

THE POTENTIAL OF FAITH FOR SOCIAL ACTION

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Since the last war in the 1990s, if not before, after the fall of Yugoslavia and the rise of new states in Southeastern Europe – the following questions still linger among us: What are believers doing in public to promote peace? Where is their engagement visible? Is not today, more than ever, every community desperately in need of what each believer will claim to be the essence of his or her faith: forgiveness and reconciliation? In other words, faith that's lived out, which encourages forgiveness, initiates and advocates reconciliation? Nowadays there are only a few believers in our region who are recognised in our community as religious citizens engaged in building a culture of peace and non-violence. I often see that these individuals are not encouraged, nor are their efforts supported by their religious communities and institutions.

I was motivated to think about the possibilities and the power that believers draw from faith, because I am convinced that we, both as individuals and communities, can do much more in building peace and reconciliation in society than we have done so far. I consider it is the believers who are to take part in “transforming social interaction”, by replacing a culture of violence with a culture of peace, which is the basic determinant of a civil society.

The objectives of my presentation are as follows:

- I want to inform and remind believers, through the example of the Catholic “version” of Christianity, what potential or capital lies in their hands and consequently ENCOURAGE them to engage in social action;
- My presentation is NOT NEUTRAL: I stand for an active involvement of believers in building communities on nonviolent principles. That involvement is one of the ways of living my faith, as the overall title of our conferences sums it up: “By building peace, we glorify God”;
- One of my concerns is to contribute in developing a BELIEVER'S IDENTITY as a PEACEMAKER so that social action for peace, reconciliation and interreligious dialogue becomes an integral part of what it means to be a BELIEVER.
- Finally, I see this presentation as an opportunity to express my disagreement and RESIST the dominant way of religious practice that is often presented as the only acceptable one. It takes a little consideration to recognize how far the passivity of laypeople is from the original message of faith, and also to grasp how the ‘private’ and ‘political’ spheres have been separated with the latter often being considered bad.

Interaction of faith and social action

Perhaps we could turn the matter around and ask the question: What implication does social action have for faith?

I come from a Roman Catholic tradition – or as my late professor of dogmatics Aldo Starić would put it – from a Catholic version of Christian understanding. That Catholic version has undergone its last major modernisation in the second half of the 20th century, at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

That Council is of key importance for our topic today, because it established some crucial guidelines for the Roman Catholic's future relation to the world. The Church has changed its understanding of the world and no more does it refer to it as the enemy, but rather as, in religious terms, a space and time in the history of salvation. Now, the world has become a place of opportunity rather than threat. The word ‘world’, can easily be replaced with ‘society’. The central

text is the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), which opens with the following words: “*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ*”.¹

Moreover, chapter 4 of this document explicitly emphasises the reciprocal influence between the Church and society. The Church has an impact on contemporary society, and society has an understanding of the Church and its mission. And peace is, as prophet Isaiah said: “the fruit of righteousness” (Is 32:17) something that is continuously to be built. Hence, the document summons all Christians “*to do in love what the truth requires, and to join with all true peacemakers in pleading for peace and bringing it about*”². There was even a shy mention of non-violence, which would conceptually be developed in the future, but even back then believers were encouraged to “renounce the use of violence”³ with a strong emphasis placed on one's personal role in social events and undertaking responsibility in the world.

Signs of the times

One of the key terms of the Second Vatican Council, which signaled a change in the Roman Catholic Church's self-understanding as well as its relationship with others, had received a programmatic expression: RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES. Just before the Council, Pope John XXIII introduced this term into Catholic vocabulary. Citing Matt 16:4: he interprets the signs of the times as a “*reason to hope for a better future of the Gospel's cause*”⁴. Here are examples of the signs of the times in the Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*: progressive improvement in the economic and social condition of working men, in the part women play in public life and also in the process of decolonization.⁵

Signs of the times are contemporary events that challenge, provoke and change the society. This time and space in which we live today are a “sign” which is an incentive for Gospel interpretation and action. History, therefore, becomes a place of theological reflection or ‘locus theologicus’⁶. Post-Council theology has a different approach towards this key concept of the Council. It is interesting that not many Croatian theologians have written on this subject.⁷ Today, theologians claim that reading the signs of the times is not only a matter of “theological reflection, but of theological experience of the Church as a community”⁸. Obviously, prerequisites for recognising the signs of the times are openness toward, and interest in, events that shape our reality today. And the reverse is important: the awareness that faith is, as Alen Kristić put it, more than, “private spirituality”⁹, in which one can easily be manipulated by influential churchmen and politicians. If one wants to live their life as a believer, then their faith must be practiced in all areas of their life, including the political and social spheres.

The Magisterium is primarily calling upon their Church members (they say “Catholics and all people of good will...”) to read the signs of the times, whereby they indirectly empower the awareness that every mature individual is able to observe, judge and act accordingly.¹⁰ Here I also refer to the maturity which is affirmed through sacraments (e.g. baptism, confirmation) and a

1 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), opening sentence. See: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

2 GS, V:78

3 Ibid.

4 Nediljko A. Ančić, “*Tumačenje znakova vremena – zaboravljena zadaća Crkve?*” (in engl.: “*Interpretation of signs of time – a forgotten task of Church?*”) in *Crkva u svijetu* 42(2007), No.2. Split: Katolički bogoslovni fakultet Univerziteta u Splitu, 2007., p. 212

5 Ibid., 212. In *Pacem in Terris* 41, available at

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html

6 Ibid, str. 219. According to G. Ruggieri, “*Zeichen der Zeit. Gebrauch und Bedeutung einer christlich-hermeneutischen Chiffre der Geschichte*”, in *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil und die Zeichen der Zeit heute*, pp. 61-70, here 61. Paper presented at the International Symposium on the Catholic faculty in Tübingen, 2005

7 Nediljko A. Ančić, p. 201

8 Ibid., 218. Compare with G. Ruggieri above

9 Alen Kristić, “*Odgovornost za socijalnu pravdu – katolički radnički pokret*”, (in engl. “*Responsibility for social justice – Catholic Worker Movement*”) in *Svjetlo riječi* No. 327, June 2010, p. 45

10 Ančić, 218. According to Ruggieri, there are only two subjects in the Church who can recognise the signs of the time: the Christian as an individual and the community of believers, gathered in a liturgical celebration.

maturity which many believers live out in different areas of their lives. They are expected to be equally mature regarding their faith and to be confident that they themselves can judge and take initiative. That sense of responsibility is a potential for creativity, in the area of social change too. Reforms of the Second Vatican Council were preceded by experience. The experiences collected in almost three decades of preparations for changes left their mark on the Council's documents.

There were communities such as *Communauté de l'Arche de Lanza del Vasto*¹¹ or movements such as *The Catholic Worker*, started by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin¹², which promoted and lived non-violence and took care of the poor. They actually lived out the vision of a community of equals. After the Council, the most famous communities were BASE COMMUNITIES in Latin America. These were gatherings of many needy, common people and illiterate peasants, who built their theology based on their own life experiences. The poor and oppressed members of base communities could easily identify themselves with ANAWIM YAHVE¹³, the little children in the Old Testament, who were God's beloved. They used their own context as a concrete framework for believers in reading both the signs of the times and the Bible.

Liberation theology

Their image of the Bible and their life experiences are like two books, each one interpreting the other. By their social actions, base communities have broken their own silence, and they have provoked resistance to all kinds of structural injustice or structural evil, as some refer to it. In 1968, at the Conference in Medellín, bishops agreed that the Church should take a [preferential option for the poor](#).

LIBERATION THEOLOGY is a newer approach, developed by theologians' critiques of unjust relationships in society and current social conditions. They consider the life of the poor as a theological reality, as the title of Jon Sobrino's most recent book suggests: "No salvation outside the poor"¹⁴. God is the Saviour of the poor, whether they are or are not at fault for their condition. Poor are all those marginalized, invisible and insignificant, those who are "at the verge of death, heavily burdened by life, which makes them poor"¹⁵. Liberation theologians consider the relationship towards the poor as the indicator of Christian practice: how far we have realised our humanity depends on what poor people say about us. The persecution and killing of the priests and bishops in Latin America at the end of the last century (as they themselves stated "not because we were reading the Creed in public, but because we sided with the oppressed"), was a clear sign for Sobrino that the message of Jesus Christ was alive among them. Liberation theology was an offspring of the Second Vatican Council, the result of what Vatican II started once it called for reading the signs of the times.

Was it an unplanned pregnancy? Was the child unwanted?

Up to the present day there are many individual cases in which theologians' actions in the Catholic context are at times sanctioned and at times considered inconvenient, as if their calling for social changes were some kind of a nuisance. Therefore, it is no wonder that a critical and active approach toward social change is not widespread among believers. Well, let me summarize:

There are two sides to the process of reading the signs of the times: being involved in developing a society and peacemaking:

- On one hand, I can live my faith, interact with the world, and pursue a dialogical approach, find new perspectives, and new understanding, which I consider sacred in my life.
- On the other hand, there is a chance for me to be perceived as a nuisance by my community. Being an "unwanted element" may make my life hard at times.

Both aspects are, in my understanding, characteristic indications of faith as such.

11 More on *La Communauté de l'Arche de Lanza del Vasto* at www.arche-non-violence.eu

12 Short overview in Alen Kristić, pp. 45-47

13 See Lk 10:21

14 Luke 6:20: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

Luke 6:24: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort."

15 Jon Sobrino interviewed by Zoran Grozdanov, „*Siromašnih nema u kalendaru*“ (engl. *The poor are not charted*), in *Svjetlo riječi*, No. 328/329, July/August 2010, p. 25. The article is also available at: http://www.svjetlorijeci.ba/pdf/razgovor328_329.pdf

War and reconciliation: signs of (our) times

When Jesus was asked: "Who is my neighbour?" he responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan: a man was beaten, robbed and left half dead along the road; two distinguished Jews were passing by, but avoided the man; eventually a Samaritan took care of him (Luke 10:29-37). So, Jesus answered the question: "Who is my neighbour?" with a story entitled "Whose Neighbour am I?" Furthermore, Jesus has set this story in a politically antagonistic context, since the main character was a member of a group whom the audience considered "the enemy". In fact, at the time of the storytelling, Jews considered Samaritans as heretics. We can be moved to action by at least three principles in the parable:

- a) Be as you would want the other to be: proactive;
- b) Be on the other side: meet the other, because the "opponent" could actually cause your growth;
- c) A sudden unfavourable event becomes an opportunity to act.

Should I choose social engagement as behaviour appropriate to my religious identity, I would be led by the above-mentioned principles. This is especially true for extreme, inauspicious events such as violence, war, etc.

Up to now, in a religious context, I have heard many interpretations of war from a Roman Catholic viewpoint, but rarely did any share the spirit of the Good Samaritan story. In connecting the experience of war with the power of faith, I have often found strength in that faith, which also was a shield, for me and my beloved, my group. But I have frequently heard other interpretations mostly from the pulpit or in religious magazines, and I was surprised how it seemed that they were widely accepted as a typical Catholic viewpoint. In those interpretations, the teaching of the Gospel that one should lay down one's life for friends is applied to a soldier who dies defending his family, his community and his homeland. In that understanding, homeland in war is identified with 'friends' and the dead soldiers with 'martyrs'. I can imagine that for some this interpretation may be helpful, but I strongly doubt that this is an authentic Gospel interpretation.

The wars and exhausting postwar periods often bring devastating consequences. Throughout my peace-building work, I am continuously confronted with the question: Why did war happen to us? People's dissatisfaction with solutions for post-war problems intensifies their feeling of betrayal and their opinion that war is nonsense. It is difficult to accept the fact that the suffering was meaningless, and the fear that it can happen again.

What may be considered a gain from a political standpoint, regarding the country, is in a Christian worldview (and a religious value system) not a factor at all. Personally, I can see the war victims as being like the beaten man in the parable of the Good Samaritan, thrown into the ditch. It may actually add to his suffering, that the question of why it happened to him remains unanswered. But then this man came along, who gave the story a meaning, the Samaritan who saw an opportunity for change - an opportunity to be merciful to this hurting stranger.

This is my understanding of the war and post-war experiences in our region, full of frustrations and disappointment: it is an opportunity for believers to "try out" anew some crucial assumptions of faith. Those crucial assumptions would be forgiveness and reconciliation. Should I not believe that it is possible to forgive and build reconciled relationships, in spite of all that happened, I would not be able to do peacemaking in the current political context which infuriates me, makes me angry and depressed. The never-ending political processes do not raise my hopes high.

Without believing that forgiveness and reconciliation constitute the core of the Gospel message, I could not make sense of my recent past nor of my future. I am not making war justifiable, I am just seeking to reverse the violence and injustices of war into transformed social relations. As in the story of the Good Samaritan, the wretchedness of the unfortunate man was an "opportunity" for someone's kindness that is much greater than those who passed him by could ever have imagined. This is what is central to the potential of faith: distress and misfortune are opportunities for creating a new and more perfect reality; they are an opportunity of a sudden or unexpected salvation.

Interreligious is religious

*“To anybody who claims that we are naive, I respond that our friendship is much more than just an opinion, it is a fact. What drives me to dialogue with my Muslim friends is not tolerance, but admiration for their faith, which helps me become more of what I actually am.”*¹⁶ These are words of a Lyon bishop spoken at the promotion of the movie *Des hommes et des Dieux* (Of Gods and Men, September 2010) which shows the life of Trappist monks in a Muslim context, in a time of warfare. In the quote, the following words are central: FACT and ADMIRATION.

- Fact:

That we live together in this region makes us a fact to each other. Now, how we will regard this fact in our lives is **another** question. Will we admire the other, fear him, or... - we can have all kinds of approaches. And the same applies to how we approach the role of spirituality in our lives and interpreting the facts in our lives.

As a believer, I try to interpret facts through theology. In other words, God has something to tell me through this fact and it is my responsibility to choose how to react to given facts. The question remains: What are we to each other? How can we individually be enriched by living with others who are different?

If my answer is dialogue and coexistence, then I am able to see new capacities and new expanses of my own perception of faith. Instead of carrying the religious tradition as a burden from the past, the new experience and understanding of another religion can be my inspiration for new options.

Therefore, interreligious dialogue is an expression of one's own religious faith from at least two aspects: from the aspect of the message or a new understanding of the content of the faith and from the aspect of inspiration or innovation, caused by joining the content of faith with coexistence among unlike people.

In our context inspiration is interwoven with boldness. We need to be bold in order to affirm the interreligious models of coexistence in the contemporary context which is burdened by tension or even animosity that are part of the historical heritage left over from the recent war in the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

- Admiration:

Whoever is privileged to experience the faith, the religiosity of the other, should be able to sense how faith is, poetically speaking, built out of the same material. It evokes in a believer, regardless of their religion, good sentiments towards the other - the admiration of which the bishop from Lyon spoke.

He explains that admiration for him means staying true to himself, yet through the very process of changing. One can admire when one ceases to perceive one's own particular mode of existence as the only one possible. When people admire each other, it causes them to change the point from which they see reality. In my vocabulary, identity refers to something stable, what others usually recognise me by and what I consider peculiar about myself. But for this firmness not to become rigid, it needs to be cultivated. I am inspired by the notion: “The one who is true to himself is the one who is able to change.” This dynamic, the exchange and reciprocity between invariability, stability and personal change, makes faith alive and a power for action in the society in which others are a FACT. Since we did not create the differences we have no right to eliminate them. This PERSONAL CHANGE cannot be avoided on the PATH of PEACE. In this marvellous process of giving up your expectations and searching for meaning, you end up discovering more about yourself which results in a change that leads you closer to yourself. It is a wonder that in the very process of giving up of one's own expectations while searching for meaning, one actually comes nearer to oneself.

¹⁶ Whole interview available at:

http://www.lavie.fr/hebdo/2010/3392/michael-lonsdale-c-est-mon-coeur-qui-a-parle-01-09-2010-9095_155.php