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RECOVERING A GOSPEL OF LOVE THROUGH CHILDREN: SHATTERING FAITH, KNOWLEDGE AND JUSTICE

Stephan de Beer and Genevieve James

This paper seeks to consider the themes of justice, faith and knowledge using the South African context as its backdrop. South Africa provides a context fraught with a multiplicity of challenges, many of which were inherited from the exceptional injustices which characterised the apartheid era, dating back to the days of British and Dutch colonisation. Since the emergence of South Africa's democracy, the new government has faced unparalleled challenges entrenched in legacy systems designed to cater for a mollycoddled minority. It is for this reason that children in South Africa cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group, since centuries of disequilibrium and dis-proportionality arising out of state-practised Euro-centrism, racism and discrimination, resulted in some children experiencing First World access to education, health care and public utilities, while others succumbed to hunger, ill-health, neglect, violence and death. South African children continue to reap the poisoned fruit of these vile injustices as the new South Africa, laden with promises of a new and better life, has yielded little in the way of social justice for children.

It is necessary to point out that the apartheid government received the necessary theological underpinning from a legion of astute theologians and academics, whose carefully crafted interpretation of biblical texts provided an ostensible basis for the supposed superiority of the white race. Undoubtedly it was an intellectual project *extraordinaire* by which the architects of apartheid successfully raised generations of white children who were led to believe they were superior, chosen and blessed by God. Meanwhile, in South African black townships, and special locations assigned for black people, those children struggled with self-actualisation and esteem issues because of both implicit and explicit messages, coupled with state propaganda, that white was beautiful, intelligent, strong, made in the image of God, beloved of God and valued. This great intellectual project, grounded in a twisted theological motivation, had far-reaching social, economic and justice implications for the children of the nation.

Against this backdrop, and great opposition, the Black Consciousness Movement and Black Theology¹ had to work with great fervour to rebuild a sense of value in the minds and hearts of the majority of the nation's children. Things began to reach fever pitch when, in 1976, children in the black township of Soweto were mercilessly gunned down during protests against the apartheid government's plan to impose Afrikaans language instruction at black schools. This would have further disadvantaged black children in an education system that was designed to keep black people in perpetual servitude. News of the killings shot around the world and this became another tragic milestone in the already catastrophic history of children in South Africa.

The war against children continued to rage across South Africa in diverse and deadly forms. Many were forced to contend with absent fathers uprooted to work in the profitable gold and diamond mines. Tragically, their children were never the recipients of the profits. Instead they had to contend with debilitating poverty, a poor health care and education system, and the irreversible destruction of their families and communities. Through it all, there were pockets of hope and rays of light, but for the most part the church failed to translate the meaning of the Good News of Jesus Christ to and for the children of South Africa in the spaces and places in which they found themselves. Seeing them only as recipients of 'Biblical' instruction and in need of discipline, the church in South Africa failed to apprehend the awesome and tremendous opportunity of declaring the justice of God.

Mission and theology always takes place in specific contexts. It is against this particular backdrop described above that the next section of this chapter will present an insightful narrative account of poor and vulnerable South African children as interlocutors of faith, knowledge and justice. The personal account to follow emerges from the city of Pretoria, the capital of the Republic of South Africa, a city which hosts the seat of the Presidency and countless international embassies. This narrative is a valuable resource for further understanding the unique mission with and to children in the South African context. The personal story is shared by Stephan de Beer, who is currently the Director for the Centre for Contextual Ministry at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. De Beer's narrative illuminates processes of meaning, traces the course of theological action and reveals a transformed missiology, one that can aid our thinking on mission with children. In this story we will read how children served as poignant and powerful agents of mission, calling for a complete *volte face* in theological discourse, consciousness and action in South Africa.

¹ See J.N.J. Kritzing, *Black Theology: Challenge to Mission* (DTh thesis, Department of Missiology, University of South Africa, 1988), and T.S. Maluleke, 'The Africanization of Theological Education: Does Theological Education Equip You to Help Your Sister?' in E. Antonio (ed), *Inculturation and Postcolonial Discourse in African Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 617.

A Catalyst for a New Conversion: The Story of the Elim Church Fire – Pretoria, South Africa

I was raised in the high-rise inner-city neighbourhood of Sunnyside in Pretoria. When I grew up, and until about 1993, this neighbourhood was 100% white in terms of those who lived there. Since 1993 it has rapidly changed and today is 85-90% black. Today the local residents not only represent the diversity of South Africa's language and ethnic groups, but also the continuous migration from all over Africa into the cities and towns of South Africa. Migrants come from Somalia, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Nigeria, Eritrea and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to find homes, open shops, attend churches and mosques, and to represent their home countries, in the dense and ever-changing neighbourhood of Sunnyside.

While studying theology in the late 1980s and early 1990s I became aware, with others, of an emerging reality that children were making the busy Esselen Street's retail district, now Robert Sobukwe Street, their home. In the late 1980s, children from as young as eight years old found their way to Sunnyside, and other similar inner-city neighbourhoods around the country, to earn a living, escape violence and abuse at home, and to find a glimmer of hope or perhaps a ray of sun.

About 1990, a friend who ran his own business in another part of the city, approached me and some other university friends, to start an overnight shelter for street boys, from where programmes could be offered that would provide alternatives to life on the streets, and also to assist boys in the process of being reconciled with their families, if at all possible.

The old Elim Church in Jeppe Street, now Steve Biko Street, stood empty, as the congregation had moved to a suburb closer to the university to serve the student population. The new owners of the building did not have an immediate use for the property, and allowed us to use this space to create the first overnight shelter for street boys in the inner city. This was not welcomed by the wider community – even veteran social workers working for local non-profit organisations were initially suspicious because they reckoned a business man and a group of university students lacked the necessary experience and knowledge to open such a facility.

However, since the street boys had nowhere else to sleep at night, permission was given. We opened the doors of the church to accommodate twenty boys per night in shelter accommodation. They were served supper, provided by churches and individuals from across the city, and in the morning, after having something to eat, they would leave the building to do whatever they did during the day: odd jobs, hanging out in the streets, stealing, begging, whatever they could find to make a living.

Not having a budget for the project, some of us took turns sleeping over at night as supervisors to the boys living in the facility. This continued for some months until we were able to employ an adult house father who took responsibility to supervise those boys living on the property and offer spiritual formation to the children.

Initially, all the boys slept next to each other in one big space that had been the church's gallery. After some time, we differentiated between older and younger boys so they could sleep in separate rooms. I remember one of the older boys telling the younger boys stories at night to help put them to sleep. These boys, who had to be brave on the streets, who faced darkness and police brutality night after night, started to become like children once they had a secure shelter off the streets. These tough street boys experienced a normal child's fears at night, needing a shoulder to cry on and a story-teller to put them to sleep.

We soon developed a programme in the shelter which included a literacy component, a life skills component, leatherwork training, leadership training, spiritual formation, and a recreational programme. Since this was not a formal residential facility, the washing facilities were limited. I mentioned the apprehension of professional social workers at the beginning of this project; however, over time, some of them became allies and even co-workers. The presence of the children on the streets of Sunnyside, the opening of an overnight shelter in the midst of what was then still a white neighbourhood, continued to generate negative responses from other sectors of the neighbourhood.

The local business community did not welcome the presence of the street children as they argued it drove their business away. Some members of the South African Police Force went out of their way to harass the children, violating their dignity and childhood. Off-duty policemen would come to the church at night, harassing the boys and those of us who volunteered as overnight supervisors. Sometimes they would threaten the boys. We often heard reports of what was happening on the streets: on one occasion the boys were loaded in police vans and driven thirty kilometres out of town, their shoes taken from them, police dogs set onto them, and they were made to walk back – all this to try and discourage them from living on the streets of Sunnyside.

And yet, the boys would return to the shelter night after night. The risks they faced living on the streets did not seem to match the risks of poverty and abuse many of them faced in their homes. The city streets offered them a strange consolation, even if it was a nebulous dream.

The boys on the streets of Sunnyside became the forerunners of new migrations into South African inner cities – not just South African black people coming from townships, informal settlements and rural areas, but in the 1990s, tens of thousands of Africans coming across the borders from Mozambique, Rwanda, Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the last decade migrants have increasingly come from Nigeria, Tanzania, Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia. Most of the migrants moving into South Africa's inner cities are particularly vulnerable to poverty and crime.

The harassment of the boys on and off the streets, and of the staff and volunteers of the overnight shelter, continued for the duration of the programme. Then a series of incidents occurred that intensified antagonism

between the project, the boys, and the police. On 12 March 1992, a fire destroyed the building that housed the shelter: eight boys died in the fire, the youngest being only eight years old. Some died in their sleep from smoke inhalation.²

A Personal Shattering of Faith, Knowledge and Justice: The Reality of South Africa's Vulnerable Children

Recently, I shared about the fire with a friend who had volunteered with us when we started the project. I sensed her surprise at hearing how pivotal the fire at the church has been for me, even twenty years after the incident. She asked if I had dealt with the trauma of the event, or whether I still carried the emotional pain of that night in March 1992.

I have reflected on her question for this chapter of the book, in reflecting about theology, mission and children: what was it about this event that has had such a deep and lasting impact on me? I think it goes beyond 'post-traumatic stress', although I acknowledge that trauma impacts us emotionally at a deep psychological level.

Why do I still draw energy from this story and still relate it to colleagues? I believe this incident became a pivotal experience in my spiritual journey, a personal *kairos* (moment). The fire and loss of the boys led me to alter my perspective of God, life, church, vocation, and the world in which I live. It constituted a theological conversion to 'justice', and not just a vague notion of justice, but to justice that can be concretised in relevant ways for families and children who are denied access to socio-economic, political, educational, legal and spatial justice.

The journey with the children on the streets of Sunnyside, the devastating event of the fire, and my subsequent experiences in Chicago and back in Pretoria, have become a catalyst for a deep personal transformation. This has led me to embrace a theology that seeks integral liberation. That is, not just salvation from personal sin, but a theology that embraces restoration of human dignity, and a struggle against those structures that deprive people of dignity, as well as access to socio-economic-political justice: i.e. freedom from systemic sin and oppression, as Jesus preached in his first sermon in Luke 4, and as Mary sang about when she praised God for the child to be born.

The vulnerable children on the streets of South Africa became the interlocutors of a new way of seeing and knowing – in a sense, my journey with them led me to experience a *shattering* of faith, knowledge and justice as I understood them. I was given an invitation to embrace faith, knowledge and justice from the perspective of the most vulnerable children on the streets. Their lives led me to a conversion from simple compassion for

² See also similar accounts in David Klatzow and Sylvia Walker, *Steeped in Blood: The Life and Times of a Forensic Scientist* (Cape Town, RSA: Zebra Press, 2010).

material welfare to a compassion with justice; to a realisation that neighbourly love and friendship requires the addressing of the myriad of systemic injustices that exclude my neighbours from full participation in the life of our communities.

Faith, knowledge and justice were re-framed, questioned and presented in a dramatically new way that represented *an epistemological and existential break* from the past. It constituted a deliberate break with an exclusivist ‘white perspective’ on the world of my youth. Shortly after the death of the boys in the fire, I spent six months living on the south side of Chicago, seeing the world through the eyes of another group of vulnerable children – those growing up in the notorious public housing projects, the Robert Taylor Homes (since demolished). These were the children of ‘welfare moms’, many with crack-cocaine addicts for parents, others born with foetal alcohol syndrome, most lured into gangs from the age of 12 or 13, born into vulnerability and marginality.

My work with these children led me to read, among others, James Cone, Gustavo Gutierrez, Theodore Walker and Dorothee Sölle. These authors opened me to new perspectives on theology, perspectives that challenged the assumptions I had held about personal sin and conversion. I began to discover what some have described as ‘theology from below’, from the underside of human experience.³ I found Jesus there, waiting, struggling, suffering with the millions of outcasts on our cities’ streets.

Previously, theology for me had been neatly packaged in orthodox systematic theological constructs, apparently universally applicable to all contexts. But when confronted with the realities of children living on the streets of Sunnyside and Chicago, I found myself at a loss. These ordered theological arguments did not help me to make sense of my new realities. The reality of the children’s lives, and the abuse of ‘white power’ to oppress black children, opened me to the Black Theology of Cone, the liberationist theological perspectives of Gutierrez,⁴ the challenge of Christ in the context of blackness and Africanness, particularly as it relates to children and youth.⁵ Reading Sölle’s book *Suffering* turned my theological constructs upside-down.

I discovered the challenge of doing theology in context, which requires an engagement with human realities, a discovery of theological wisdom

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³ This essay does not allow space for an in-depth analysis of these texts; however, see Gustavo Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation*, 15th anniversary edn, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1975); and Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975).

⁴ See also Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

⁵ Theodore Walker, *Empower The People: Social Ethics for the African-American Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

‘from below’, from the community, and from many contexts of suffering around the globe. The lives, and the deaths, of children in the city became fertile soil for ‘liberating’ and more creative theology to find root in my thinking and work.

I recognise now that this personal reorientation probably started on the streets of Hillbrow, South Africa, where I did my practical ministry as a student, and that it had been nurtured in my home with my mother’s strong sense of justice and fairness. But now it wears the clothes of children living on the streets, of their black experience; it has become more embodied and not just philosophical and abstract.

On Faith – Towards Practical Obedience to God

This experience could have shattered my faith. I was 24 years old when I chose to follow Christ and we did what we thought was right for the street boys. We gained access to the church and we invited the boys in off the streets, then they died. I never blamed God for what happened, nor did I ask where God was in the tragedy. I believed that God was probably deeply shattered by the premature death of the boys, as we were. But this event did shatter the kind of faith I embraced. It shattered a naive notion of faith that was shattered already on the Cross.⁶

Suddenly, new questions surfaced for me. I had to ask: Who is God? Who is God with? Who is God for? I realised that God cannot be neutral although my faith previously would have had me believe in a neutral loving God. But now I realised that in a situation such as this, neutrality would be criminal, an evil, a compliance. I asked new questions about whether the church holds to a faith without deeds, a faith without commitment to justice, a faith in a God who was not also the God of the child who suffers or who dies in a fire. The content of my faith was deeply challenged and expanded.

The childlike nature of my faith did not disappear but I started to grapple with Jesus’ words that we had to become like children. The experiences with the boys off the streets, who had become my interlocutors, became the voices and lives that God used to change me into someone I was not before. These boys reaffirmed that God embraces the children of the world, and particularly the most vulnerable. God in a special way sides with the children, in the face of those who seek to destroy and violate them.

Mine became a faith of the streets, shaped by the streets and its realities. And the gracious presence of God worked in me a faith in the city, not only practising my faith and seeking to translate it into challenging urban places, but also believing in the city itself and the potential of the city to be home

⁶ See C.S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 98-99.

to the stranger, playground to the child, a hospitable place for all who call it home.

This leads to a question of both faith and obedience in mission: how do our educational programmes, spiritualities and Christian rituals foster such a faith – childlike yet not naïve, a faith of children, of the city streets, of concrete justice?

On Knowledge – To Know as We Are Known

Only three months before the fire I completed a theological degree that enabled me to enter ministry. After six years of theological preparation, generating knowledge to equip me for ministry in the world, the fire and the death of the boys challenged the knowledge I had acquired in my training, because it was not the kind of knowledge that had prepared me for a trauma of this nature.

The knowledge of the classroom can never compensate for the knowledge we gain when we go onto the streets. Practical wisdom is nurtured in the heat of things on the streets and in communities, where knowledge is tested, assessed, purified and refined. If we do not find innovative ways to integrate the intellectual knowledge of university, the academy and practical modes of training with the school of the streets, we will always run the risk of producing sterile, impotent knowledge, uninformed by the wounds of the city. Knowledge has to be refined in the fire of contextual experience.

The debate about theory in itself being ‘real’ and ‘noble’ to me seems to be a false debate, as theory in itself can never be the endeavour of universities – our theory needs to be informed and shaped by contextual questions and wounds, and in return theory refined in such a manner can then again inform our practices and interventions. It is an ongoing cycle of praxis that is required if we are to develop liberating engagements with the lives of vulnerable children and other people in our urban communities.

The children as interlocutors helped me to understand theology and mission in new ways: the knowledge of six years of theological preparation was tested, evaluated, and critiqued by working with these street boys. This was knowledge ‘from below’ – knowledge generated through solidarity and shared experiences with of the most vulnerable of our city; it was knowledge transformed from rational jargon to intimate love expressed in a search for justice and truth. Knowledge, according to Parker Palmer, is best obtained in the experience of being known ourselves.⁷ For Palmer, we are known first and foremost by God, as our masks and illusions of self are revealed, as our prejudices crumble, and as our fears diminish, we know

⁷ Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco, CA: Harper One, 1993).

anew. In this way, we might discover afresh the presence of God amongst vulnerable children in the streets of our cities.

A second set of questions emerge for mission with children: how do our educational programmes, spiritualities and Christian rituals foster a knowledge in which we will be known with love, and therefore we will know anew – knowledge translated into practical wisdom, incarnational love, and quest for the truth? Adults working with children on the streets might explore the following: how do we create spaces in which new and liberating kinds of knowledge can be generated, in which existing knowledge can be transformed on behalf of children?

On Justice – To Seek the Peace of the City

At the core of the event that shaped me so profoundly was a conversion to justice.⁸ This means a political conversion, not only to God and my neighbour but also to the city in a way that will seek the *shalom* of the city in every sense of the word: liberation from all that deprives the city, its people and its children from wholeness, and an ushering in of the good news of healing, freedom and justice as envisaged in Luke 4:18-19.

Many individuals and churches were involved in the shelter in those months when we fed and housed the children. But when the church burnt down and the boys died and we had to ask what happened, who was responsible for the fire, why were young boys such a threat to establishment society that they were killed in this cruel manner, disturbingly, there was an overwhelming silence from the local churches of our city.

I realised that in our churches and theologies we are often more comfortable with charity than with justice. Our charity can still happen at arm's length but justice requires us to change in encounter with our neighbours. Charity is often one-way traffic, while justice requires mutuality in relationship and a re-ordering of the way things work. Charity can come from within our church premises and circles, but when we deal with justice, it takes us beyond the church to the streets, the boardrooms, the court rooms and the political chambers. Charity deals with the symptoms of sin: exclusion, deprivation, hunger, homelessness. But justice deals with underlying causes – asking *why* people are hungry and homeless. It seeks to address systemic evil and the root causes that lead children to the streets in the first place. Working for justice means examining and

⁸ For additional reading on justice in theology and mission, see Donal Dorr, *Spirituality and Justice* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984); Walter Brueggemann, S. Parks and T.H. Groome, *To Act Justly, Walk Humbly, Love Tenderly: An Agenda for Ministers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986); Robert McAfee Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation: Overcoming the Great Fallacy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988).

challenging the structures that support injustice, such as indifference or corruption. Biblical justice seeks liberation in the way society is organised and how social resources are shared. Justice is not satisfied with a surface renewal of the city, which often simply means a clean-up of garbage and a displacement of the poor. Instead of urban renewal, holistic justice will seek to transform the city so that it can be viable, sustainable, and radically inclusive of all those who are weak and vulnerable.

Charity often soothes the conscience and silences the most immediate hunger, but working for justice goes deeper, addressing vulnerability, and celebrating signs of breakthroughs, where God's justice is demonstrated. Justice can seem elusive but at the same time it calls for hope and courage. The children of Sunnyside taught me that justice cannot simply be a vague philosophical concept but it needs to be demonstrated specifically, in concrete situations with living communities. Victims of injustice or those who are marginalised become our friends, translators and interlocutors.

The deaths of those boys over twenty years ago traumatised me and my co-workers, their parents, and families. But their deaths also led me to seek to better understand the lives of children on dumping sites of cities in the global South, from Mamelodi to Maputo, from Addis Ababa to Manila; the orphans and vulnerable children having to fend for themselves in Uganda and the South Sudan; child soldiers in Burma or child prostitutes all over the world.

I propose a third set of questions for mission with children on the streets: how do our educational programmes, spiritualities and rituals foster an agenda for justice? How do they equip us with vision, knowledge and skills to become advocates and activists for change; to stand in solidarity with those who cannot speak for themselves; to name local situations of violation and oppression, to resist and stand against it, to overcome and transform it?

In review, the children of the Elim Church have led me to ask: Is our faith actively engaged in partnership with the most vulnerable children and others in our cities, towns and rural places? Is our knowledge sufficient to enable us to be responsible and liberating companions of the poor? Do we allow the children of our streets to teach us where, when and how justice should roll down?⁹

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The Things We Gained in the Fire

For narratives to flourish, there must be a community to hear ... for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics.¹⁰

⁹ Amos 5:24.

¹⁰ Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Analysis of Personal Narratives*, Boston University, 20 April, 2000. www.uel.ac.uk/cnr/riess1.doc

When carefully considering de Beer's account of his 'conversion' as a result of the children of Elim Church, I was reminded of the pop group *Bastille's* hit song *Things We Lost in the Fire*. Fire has the power to kill, destroy and ravage; yet, from this story of destruction and desolation there are significant gains to be made. Out of this story come some important lessons for our mission with children in the current age.

The burning of the church and the death of the children served as a cataclysmic event that brought new insights, reordered priorities, and reshaped the destiny of those like de Beer who would be changed by its message. The fire shed light on traditional practices, the churches' response, and human nature. Though we may experience cataclysmic events all around us, we may never have the eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. In the case of de Beer, we see the missiological possibility of grief, shock and despair to cause deep reflection and an authentic response to the cries of the children in his city. His missional identity was irreversibly changed as a result of the incident. He grasped the full significance of the event. As a result also, de Beer inspired collective action by establishing a responsive organisation, and infusing the faith community in South Africa and several countries around the world with a new vision for mission as justice, a vision forged in the fire. His missiological reflection led to the establishment of a movement for urban justice, with children as key dialogue partners in this journey. The event served as a critical artefact, and the subsequent shock and trauma mobilised him into a transformed praxis. His personal discourse formed by years of theological training was irreversibly changed by these events, leading to the formation of a *public* discourse rooted in the revealed realities of his city. The event enabled de Beer to proclaim his interpretation of mission as justice, first to himself, and then to the wider faith community.

Through de Beer's narrative we see that mission with and to children is also a serious intellectual exercise, involving not just compassion and heart but also mind, ideas, concepts and interpretation. De Beer discovered a different way of thinking, acting and doing. His openness to what the Spirit was saying to him resulted in a kind of 'Cross' thinking – the ability to critically explore the meaning of the Cross and the Good News in the light of his unique context and experiences, since justice, faith and knowledge do not take place in a vacuum but in specific places with specific people.

The children played a subversive role in this story. They witnessed to a 'new' Christ, a Christ who was impartial with regard to pedigree, race or education. They witnessed to a Christ who dwelt in, and was revealed through, the brokenness, rejection and neglect of the children of the street. In this narrative, children have served as the primary catalysts of conversion. This is a critical departure from the traditional view of children as recipients of mission rather than as agents of mission. Embedded in the stories and life experience of children is the latent power for the conversion of the church. Children have always, and continue, to call the church to a

new conversion. This is a conversion *from* institutional building, the development of empire and the indulging of the middle class *to* the reversal of human hierarchies of status and power and to establishing the reign of God, which is a reign of love and justice. Residing within the child is the constant interplay between the *not yet but already*. While we wait for the realisation of the full reign of God which is *not yet* – as revealed in the injustice, inequalities, suffering and death of the children – we do observe precious signs of the *already*: love, joy, and hope. The children are therefore authors of a ‘new’ gospel, urging us on to a renewed and authentic praxis of justice, faith and knowledge.

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