

Living Faith Through Justice
AEFJN 25th Anniversary Seminar
15 November 2013
Rome, Italy

Responding to: “Living Faith Through Justice: Old and New Frontiers”

I wish to express my gratitude to Sister Roxanne Schares, SSND, and the organizers of the AEFJN 25th Anniversary Seminar on the important topic: “Living Faith through Justice” and especially for asking me to be one of the responders to this very challenging topic as specified by the Keynote Speaker Fr. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ Provincial of Eastern Africa “Living Faith Through Justice: Old and New Frontiers”.

When I found the email from AEFJN on the night of Friday, 8 November 2013, coming from the Tenth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in BUSAN, Republic of Korea, I was reminded how we dealt with the very challenging and at the same time hope-filled topic: “God of Life, Lead Us to Justice and Peace, from Wednesday, 30 October to Friday, 8 November 2013. The Assembly opened with a ‘New Day’ for Ecumenical Life. In the midst of the global financial crisis, a shifting religious landscape and continued threat to the environment, *the WCC’s commitment to unity* and its role as *a prophetic voice* remain strong. We said. “The WCC is called to a ‘pilgrimage’ of justice and peace”.

Then, when I had a glance on the text presented by Fr. OROBATOR, SJ, I said to myself, here is a good Jesuit who, wonderfully put in a nutshell some of the highlights of our Plenary sessions, some themes of our ecumenical conversations or business sessions, etc. I felt in harmony and at ease with the wonderful text Fr. ORBATOR has offered for reflection this morning. Given the time allotted to each of us I would like to underscore a few aspects:

1. I totally agree with Fr. OROBATOR when he asserts that “In our day and age, the greatest threat remains to reduce “Faith” and “Justice” to mere theoretical formulation or individualistic predilection, in which case faith would be a matter of what a person chooses and justice an optional extra”. Faith is a gift which needs to be accepted and treasured as the Emeritus Pope Benedict reminds us in his Apostolic Letter of 11 October 2012,: “In our days too faith is a gift to rediscover, to cultivate and to bear witness to”

because the Lord grants each one of us to live the beauty and joy of being Christians.” And as for the notion of ‘justice’ I found the explanation from the Christian theology very enlightening: there are two principal notions of justice: internal justice and external justice. To make it short: internal justice relates to the first and the greatest command, to love the Lord with one’s heart, soul and mind (Mt 22: 37-38). External justice relates to the second command to love one’s neighbor as one self (Mt 22:39). External justice seeks humanizing activity leading to right relationships with one’s self, the community, its social structures, and finally to the environment itself.”¹ What can we really do to restore the poor, the oppressed, the children to right relationships, first with God, with themselves, others and with Mother Earth? It is a long journey that requires me to get off the road I am on and enter the world of the other. This means to be moved by the Spirit, to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. This is to live in solidarity with the marginalized, the poor...

Here are two concrete lived experiences to illustrate the challenges embodied in the topic we are developing. As you know from his *Homilies* on the Gospel of Matthew, St John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople was generous and financially contributed to the constructions of hospitals for the poor. He never dithered when something was about the service to the poor, the body of Christ. He preferred to see his priests using chalices made of wood and having hearts of gold... “Of what use is it to weigh down Christ’s table with golden cups, when he himself is dying of hunger? First, fill him when he is hungry; then use the means you have left to adorn his table” (cf. Daniel G. GROODY. *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice*; p. 59)

I found the history of Gandhi very fascinating; he epitomizes the meaning of “Living faith through Justice”. Allow me to read the following quotation - it is worth doing so: Gandhi devised “*satyagraha*, the revolutionary force of truth he discovered in his own life and in the lives of his people. If he and they were willing to come together, Hindus and Muslims alike, and give their lives for the truth, the bullets, bombs, and jails were powerless against them. General Smuts had seen enough of that truth in South Africa to know Winston Churchill was liable to be frustrated. Churchill could call on the might of the

¹ (According to Daniel G. Groody: This definition is drawn in part from an excellent article by Michael CROSBY, “Justice,” in the *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press 1993), 597, quoted by Daniel G. Groody, p.27-28).

British Empire, but Gandhi could call on a force more powerful. Churchill was trying to stop a fearless force whose capacity to transform the world was, as Gandhi understood, nothing less than the power of God. Gandhi was determined to give his life totally to that power... In his discovery of *satyagraha* lay the seeds of both Indian independence and his own assassination”.²

2. Fr. Orobator wrote: “Ecological justice represents a new way of living the faith. *Ubuntu* calls our attention to the simple truth that our survival as a human race is intimately linked to the survival of the earth. We are because the earth exists and for us to continue to exist, the earth ought to become the object of our special care and concern”. I personally lived a very powerful experience during the Morning Prayer and the Bible Study (Gen 2:5-9, 15-17) at the WCC’s Tenth Assembly in Busan, Republic of Korea. In the morning prayer we proclaimed together: *”Creator God, God of oceans, and God of the land and all that is within it: You created this world with the power of your word. You formed humankind with your own hands, and breathed your own breath into us. You gave us these lands as a gift – a source of our identity and sustenance, you empowered us to be the stewards of what you have made. Loving god, we have failed you and abused the gift you have given us. We have offended you and defiled what you have made. Forgive us for betraying your trust. Forgive us for our greed and arrogance.*

And at the Bible study of that very morning I heard the cries from the Pacific Islanders: the ocean is rising and overwhelming the inhabitants as they see their ancient land slowly but steadfastly disappearing and distancing itself from them. Changes taking place there are compared to earthquakes and affect their lives. I can still hear the anguished cry of the Pastor in our French speaking Group. There were also three women in the group who were very silent. The Pastor called out to our attention in these terms: « Mes Frères et Sœurs mettez-vous à notre place, notre terre est en train de disparaître et bientôt nous avec elle, que faut-il dire aux Français et à tous ceux qui sont venus détruire notre terre avec leur missiles?” (Brothers and Sisters, could you figure out our situation, he was almost shouting at us, our land is disappearing and very soon we will also disappear with it? Put you yourselves in our shoes, what should we say to the French people and other

² (James W. DOUGLASS. GANDHI and the Unspeakable. His Final Experiment with Truth. Orbis Books, 2012; p.26).

who came here with their missiles to destroy us?). Every day we are experiencing the adverse effects of climate change on the whole of creation and especially on vulnerable communities like the ones in the Pacific Islands. How do we address the tragedies associated with climate change? Michel Maxime EGGER in his article: “Repères pour un écospiritualité”³ suggests that we have to complete the external ecology by an internal ecology. We can organize Conferences, international Congress, Laws on CO², politico-economic changes, sustainable development etc...

But, we have to go beyond all these parameters so that we can touch the human heart. The human heart is the locus of the crisis; and after a serious discernment Egger develops the concept of an integral ecology, from which he crafts the concept of “Eco-spirituality”. Eco-spirituality implies the process of personal and collective *metanoia*.

3. I appreciate very much the pertinent reflection about *“the continued existence of structural, cultural, religious and ideological barriers that prevent the participation of women in all walks of life constitutes a glaring manifestation of injustice. I thank Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens who made the historical statement: “Women”, it is either we believe that women are created by a just God or we are devotees of a lesser god.*

The challenge that we face relates to the need for **a radical deconstruction of the base of gender inequality** and the simultaneous reconstruction of a more just arrangement – a task for which personal and Institutional conversion remains a fundamental prerequisite.

I think that the real problem is that we know that we are all created in God’s image and likeness. We are aware of that since we have all read Genesis 1, 27. All theologians know that and have elaborated wonderful theories. The only trouble is that we are aware of that, ***but we do not believe in what we know***. It is up to all of us, including women and men scholars and practitioners from all continents, to work to bring about a conviction that we are ALL created in God’s image and likeness.

I would like to conclude with the following statement from one of the Plenary on: “God of life, lead us to do justice in today’s world: “The prevailing globalized culture seems to accept

³ Michel Maxime EGGER. “Repères pour une écospiritualité”. In Développement & Civilisations. No 406, Septembre 2012, p.2. La Revue du Réseau International pour une Economie humaine. www.lebret.org

and legitimize social, economic and ecological injustice. So much so that human and ecological abuse, exclusion and impoverishment of the vulnerable and the denial of rights and dignity of many and particularly of people with disabilities, women, children and people with HIV and Aids are increasingly seen as inevitable fallouts in a world gripped by the logic of dominion, growth and greed. Injustice has always been a part of human history but the injustice of our generation to the Earth and to our own brothers and sisters does not seem to have parallels.

Amidst this churches need to recognize the moral imperative of confronting injustice as an integral part of “costly discipleship”. Churches are called to make a difference and to be conscience keepers in the wider society and work with people of other faiths and ideologies committed to the cause of justice.

Thank you for your attention.

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