



## Prophetic Witness for Universal Communion – Mission in Conflict Zones and Healing

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## ***SEDOS***

*(Service of Documentation and Study on Global Mission)  
is a forum open to Roman-Catholic Institutes of Consecrated Life,  
which commit themselves to deepening their understanding of Global Mission.  
It encourages research and disseminates information  
through its Bulletin, Website, Seminars and Workshops.*

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## *Editorial*



**Dear Members and Readers,**

The May-June issue of SEDOS Bulletin consists of the presentations delivered during the SEDOS Residential Seminar held at Casa

Divin Maestro, Ariccia, from 6-10 May 2024. The theme which focused on, “Prophetic Witness for Universal Communion: Mission in Conflict Zones and Healing” was chosen after much discussion and deliberation. Forty-one members from 22 different congregations, actively participated in the seminar.

The notion of prophetic witness for universal communion stands as a beacon of hope and a call to action. This concept, rooted deeply in spiritual and religious traditions, emphasizes the mission of promoting peace, healing, and unity, even in the most troubled areas of the globe. By examining the role exercised by religious leaders and communities in conflict zones, we can understand how their efforts contribute to reconciliation and the broader mission of universal communion.

Prophetic witness refers to the act of living and voicing truth inspired by a higher moral and spiritual vision, often against prevailing injustices and adversities. This role is not confined to predicting the future but involves a profound commitment to justice, peace, and the common good. Prophets, in this context, are seen as voices that call for repentance, reconciliation, and the establishment of a more equitable and loving society.

The Conflict Zones, marked by violence, instability, and deep-seated animosities, offer unique challenges and opportunities for prophetic witness. Missionaries and missionary organizations are often at the forefront, where they mediate peace efforts and provide humanitarian aid.

Their mission in these areas involves:

1. **Advocacy for Peace and Justice:** We read of many prophets in the Old and New Testaments who sacrificed their lives fighting for truth and justice. Jesus always stood for truth and fought against all injustice and as a consequence he gave up his life. Missionaries are called to be prophets following their Master. In the present context we find many missionaries who stand up and do not care about the consequences. These ‘Prophets’ in conflict zones advocate for peace by addressing the root causes of violence, such as poverty, oppression, and discrimination. They engage in dialogue with the parties in conflict as they strive to break down barriers of mistrust and hostility.

2. **Providing food, shelter and Support:** Many missionaries and religious communities offer sanctuary to those displaced by conflict, providing food, shelter, and medical care. This act of compassion not only meets the immediate needs of the people but also fosters a sense of solidarity and shared humanity.

3. **Promoting Interfaith Dialogue:** We see that many missionaries become peace-makers by resolving the causes of conflict between diverse groups. In regions where religious differences fuel conflict, they try to promote interfaith dialogue. They take initiatives and create platforms for understanding and cooperation among various religious groups, emphasizing common values and mutual respect beyond their immediate differences.

4. **Healing Trauma:** Such trauma and conflict leave deep scars in the hearts and minds of the people who have experienced these dreadful events. We find many missionaries engaged in healing these deep psychological and emotional scars. Their prophetic mission includes the healing of trauma through counselling, spiritual guidance, and rituals that help individuals and communities to come to terms with their pain and find hope. The process of healing in conflict zones is complex and multifaceted. It involves



both immediate relief and long-term efforts to rebuild trust and harmony.

In such situations we, missionaries, are called to play a vital and prophetic role. We can motivate and strengthen the lives of the people who are suffering and help them to rebuild a society which values human lives and stands for peace and justice. We can facilitate truth and reconciliation by helping the communities to confront their past atrocities and seek forgiveness and reconciliation. We as prophetic leaders can help in creating a narrative of collective healing and future coexistence. We can initiate education for peace which is a cornerstone of long-term healing. There is a need for a curriculum that emphasizes peace, tolerance, and conflict resolution, to nurture a new generation committed to universal communion. Spiritual Renewal can also be a solace and give a sense of continuity to those affected by conflict.

A missionary, as a prophetic witness, can offer a vision of hope and renewal that transcends immediate suffering; empower local communities to take an active role in peace-building and ensure that the mission of healing and reconciliation is sustainable. This mission includes training in conflict resolution, leadership development, and economic initiatives that provide stability and reduce tensions.

Prophetic witness, for universal communion in conflict zones, is a powerful testament to the enduring human spirit and the quest for a more harmonious world. Through advocacy, sanctuary, dialogue, and healing, our mission can transcend individual differences and strive for the common good. We must recall that even in the darkest of times, the light of compassion, justice, and unity can shine through, and guide humanity towards a future of universal communion and peace.

The Welcome Address by Alain Mayama, CSSp, invites all missionaries to be prophets and prophetesses to can heal the victims of conflicts by asking the question: “What is our role as followers of Christ; as missionaries and what does being a mission Church in the context of violence and war involve?”

In the Keynote Address, entitled, “Temoignage Prophetique Pour la Communion Univerelle Mission Dans Les Zones de Conflits et Guerison”, Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, C.S.S.p, a religious missionary priest and Pastor (bishop) of the local Church, in the Archdiocese of Bangui, Central African Republic, shares his practical experience in areas torn by conflict, war and violence.

In the article, “Jesus, a model of non-violence”, Guy Theunis, M.Afr, presents the biblical foundation of the theme based on the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, found in Matthew’s Gospel (5: 38-42), and on Jesus’ own life.

Marie Dennis, in her article, “Gospel Nonviolence: A New Paradigm for the Mission”, calls upon all to work for true peace that is rooted in justice. According to her, true peace is not merely the absence of war, but the fullness of life for, all which is the Christian vocation. She says, “As followers of the One who is Peace, who on the Cross overcame the violence in our world, we are called to help move our broken and violated world toward the full flowering of the New Creation.”

The presentations “Mission in conflict zones and healing” by Pier Luigi Maccalli, SMA, and “Social Support as Means of Healing” by James Kulwa Shimbala, SMA, are personal and moving testimonies of their lived experience. I am sure these articles will enrich you, enlighten you and guide you on your missionary path.

John Paul Herman SVD  
Director of SEDOS



*Anna Damas, SSpS*

## **Opening Prayer**

As we begin our seminar, we turn to you, o Christ, who risen from the dead brought into the world reconciliation and peace. You call us to be your witnesses.

We bless and thank you for bringing us together this week in Ariccia from so many continents and countries, so different in cultural backgrounds and languages, belonging to a variety of congregations and societies, but all members of the one Church, all one in you, O risen Lord, called to be for our world a prophetic sign of universal Communion.

May your life-giving Spirit enlighten our minds and fan into flames of divine love our hearts

As we seek this week to deepen our missionary vocation to work for reconciliation, peace and harmony as well as to accompany sisters and brothers who because of violence and war, famine and drought, are fleeing home and country, and are seeking shelter and refuge;

As we seek this week to face some of the realities of violence and injustice in ourselves, our communities, Church and countries, near and far, and as we share experiences of nonviolent approaches which are key to the survival of life on earth and to the healing of the planet;

As we listen to your life-giving Word in the Gospel and celebrate your risen Presence among us and in us, thus enabling us to be prophetic signs of universal Communion.

We ask you all this, O God, our Father, Giver of Life, whose Spirit is in all things, through our Lord, Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you, one God forever and ever.

Amen.



Alain Mayama, C.S.Sp.

## Welcome Address

### Memoria and Koinōnia – Remembering our Call to Communion



#### 1. Introduction

On behalf of SEDOS Executive and the entire SEDOS membership, it gives me immense

warmth and great pleasure to see your presence grace this august occasion. It is my pleasure to present this welcome address today amongst you, the most esteemed members of SEDOS.

It is a glorious moment to extend my warm wishes, in the name of SEDOS Executive, to welcome you all in this beautiful setting in Ariccia to this SEDOS Residential Seminar which begins this evening and which will continue until Friday. I want to convey my heartfelt gratitude to his Eminence Dieudonné Cardinal Nzapalainga, C.S. Sp for accepting the invitation to give the keynote address for this Seminar on the theme “*Prophetic witness for universal communion: Mission in conflict zones and healing*” here at Casa Divin Maestro, Ariccia, (ROME).

Before we begin this Seminar, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all of you who are sincerely committed to this event to make it a success: the SEDOS Team and SEDOS Executive Committee, and SEDOS Members. This event would have been impossible without the support of each and every one present here.

As you all know, SEDOS Seminars are opportune moments to reflect and debate upon the problems of mutual interest with our esteemed participants from various missionary congregations. The last seminar was based on “*The Changing Landscape of Religious Missionary Life*” which was graced with positive feedbacks from participants, missionaries, etc.

#### 2. The Context

The theme of discussion for the next few days is “*Prophetic witness for universal communion: Mission in conflict zones and healing.*” On each day, we will be invited to focus on a different dimension of this theme. Tomorrow, Tuesday, the Biblical foundation for Prophetic witness for universal communion will be explored. On Wednesday the focus will be on Psychological Approach; while Thursday will put an emphasis on the Spirituality of Non-Violence. Friday is a day reserved for sharing the outcomes and insights of the week “On We Go” – you will hear a little more about that later as the week progresses. Each topic for reflection and discussion for these few days’ Seminar was chosen keeping in mind the interest of mission and missionaries.

To my mind, our theme broaches the role of missionaries as prophets and prophetesses who should be healers of victims of conflicts. The first presupposition this topic raises, on the one hand, is that of synergy among us, who belong to different religious lives and vocations; on the other, we have the challenge of synthesising the disparate elements of our theme: “*prophetism,*” “*witnessing,*” “*mission,*” “*conflict,*” and “*healing.*” For example, the face of conflict is variegated: there are many victims of rape, orphans, amputees, both internally and externally displaced persons, emigration, bearers of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), gaping poverty disillusionment and cadavers to be properly buried. We should not forget those victims who blame religion and God himself for their predicaments. Yet, we need to heal them all.

Obviously, we live in an age that is filled with signs and wonders, many of which are gloomy and terrifying—our politics continues to be in turmoil, fears of wars and terrorism persist, our

environment is being polluted in ways unseen before, our families, youth and societal institutions continue their collapse. The world has been afflicted by conflict, war, and violence. Today we see everything from personal discord and community conflict to political unrest and regional wars. What is our role as followers of Christ, as missionaries and what is it like being a mission Church in the context of violence and war?

Providentially, “universal communion” made it to the topic of our residential seminar, and on it I want to dwell because the various vocations God has inspired in the different religious lives attend to the variegated faces of conflicts we mentioned above through our different charisms.

### 3. Communion as Silver Bullet

Brothers and Sisters, as we gather for our 2024 seminar, I want us to think about what binds us together as partners in the work of evangelisation for an effective missionary work.

Of course, there are many elements of theological bonding among us that one may invoke. I want to mention just one — “universal communion”, as our theme calls it. Moreover, Joseph Ratzinger, the late Pope Benedict XVI, entitled one of his books, “Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today” (1996). I want to extend the same call to missionaries and religious today, that is, ourselves.

I want us, during these days of our residential seminar, to see our missionary visions and contributions to be a participation in “communion ecclesiology”. “Communion as silver bullet” suggests that all the tangents of the theme for our residential seminar this year is encapsulated under communion. Indeed, communion ecclesiology includes missiology, not just the harmony between the universal and

local churches that Ratzinger underscores in his book “Called to Communion”. This welcome address seeks to emphasise one point: “communion with God and one another is the core of missionary prophetic healing.” This theme of “communion” draws attention to the missionary dimension of communion ecclesiology, which has become the mainstay of Vatican II’s interpretation, according to the 1985 Synod of Bishops in Rome.

### 4. Remembering “Communion”

I think that we need to “remember” the tangent of communion in our missiology because (1) of its power to heal the violence and conflict emanating from our “democratic communion” and (2) in furtherance of the Church’s invitation to missionaries to appropriate the semantics of communion ecclesiology.

Obviously, the ubiquity of violence and conflicts around the world and the untold sufferings they unleash on humanity, to seek “communion”

becomes an imperative for a world on the brinks of collapse. Our desire to assuage the sufferings of the

world behooves us to ask about their origin. One origin of conflict is a misunderstanding of “communion”.

What is Koinōnia for our democracy? Koinōnia, translated as “communion,” “sharing,” and “fellowship,” just to mention these three, has its Greek usage among Greek political philosophers. The basic meaning of koinōnia, for the Greeks, is the fact that citizens share the same polis — city-state. Consequently, koinōnia for them means sharing in something, especially the city-state. This definition of “communion” is still rife among us today. We see the limitation of this city-state definition of “communion” in the distinctions made among citizens of different countries and the distribution of violence and conflicts we see in its wake.



For Christians, on the contrary, *koinōnia* means sharing in somebody or someone. The someone or somebody of *koinōnia* is Jesus Christ. Instead of a sharing or communion in something as the Greeks conceived of *koinōnia* and



Matthew 25:31-46 and 1 Cor 12 expatiate on the social dimensions of horizontal communion. In a word, both texts make everyone's affairs our affairs. We need to feed the hungry, quench the thirst of the thirsty, take the

appropriated by most of our democracies, for Christians, it is the sharing in the person of Jesus Christ. How does one share in Christ, one may ask?

The classic statement of response of the ascended Lord to Saul on the way to Damascus, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5), provides the proof that each Christian, especially those persecuted and hurting in whatever shape and form, Jesus shares with them in their suffering. This reality of communion (*koinōnia*) as sharing in Jesus Christ is further substantiated by Matt 25:31-46, where Jesus considers every treatment meted out to any Christian as directly meted out on him — whatsoever you do to the least of these, you did it to me.

It is from the realisation that Christianity is founded on *koinōnia* — sharing in the Lord Jesus — that healing as a missionary imperative begins to make sense. This is the case because the healer and the sick both share (*koinōnia*) in the Lord Jesus. Hence, healing is inseparable from missionary work because the healing work of the earthly Jesus continues in the healing ministry of today's missionaries.

It is important to remember that communion ecclesiology splits *koinōnia* in two — vertical (our collective connection with God through the gift of salvation) and horizontal (our fellowship with one another as the recipients of salvation). Horizontal *koinōnia* or the implications of being recipients of God's salvation obligates us to be there for one another through what the Church calls corporal and spiritual works of mercy — making "healing" both spiritual and physical.

sick to the hospital and visit them there, etc. This is the Matthean imperative. 1 Cor 12:13 insists that Christian oneness, because of baptism and reception of one Holy Spirit, create one inseparable body of Christ with every part looking out for other parts, especially the weak parts/members. These conclusions would be meaningless, were it not for the examples of the life and exemplary actions of Jesus Christ. It is now our turn to imitate the Christ.

## 5. The Job of Making Christ Present

"Remembering communion" remains of actuality in pontifical theology. Pope Francis, in his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, addresses the importance of memory and remembrance. To remember, is to remember Jesus Christ; and to remember Jesus Christ is to share in a "communion" or to belong to those whose lives are shaped by the *acta et dicta* of Jesus Christ. The four-fold usage of "memoria" in *Lumen Fidei* 9, prefigures the realisation of the communion for which Christ shed his blood in the promise of a future multitude of descendants to Abraham (Gal 2-3). I lend my voice to Pope Francis' determination to rediscover the memory of the Church as "a light to be recovered" to prevent ecclesial amnesia.

The necessity for a recourse to the concept of "memoria," according to the encyclical (*Lumen Fidei*, 25) is that humanity suffers from historical "amnesia" and relativistic conception of non-scientific truth. *Lumen Fidei*, 25 points out that "memoria" has three dimensions: foundational, unitive and transcendental.

“Memoria” is transcendental not only because it precedes each one of us, but also it encapsulates the meaning and goal of human life. Indeed, the “transcendence” of “memoria” reminds us that “memoria” has God as its foundation, the grounding principle of all reality. It follows that missionaries are not laying new foundations but sharing the communion of salvation freely received from Christ with the human race. The memory of the labor of our founders and our current missionaries must spur us toward a future full of hope that the Holy Spirit renews communion among us today and will continue to do that *ad vitam aeternam*. The Church reminds us that we make Christ present in our missionary works in these words:

*“How can we not recall with gratitude to the Spirit the many different forms of consecrated life which he has raised up throughout history and which still exist in the Church today? They can be compared to a plant with many branches which sinks its roots into the Gospel and brings forth abundant fruit in every season of the Church’s life. .... The Synod recalled this unceasing work of the Holy Spirit, who in every age shows forth the richness of the practice of the evangelical counsels through a multiplicity of charisms. In this way too, he makes ever present in the Church and in the world, in time and space, the mystery of Christ”* (Vita Consecrata, 5).

Quintessential to “remembrance” for our purposes is Jesus’ link between his mission as a Savior and the work of healing, preaching, and social transformation, under the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus takes up the prophetic tradition of Isaiah when he appropriates Isaiah 61:1-2a: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Lk 4:18-19).

Our remembrance of Jesus’ ministry recalls to us what our own missionary engagements and blueprint should be. We heal through medical and psychological sciences, not necessarily through the invocation of the Word like Jesus

and his disciples did. We heal sacramentality through the sacraments of the Anointing of the sick and Confession. We further heal through encouraging words to those whose marriages have taken a beating, and those whose traumatic life experiences nudge them toward suicide. Moreover, our journeying alongside the lonely, immigrants and refugees, even by our mission of presence without spoken words, is therapeutic.

## **6. “SEDOSing” Healing**

Lest we forget, the universal church calls us, consecrated persons, to become promoters of communion ecclesiology in these words: “A great task also belongs to the consecrated life in the light of the teaching about the Church as communion, so strongly proposed by the Second Vatican Council. Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practise the spirituality of communion as “witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God’s design”. The sense of ecclesial communion, developing into a spirituality of communion, promotes a way of thinking, speaking and acting which enables the Church to grow in depth and extension. The life of communion in fact “becomes a sign for all the world and a compelling force that leads people to faith in Christ ... In this way communion leads to mission, and itself becomes mission”; indeed, “communion begets communion: in essence it is a communion that is missionary” (Vita Consecrata, 1996, no. 46).

The “spirituality of communion” is never to go it alone, but to always go it with others because the Church is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, according to the Creed we profess. Our mission of healing of conflicts and ailments must be in apostolic continuity for a united and strong Church. For our purposes in this welcome address, “called to communion” aims to signify our unity or communion as agents of the Church’s mission. This ties in with Vita Consecrata 47:

*“Consecrated persons are called to be a leaven of communion at the service of the mission of the universal Church by the very fact that the manifold charisms of their respective Institutes*

are granted by the Holy Spirit for the good of the entire Mystical Body, whose upbuilding they must serve (cf. 1 Cor 12:4-11)”.



This understanding of “communion ecclesiology” as missiology reminds us of the synergy and complementarity that is at the heart of our collective charisms. It makes it clear that our different charisms cannot be isolated from those of others. Furthermore, missiology becomes integral healing through the synergies of our collective charisms.

However, we cannot talk about “communion ecclesiology” without connecting it to the Eucharist. As we know, every Eucharistic celebration celebrates the sign of human salvation wrought by Christ (*signum rememorativum*). The concrete sign of a Eucharistic celebration is the visible communion of the people of God redeemed by Christ – the Church. The anticipatory sign (*signum prognosticum*) of a Eucharistic celebration is the hope of the eschaton towards which the Church journeys, a hope which reveals that the Church is a pilgrim people of God. The presupposition here is that the Eucharist makes the Church. This fact does not negate the argument that the Church is also a *creatio verbi* – the Church as the consequence of the preaching of the good news; for this is the etymology of the Greek word *ekklesia* – a calling out of a faith community. As consecrated persons, we participate, according to our different charisms in this building of communion. We, as consecrated persons, join in

the universal mission of the Church and we never work outside of it:

“All this brings out the character of universality and communion proper to Institutes of Consecrated Life and to Societies of Apostolic Life. Because of their supra-diocesan character, grounded in their special relation to the Petrine ministry, they are also at the service of cooperation between the particular Churches, since they can effectively promote an “exchange of gifts” among them, and thus contribute to an inculturation of the Gospel which purifies, strengthens and ennoble the treasures found in the cultures of all peoples. Today too, the flowering of vocations to the consecrated life in the younger Churches demonstrates the ability of the consecrated life to make present in Catholic unity the needs of different peoples and cultures” (Vita Consecrata, 47).

The different “needs of different peoples and cultures” include the resolution of conflicts that our residential seminar calls us to attend.

1. Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, “Communion” in Dictionnaire critique de théologie, sous la direction de J. Y. Lacoste, P. U. F., Paris, 1998, pp. 236-242.



## Temoignage Prophetique pour la Communion Universelle Mission dans les Zones de Conflits et Guerison



### Introduction

Je voudrais exprimer ma gratitude à la direction de SEDOS pour m'avoir invité à participer à ce séminaire résidentiel et à partager mes idées

basées sur mes expériences en tant que prêtre religieux missionnaire, pasteur (évêque) de l'église locale, l'archidiocèse de Bangui, République centrafricaine, qui a une expérience vivante du travail missionnaire dans de zones déchirées par les conflits, les guerres et la violence. Je voudrais féliciter SEDOS pour l'organisation de ce séminaire résidentiel sur un thème très important.

Notre intervention s'articule autour de trois points, à savoir : *le courage prophétique, le Témoignage prophétique et l'avènement de la paix, et enfin le langage de vérité au service de la communion universelle.*

### « Soyez toujours prêts à rendre compte de l'espérance qui est en vous » (1 P 3, 16)

Cette déclaration solennelle de Pierre au lendemain de la résurrection du Christ se présente comme une véritable *Magna Carta* de témoignage de la foi chrétienne. La foi chrétienne est elle-même fondée sur le témoignage de la mort et la résurrection du Christ (1 Co 15, 14). L'identité chrétienne tire ainsi son essence du témoignage, c'est-à-dire de la manière particulière de vivre la *Sequela Christi* et de répondre à son appel.

Témoigner c'est confirmer ou attester la vérité, la valeur de quelque chose par ses paroles ou simplement par ses actes ou par son existence même. Le mot grec *martus* signifie témoin. Le témoin est une personne qui subit un martyre, c'est-à-dire un supplice destiné à le faire renoncer à sa foi, et qui accepte la mort plutôt que d'abjurer. Le témoignage prophétique se vit

souvent dans un monde plein de contradictions et de conflits.

La communion universelle que nous appelons de tout notre vœu ne sera possible que lorsque notre témoignage prophétique manifeste son authenticité, dans le courage d'annoncer la Bonne Nouvelle du Christ dans un monde hostile à la vérité, mais aussi dans notre détermination, comme personnes consacrées et missionnaires, à soigner et à guérir les blessures de la violence des conflits de notre monde afin de bâtir une vraie communion universelle.

### 1- Le courage prophétique

L'engagement prophétique implique nécessairement le courage. Le prophète est un lanceur d'alerte, c'est un avertisseur et un guetteur. Le prophète se tient toujours sur le rempart car il est un veilleur dans la cité. Cette position de garde et de veille expose souvent le prophète à l'incompréhension et au désaveu et même au sacrifice suprême. Nous pouvons évoquer ici le martyr de Jean le Baptiste, mort en martyr. Non pas un martyr de la foi – car on ne lui demande pas de renier sa foi- mais un martyr de la vérité. Il s'agit d'un homme "juste et saint" (Ac 3, 14), mis à mort pour sa liberté de parole et pour la fidélité à son mandat prophétique. Le Saint Père Pape François disait que « la vie n'a de la valeur que si on la donne, si on la donne dans l'amour, dans la vérité, si on la donne aux autres, dans la vie quotidienne. Si quelqu'un prend sa vie pour soi, pour la garder, la vie meurt, la vie flétrie »<sup>1</sup>. Le prophète Jean-Baptiste, témoin de la vérité ne pouvait dire autre chose en dehors de la vérité contemplée, de la vérité rencontrée, de la vérité annoncée et désignée comme « l'Agneau de Dieu » (Jean 1, 29).

Au-delà des adversités et des contradictions liées à son mandat de témoin de la vérité, le prophète apparaît également comme un porte-

<sup>1</sup> Homélie du Pape François lors de la messe à Santa Marta, 8 février 2019.

flambeau, un porte-espoir, celui qui est la voix des sans voix, celui qui dit tout haut ce qui se murmure dans la société par peur de répréhension. La figure de Jean le Baptiste doit nous servir de modèle dans l'acte de notre témoignage prophétique pour une véritable communion universelle. La communion universelle demande un engagement réel de tous à la défense de la dignité humaine.

Dans son encyclique *Fratelli tutti*, le pape François a insisté sur l'attention que doit être portée sur les graves violations de la dignité humaine de notre époque. Il a souligné avec insistance le fait que cette dignité existe « en toutes circonstances », invitant chacun à la défendre dans chaque contexte culturel, à chaque moment de l'existence d'une personne, indépendamment de toute déficience physique, psychologique, sociale ou même morale.

La déclaration "*Dignitas infinita*" (sur la dignité humaine), publiée le lundi 8 avril 2024 par le Dicastère pour la Doctrine de la Foi, s'appuyant sur une analyse originale et une étude approfondie de la question de la dignité humaine dans la lettre encyclique « *Fratelli tutti* », parle de la dignité de tous les êtres humains comme « infinie » (*dignitas infinita*), en référence aux paroles de saint Jean-Paul II lors d'une rencontre avec des personnes souffrant de certaines limitations ou handicaps<sup>2</sup>, afin de montrer comment cette valeur reconnue à tous va au-delà de toutes les apparences extérieures ou des caractéristiques de la vie concrète des personnes. Le prophète, ami de la vérité, est aussi ami de la paix.

## **2- Le Témoignage prophétique et l'avènement de la paix**

Dans son message pour la Journée missionnaire mondiale du dimanche 23 octobre 2022 sur le thème « Vous serez mes témoins » (Ac 1,8), le pape François nous rappelait que « Tout chrétien est appelé à être un missionnaire et un témoin du Christ ». « Et l'Église, communauté des disciples du Christ, n'a d'autre mission que celle d'évangéliser le monde en témoignant du Christ. L'identité de l'Église est d'évangéliser ».

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Jean-Paul II, *Angélus avec les personnes handicapées à l'Église cathédrale d'Osnabrück* (16 novembre 1980) : Insegnamenti III/2 (1980), 1232.

Ainsi donc, l'appel à témoigner du Christ par une vie chrétienne exemplaire va ensemble avec l'annonce du Christ.

Il se trouve que parfois, nous sommes appelés à témoigner du Christ dans de zones de conflits. Aujourd'hui, nous voyons tout un éventail de conflits, de guerres et de violences ; des discordes personnelles aux conflits communautaires, en passant par les troubles politiques et les guerres régionales. Et dans ce genre de contextes, nous nous posons la question sur notre rôle véritable de disciples du Christ, et surtout, ce que signifie être missionnaire et témoin du Christ dans le contexte de la violence et de la guerre ?

La véritable paix ne se fait pas seulement avec les amis mais davantage avec ceux qui sont considérés comme des ennemis. Nous devons inventer des mots qui font bouger les lignes, des mots qui libèrent, des mots qui donnent le pardon.

Lorsque le langage humain créera ses propres mots relatifs à la paix, à la concorde, au vivre-ensemble, à l'amour, alors notre humanité sera restaurée et nous pourrions à nouveau chanter l'hymne à l'amour et laisser la vie circuler en chacun de nous. Notre langage est aujourd'hui chargé de mots liés à la guerre, à la violence, à la haine, à la rancœur, à la vengeance. Le prophète, artisan de paix, est celui qui doit inventer un nouveau champ lexical dépourvu de haine et de tout discours belliciste.

Je suis souvent irrité, voire outré quand je suis à la télévision des discours tendant à attiser le feu, demandant l'envoi des armes. N'oublions pas que la violence engendre la violence. Nous devons apprendre à sortir de cette spirale et de cette logique de la guerre en voulant tout régler par les armes. Il y va de la survie de notre humanité.

J'ai l'impression que notre humanité n'a pas encore appris les leçons de Nagasaki et de Hiroshima. La logique de la guerre et de la suprématie constitue une réelle menace pour l'espèce humaine et pour notre monde suspendu aux appétits effrénés des puissances nucléaires. Tout se passe comme si l'humanité se prépare à la dernière guerre contre l'homme. Martin Luther-King disait que : « Nous devons

apprendre à vivre ensemble comme des frères, sinon nous allons mourir tous ensemble comme des idiots ». Cette assertion montre à suffisance la nécessité de créer entre les différents peuples, entre les différentes nations, les conditions positives d'un vivre-ensemble. C'est ici que le concept de convivialité trouve toute sa densité, toute sa profondeur et tout son sens. Pour parvenir à cette convivialité, il nous faut nécessairement dialoguer, libérer la parole, se parler pour construire un monde fraternel, un monde de paix et une véritable communion universelle.

Notre monde a plus que jamais besoin aujourd'hui de missionnaires et témoins du Christ qui acceptent le défi de dialoguer et de prier inlassablement avec ceux qui ne cessent de créer ou d'entretenir les situations de conflits et de guerre. La nécessité de faire des disciples dans les zones de conflit ne cessera pas. Et le mandat missionnaire appelle les « disciples missionnaires », pour reprendre l'expression du Pape François, ainsi que les religieux et religieuses missionnaires, à faire des disciples de toutes les nations. Cela signifie que la communauté peut agir dans n'importe quelle situation, paix ou conflit, en utilisant l'Évangile comme fondement de paix et de fraternité.

Dans un monde où nous ne pouvons plus nous ouvrir les uns aux autres, où il devient impossible de parler à l'autre, de s'adresser à l'autre, ce monde où la parole vient à disparaître, c'est un monde de conflits, c'est un monde en guerre, c'est la guerre qui s'installe. La guerre est l'incapacité d'aller à la rencontre de l'autre en tant qu'autre, la guerre c'est l'usage de l'argument de force au lieu de se servir de la force persuasive et performative du dialogue à travers la parole pour faire bouger les lignes et faire advenir la paix et la communion universelle.

En 2013, alors que la guerre battait son plein en République centrafricaine, j'ai rencontré dans la brousse un jeune homme de 16 ans devenu "Général". Je lui ai parlé de l'éducation à la paix. A ma grande surprise, voire à la limite de l'étonnement, il m'a répondu: ici, quand une personne n'obéit pas, je la tue ! Quelle menace ! Mais quelle ignorance ! Quelle perte et quelle dépravation de mœurs.

Ce jeune homme est privé d'éducation et de parole comme arme de persuasion. Il lui reste des biceps à bomber, c'est-à-dire le pouvoir de la violence<sup>3</sup>. La plainte de Dieu par la bouche du prophète Osée a retenti tout de suite en moi : « *Mon peuple périt faute de connaissance* » (Osée 4, 6). C'est pourquoi je fais ce plaidoyer, je demande au nom de Dieu et au nom de la paix, au nom de la communion universelle d'avoir le courage de faire bouger les lignes en donnant une culture de non-guerre, une culture de la paix à notre humanité ; car le prophète Isaïe nous prévient que : « *Il (Dieu) sera juge entre les nations et l'arbitre de peuples nombreux. De leurs épées, ils forgeront des socs et de leurs lances, des faucilles. Jamais nation contre nation ne lèvera l'épée ; ils n'apprendront plus la guerre* ». (Isaïe 2, 4).

### **3- Le langage de vérité au service de la communion universelle**

La vraie paix ne saura être obtenue par l'unique usage de la force. La véritable paix est celle qui advient une fois les causes des conflits et des guerres sont connues. Les conflits naissent généralement des situations d'injustice systémique. La mondialisation ne doit pas être perçue aujourd'hui comme l'exclusion des moins forts, l'exclusion des plus faibles ou encore l'extinction des nations longtemps spoliées et dominées. La mondialisation doit être au contraire une chance où toutes les nations sont appelées de façon symphonique à participer au concert du bien-être et du bonheur, à l'avènement de la paix et *in fine* à la communion universelle. Le destin de toute l'humanité est désormais lié ; autrement dit, ce qui touche à un seul être humain doit toucher à toute l'humanité. Nous n'avons qu'une seule essence humaine. Les nombreux conflits vécus en Afrique doivent interpellier notre conscience humaine et susciter la communion universelle. A vrai dire, la construction des murs et des blocs d'alliance en occident doit rappeler la nécessité de la solidarité en Afrique, en Asie, au Moyen-Orient et partout ailleurs dans le monde.

<sup>3</sup> Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, *Je suis venu vous apporter la paix. Le combat d'un cardinal courage au cœur de la guerre*, Douala, Médias Paul, 2021, p. 85.

Notre monde doit avoir un langage de vérité qui milite en faveur de justice pour tous. Chaque être humain a droit à la justice et doit bénéficier des richesses que nous offre notre monde. Les guerres naissent dès lors que ce droit universel et inaliénable est foulé aux pieds.

La diplomatie internationale doit également avoir un langage de vérité valable pour toutes les nations.

La crise que nous avons connue en République centrafricaine avait certes d'abord des causes endogènes assimilées à la frustration d'une partie de la population s'estimant exclue. Des revendications légitimes ont poussé une partie de nos compatriotes à prendre des armes pour revendiquer leur droit d'accès aux structures de base de l'Etat telles que l'eau courante, l'électricité,

l'hôpital, l'école, les routes, etc.

Ces revendications ensuite vont très vite être instrumentalisées par certains acteurs endogènes et exogènes qui commencent à médiatiser le conflit en lui attribuant une connotation religieuse.

Heureusement la sagesse divine aidant et grâce au langage de vérité déployé, nous avons fait bloc contre cette dangereuse rhétorique qui commençait déjà à parler du conflit interreligieux entre chrétiens et musulmans en République centrafricaine<sup>4</sup>.

La diplomatie n'est pas synonyme de démagogie ni d'hypocrisie. La diplomatie

internationale doit apprendre de ses erreurs du passé et dresser des ponts de justice et d'équité entre les nations et entre les peuples pour faire advenir la paix. Je suis persuadé que tous les moyens déployés aujourd'hui dans la course à l'armement peuvent largement contribuer à anticiper sur les futurs conflits internationaux en investissant dans l'éducation à la paix en vue de l'avènement d'une communion universelle.

### Conclusion

Nous retenons que notre témoignage prophétique en vue de la communion universelle demande un engagement réel et authentique de tous et de chacun au service de la paix. Cet engagement ne va pas sans entraves ni sans difficultés pouvant même conduire au sacrifice suprême du prophète. Mais au-delà des adversités inhérentes à sa mission, le prophète

est un homme de foi qui sait compter sur Dieu et qui garde toujours allumée la flamme de sa foi afin de pousser les autres à redécouvrir la proximité providentielle, aimante et rassurante de Dieu.

La

communion universelle n'est possible que lorsque notre humanité prenne conscience que nulle ne doit être abandonnée au bord du chemin (Lc 10, 25-37: le bon Samaritain).

Le témoignage prophétique demande que la Bonne Nouvelle soit toujours annoncée à temps et à contre temps à notre monde déchiré par les conflits et exposé aux idéologies nouvelles. Finalement, le prophète est l'ami de la vérité et il ne se lasse jamais de la chercher et de l'annoncer.



<sup>4</sup> Justin Ndema, *Le dialogue islamo-chrétien en Centrafrique*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2014, p. 22.

## Jesus, a Model of Non-Violence



The theme of this session is “Prophetic witness for universal communion. Mission in conflict zones and healing”. Today we begin with the biblical foundations.

For years now, I’ve been leading Ignatian retreats on the theme of “Jesus, a model of non-violence”. I won’t be able to cover everything in 45 minutes. My presentation is divided into three parts.

### 1. The Charter of active non-violence: Mt 5:38-42

I begin with the most difficult Gospel text, that of the 5th antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew's Gospel (5, 38-42), a text that is often misunderstood but which, for me, is the most fundamental text for understanding active non-violence.

I’ll take it in its entirety before developing its various aspects:

*You have learned that it was said: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. And I tell you not to resist the wicked. On the contrary, if someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other as well. If someone wants to bring you before the judge to take away your tunic, leave him your cloak too. If someone forces you to walk a thousand paces, walk with him two thousand paces. Whoever asks you, give; whoever wants to borrow from you, don't turn your back.*

Like the previous antitheses, the text is structured in two parts: *You have heard that it was said - And I say to you...* This second part contains five propositions.

The antithesis begins with what is known as the "law of retaliation" (v. 38). The principle of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21)

predates the Bible. It can already be found in the code of Hammurabi, king of Babylon (1750 BC) and is found in all the civilisations of the Near and Middle East. The latin word “talio” (in English “retaliation”) appears for the first time in the Laws of the Twelve Tables drawn up in Rome in the fifth century BC.

The law of retaliation brought significant progress for civilisation as it prevented indiscriminate vengeance, imposing on others much more than they had done. In this way, it limited violence. However, it's an image and it does not have to be taken literally. Jesus loved images.

### *Do not oppose those who harm you (v. 39a)*

The verb used in Greek - *antistènai* - almost always carries the connotation of resisting with violence or using armed resistance in a military context. In the negative, therefore, the idea is not to retaliate at all, not to strike back blow for blow, not to act in the manner the person who is doing you violence, not to take revenge on the person by striking back in the same way, using the same weapons as the person did, but rather, as the following examples show, to enter into a different logic, to adopt a completely different attitude towards the person who is doing you harm, an attitude of active non-violence rather than passivity.

### *Whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also (v. 39b)*

This text has often caused problems. Some people have even been scandalised by it: 'What, I'm the victim of someone else's brutality and I should not only let myself be beaten, but ask for more?' In our society, 'turn the other cheek' is sometimes synonymous with weakness... This appeal is also seen as unrealistic and utopian. But what does it really mean?

To understand it properly, we need to look at the context of the time. Religious Jews did not touch anyone with their left hand, because that hand was reserved for menial tasks. With the inside of their right hand, they touched the other Jews, those who were equal to them, pure like

them, members of the chosen people. With the outside of their right hand, they touched the unclean, the slaves, all those who were inferior to them.

Matthew specifies that the slap is given "on the right cheek". Now, a slap with the right hand on the right cheek is the same as a slap with the back of the hand. So, it's not a slap intended to gain the upper hand physically, but rather a scornful blow intended to humiliate. It is a gesture of contempt, of belittlement, of



dishonour, a gesture that sends the other back to the place he should never have left. Through this slap, a Jew put a slave in his place.

We are faced with a socially accepted custom, a gesture that was part of the way society worked and no longer surprised many people; yet it was a gesture that conveyed scorns and demeaned the humanity of both actors.

### ***Turn to him the other also (v. 39b)***

First of all, we notice that Jesus invites the victim to take the initiative. As usual, Jesus starts with the smallest, the humiliated, the poor, the weak. He starts with the victim because it is the victim who has the power to break the spiral of violence. While victims generally feel powerless, Jesus invites them to make a concrete gesture. Jesus seems to say: 'You who suffer such violence, you who are the victim of such injustice, don't remain inactive, you have the power to change things!' How?

When Jesus suggests turning the other cheek, what does that mean? He invites him to turn his left cheek. In other words, if the superior wants to slap him again, he is obliged to use the inside of his right hand and no longer his backhand. In

Jewish logic, this makes him impure. And in the balance of power, paradoxically, this means that he is forced to recognise the person he considers inferior as his equal. Such is taken who thought he was taking!

Turning the left cheek therefore means physically preventing a slap of the same kind. While the first slap is often delivered impulsively, a second slap that is deliberate, especially in the face of someone in all their vulnerability and determination, is not so easy to deliver! This is all the more the case because the call to conscience is not only at the level of thoughts, it always includes symbolic aspects (the cheek as a part of the human body especially linked to tenderness) and invites the actor to assume his deepest feelings.

So Jesus offers the victim an original initiative that is likely to disconcert the person who hits him. In any case, it has nothing to do with a passive attitude of letting the other person do as he pleases. By presenting his cheek, the inferior is saying: I am a human being like you. From now on, I refuse to be humiliated. I am your equal. It's a refusal of both passivity and counter-violence.

This gesture opens up a third path, that of active non-violence. Turning the cheek is an act of protest or provocation, as Jesus himself did: he did not allow himself to be passively slapped by the soldier at his trial (John 18:22-23); he challenged him by asking him a question. Turning the cheek is also a positive gesture: in response to an evil act that scorns and demeans the humanity of both parties, it is an act that aims to restore this dual humanity, that of the offender and that of the offended.

### ***Whoever wants to bring you before the judge to take your tunic, leave him your cloak too! (v. 40)***

The text of the Sermon on the Mount does not limit itself to the example of the slap, but mentions two others, including that of the cloak. Matthew is referring to a judicial action: "*Whoever wants to bring you before the judge to take your tunic...*" (v. 40). It must be a poor man who is in debt and is being sued because he does not pay back his debts. His creditor takes him to court so as to have the right to seize all

his possessions, including his tunic. This garment, a kind of long shirt, rectangular in shape, seamless, woven from linen, was worn directly against the skin. It was the most essential garment, and was only taken from someone who was going to be sold into slavery (cf. Genesis 37:23).

The demand is therefore exorbitant. The creditor is hard-hearted and lacks humanity. But he is within his rights and takes care to follow the legal procedures to assert them. In this case, they could go so far as to take everything from this man, except his cloak, which had to be returned to him every evening. For the poor, the cloak served as a blanket for the night: *If you take your neighbour's cloak as a pledge, you must give it back to him by sunset, because it is his only covering, the cloak that protects his skin.* (Exodus 22:25-26; cf. also Deuteronomy 24:13). Taking someone's cloak was a serious matter because the cloak is the symbol of someone's personality, of their status in society. Without his cloak, he was nothing. By leaving him his cloak, we are pretending to leave him his dignity!

In such an economic drama, Jesus turns to the person living in extreme poverty. What is he asking them to do? To shirk justice? Of course not. But once again, to take the initiative and make a provocative gesture in court. Because leaving his cloak in such a context, after his tunic has been taken away from him, is bound to shock and provoke public scandal: the poor man finds himself naked in front of the creditor and the judge. And in Israel, nakedness brings shame on the one who sees it (Genesis 9, 20-28).

So, it is the judge and the creditor who become ashamed and impure. This gesture is addressed above all to the creditor, who is strong in his right: by leaving his cloak, the poor man reveals to him, without any malice, the hardness of his heart and the blindness of his conscience. Wasn't this the same gesture Francis of Assisi made to his father, who was appealing to the justice of the bishop and of men to give him back all his sheets?

So, Jesus is not advising the poor to add to their humiliation, or to avoid justice, but to use the legal system against itself. There is nothing symbolic or absurd about his request. It seeks to

touch the conscience of the rich and bring about a change in their attitude.

***If anyone forces you to walk a thousand steps, walk with him two thousand steps (v. 41).***

After the images of the slap and the judicial seizure of the tunic, Jesus uses "*angareuein*" as a third example. *Angareuein* is a Greek verb derived from Persian. The ancestors of the postman in the Achaemenid Empire, the *angaroi* were the emperor's couriers who had the right to request people as they went along to contribute to the priority needs of their postal mandate.

This imperial prerogative was also found in Rome. A representative of Roman authority, whether military or civil servant, could oblige any passer-by along the way to carry stuff or to serve as a guide in conquered territory. This verb can have a very broad meaning and refer to any type of forced labour. Nevertheless, exegetes agree that Matthew 5:41 refers to the right of the Roman occupying power to use forced labour. Any Jew on the road could be forced into service. In Matthew 27:32, we find Simon of Cyrene "forced" (*engareusan*) by the soldiers to carry Jesus' cross.

Matthew uses another interesting term: *milion*. This is the Roman 'mile' (worth about 1,500 metres), whereas everywhere else in the New Testament, the Greek measure of distance, the stadium (*stadion*), is used (about 185 metres). So here we have a direct allusion to the Roman occupiers and the arbitrary right authorised by Rome and, at the same time, limited to prevent abuse. For the chore imposed could not exceed one thousand steps. This was evidenced by the stones placed along the Roman roads every Roman mile, as milestones. This text therefore refers to the right of the victor to reasonably exploit the vanquished. It is not difficult to understand that the Jews did not take kindly to such forced labour.

In such a context, Jesus once again asks the victim not only not to run away, but to do double the service. What is the meaning of this request? The initiative that Jesus proposes is in line with the previous examples: to use the system against itself to turn the situation around. As long as the Roman agent only exploits someone for 1,000 steps, he is in compliance

with the law. But he can no longer hide behind the law if someone takes 2,000 steps. Let's imagine that a complaint is made to his superior. He would be the one summoned to explain himself and risk being reprimanded. By voluntarily taking the 2,000 steps, the Jew is putting the Roman soldier or civil servant in an awkward position!

### **Breaking the spiral of violence**

In Israel, the three examples we have just analysed seem to be aimed at the various upper classes at the time of Jesus: the Jewish religious elite (religious power), the ruling elite (both the rich and the judiciary) and the Romans (political power). In the three examples, we are faced with socially accepted attitudes, laws and customs that nevertheless demean and diminish people, both those who apply them and those who are subjected to them.

Jesus, far from accepting these injustices and inviting resignation, suggests that the oppressed take the initiative and adopt a 'subversive' attitude, do something out of the ordinary, make the oppressor think, challenge him and invite him to change

his attitude, in a non-violent way. In this way, it is truly revolutionary. Not a political revolutionary, because no one of his kind would dare attack all the powers at once, especially if they were weak. Jesus' subversion goes much further.

Is Jesus citing the different powers so that each of his listeners will find himself in one of these examples? It's possible. In fact, it is unlikely that any Jew at the time did not have at least one similar experience where his dignity was "legally" trampled underfoot by one of the powers that be. This listener may also have had an experience where he himself had trampled on the dignity of others. In fact, Jesus is talking here about what we today call structural violence.

***Give to anyone who asks you, and do not turn your back on anyone who wants to borrow from you (v. 42).***

The last sentence of our antithesis seems to be different from the previous ones, but it must be interpreted in their light. The majority of exegetes tend to understand this verse in the context of beggars on the street who insist on receiving alms. When we know how tenacious beggars can be in the East, we can imagine what Jesus is asking for. This time, the violence does not come from the rich, but from the poor. It is the one who is begging who is exerting the pressure; it can even become painful to insist shamelessly.

Against a backdrop of widespread impoverishment, the poor are harassed for their very survival. Jesus observes the reactions of his

contemporaries who try to escape this pressure. But the violence inflicted by those who ask is nothing compared to the violence that socially excludes. Jesus is clear: do not turn away from your weak and poor brother; give, lend.

In this fourth illustration, it is the person in a superior

economic position whom Jesus is addressing. The context must be one of precariousness, extreme poverty, where the poorest are unable to pay their taxes. Jesus then invites those who have to lend them the money they need, without demanding anything in return.

## **2. The parables of Jesus, models of non-violent communication**

In this second part, we look in detail at how Jesus lived non-violence, how he behaved in his daily life. To do this, I'll take just one example: his invitation to Simon, the Pharisee (Luke 7, 36-50).

*A Pharisee had invited Jesus to eat at his house. He went into the Pharisee's house and lay down to eat. Now there was a woman in that town who was known as a sinner. Knowing that Jesus*



was at table in the Pharisee's house, she got herself a precious jar full of perfume. She stood back at Jesus' feet, weeping, and her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them away with her hair and kissed it for a long time, then poured perfume on them.

Seeing this, the Pharisee who had invited him said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know that she who touches him is a sinner; he would know this woman and what she is like." Then Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." And he replied, "Speak, Teacher!" Jesus continues, "A man lent money to two customers, one owed him five hundred silver coins, the other fifty. Since neither of them could pay him back, he forgave both their debts. Which do you think will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who owed him the most." Jesus said to him, "You have judged well!"

And turning to the woman, he said to Simon, "You see this woman. I came into your house and you did not pour water on my feet, but she flooded them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't kiss me, but ever since she came in, she hasn't stopped kissing my feet for a long time. You didn't perfume my head, but she covered my feet with perfume. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, her many sins, are forgiven her, because she loved so much! But he who is forgiven little shows little love!" Then he said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven." And those who were at table with him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who goes so far as to forgive sins?" But he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace".

Luke describes the facts in a simple and direct way. On the one hand, we have Simon, the Pharisee, who invited Jesus to eat at his house, but not out of friendship, because Simon did not perform the usual Jewish rites for welcoming visitors: pouring water on the feet, giving the embrace, perfuming the head or pouring fragrant water on the collar of the garment. On the other hand, we have the sinful woman who, having learned that Jesus is in the Pharisee's house, comes to thank him for the benefits he has received and even makes excessive gestures of gratitude towards him.

Simon the Pharisee is embarrassed: he has invited Jesus to eat at his house, but before the

meal has even begun, Jesus allows a sinful woman touch him. A sinner is anyone who openly transgresses one of the laws of Moses, thereby becoming unclean. Touching another makes her unclean too. Jesus has thus become unclean; the meal is now compromised because you cannot eat with a person who is unclean. Hence Simon's thought: "If this man were a prophet, he would know that she who touches him is a sinner; he would know this woman and what she is like" (v. 39).

### **A parable**

Jesus uses a parable to get out of this embarrassing situation and explain why he allowed the woman touch him, inviting Simon to reflect and examine himself. This parable is not based on the laws of purity and impurity, but on what lies at the heart of human relationships: friendship and gratitude. For Jesus understood the gesture of the grateful woman:

"Simon, I have something to tell you. And he replied: 'Speak up, Teacher!' Jesus continued: 'A man lent money to two customers, one of whom owed him five hundred silver coins and the other fifty. Since neither of them can pay him back, he forgives both their debts. Which do you think will love him more?'" (v. 40-42).

Simon's answer is the expected one: 'I suppose it's the one with the greater debt' (v. 43). Through this parable, Jesus invites Simon to judge a fictitious situation and so to commit himself. All that remains for Jesus to do is to compare the imagined story with what really happened in Simon's house; Jesus too exaggerates by describing the woman's actions:

"You did not pour water on my feet, but she flooded them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't kiss me, but ever since she came in, she hasn't stopped kissing my feet for a long time. You did not perfume my head, but she covered my feet with perfume" (v. 44-46).

Between the two customers whose debts have been cleared, who will be the most grateful? Of course, the one with the greater debt. Between you and the woman who showed more love, who is more grateful? The example and its purpose are very clear: "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, her many sins, are forgiven her,

*because she has loved much (she has shown much gratitude)” (v. 47).*

### **Back to the concrete situation**

Through this parable, Jesus invites Simon to examine himself and to look at the woman in a way other than as a sinner or an unclean person. Why didn't he make the usual gestures of welcome? On the contrary, shouldn't he realise that the woman's actions are the result of grateful love? She believed in the forgiveness of her sins. This is why Jesus ends by addressing the woman: *“Your faith has saved you; go in peace”* (v. 50).

The text ends without saying what Simon's reaction was: did the meal take place or not? We don't know. The reason is simple: Luke wrote this text because it was addressed to his readers, and to us today. Jesus uses this parable to invite Simon, and us today, to examine ourselves, to change the way we look at others. Aren't we debtors too? Don't we all have prejudices about others? Born into a violent world, aren't we all violent?

### **The usefulness of parables**

There's another element I'd like to highlight in connection with non-violent communication. We've all been in awkward situations where we don't know what to say or how to say it. Parables are an effective and non-violent way of challenging those we are talking to. Why don't we use parables more often? For my part, I can share with you my experience in Rwanda, where it was taboo (and still is) to talk about Hutus and Tutsis. I said to myself: why not invent parables? Several times, I started like this: A father had two sons, one taller, the other stockier... People understood straight away what he was talking about! Parables can help us not to use violent words, but by putting ourselves in the place of the person we are talking to, to understand what they are going through in order to help them overcome their prejudices and violence...

### **3. Jesus' prophetic gestures**

In this last part, I would like to look at the end of Jesus' life and what characterises it: prophetic gestures. These too are non-violent ways of communicating a message.

### **The cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem**

I'll start with the first one which is often thrown at us when we talk about Jesus and active non-violence: the cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem. This episode is sometimes called "Jesus drives the merchants out of the temple", but doesn't our understanding of it depend on the drawings we've seen of this Gospel story, showing Jesus striking people (cf. El Greco's painting). Nothing however could be further from the truth!

It is true, according to John's Gospel, that Jesus made himself a whip from cords (2:15), but Jesus never struck people; the translations in our languages (French, English, etc.) are often inaccurate, as if Jesus had driven away the sellers with this whip. This is not the case. The Greek text (not Jerome's Latin translation, the source of the misunderstanding) says that he drove the sheep and the oxen out of the temple, all together. Jesus respects people, all people, unconditionally. He may have had harsh words for the Pharisees at the end of his life (Mt 23), but several exegetes today affirm that this is a composition by Matthew, who was at odds with the Jews of his time.

### **The entry into Jerusalem**

There is another prophetic gesture that Jesus made in Jerusalem: his entry, not on a horse, an animal of war, but on a donkey or colt. Jesus refused all forms of violence and clearly wanted to show that he was coming as a man of peace, as Luke's account underlines: *"He was already approaching the downward slope of the Mount of Olives, when the whole group of disciples, filled with joy, began to praise God with a loud voice. They said, 'Blessed is he who is coming as King, in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heavens'"* (Luke 19, 37-38).

### **Jesus, facing violence and death**

There are many texts in the Gospels that evoke the violence Jesus had to endure, as did all the pioneers of non-violence. We know that he fled abroad when Herod wanted to kill him (Lk 13:31). But it is especially at the end of his life that the texts are numerous; in Mark, following the episode in the temple, we have five texts called controversies where we see how the authorities try to trap Jesus so that they can

accuse him and have him killed (Mk 11:27 - 12:34).

For my part, I admire Jesus' non-violent attitude. I like to meditate on the texts that underline it, such as when, instead of answering their questions, he puts a question to them or asks to show him a piece of money. Let's also contemplate how he faced growing opposition with inner freedom, how he gave meaning to the death he felt was approaching. At the last supper he expressed it with a prophetic gesture and the following words: *'This is my body given up for you... This cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for you'* (Lk 22:19-20).

Some texts may also raise questions, such as this comment to the disciples about the imminence of the passion shortly before his arrest, according to Luke: *"Jesus said to them: 'But now, whoever has a purse, let him take it; and whoever has a bag, let him take it; and whoever has no sword, let him sell his cloak and buy one'... 'Lord, they said, here are two swords'; He replied, 'That's enough'"* (22, 36-38). This way of speaking of the Lucan Jesus symbolically underlines the seriousness of the situation. The last word is sometimes translated as if two swords were enough; in fact, it is a remark of Jesus putting an end to the conversation: "That's enough", as some manuscripts express it more clearly.

### **The passion narrative in Luke**

Not only does Luke omit some of Jesus' sufferings (the guards' slaps, the scourging, the crowning with thorns, the soldiers' mockery), but he insists on Jesus' attitude of love and compassion, even in suffering. When they come by night to arrest him and one of the disciples actually hits a servant of the high priest and cuts off his right ear, *But at this Jesus said: 'That is enough' and touching his ear, he healed him'* (v. 50-51). Matthew added the following words of Jesus: *'Put your sword back in its place, for all who take up the sword will perish by the sword'* (Mt 26:52).

Luke highlights Jesus' loving attitudes in his account of the Passion. We know that a person who is suffering, a sick person for example, has a tendency to close in on himself, to think only of himself, to talk only of his suffering... According to Luke, the attitude of Jesus in his passion was very different. Several details are unique to Luke's account: the question to Judas: *'Judas, do you betray the Son of Man by kissing him?'* a last non-violent attempt to make him think (22:48); after Peter's threefold denial, *The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter* (22:61), and it was this look that restored Peter to his discipleship; to the women who were beating their breasts, *Jesus said: 'Women of Jerusalem, do not weep for me! Instead, weep for yourselves and for your children'* (23:28); let us quote his prayer on the cross: *'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are*



*doing!'* (23,34); to the man called Dismas who begged Jesus, saying: *'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom! Jesus replied: 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise'* (23,43).

Jesus' extraordinary non-violence for the servant of the high priest, for Judas, for Peter, for the women of Jerusalem, for those who condemned him to death, for his executioners, for the one called the good thief. What wonderful examples of active non-violence! What inner freedom Jesus had in the depths of his suffering and even in his death!

Marie Dennis

## Gospel Nonviolence

### A New Paradigm for the Mission



Woven into the fabric of the Jesus' story from beginning to end is an identification of his mission with peace on earth – deep peace, peace

rooted in justice, shalom, and a call to the task of peacemaking for those who would be disciples.

We say the words often and easily: “Peace be with you.” We call him the Prince of Peace. We listen to the promise, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” We struggle to follow his mandates: “Love your enemy;” “Leave your gifts at the altar and go be reconciled with a brother or sister who has something against you.” And we are deeply puzzled by his warning, “I come not to bring peace, but the sword.”

To seek peace, deep peace rooted in justice, shalom – not a mere absence of war, but the fullness of life for all – that is the Christian vocation. As followers of the One who is Peace, who on the cross overcame the violences of our world, we are called to help move our broken and violated world toward the full flowering of New Creation.

Peace is Mystery. It is the Promise, the “already and the not yet.” It requires presence, accompaniment and the nurturing of relationships across boundaries – that is your vocation as missionaries. That the pursuit of peace is an act of hope is abundantly clear if we look, even briefly, at our world where what Pope Francis calls “a third world war fought piecemeal” is raging.

For decades, many of us have been discerning ways to move beyond the paradigm in which we find ourselves – a paradigm that justifies enormous loss of human life and widespread

destruction of creation in pursuit of a thin peace and a false security.

Thomas Merton once said, “The task of the Christian is at least to make the thought of peace once again seriously possible.” (*Peace in the Post Christian Era*, 7) That, I believe is the vocation of the Church, and exactly what Pope Francis is trying to do. It is, however, a monumental challenge.

#### Making Peace Possible

Pax Christi is convinced that in the long run, the only way to make the thought of sustained peace seriously possible, the only way to follow Merton's plea is by embracing Gospel nonviolence - and we are finding more and more people on every continent and in the institutional Catholic Church who are open to that possibility.

Nonviolence is not the same as pacifism. It is a spirituality, a way of life, an ethic that is potentially universal, and a proven, often-effective approach to preventing or interrupting violence, to protecting vulnerable people and the planet, to promoting just peace.

Nonviolence is not passive. It does not retreat from conflict. It actively engages and transforms conflict and is a courageous force for mercy and reconciliation.

Nonviolence is also not magic. It is not always – or not yet – up to the monumental task of stopping an invading army or extremist violence. At the same time, nonviolence has been proven to be more effective than violence in many contexts. Yet, it is woefully ignored, misunderstood and underfunded – especially in comparison to the world's investment in weapons, in military training and preparations for war and in armed security.

We have failed to “arm our children with the weapons of dialogue” or to “teach them to fight the good fight of the culture of encounter!” as Pope Francis proposed in *Fratelli Tutti* (217).

Nonviolence education and spiritual formation are almost never included in Catholic elementary schools or Catholic high schools or across disciplines beyond peace studies in Catholic universities. With some important exceptions, rigorous research into the impact of particular nonviolent strategies in different contexts is only beginning to come “into its own.”

### **A New Way of Being**

Despite overwhelming signs to the contrary, though, I believe that we are on the threshold of a new way of being, a new paradigm, a new logic for life and that embracing Gospel nonviolence at the center of Catholic life and teaching will help us move in that direction. Nonviolence is, but is not only, about war and peace, not only about pulling back from the brink of human and ecological devastation. It is also about respect and honesty, about social justice, about building right relationships between humans and with the earth, the natural world.

Czech theologian and professor of sociology Tomas Halik remembers Teilhard de Chardin as one of the first prophets of globalization, who believed that humankind would eventually turn toward “a single force that unites without destroying,” the force of love as understood in the Gospel. Halik believes that this decisive moment is happening right now and that the turn of Christianity towards synodality, the transformation of the Church into a dynamic community of pilgrims, can have an impact on the destiny of the whole human family. (<https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/46526>)

Nonviolence is a powerful force that unites without destroying, an essential dimension of the beloved community – what Ugandan Father Emmanuel Katongole calls “a spirituality that reflects the very nature of God.” (Pax Christi International

<https://youtu.be/D8Aads1Qq2o?feature=shared>)

It rejects violence in all its forms: yes, war and physical violence, but also structural and systemic violence, gender and racial violence, cultural, ecological, economic, spiritual and psychological violence.

This new nonviolent paradigm is based on a completely different understanding of our place as humans in the whole Earth community, latecomers as we are to the spectacular cosmic reality that we are just now beginning to see – thanks, for example, to the amazing Webb telescope. It helps us to understand that diversity and relationality are imbedded in the cosmos and essential to survival on this planet.

Franciscan theologian, Ilia Delio, talks about “the new person” emerging in evolution, who is embracing pluralities of gender, race and religion; who is called into a “new type of consciousness where things are first seen together and then as distinct within this togetherness.” She affirms that we are being rewired for belonging to the cosmic whole. We are more and more aware that we are one earth community; we have a planetary consciousness and “are beginning to see that systems in nature do not work on principles of competition and struggle but on cooperation and sympathy.” (*Hours of the Universe*, Chapter 14)

Michael Nagler, founder of the Metta Center for Nonviolence, talks about “the new story” that is replacing the “old story” told by the dominant white culture about scarcity, competition and violence. He insists that violence is not the nature of humans - that love, faith, trust and the desire for community, peace and well-being are central to our identity and that nonviolence is a creative power, a pervasive energy, a fundamental principle that we can develop and deploy in human interactions. “Violence, he says, “is a tendency that pulls us back, away from the recognition of unity; nonviolence pulls us forward, toward that recognition ... We human beings ... can play an active role in our own evolution and consequently that of our species. The discovery of our capacity for nonviolence, connected as it is with higher consciousness or love, is a key to this development ... Nonviolence is not only at home in the new story,” Michael Nagler says, “it is the new story.” (*The Third Harmony*, Chapter 4)

That is the nature of the nonviolence that the Church is learning to embrace. It is a new way of thinking that could guide the world, including in times of crisis, toward just peace rather than

justified war; toward respect and inclusion rather than exploitation. It is also a very old way of thinking that so often characterizes the worldview of Indigenous people and is visible in traditional rites of reconciliation in many different cultures.

Our commitment should be to a nonviolence that imitates Jesus' way of life -- that is also challenged and shaped by the history and contemporary experience of those on the peripheries, on the receiving end of war and racism and neglect and planetary destruction. As missionaries you know that world on the margins well.

The nonviolence moving to the center of Catholic teaching on war and violence and on peace is a more accurate, expanded, evidence-based and comprehensive approach to nonviolence capable of mobilizing a wide spectrum of tools for change. It is not just *not violent* but is powerful and actively engaged in preventing or interrupting the violence that is imbedded in many societies by the way we relate to each other and by the way we humans treat the earth.

And it is a nonviolence that energetically promotes just peace, the new story, the beloved community, the New Creation.

I see this shift happening everywhere. I know thousands of people, whole communities around the world who are giving their lives to making the new story real. I am sure you do too. I see it in brilliant work to root out systemic racism and colonial exploitation; to redress centuries of oppression against Indigenous communities; to break habits of exploitation that are destroying the earth; to learn and promote restorative justice practices; to welcome migrants and refugees; to rid the world of nuclear weapons; to celebrate diversity and promote unwavering inclusion and respect for the rights of all people,

believing that radical inclusion is the foundational message of the Sermon on the Mount.

### A New Story of Nonviolence

I see the new story of nonviolence in Pope Francis' vision, creativity and commitment to the cry of the earth and the cry of those forced to live on the margins of our world. As he looks around the world, he is clearly horrified, pleading again and again for the paradigm shift so desperately needed away from the direct violence of war and militarization; the cultural violence of indifference and domination; and the structural violence of racism, economic injustice, ecological destruction and more.

I see the new story of nonviolence lifted up in countless communities around the world - most recently, for example, in the extremely challenging contexts of Palestine, Mexico, South Sudan, Myanmar and Ukraine.



In Palestine, even before the current horror, I saw the devastating

consequences of occupation, the violence of an apartheid system – children killed and imprisoned, recently demolished houses, a massive Wall separating families from their land and from each other, children from their schools, people from their olive trees. Despite the dehumanizing brutality, however, the people stay. They call their steadfastness “sumud,” a powerful expression of nonviolent resistance.

In Mexico a few weeks ago, I saw thousands of people on the move, migrating north, hoping for safety and a decent life. I also saw the brutality of cartels exploiting migrants and Mexicans alike. Yet, local communities organize courageously to expose the truth and protect each other, and migrants keep moving along extremely dangerous paths to claim – nonviolently - a better future.

In South Sudan I saw the results of a bloody civil war following a bloody civil war – unrelenting multidimensional violence – war and military violence, extortion, corruption, torture, disappearances, gang violence, domestic violence, cultural violence, gender violence, the dehumanizing violence of deep poverty, all strangling a people who fought to be free but who have yet to taste peace.

But I also witnessed there the prophetic stance against violence and injustice of South Sudan’s Christian leaders and their powerful commitment to Gospel nonviolence. They said, *the Church of Christ in South Sudan ... recommits itself to Gospel nonviolence. It rejects any form of violence and commits itself to a prophetic stance against violence and injustice. This is not a passive approach, not simply submitting to or colluding with violence, but it is active and prophetic in responding to all forms of violence ...*

The South Sudan Council of Churches General Secretary, James Oyet, introduced the powerful SSCC statement, saying “His Holiness Pope Francis has revealed the sacrament of nonviolence. Here [in South Sudan] the symbol becomes substance as we embody visible acts of nonviolence. Let it be our Church institutions who teach, preach and heal through the sacrament of nonviolence for the salvation of Mother Earth and all her Children.” Beautiful. The sacrament of nonviolence. The symbol becomes substance. (<https://www.ctcinfohub.org/south-sudan-council-of-churches-releases-statement-on-nonviolence/>)

During the Synod gathering in Rome last October Cardinal Charles Maung Bo from Myanmar, whose country is experiencing a heartbreaking civil war, said:

*The violence and trauma being experienced in this moment by the people of Israel and Palestine—as by the people of Myanmar and by so many others around the world—underscore the critical need for humanity to make a dramatic shift from a global paradigm of war and violence to a paradigm of just peace and nonviolence ...*

*Nonviolence is a way of life that “unlearns” the beliefs and ways of violence and “learns” and “practices” ... our core identity as nonviolent beings ...*

(<https://paxchristi.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Cardinal-Bo-Nonviolence-Statement.pdf>)

Finally, the intense process of discernment now underway to imagine and promote effective nonviolent ways to end the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine – as difficult as that is to imagine - and to heal the wounds of that brutal war is another sign of the shift toward nonviolence. Many Ukrainians are already demonstrating clearly and with great courage that nonviolent defense can be effective and could be much more readily available with significant investment in resources, training, and research.

In Ukraine, unarmed civilian resistance has: 1) hindered institutionalization of the Russian occupation; 2) protected many civilians; 3) undermined the Russian narrative; 4) built community resilience; 5) strengthened local governance, and 6) built social cohesion. Farmers refused to sell grain to Russian soldiers; fire departments refused to work under a Russian mandate; resisters protected local administration officials and school directors; created an alternative government; and engaged Russian civil society with anti-war messaging.

Many believe that the war of aggression against Ukraine is challenging the very idea that Gospel nonviolence could ever become a widely applicable ethic, but I believe precisely the opposite. Jesus proclaimed a new, nonviolent way of life that was rooted in radical inclusion, the beloved community, mercy and the unconditional love of God -- and he did so in the context of a brutal Roman occupation. He was so completely engaged in transforming unjust structures and interrupting violence (even the violence of his “defender,” Peter on the night before he died), that Jesus was hung on a cross as a dangerous threat to those in power. While international law and our own moral tradition provide sovereign nations with the right to self-defense, in a world of highly destructive, extremely expensive weapons, the

human and environmental consequences of armed self-defense cry out for an effective alternative.

For the sake of present and future generations we have to replace the logic of violence in which we are mired with a new logic of nonviolence. Otherwise, we will be perpetually trapped exactly where we are right now, convinced that self-defense and protection, whether in Ukraine or Israel or Washington DC are only and always armed, that only weapons and military might can interrupt violence and protect threatened communities. The question is not *whether* to defend against a brutal military invasion or organized crime or terrorism or other serious threats, but *how*, especially how to imagine and build a new paradigm where nonviolent options are increasingly viable and effective.



Nonviolence has been a hallmark of Pope Francis' response to war and to other forms of violence - what he calls a third world war fought piecemeal. In *Fratelli Tutti* and in scores of other statements Pope Francis has repeatedly placed nonviolence as the lens through which to evaluate any crisis.

### **The Catholic Church and Nonviolence**

The Catholic Church needs – and I believe is moving toward – a new moral framework that will move nonviolence to the center of Catholic teaching, even as it precisely negotiates an ethical response to the complex expressions of violence encountered in any crisis. The realization of a new paradigm based on nonviolence is even more necessary than it was a few years ago – and more difficult.

Seven years ago, in his 2017 World Day of Peace message, Pope Francis said, “to be true

followers of Jesus today also includes embracing His teaching about nonviolence. ...I pledge the assistance of the Church in every effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence.”

Pax Christi's Catholic Nonviolence Initiative is doing all that we can to take Pope Francis up on his offer, urging the Church to promote the necessary shift from an ethic of violence and war to an ethic of nonviolence – through our dialogue with the Holy See; bishops and episcopal conferences, Catholic universities, religious communities, diocesan and parish programs, and Church diplomatic efforts.

We do see a leaning toward nonviolence in Catholic social thought – less inclination to dismiss nonviolence as naïve, unrealistic and a more serious effort to imagine a shift from the logic of violence to the logic of nonviolence. That movement is being enhanced by the synodal process, which is participatory, collegial, grounded in and energized by the creative spirit of God, affirming the nonviolent impulses of listening, dialogue, and working through differences. From this perspective, the current Synod can be understood as a global, nonviolent practice to foster a more nonviolent Church and world.

According to the Synthesis Report, *Conversation in the Spirit*, the Synod methodology, “interweaves thought and feeling, creating a shared vital space.... Conversing ‘in the Spirit’ means living the experience of sharing in the light of faith and seeking God's will in an authentically evangelical atmosphere within which the Holy Spirit's unmistakable voice can be heard.” (*Synthesis Report*, 7).

Gospel nonviolence speaks that same language. Nonviolence is not one more issue, but a personal and collective spiritual process, an ethical proposal, a method to be learned and taught, a Christian way of life. Nonviolence has its own procedures, methodologies and techniques, such as mediation, restorative dialogue, peace facilitation, circles of reconciliation, conflict resolution, consensus-building and trauma healing that are also integrated into the Synod on Synodality process. Both processes are grounded in faith, open to

the intervention and guidance of the Spirit and facilitated by love, reason, knowledge and previous experiences.

The *Working Document* for the General Assembly of the Synod last October said: “A synodal Church can offer a prophetic witness to a fragmented and polarized world, especially when its members are committed to walking together with others for the building of the common good. In places marked by deep conflict, this requires the ability to be agents of reconciliation and artisans of peace.”

Gospel nonviolence based on the life and teaching of Jesus demonstrates ways to become agents of reconciliation and artisans of peace. Pope Francis reminds us that Jesus Himself offers a ‘manual’ for this work in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Synod Synthesis Report specifically mentioned nonviolence twice:

Once calling for **more reflection and formation in order that we can manage conflicts in a nonviolent way**, a valuable contribution that Christians can offer to today's world in dialogue and collaboration with other religions. (p. 13)

The other calling for careful consideration of matters that are controversial within the Church, such as ... **nonviolence and legitimate self-defence**, “(p. 30).

(<https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assemblee/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>)

Gospel nonviolence does not have all the answers but it does have the methodology, the tools, the knowledge, the experience, the commitment, the faith and the love to seek answers with others.

Imagine 1.3 billion Catholics committed to this mission, being agents of reconciliation and artisans of peace. Imagine Gospel nonviolence being taught in every parish, diocese, Catholic school, high school or university. Imagine Gospel nonviolence guiding our everyday actions in every place, at every border, before every difficult issue. In a divided world where violence is so present and armed conflicts seem

to surround us, Gospel nonviolence aims to contribute to the synodality of the Church and to a more peaceful world where walking together as humanity is still possible.

But this unprecedented global transformation will also depend on mobilizing worldwide people-power movements for change using active nonviolence that is what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s daughter, Dr. Bernice King in her meeting with Pope Francis called “strategic, courageous, love-centered and organized.” Without a committed and systematic advance of the vision, principles, strategies, practices and tactics of nonviolence, humanity will remain under-equipped to meet the historic challenges of the climate crisis and biodiversity loss.

This leaning toward nonviolence in Catholic social thought is also visible in *Laudato Si*, which has enabled us to see more clearly that the cry of the earth and the suffering of the creatures living on this planet are intrinsically interconnected with human violence, including the cultural violence of indifference and domination; the direct violence of war and militarization; and the economic violence of destructive, unaccountable extractive projects or unsustainable, consumption-driven lifestyles. Humans, instead of caring for the earth that nurtures us, have damaged its ability to sustain life.

Gospel nonviolence is much more than a political strategy; it is a spirituality through which we see and interpret life, a set of virtues and principles for personal and social change. You will reflect on the spirituality of nonviolence with Sister Sheila Kinsey later in the week.

### **Rich Diversity of Nonviolent Practices**

As you probably know, Pax Christi International is a global Catholic peace movement with 120-member organizations working for peace on six continents. For almost 80 years, Pax Christi International members around the world, including many who have lived in zones of conflict and extremely dangerous situations, have nurtured a deep commitment to active nonviolence.

About 15 years ago we began to collect stories about the methodology and impact, success or failure, faith-connection or not of nonviolent practice from different, often very violent contexts where our members live or work. We began to see amazing creativity, wisdom and, frequently, the effectiveness of nonviolent strategies despite the fact that nonviolent options were often dismissed as passive, naïve, even irresponsible in the “real” world and almost always under-resourced.

A rich diversity of nonviolent strategies is being employed in different contexts. They have been the “bread and butter” for Pax Christi member organizations for decades: trainings in strategic nonviolence for communities negatively affected by extractive projects throughout Latin America; nonviolence trainings for youth and religious sisters in the DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan and Kenya; accompaniment of communities at risk in the Middle East; sports for peace programs in Haiti and South Sudan; reintegrating former combatants into their communities in the DR Congo; and creative nonviolent advocacy to reduce military spending and support diplomatic solutions to seemingly intractable violent conflicts – the list is endless.

We were tired of being figuratively “patted on the head” when we challenged violent responses to threatened or actual violence, especially when one of the great gifts of our age is the empirical evidence that active nonviolence is a positive, constructive and powerful force for social change and very often more effective than violence. Diverse nonviolent approaches – from diplomacy to trauma healing, from restorative justice to accompaniment, from civil resistance to civilian based defense, from nonviolent communication to unarmed civilian protection – are effectively dealing with violence without lethal force; transforming conflict; protecting people and communities at risk; and fostering just and peaceful alternatives.

As a Catholic movement we began to realize that it could make a huge difference in knowledge about and the development of nonviolent approaches to conflict transformation if the Catholic Church turned its vast capacity for education, communication,

advocacy and diplomacy to teaching about nonviolence, researching the effectiveness of different nonviolent options, advocating for public policies that support and promote nonviolent approaches to national and international security.

What if over 1 billion Catholics worldwide were formed from the beginning of life to understand and appreciate the power and effectiveness of active nonviolence and the connection of nonviolence to the heart of the Gospel? What if we all knew how to apply nonviolent tools to defuse conflict before it became violent?

What if the Catholic Church itself adopted the discipline and spirituality of nonviolence to transform the violence of clericalism and abuse in our Church?

What if the Catholic Church committed its vast spiritual, intellectual and financial resources to developing a new moral framework and language for discerning ways to prevent atrocities, to protect people and the planet in a dangerous world? What would happen if the Church left behind easy references to “just war” and prioritized nonviolent tools to address violent or potentially violent situations?

In April 2016, 85 people from around the world gathered in Rome for what has been called a “landmark” conference on nonviolence and just peace. Invited by the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International, participants came together to imagine a new framework for Catholic teaching on war and peace that could help the world move beyond perpetual violence and war. Central to our conversation were the voices of people promoting active nonviolence in the midst of horrific violence.

Many participants came from countries that have been at war or dealing with serious violence for decades: Iraq and Afghanistan, Palestine, Lebanon, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Korea, Japan.

Ogarit Younan, who co-founded the Academic University for Nonviolence and Human Rights

in Lebanon, shared her positive experience of equipping youth, educators and community leaders throughout the Middle East with nonviolent skills to end vicious cycles of violence and discrimination.

Archbishop Odama, from Gulu in Northern Uganda, spoke about nonviolent strategies used by the Acholi Religious Leaders to engage the Lord's Resistance Army.

Together during the conference we wrote an *Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-commit to the Centrality of Gospel Nonviolence*, urging the Church to move beyond the language of "just war" that has been central to Catholic theology on war and peace for centuries and to "integrate Gospel nonviolence explicitly into the life, including the sacramental life, and work of the Church through dioceses, parishes, agencies, schools, universities, seminaries, religious orders, voluntary associations, and others." We also asked Pope Francis to write an encyclical, on nonviolence.

Obviously, we were delighted when he wrote his 2017 World Day of Peace message on "Nonviolence A Style of Politics for Peace," presenting active nonviolence as both powerful and, according to recent studies, very effective. Immediately after the 2016 conference we organized the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative as a project of Pax Christi International to encourage the Church at every level to center nonviolence in its teaching and practice.

A second conference in April 2019 entitled "Path of Nonviolence: Towards a Culture of Peace" was cosponsored by the Dicastery for Integral Human Development. And a third conference in Rome in December 2022 focused on "Pope Francis, Nonviolence and the Fullness of Pacem in Terris," All of the conferences followed the same pattern, bringing experienced nonviolence practitioners from the peripheries together with cardinals, bishops, theologians and social scientists to contribute to a renewed Catholic understanding of nonviolence.

## **A Deep Exploration of Nonviolence**

Beginning in 2017, the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative organized an international virtual process of discussion, discernment, and research on key themes related to nonviolence and just peace involving 125 theologians, academics, grassroots nonviolence practitioners and some Church leadership. The purpose of this process was to generate deep thinking about nonviolence in different contexts and to gather material that could be a resource for Church leaders.

In all, there were five roundtables, each of which produced a final paper that formed the basis for our book *Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace in the Church and the World*. In addition, a two-day consultation with 12 theologians and peace practitioners from five African countries and in-person interviews with over 15 theologians and peace practitioners



from El Salvador, Colombia, Guatemala and Nicaragua brought deep experience in different contexts of war and ongoing violence to the roundtable discernment process.

**1.** The first roundtable contributed to a foundational theology of nonviolence using classic theological categories: Creation and Anthropology, Biblical Foundations, Christology, Pneumatology, Eschatology and Ecclesiology. Their reflections began with Genesis and generally moved in chronological order through the Scriptures, engaging with God's call to humanity throughout history to live nonviolence, making an effort to retrieve and proclaim the shape that God's absolute peace, mercy, love, and justice take in the midst of a world fraught with violence: the incarnational nonviolence of Christ Jesus. The Church – the People of God – experiences this

call through discipleship, community, prayer, sacrament, ministry and discernment under the guidance and creative power of the Holy Spirit.

2. The second roundtable studied Jesus' nonviolence according to the Gospels. They explored seven important findings:

- Jesus teaches us how to prevent violence and seal it off at its origins by his teaching on love of enemies. (Mt. 5:43-45) By refusing to see anyone as an alien or enemy, the violence that begins in the mind through the act of labeling is stopped before it can fester.
- When violence does break out, Jesus teaches us how to use transforming initiatives, how to intervene with practical, creative nonviolent practices that stop the escalation of violence. (Mt. 5: 38-42).
- He shows us how to attack and overcome the structural causes of violence and suffering through civil resistance – nonviolent direct action. In Jesus' day the main pillars of Jewish life and society—Sabbath, Torah and Temple—were controlled by often self-interested elites operating within the Roman imperial context. Jesus modeled how to go after root causes. (Mark 3:1-6; Luke 13; John 14:27; Mark 11: 15-17).
- He teaches and models a way to reconcile a community after it has been torn apart by violence and division. He teaches a way to bring a community back together again by giving agency to the victim, making the guilty accountable and through sublime acts of forgiveness. (Mt. 18: 15-17, 20; Mt. 18:21; Luke 23:14).
- Jesus demonstrates how to defend the innocent with nonviolent action instead of violence. (John 8: 4-10).
- He shows us how to construct a community and culture of nonviolence as an antithesis to regimes of domination through violence.
- He shows us how to live a life of nonviolence to the full and to the end.

Beyond the testimony of the Gospels, this roundtable also pointed to the life and witness of the disciples after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. In the Acts of the Apostles Luke describes how the early disciples lived out Jesus' nonviolent style of life—reaching out

without fear to all, healing, rejoicing and building the reign of God. Many figures of the early Church followed him into suffering and death. All the disciples of the early church understood his call. They understood the risks. They knew where his way of life might lead. The most quoted section of the Bible up until the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. was consistently the Sermon on the Mount teaching of love of enemy. Early Christians believed it. They practiced it.

- The third roundtable contributed to a new moral framework based on nonviolence and just peace that is rooted in the experience of those who have lived in contexts of war, destructive conflict, and violence, and is reinforced by evidence of effective nonviolent alternatives. It recapitulates Catholic social teaching as a whole; emphasizes active, strategic, nonviolent approaches; and proposes just peace norms that (1) prepare for and work through the inevitable conflicts in human societies (2) exit vicious cycles of violence and (3) build sustainable peace. It is more expansive than either pacifism or the just war tradition and requires constant attention to the root causes of violence and to the social conditions that make for peace, rejecting simplistic solutions that make violence deceptively tempting.
- The fourth roundtable developed a comprehensive proposal for how the institutional Catholic Church could integrate Gospel nonviolence into its life and mission.
- The fifth roundtable gathered powerful, detailed case studies of nonviolent action and experience in different violent circumstances around the world (in Kenya, Croatia, England, Afghanistan, the United States, Colombia, South Korea, Philippines, Australia, Uganda, Lebanon/Syria, Central African Republic, Palestine, South Sudan, and Mexico).

The work of Pax Christi's Catholic Nonviolence Initiative has continued energetically since those round tables and 2017-18. The roundtable reports and are available on our website along

with many additional reports and multiple resources for individuals and communities.

The very positive international response to the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative has been quite amazing. Everywhere it seems that human beings are yearning for a new paradigm, a new stage on which to enact the Earth Community drama. We don't pretend to have the definitive word about active nonviolence. In fact, we are specifically encouraging people to make use of the excellent resources developed by organizations in many different countries and, especially, to learn from local experience how to live nonviolently in their own context, how to employ nonviolence wherever they live in the service of just peace and ecological integrity. Pope Francis has been helping us all imagine a

*commitment, to political activity and international relations."*

*"In every situation, this means rejecting violence as a method for resolving conflicts and dealing with them instead through dialogue and negotiation."*

*"This is not the same as weakness or passivity; rather it presupposes firmness, courage and the ability to face issues and conflicts with intellectual honesty, truly seeking the common good over and above all partisan interest, be it ideological, economic or political."*

<https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2016/12/15/pope-francis-nonviolence-not-weakness>



Church actively committed to advancing Gospel nonviolence. Reflecting on the 2017 World Day of Peace message, "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace," he said that the path of nonviolence in politics and society *"is the path to pursue now and in the future."* *"This is the way of peace,"* ... *"not a peace proclaimed by words but in fact denied by pursuing strategies of domination, backed up by scandalous outlays for arms, while so many people lack the very necessities of life."*

In a world marked by war, conflict and widespread violence even in people's day-to-day life, he said, *"the choice of nonviolence as a style of life is increasingly demanded in the exercise of responsibility at every level, from family education, to social and civil*

The issues, the challenges we face are intertwined, interconnected at a root deep level. Either we will continue to live our way into the new story of right relationships and commit to developing and scaling up diverse, powerful nonviolent tools to provide protection and genuine security -- or we will remain stuck in the old story that violence and war are inevitable.

If humans and the earth community that we call home are going to survive, nonviolence is essential to the future we have to create - beginning in the zones of conflict where so many of you are in mission. Thank you.

## Mission in Conflict Zones and Healing

### 1. La mia 'storia' non è solo due anni di sequestro...

Sono missionario della S.M.A. (Società Missioni Africane nata nel 1856 per l'annuncio del vangelo in Africa) e per 21 anni ho servito in Africa Occidentale (Costa d'Avorio e Niger). Il mio impegno missionario ha sempre avuto come *focus* il servizio alla vita. Missione per me è servire la vita e testimoniare il Dio della vita. Per questo ho sempre messo insieme Vangelo & Promozione Umana.



La Buona Notizia/Parola di Dio si è fatta carne e questo ha motivato le tante iniziative d'impegno sociale che mi hanno sempre caratterizzato. La mia pastorale sociale si è sempre articolata in 3 aree: **Salute + Scuola + Sviluppo**. Cioè curare la vita malata (**salute**), offrire un futuro ai ragazzi (**scuola**) e permettere alla gente di mettersi in piedi (**sviluppo**).

•**Salute** = Mi son interessato alla realizzazione di Pozzi, Maternità, Centro Nutrizionale x malnutriti e orfani dalla nascita, la cura di persone con handicap e la missione di Bomoanga assicurava anche un Deposito-Farmacia per la popolazione.

• **Scuola** = Assicuravo delle borse di studio a famiglie che non potevano permettere la scuola ai loro figli, organizzato corsi di Alfabetizzazione per adulti e in particolare donne. Sognavo iniziare anche un liceo agricolo a Bomoanga.....

•**Sviluppo** = Settimane di formazione per gli agricoltori (nuove tecniche come l'uso dell'aratro) e avvio al lavoro per giovani apprendisti (*petit métiers*). Imparare a gestire il cambiamento climatico e la penuria delle piogge (cfr miglio rapido).

Ma... tutto si è interrotto quel 17 settembre 2018.

### 2. Nel mio libro 'catene di libertà' racconto di questo mio sequestro (e del mio viaggio interiore) ...

di cui alcune date significative:

- 17 sett. 2018... rapimento
- 5 ottobre 2018 ... catene
- 28 ottobre 2018 = 1° video e poi Sahara x 6 mesi solo... poi la compagnia di Luca e di Nicola
- 14 settembre 2019 ...catene ogni notte (dal tramonto all'alba).
- 5 febb.2020... speranza di liberazione
- 11 settembre 2020 = ultimo video
- 8 ott. 2020 = liberazione.

È stata una sventura che mi ha sorpreso e che mi ha segnato profondamente, ma mi ha anche insegnato altro: sulla preghiera, sulla missione, sulla mia fede... un andare all'essenziale.

**2.1 - Missionario in catene:** la mia preghiera sprovvista della mia biblioteca di libri (breviario, Bibbia, messa...) si è arricchita della preghiera delle lacrime e della preghiera del cuore. Quando mi hanno incatenato (il 5 ott. 2018, mi hanno messo una catena alla caviglia e l'altro capo a un albero e per 22 giorni consecutivi vi sono rimasto incatenato), ho pianto tutto il mio sconforto e ho gridato a Dio i miei tanti perché: *perché mi hai abbandonato? Fino a quando Signore ti dimenticherai di me? Signore vieni presto in mio aiuto...*

Mi hanno portato nel deserto di dune di sabbia e per un anno intero il Sahara è stata la mia prigione a cielo aperto; ho solo ottenuto che mi togliessero le catene. Ma ho ritrovato le catene ancora il 14/10/2019 dopo che un ostaggio aveva tentato la fuga di notte e da allora ho avuto le catene ai piedi tutte le notti, fino alla liberazione e... vi posso assicurare che le catene sono molto scomode.

Ma, anche se vi può sembrare paradossale, le catene hanno aperto il mio spazio libero. Mi son detto: **“Se i miei piedi sono incatenati il mio cuore no.”** Ho pregato per le periferie del mondo come la piccola Teresa di Lisieux e ho capito (stando in catene) quanto diceva il fondatore della SMA: *‘essere missionario dal profondo del cuore’*. La preghiera del cuore è stato il mio spazio libero. La mia preghiera di cuore intreccia (ancora oggi) questi 3 verbi: **respirare Dio, parlare con Dio e amare come Dio.**

**Respirare Dio** - Ogni mattina respiravo profondamente vita, al levar del sole, ...*mi dicevo Gigi resisti (la prima volta fu il 28 ott. 2018 quando mi hanno fatto il 1° video) ... cioè R-ESISTI = esisti giorno dopo giorno.*

**Parlare con Dio** - non usavo formule ma vivevo un cuore a cuore con Dio: presentavo volti/persona e situazioni e il mio desiderio di pace... e pregavo per i persecutori della pace.

**Amare come Dio** - Simone Weil, mi presta le parole x esprimere quanto ho intuito, nel libro *Attesa di Dio* lei scrive: *‘Nella sventura Dio è assente... ma è proprio lì che l’anima fedele ama come Dio, cioè a vuoto, e percepisce l’oltre di Dio che ama gratuitamente sempre’*. Io non ho fatto niente, assolutamente niente per oltre 2 anni, ho pregato e amato-a-vuoto. Preghiera ritmata dal rosario di stoffa e dalla sequenza di pentecoste allo Spirito Santo. Maria e lo SpS sono stati i miei compagni nella prigionia.

La preghiera (*il mio rosario di stoffa*) è stata il mio link di comunione con Dio e col mondo. La preghiera per me oggi è disobbedire alla solitudine! Quel deserto mi ha permesso di scoprire l’essenziale. In quella privazione e

aridità spirituale ho visto che l’essenziale per una vita piena è la RELAZIONE.

Durante la mia prigionia la mia più grande sete/sofferenza era non poter comunicare con famiglia/comunità. Sentivo in me come un *‘dolore fisico’* al pensiero che questa sventura procurava alla mia famiglia tanto dolore. Ho sofferto tante incomodità: sempre all’aperto, dormire su una stuoia e mangiare le solite cose e bere acqua al sapore di benzina... ma le cose di cui ero privato non mi pesavano tanto quanto il non poter comunicare. **Siamo relazione.** Ciò che sta al cuore dell’esperienza umana ed è vitale è la comunione d’Amore e la Libertà. Queste mi mancavano!

In quella solitudine ho capito (e avuto conferma) che l’essenziale della missione è umanizzare le relazioni. Nei miei anni di missione in Niger la mia pastorale è sempre stata ispirata a questo adagio di P. François Varillon (gesuita francese): *“ciò che l’uomo umanizza, Dio divinizza”*. Ho applicato questo principio anche con i mujahiddins: curando la piaga al polpaccio di uno di loro, alleviando il mal di denti di Abdul Haq, insegnando a contare in francese ad Abel Nour... e piano piano ho compreso che i veri ostaggi erano loro.

Sono convinto che l’essenziale nei conflitti è il dialogo e l’incontro, mai lo scontro. Le guerre non risolvono i conflitti. Con fatica/pazienza e soprattutto provocato dalla parola di Gesù *“amate i vostri nemici”* ho scelto di perdonare. Non porto odio/rancore in me, mi sento in pace. L’ho anche esplicitamente detto ad Abu Naser il giorno della mia liberazione (8 ott. 2020): **“che Dio ci dia di comprendere un giorno che siamo tutti fratelli”**. Gli ho offerto la mia fraternità umana. Sono convinto che solo il perdono e la mano tesa di fraternità creano il ponte della pace.

**2.2 - Fare l’essenziale:** è cambiata la pretesa di salvare il mondo a partire da quel che si fa. Per 2 anni non ho fatto niente e credevo che mi avessero rubato 2 anni di missione attiva e positiva, ma mi sono reso conto (al mio ritorno) che quei 2 anni inutili son stati i più fecondi di tutti i miei anni di ministero attivo = Missio Dei!

Questa esperienza mi ha permesso di fare sintesi tra le 2 dimensioni della missione: ho compreso il nesso forte tra il valore missionario dei contemplativi e il valore contemplativo dei missionari.

Non rinnego il valore 'fattivo' della missione che si esprime con ospedali, scuole, attività di sviluppo (con cui traduciamo la compassione di Cristo che tocca e guarisce), ma dopo questo mio tempo di deserto credo importante ripartire dall'essenziale: che articolo in **fare-silenzio, fare-spazio, fare-insieme**. Il nostro è un tempo di crisi/passaggio epocale, ma è certamente una grande opportunità per andare in profondità e **all'essenziale**.

**1. Fare silenzio:** La Missione è di Dio (Missio Dei). Nel mio deserto ho scoperto che Dio è silenzio, che il silenzio è la comunicazione di Dio e che la preghiera è armonia di due silenzi. Ripartire allora da: meno ritualità e più spiritualità. Già gli apostoli avevano fatto questa scelta: *"noi ci dedicheremo alla preghiera e al ministero della parola"* (At 6,5).

**2. Fare spazio:** essere Chiesa aperta e accogliente a tutti (quanto le ripete il papa). L'immagine della *shekina* (tenda) traduce bene la Chiesa in uscita. Ne ho viste di tende tra i tuareg del deserto: sono tetto senza mura e c'è posto per tutti. Non muri e filo spinato, ma comunità accoglienti.

**3. Fare insieme:** promuovere le competenze e le collaborazioni di ciascuno. Essere Chiesa che "valorizza l'ascolto" (cfr *pastorale della stuoia*), l'incontro e il dialogo. Siamo interconnessi, lavorare insieme (=corresponsabilità: laici-religiosi-giovani-famiglie) ...

**2.3 - La mia conversione:** il Dio che mi è stato accanto, è il Dio della croce. Come lui ero sconfitto e confitto (impotente) sulla croce del sequestro, ma questa posizione scomoda ha trasformato questa mia sventura e il male che ho patito in una comprensione altra della fede. Sì, Dio è impotente, la sua è solo la potenza dell'Amore. Dio non è altro che Amore.

Dio non è onnipotente (è questa una categoria ambigua). L'onnipotenza di Dio è l'onnipotenza dell'amore: è l'amore che è onnipotente! Talvolta si dice: Dio può tutto! No, Dio non può tutto, Dio può soltanto ciò che l'amore può, perché egli non è altro che amore. E tutte le volte che usciamo dalla sfera dell'amore ci inganniamo su Dio e stiamo costruendo qualche Giove. Questa la mia conversione dell'immagine di Dio.

Dio-Amore è impotente davanti alla libertà che rispetta sempre anche quando rifiuta il suo amore. Gesù in croce è vittima innocente di malfattori (= persone che gli fanno del male). Lui incassa il male e ne rimane annientato (*muore*); può solo trasformarlo in amore (*perdona-loro*). La croce ci mostra il vero volto di Dio che non è altro che Amore. Dio non trasforma il male in bene (scorretto dirlo perché il male resta tale), ma lo trasforma in amore. Questa è la novità cristiana. Dio è disarmato, Dio è impotente davanti alla libertà di chi opera il male. Dio opera solo con la forza dell'amore che attira a sé: *"quando sarò innalzato da terra attirerò tutti a me"* (Gv 12,32).

Gesù è il mio riferimento. Dio lo vedo con gli occhi di Gesù di Nazareth. *Dio è come Gesù* = ama come Gesù, si dona come Gesù, condivide la nostra vita e muore come Gesù. *'Dio nessuno l'ha mai visto, il figlio che è nel seno del Padre ce lo ha rivelato'*, così si esprime il prologo di Gv 1,18. Il mio Dio è come Gesù.

**3. Le mie convinzioni maturate dopo questo sequestro:** Abitare il conflitto - Coltivare la dimensione contemplativa che sposa la solidarietà con gli innocenti della storia - Andare all'essenziale

### 3.1. Abitare il conflitto

La vita è conflitto: non esiste vita senza un'opposizione. Tutta la vita è conflittuale (presenza di + e -). Ex: la relazione figli-genitori (e tra fratelli); il rapporto insegnante-alunni; datore di lavoro e operai... e così nello sport, in amore/amicizie, con il creato (ambiente/clima). Chi non sa gestire il conflitto è destinato a non-vivere, a maggior ragione un missionario/a. La missione (sempre) è un andare come pecore tra lupi...

Parlare di conflitto non è sinonimo di guerra: la guerra prevede l'eliminazione del nemico, vince chi uccide = massacro. Mentre il conflitto non richiede affatto l'eliminazione dell'altro (cfr marito-moglie, adolescente-genitore, col vicino di casa).

Non bisogna aver paura dei conflitti, **bisogna temere la violenza e la guerra** e imparare a disarmarla. Da ex-ostaggio e da uomo libero dico e ripeto: disarmiamo la parola! La parola è la scintilla che incendia ogni conflitto. Dalla parola si passa alle mani, ai pugni e se queste mani sono armate si arriva all'omicidio o femminicidio o alla guerra. Disarmiamo la parola per disarmare lo sguardo e imparare a vederci non da nemici ma da fratelli (*almeno da esseri umani*). Disarmiamo la parola per disarmare il cuore e imparare ad accogliere tutti.

### 3.2 Preghiera e Solidarietà con il dolore innocente da contemplativi: stuoia e grembiule

Il primo vescovo di Niamey (Hippolyte Berlier) parlava della pastorale della stuoia. Stare-con, ascoltare e imparare la lingua locale. In altre parole significa: con-dividere, con-solare, con-patire, comunione, con-tatto... vivere la solidarietà **con** gli ultimi e **con** i più abbandonati.



Il vescovo di Molfetta (Don Tonino Bello) ha scritto che *l'habitus* del presbitero è la stola e il grembiule che fa di lui un **contemplativo** ossia un uomo di preghiera e di servizio... (lo prendo come paradigma estendibile a tutti i missionari/e). (*Circa il dolore innocente rimando al capitolo 3 del mio libro Liberare la Pace*).

### 3.3 L'essenziale (per me) è testimoniare la nonviolenza & liberare la pace

Queste due parole sono l'orizzonte del mio impegno che nasce da questa mia sventura di

ostaggio di guerra. Per me oggi è forte la centralità di Mt 5-7 in cui vedo il cuore del vangelo e del regno di Dio annunciato da Gesù. Nonviolenza e Pace è la quintessenza dell'annuncio della Lieta Notizia.

Concludo con quanto ho scritto a Papa Francesco... a fine febbraio scorso.

#### Caro Papa Francesco,

Ho scritto questo mio libro 'Liberare la Pace' come eco al tuo invito a **guardare la guerra con gli occhi delle vittime** (cfr. *F.T. n° 261*). Sono stato sequestrato per oltre due anni nel Sahel e questa sventura ha maturato riflessioni e considerazioni sull'urgenza oggi di Liberare la Pace.

La guerra mi ha *inghiottito* mentre ero missionario a Bomoanga in Niger. Ho sofferto prigionia e catene per oltre 2 anni, ma soprattutto ho visto la 'bruttezza e l'insensatezza' della guerra nel Sahel e che la violenza non produce mai la pace. Ho pregato, ho pianto, ho perdonato... e oggi sono in pace.

La terza guerra mondiale a pezzi a cui assistiamo impotenti, mi conferma che è urgente oggi dire una parola forte sulla Pace. Sogno e spero di leggere, un giorno, in una enciclica papale, una **dichiarazione forte che abolisca la guerra** senza *se* e senza *ma*. È tempo di liberare la Chiesa e i cristiani dalla confusione del credere in altri poteri che non siano la logica dell'amore, del perdono e della nonviolenza. (...)

Attendo e spero una parola forte e chiara sulla PACE togliendo tutte le ambiguità del caso... di chi vuole ancora salvaguardare la guerra giusta o di difesa. Io sono con don Primo Mazzolari, che profeticamente diceva nel suo libro 'Tu non uccidere' (1957) «Ogni guerra è fratricidio, oltraggio a Dio e all'uomo. O si condannano tutte le guerre, o si accettano tutte. Basta un'eccezione per lasciar passare tutti i crimini». Io intanto mi ci impegno in prima persona...

## Social Support as Means of Healing

### Example of Resilience Programs offered by ICOF Program

#### Introduction

The main message of this presentation is that Social Support is one of the key means of healing and resilience even in conflict zones.

The methodology of this presentation is mainly reflection and sharing from lived experiences, especially in ICOF Resilience Programs.

#### About ICOF Program:

ICOF stands for Inter-Congregational Ongoing Formation.

It is Inter-congregational since it is founded by and run conjointly by 5 congregations:

- Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritans)
- Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers);
- Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (MSOLA / White Sisters)
- Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles (OLA)
- Society of African Missions (SMA)

ICOF Program was founded in 2015 mainly to serve priests and religious needing ongoing formation, with a particular focus for those in Africa.

**ICOF Resilience Program.** Among others, ICOF runs a Resilience program, which aims at the fullness of life in the people, especially those in conflict zones. And where a person has been broken by trauma, loss, burnout, and problematic transitioning, we aim at their healing and bouncing back to healthy life.

We also attempt to provide our target population with more skills for bringing healing and growth through their pastoral care of their faithful.

#### Countries in which we have run programs.

We have run resilience programs in the Republic of Central Africa, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Nigeria. These are among the

countries that have been or even still are having conflict.

We will start by describing social support, then we will highlight three of the lessons we have learnt from experience in working there.

#### 1. Social Support<sup>1</sup>

Social support is one of the most fruitful ways of bringing healing and resilience in persons living and working in conflict zones.

*A person who was working and living in a conflict zone had just come back from hiding from terrorists who had come to abduct people, kill some and burn houses in the neighbourhood. He was back into the house from which someone was abducted a few days earlier, and there was nothing yet done to provide him more security. A journalist asked him what he most wished at that moment of uncertainty to happen in order for him to feel better. He said he most wished a visit or a call from his leader, or at least from the people he considered close to him. He desired this more than even being guarded by armed police or being brought to a safer place. He needed someone to express care, concern, listening ear... in other words, he needed social support.*

**Types of Social Support** With examples from our experience in ICOF's Resilience programs, let us see the four types of social support: emotional; instrumental, informational, and appraisal.

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<sup>1</sup> Among the major authorities in the Social Support theory are Don Drennon-Gala and Francis Cullen, who were researching how to reduce or even prevent juvenile delinquency. The communion brought by Social Support has been proven to bring healing and to prevent many kinds of difficulties. ICOF Program insists a lot in creating an ambiance where social support is lived practically in order to bring the healing, renewal and resilience in its participants.

**Emotional social support:** ICOF Program offer an opportunity for individual and group accompaniment in where members have 10 hours of sharing about their emotions around their significant experiences for which they need resilience and healing. This accompaniment is a form of healing communion. In this sharing, emotions are noticed, named, and processed. There is the experience of healing by empathy from others in the context of a healing communion. It was helpful to be allowed to feel and to allow emotions to be expressed. Some participants found this permission to feel very liberating since the expressed emotions could be unblocked and healed.

**Instrumental social support:** instrumental social support is where there is practical help given to a person to alleviate the suffering. Among the practical help we have seen includes participants making a collection of money to support those among them who had more serious financial challenges in their zones of conflict. Others were teaching and encouraging each other in doing therapeutic and relaxation exercises in small groups in the afternoons.

**Informational social support:** we have provided psychoeducation in topics like the bereavement process, PTSD, polyvagal theory, capacitor exercises, relaxation techniques, management of fear, helpful way of talking about traumatic experiences, the importance of working with the body, preparing the 72 hours emergency preparedness kit, social skills, post-traumatic growth, and cognitive restructuring to manage toxic thoughts... I have received calls from former participants sharing how this information made their life better and enriched their ministry.

Informational social support also came from exchange by participants of helpful information like phone lines, helpful apps, methods for building peace, and some survival skills that have worked.

**Appraisal social support:** we have found appreciation from other members very helpful in giving a positive and larger meaning to one's ministry, life, suffering and even of dying. A religious had been considering herself a coward,

but after hearing other members appreciate her courage to stay in a conflict zone in order to give support to vulnerable people there, she started seeing in herself what her group members were seeing in her. She saw the courageous woman, the hero, and the modern prophet. The meaning of her sacrifice was highlighted and made evident and obvious. With this understanding, she decided to stay with the poor vulnerable people as long as it was still possible, reasonable and helpful. Through this sharing, she also empowered the other group members to get more zealous in reaching out more towards others, to outgrow the limitedness of being overconcerned with self-preservation.

## **2. Some Lessons Learnt from Experience at The ICOF Resilience Program**

### **i). There is more healing in giving than in receiving social support.**

I learnt this from a person who shared his experience of being abducted and was forced to live in a very difficult situation for over a month. He describes terrible experiences there, like, being starved, beaten, humiliated and fainting. The experience of being abducted; when it did not kill him, made him stronger in advocating for peace in his region. He shares that what made him go on was his love and concern for his local church, for parishioners, and for fellow abductees that he was doing everything to help them to be as well as they could in those terrible conditions. His great love included even the people who abducted him in a way that he was trying to understand them empathically. This love of even the enemy is a seed for the healing communion and peace that he is trying to bring about in that conflict zone. When a person's focus is larger than themselves, intending to give social support to others, they can be more resilient than if they were only focused in receiving social support.

### **ii). Importance of spirituality and of religion.**

It is a bit in fashion now to talk of being spiritual but not religious. Do we really still need religion? Can religion be of any use in witnessing a universal communion today when in fact it is at the base of most of our conflict today?

I have met religious and priests who are ministering in difficult zones despite there having been wounded and the possibility of being martyred. They are driven by a reality that is beyond themselves and their self-reservation. They have been healed of self-centredness, and so even the fear of real danger of death is no longer controlling them much. But what is it that leads them to this level of healing? It is spirituality that is connectedness to God, and through God, to others, including their enemies. I have seen that these people have learnt and keep repairing this spiritual connectedness through their faith and religious activities like their prayers and liturgy. Good religion therefore should help us become more spiritual, more virtuous, and reach out more to form rather than break the universal communion, even when it is difficult.

**iii). We should aim at being healed healers, in addition to being wounded healers.**

After listening to the stories from the conflict zones, I saw that there are 4 main quadrants of being and of impacting others in our ministry. I have noticed that healed healers are more fruitful in the prophetic witness for the universal communion we are reflecting on.

**Conclusion**

The wounders, who are perpetrators in the conflict zones, need healing and moving towards being healed healers. healed, they will build rather than break universal communion. But they need leadership in that healing path. The religious and priests, at their best, have been witnessing by words and deeds this spirituality of universal communion, beyond warring conflict.

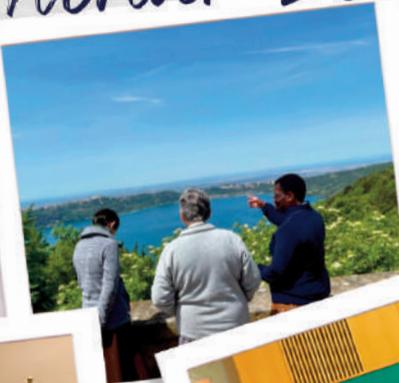
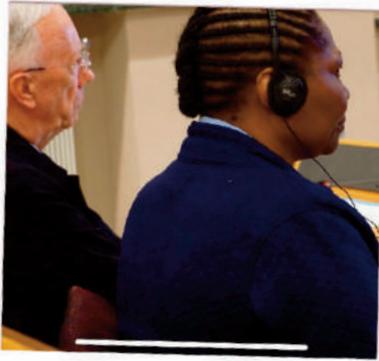
Through its Resilience Programs, ICOF Program has been providing opportunities for its participants to experience this healing communion among people from different cultural and national backgrounds. They live it by giving and receiving from each other Social Support. The shared Social Support enables them to experience healing.

The healing they experience ushers and anchors them into the quadrant of healed healers, beyond just being wounded healers. We believe that the healed healers will feel courageous enough to prophetically and prudently reach out even to the other camp of the current enemy, build bridges, in order to universalise the communion that they witness by word and deeds. And this will lead to the healing of the conflict zones.

<b>Influence on Others</b> <b>Identity</b>	<b>Wounding Others</b>	<b>Healing Others</b>
<b>Healed</b>	<b>1. “Healed” wounder</b> - Projection of one’s woundedness - Wounding seen as healing	<b>2. Healed healer</b> - Easter energy, thriving - Eg. Risen Lord giving peace, joy, forgiveness - <i>Post-Traumatic growth</i>
<b>Wounded</b>	<b>3. Wounded Wounder</b> - Vengeful energy - E.g. cycle of violence / abuse	<b>4. Wounded Healer<sup>1</sup></b> - Good Friday energy - E.g. Wounded Jesus

<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen’s book, *The Wounded Healer*, is a beautiful portrait of the person who heals others thanks to her or his having gone through being wounded. The notion of the wounded healer is one of what Carl Jung termed as “archetypes,” prevalent in many of the healthy religions and cultures. The Greeks even had a mythical character, the Chiron, who was a very good healer because he understood empathically the pain of his patients since he had a wound that will never heal, and, being divine, he would not die, so he was condemned to suffer the wound eternally. The woundedness of the wounded healer is a major resource for his being a healer. Growing into the healed healer will enable this wounded healer to do even better in his healing ministry. They surely have some healing happened, making them well enough to attend to those needing their healing ministry. Healed healers are not denying their pain and suffering, they only allow it to continue being transformed. By acknowledging their being healed, they are acknowledging their woundedness, a state from which they are healing.

# Residential Seminar 2024





# SEDOS

RESIDENTIAL SEMINAR

06 -10 MAY 2024

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