar links with other human rights advocacy groups that have letter writing campaigns and resources bases such as Christians Against Torture, Consistent Life, Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Human Rights First.

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