

PREFACE

The sixtieth anniversary of the death of Mahatma Gandhi and the fortieth anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King in 2008 provided the opportunity for a wide audience to remember the legacy they left to mankind. But if we observe the mechanisms governing today's society, the evidence is clear: their teaching and practice of non-violence continues to fascinate, but has not become the established point of reference from which to address the social and political problems of the twenty-first century.

How is it within the churches? If we look at the ecumenical dialogue on peace and justice, we see that it has been characterized for nearly a decade by the increasingly frequent adoption of the expression: "the preferred option of non-violence." For some, this wording represents a step forward: it expresses the desire to see churches constructively engaged in the service of peace and the elimination of violence and war. It is one aspect of the definition of a "just peace", another concept used increasingly to express the wish to declare the theory of "just war" obsolete. Some celebrate this as a convergence of positions on the question of pacifism. Others reject the notion of "preferred option" as being too ambiguous: if non-violence is only considered as an option – even a preferred one – the door is still left open to the use of violence as an option of "last resort" when non-violent means have proved "ineffective". Thus, the possibility is held in reserve to justify the use of military force in extreme cases and the criteria used to define these cases are strongly reminiscent of those used in the theory of just war ... The vocabulary may have changed, but the terms of the debate have remained the same. The discussion – inside and outside the churches – on the "responsibility to protect" populations from genocide revolves around this tension.

The presentation of Maria Biedrawa, "Discipleship, Community and Nonviolence", brings valuable, albeit subtle insight to this debate. Indeed, it focuses on non-violence not as an

option or a principle – nor even an absolute preference – but as a vocation and lifestyle for believers. She demonstrates convincingly that non-violence is the very expression of discipleship, of walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ: an engaged commitment in the midst of societal conflict that is inseparably linked to a supportive community.

Based on Scripture and on her own experiences alongside non-violent Christian movements, especially in Africa, Maria Biedrawa invites us to grasp the full extent of committed faith, at once deeply spiritual and resolutely political. Her purpose extends beyond academic discussion and lays the foundation for practiced non-violence here and now. This non-violence is based on a comprehensive vision of partnership with victims of violence and its relevance is not measured in the conventional terms of effectiveness.

Presented at the diamond jubilee celebration of the European network Church and Peace at Bienenberg on 13 June 2009, this presentation was greeted warmly by the delegates made up of Christians from across Europe and pledged to live out daily the personal, community, social and political life of a disciple of the nonviolent Jesus. Church and Peace is pleased to publish it and make it available to a wider audience and so to make a contribution to dialogue within the framework of the "Decade to Overcome Violence" of the World Council of Churches and the "International Decade for the Promotion of a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World" of the UN, both of which end in 2010.

Marie-Noëlle von der Recke



**DISCIPLESHIP,
COMMUNITY
AND NONVIOLENCE**

THEOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL REFLECTION

MARIA BIEDRAWA

INTRODUCTION

Non-violence is something I encountered only late in life. Yet I discovered that I was familiar with the practice: by chance I had spent one of the three weeks of the strike staged by Solidarnoz in September 1980 with 200 people in a Polish barn. I was also very familiar with Bible smuggling and supporting human rights activists in the Warsaw Pact countries, not with the great and famous, but with young people of my own age. So I was able to learn through people, and not through books, what dictatorship is like, how people opposed it and how they operated within it. But above all, they were a constant, living question to my conscience: Maria, what are

you doing with and making of your freedom? Getting to know non-violence as a concept and method then meant a turning point in my life, when I found words for what I was seeking and hoping, above all for and with oppressed, dispossessed people. I

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I discovered an undreamed source of strength, which I owe to the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR), of which I have been a member since 2000.

IFOR, at least in France, is a movement, not a community. My experience and reflection about community comes from the experience of living in the Arche Community (founded by Jean Vanier), which has nourished me in a human, intellectual and spiritual sense for 22 years now.

But now to our topic: I would like to start from discipleship and community, and then talk about non-violence and how it brings us as individuals and communities into relationship with the world around us. Active non-violence is the answer that we share with, and wish to offer, to the world.

These three themes (discipleship, community and non-violence) are not separate from one another, they are interrelated. They are even mutually interdependent. There are two reasons for that: (a) anthropology, which tells us what makes human beings human, and (b) the nature of violence itself.

a. The anthropological basis:

– As individuals, distinct from one another and yet similar, we are inhabited by an inalienable human dignity, which goes hand in hand with freedom of conscience (Art. 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). This makes us unique persons, individuals capable of transcendence. The



individual decision to follow Christ has its place here.

– We do not place ourselves in this life. We are created by others and cannot live without them. If we have no relationships we die. “A person only

becomes a self through encountering the other,” said Martin Buber. We need relationships, we need community, participation, belonging.

It is part of our being that we reflect on and are on the lookout for meaning and values. We are guided to what we have recognised to be valuable and meaningful for ourselves and thus help to shape the world. All that is enabled by language.

b. The nature of violence itself:

Violence destroys just these key areas:

- individuals, their human dignity, their conscience, their freedom, their uniqueness and, lastly, their lives (or the environment that sustains them)
- individuals from the standpoint of transcendence: through a false image of God or a prohibition of God

- interpersonal and social relations
- and, finally, even speech - not just in the oppression of dissidents, but because violence is itself an experience of suffering, and suffering cannot be expressed in words at the moment it is experienced; it is often only long after the event that it can be articulated, if this ever happens at all.

Violence destroys people where they are truly human, but also most vulnerable. Non-violence should be an instrument and a force for the sustainable shaping of society, and so it has to integrate these key areas and combine them in a coherent way. They are not optional but essential elements of our lives as humans.

Sometimes we may ignore a component of humanity or not allow its full scope because that contradicts our individualistic world-view or perhaps because we ourselves are victims or strugglers in one of these fields. In so doing, we deprive non-violence of its power, undermine the agent and, in the worst case, reduce non-violence to an ideology.

The best example we as Christians have is the life of Jesus himself, which contains it all: the uniqueness of his being, his inner and outer freedom, his intimate relationship with God, his non-violent action, his work to enhance relationships and the community into which he bonded himself. It is like the image of communicating vessels. Their harmony and their inner unity result in development and fulfilment.

I. LIVING AS FOLLOWERS OF THE NON-VIOLENT JESUS

The last word uttered by a person before they are separated from us by death is often symbolic of their life and shows the way forward for their survivors. It is like a legacy that summarizes all the foregoing, and to which nothing can be added. So it is also with the last words addressed to someone by Jesus, as recorded in the New Testament. He says to Peter, and to us, “Follow me!”¹

The special thing about these last words is that they also resonate with the first words that God speaks about human beings. The significance in the original Greek goes far deeper than our translation. It means: “Become like me, be like me.” These words remind us that we have been made in the image



and likeness of God – and Jesus leaves the testament of his yearning in the heart of Peter and each and every one of us: “Be like me”; “Be happy, be blessed” ; “Go

through death like me and allow yourself to be given a new, indestructible life”; “Live that which is not of God like a child of God;”² “Console with the consolation with which you were consoled,”³ and in the power of the Spirit, in the power of

faith, perform works that I have performed, even greater ones than I, for I am going to the father⁴, works that renew the face of the earth⁵. We are given that as a gift, a promise and a mandate.

We are thus thrown back onto the story of creation. How can the first two pages of scripture serve as a guide to “becoming like”, in order to bring this gift and task to full fruition?

Here are some brief insights that stem from the creation story of Genesis 1. These aspects also become visible in the life of Jesus, who is the firstborn of all creation and the image of the invisible God.⁶

1. Speaking life-giving words

God’s Word gives life. Do my words give life or do they drive people away from their standpoint, from what they hold onto, and thus cause their downfall? We all know that words can cause lasting injury and even death. We also know, however, that the Word of life is “very near to [us], in [our] mouth and in [our] heart”⁷ and God himself has entrusted “the word of reconciliation to us”.⁸

2. Speaking words that name and thus separate

Four times there is talk of separation at the beginning, and it is about naming things. God separates light from darkness, the day from the night, heaven from earth, and land from water. All of them have their own character and place. All things work together in their diversity. Do we dare to speak the words that call things by name and show them their place? It is the basis of our commitment to discern truth from lies, right from wrong, exploitation from development, slavery from free service, in other words to separate and so to be prophets in the world, who first of all describe the situation as it is. “Empathetic listening” is thus not always enough and must not serve as cover when we ought to speak up.

I once read an interesting interpretation by a Jewish author on the murder of Abel. Why did Abel keep quiet, why do we all keep silent in this story, in face of Cain's anger? Why was God the only one left to speak to him? The author concluded: there is a commitment to the word, a commitment to stand upright before the other and appeal to his or her conscience. If "sin is lurking at the door" of Cain⁹, why is no one's wisdom seated at his door as well?¹⁰

That is our task: as a non-violent movement to be there where violence is about to break out, with words that name it and do not allow any confusing of blind fury and justice. When the prologue of John's Gospel states "All things came into being through [the Word] and without [the Word] not one thing came into being"¹¹, then it expresses something about God, but also describes a human reality: "Thou" is the human word that creates life, the beginning, bringing light and order into chaos. That is a ministry of prophecy for the world.

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3. Speaking the word of blessing

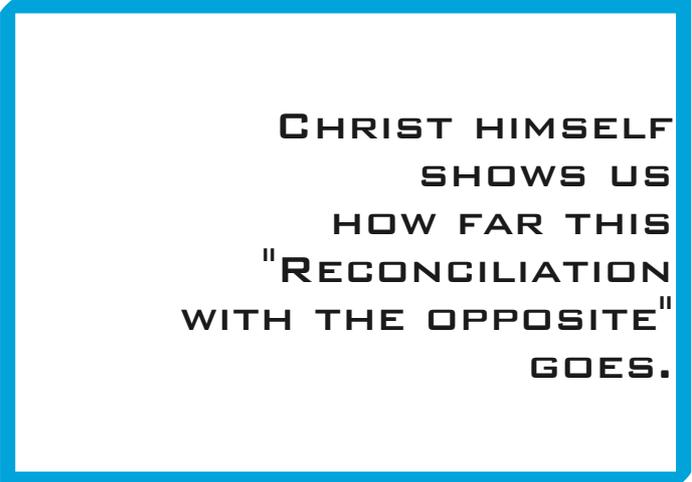
Do my words recognise the life in me, around me, and God as its creator? It bubbles out of the prayer of blessing, as gratitude for a friend who is near to us in a crucial hour. It is even delightful if we think of Jesus blessing the children. But following the non-violent Jesus means more: this blessing leads us into the heart of loving our enemy and is then particularly difficult when the enemy is our neighbour: "Bless those that persecute you, do not curse them!"¹² "Why? Not only because, in so doing, we stop mirroring and imitating that which is evil and thus we disempower it. Denial alone is

not enough. It is about allowing new things to arise. We do not need to invent the new. That is God's work through us, with us and in us. Our share is in anchoring the others and ourselves in the image of God and thereby, although often pretty helplessly, promising to another person: we are part of one another. We are in the covenant that God has concluded with us and that binds us personally. We did not seek one another out but together we can be whole. C.G. Jung would probably have spoken of "reconciliation with the opposite". Christ himself shows us how far this "reconciliation with the opposite" goes. It embraces all the opposites that crisscross the world and crucify people. In this situation Jesus did not withdraw the blessing but gave it the name of love of the enemy, and forgiveness.

A small example from Brazzaville in March 1977: the murdering of the very popular, peace-making Cardinal Emile Biayenda was to provoke a campaign of vengeance among the Catholic population and in his tribe, thus pouring oil on the flames of ethnic conflicts.

Shortly before his death he left a message to his compatriots, a message of peace, a kind of last will and testament, and a summary of his mission among us in the spirit of the gospel: "We ask all brothers in faith, in the North, Centre and South, to keep the peace, fraternity and trust in God, the father of all races and tribes. Not a single uncontrolled act is to shake the climate of peace for which we all yearn."

The church turned the request for avoiding "uncontrolled acts" into a call for positive action. It urged all the faithful not only to refrain from taking revenge but to simply say hello to all their neighbours. That was all. A member of IFOR in the Congo who had done this himself admitted that that was the most difficult greeting in his life. But the seed took root. The



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war has not broken out again. The peace, however fragile, has held.

4. Not putting anything created in place of God

Possessions; power; success; an idea; raising a person to become an idol or demon, including ourselves. Here I often think of a phrase of Erich Fromm: “Those whose hope is weak settle for comfort or violence.”¹³ The Iraq war, for example, showed us how far we are willing to use massive force to keep this “god” of crude oil, that is the basis of our prosperity.

And others who have lost hope in human dignity cannot be kept from destroying people when they stand in the way of their ideas, their power etc. In this



context, the second temptation of Jesus to seek and abuse earthly power is probably also our own, above all because non-violence has to face up to abuse of power and is itself a form of power.

5. Different and of equal value as human beings

There are countless situations in which the mark of God’s love in others, their likeness with God, is distorted: torture, abuse, euthanasia; racism, xenophobia; structural injustice and violence underlying the North-South divide,

dehumanising situations of exploitation; or any type of possessive relations etc. Thomas Merton tells us: “To bear in mind that each person is a bearer of God’s image, no matter how hidden it may be” – and, I would add, no matter how distorted – “is the beginning of peacemaking.”¹⁴

6. The consistent matching of word and deed

God himself gives us here the keys to building confidence or, after a loss of confidence, rebuilding it. The phrase “I don’t trust you any more” rapidly becomes an all-embracing judgement or a kind of myth, blocking any development from the start. Thus this repeated phrase (in Genesis 1) “And God said ... and it was so” is very important. Saying what we do, and doing what we say, gives trust. That is also part of the relationship that is in our hand, even if we sometimes feel a justified need

for protection in some situations. We thus remain responsible agents – and according to

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Jesus “blessed”, i.e. people from whom joy springs: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!”¹⁵ Blessed in the Hebrew meaning of the word: “get moving”.¹⁶

All this is about two things: contributing as “fellow workers with God”¹⁷ to the ongoing creation story and ourselves being in the active process of becoming “in Christ a new creation”¹⁸, as it were in a kind of “learning by doing”. Daily life itself prevents euphoria, as we “know that the whole creation” – our world – “has been groaning in labour pains”. (...) “But we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly while we wait (...) for the redemption of our bodies” – as the beloved children of God. “The Spirit helps us in our weakness.”¹⁹

Jesus himself trod this path into the labour pains of the world, into the depths of humanity, into the epicentres of power, but he did not do so alone. John's gospel repeats on

almost every page that he is one with the Father. According to Luke, "the spirit of the Lord rests upon him".²⁰ He is the human face of the triune God, the God who is already in community.



On my first trip to Africa that was what impressed me most. It was a

quite trivial event – I think that I just wanted to carry my suitcase by myself. A member of the group, with whom I had spent seven weeks, and who was certainly no theologian or churchy person said dryly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world: "Your God is called community and now we will carry this suitcase together." This phrase has electrified me, a dyed-in-the-wool European individualist, to this day. One can only reply "on earth as it is in heaven".

In order – like Jesus, in the name of the father and his spirit – to go into the labour pains of the world, the epicentres of violence and the depths of humanity, we need brothers and sisters, that is, community. That is what it is all about: wherever violence has broken relationships, they are to be knit up again, enabling community. And we can best do that by being recreated here by the triune God, taking on the image of God of the community and being shaped by God to create community. There is no other antidote to violence.

II. THE ACTIVE COMMUNITY

1. The community as agent

First, a quite pragmatic point: the tasks that we set ourselves go far beyond what an individual can achieve. Acting as a community offers the opportunity to take lasting action, founded on collective intelligence and wisdom, and to guarantee this through complementary gifts and abilities of all its members. The individual places him or herself in the service of a mandate undertaken by the community.

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That also corresponds to the human need for involvement: it encourages us and allows us to grow; a community sends us out, it entrusts us with something, has confidence in us; together we can prepare for actions and be accompanied; we can glean and reprocess experiences.

But community also means encountering our own and others' limits; long-drawn-out processes of decision-making; conflicts of authority, different interests and sometimes power issues; projects that constantly change as we work on them and slip out of our hands; disappointment, conflict, loss of orientation, confrontation with the incomprehensible otherness of the other; the clash of "I" and "thou", (or "you" and "me"), of autonomy and mutual dependence; the need for

security and the need for change; the discernment of dream and reality, the reality principle and the principle of hope.

Being in community is not an easy ride for those actively contributing to it. It calls for clear guidelines, transparent decision-making

processes and fields of action, and explicit conditions allowing individuals their place in the structure, so that they are not instrumentalised in achieving common goals.

Explicit because any-

thing not explicit, not articulated, will sooner or later become a source of violence, and all instrumentalisation, be it for the noblest cause, is a form of violence. Only when the individual develops, will the common project unfold in all its wealth. But the opposite is also true: only those who make their contribution, and sometimes encounter their limits, will be able to realise their true selves, i.e. grow in contact with reality – not the dream – and become adult.

However, we know only too well that the actual struggle, the real challenge, often lies less in the projects themselves than in acting as a community and preserving unity. That brings us to the next point.



2. Community as a sign

Sooner or later we find out that, individually and together, we only “have this treasure in clay jars”²¹; that we “bear one another’s burdens”²² and that roles are interchangeable; that we have to withstand disappointment, that we wanted to be a just, loving community that knows how to handle conflict – but, lo and behold, we have to learn to accept the community with its injustice and lovelessness, with its inability to work through conflicts, willing to accept its limits and patiently transform them, and that after a while, where it was a “community for me”, the time comes in which I have to wrestle my way through to a new affirmation, “me for the community”. All that, without exception, can be a place of inner growth for the community, the place that inexorably leads us more deeply into incarnation and the Easter kerygma (proclamation).

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Then the community, independently of its action, will itself send a signal, which as such has a plain and simple effect. The “how and why” does not lie in our hands. We let the events and relations happen to us. They change us and we allow ourselves to be changed by them. That can become a sign of hope for others and give bystanders courage or comfort and new trust.

We should thus never be ashamed of the trials and shortcomings to which life in community exposes us. God himself knows when and how this inner struggle becomes a sign and we say, looking back, in the words of the Resurrected One, who, unrecognised, accompanied the disciples on the walk to Emmaus, “was that not meant to be? ...”²³, “Didn’t we have to go through that in order to gain a new understanding, a more veritable insight? In order to be signs of hope for one another? In order to be able to read the signs of the times, to understand ‘the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties’²⁴ of the people entrusted to us, from within, and to adapt and fine-tune our actions?”

An example from Côte d’Ivoire: a community of Catholic sisters was strongly shaken by the ethnic tensions connected to the civil war. A third of them came from Côte d’Ivoire, a third from Burkina Faso and a third from France. The whole “cocktail of war” was held together in a microcosm. And it surpassed the limits of what was humanly possible. The atmosphere was cold, the conversation difficult or stalled. Something had to happen. This community then started to seek a path of reconciliation. For 10 days it withdrew and struggled for words to express what it had gone through and suffered. With courage and a humility that commands respect they made a new beginning.

III. NONVIOLENCE AS A MISSION

The change of heart only took place in this community because individual members loyally followed Jesus through all incomprehension and kept up a very intensive prayer life (that gave the Holy Spirit a ‘landing permit’).

What is truly new about that? This community took action before, as well. It was no doubt a sign and a signal, in its own way. Otherwise it would not have attracted new members and those that were already there would probably have run away.

What was truly new was this unplanned Pentecostal experience, the work of the Holy Spirit and being sent out by it. The congregation recognised the signs of the times and took the responsibility for this new mission to make reconciliation and peace very consciously, both at the regional level in West Africa and at the level of the international leadership of the religious order.

That means a full programme. In summer, some of the sisters are to be trained in active non-violence, giving another group the opportunity to enjoy personal accompaniment and capacity building. A third group will work with other experienced Africans on a training manual on ethnic reconciliation work, that we hope to present to the Africa Synod in Rome in October 2009. In addition, a sister who is already well prepared for this role will be seconded for specific operations (e.g. training young people in Togo to become mediators as a way of working through war traumas).

Only a year ago, no one could really have imagined the future in this heavily shaken community. Who would have dared to dream that precisely this could become the basis for a new mission, indeed a refounding of the community?

Let us now link this example with our starting point, what Jesus said to Peter: “Follow me”, “Become like me”. The above-mentioned community reached its new mission by roundabout means, and that was also the case for Peter. Jesus’ phrase “Follow me!” is preceded by three conversations that make us sit up and listen.

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First of all, after the last supper, Jesus tells Peter that he will deny him. We learn that Peter's faith must have been on the point of extinction. What preserves him from that is purely and solely Jesus's praying for him²⁵. After that, when Jesus is taken captive, Peter is seized²⁶ with panic and cuts off the ear of a quite ordinary servant, who was in any case helpless. Jesus heals him and comments to Peter: "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."²⁷

Nevertheless, only a few days later Jesus does not hesitate to ask Peter the question that makes us all most vulnerable: "Do you love me?"²⁸ What if he - once again - denies himself and Jesus?



We are here witness to a total transformation of Peter, which is very moving. His almost extinct faith, a flame that has been reduced almost to ashes, suddenly flares up: it is love. If that is not like the rolling-away of a stone, a resurrection in the midst of this life ... Now Peter becomes capable of strengthening his brothers and sisters²⁹, the lambs and sheep, of feeding Jesus' flock.

God himself asks this question to humankind, some of whose representatives had decisively rejected this love only shortly before. He asks us today, do you love me? What if we say yes? What if we too are supposed to strengthen our brothers and sisters who die according to the logic of the sword? Can we

do that? As in his prayer for Peter, Jesus has gone before him and also before us. He is the one who symbolically prepared the fire by the shores of the lake. Where Jesus is, love is always there already. We sometimes only need some personal coaching to recognise the connections and the humility to stand up for what we in truth are: people made in the image of God to love, and set free to love. And our weak knees or sometimes trembling voice is no obstacle to this.

From this there follow a number of conclusions regarding the way in which we should live out the mission.

First, it means not underestimating our own readiness to use force and accepting it, not in order to fatalistically flip out, but to gradually subject it to a work of healing and help ourselves to do so. It means recognising in the denial of another, the partial denial of my own shadow, the inability to hear that I myself am vulnerable or fragile, and instead of chopping off the other's ear, opening up my own ear. Let us come into the presence of God with our cries and laments, with all that enslaves us. God is the First Hearer and listener, even if God uses the ear of a brother or sister. God seals this listening in a covenant with us.

Jesus heals the deaf and also poor Malchus, injured by impulsive Peter, by a touch. In the creation story of Genesis 2 the human being is formed with God's own hands from the "dust of the ground", i.e. through a direct touch, and receives the breath of life, as though a word would not suffice. God's fingerprint and breath – God's image – remain so to speak engraved in the human body and the body of humankind.

So it is that the path of non-violence is outlined by the two senses: hearing and touching, that does not lead to separation by the sword but to the covenant, to a deep, tender, creative community. Only someone who has listened long enough, who has overcome their anxiety about touching wounds, will find inspiring words and be able to speak credibly of non-violence.

Here we cross a threshold and are called upon to go into the suffered or practised violence of others. When Jesus heals people it is striking that we almost always find a variation of the question “What do you want me to do for you?”³⁰.

However, when Jesus stands before violence, he acts with full confidence, he stops the spiral of violence without waiting for anyone’s agreement and, indeed, heals its causes at the same time, as for example in the following cases, in which it is a matter of structural violence, not just personal violence.

– when healing the man with an unclean spirit in the country of the Gerasenes³¹, where Jesus even acts against the request of the man who was doing himself harm, be-

cause he refuses to be intimidated by a person in bondage to an external power;

– in the previously discussed situation where Peter draws his sword, and Jesus simply heals Malchus’ ear;

– with the adulterous woman who is about to be stoned³² or

– with the code of conduct of the Sermon on the Mount in the cases of oppression³³ (cheek – coat – mile), where Jesus does not preach false humility and subordination but self-confident action, that makes the other person aware of their wrongdoing.

In all these cases, it is not just a matter of personal but also of systemic violence.

The message for us is clear: not to watch while violence happens, not to wait for the applause of the authorities, not even to wait for an elaborate description of events from the

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victim, but to act (or at least prepare for action), and do all that so that victims and perpetrators can shoulder their share of responsibility and become healed.

This now brings us to a sensitive point: as non-violent movements and communities, working in direct contact with a rapidly and radically changing world. The trend is away from ideology and mass movements and towards small, manageable groups, which break with anonymity, where the contribution of individuals counts more than the programme requirement, where the network replaces the mass movement,

because it allows for unity in diversity. Young people do get involved in this sort of context.



We no longer live in a society characterised by the concept of systematic injustice and the demand for justice, but in one hinging on the

personal experience of suffering.³⁴ It is worked through more psychologically than in political, collective actions. Politicians know how to appeal to psychology, when we [in France] witness presidents attending the funeral of unknown fishermen who have drowned or suddenly getting on a commuter train at the other end of the country because a conductor was attacked on this line the day before. It is clear that they are not really thinking of either the conductor or the fishermen.

And what about us? Do we know how to handle this psychological approach? For many of those who were

involved in the student movement around 1968, taking an individual approach is a scandal and the beginning of the end! However, psychology, as a way to be a person and an individual, is also the “luxury of democracy”, according to Boris Cyrulnik.³⁵

All that does not call into question the need for non-violent methods or all the valuable experience that has been gained in using them. We

must continue to remind people of structural abuses and use such methods to put them to rights. However, for the sake of clarity we must pick people up where they are even if that sometimes takes the wind out of

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our sails and confronts us with new questions. The charismatic non-violent figures have probably always understood that. For the sake of the world and our mission we must risk this direct contact with the people of our age and be able to answer their questions, not our own!

We must not force this contact into a success-failure pattern. It is about the value of non-violence as an expression of love, the very being of God. Thomas Merton reminds us: "The peace which Christ brings is not a thing, or a practice, or a technique: it is God Himself, in us. It is the Holy Spirit."³⁶ It is about our participation in the cross and resurrection. Only thus will we become “ambassadors of Christ”³⁷ entrusted with the message of reconciliation.

That is never a closed process. It takes place in God’s today, in a life in which contemplation and action merge into a unity: contemplating God, looking at God’s action in the

world and in our hearts, and then going and doing likewise, doing what we have seen. John promises us “when he is revealed we will be like him, for we will see him as he is”.³⁸ We will then experience the truth of the words of the Psalm in our own case: “You love righteousness and hate wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness.”³⁹ This joy is God’s invitation to share the 7th day of creation with him, the Shabbat shalom, the day in which each deed merges into peace.

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We are not yet there, we are still on the way. Pausing for breath, as at this conference, is all the more important, and helps to “guide our feet into the way of peace”. From this inner gift of peace we can make peace wherever people “sit in darkness and in the shadow of death”.⁴⁰ The blessing of the peacemakers starts from being made in the image of God: “You will be called the sons and daughters of God⁴¹, whose likeness with the father of peace is literally written in their faces.

AN EXAMPLE, TO CONCLUDE

I have selected a group⁴² from IFOR that I have known since 2003 and from whom I have learned a great deal. They live in Lubumbashi, which, with its over one million inhabitants, is the second largest city in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the far Southeast of the country. It is the capital of the incredibly mineral-rich Katanga Province. And still the region is bitterly poor, due to its wealth.

- About 5 million people have been killed so far in the wars. Millions of others have become internally displaced (IDPs) or refugees.
- Since the decline of mining, there has been mass unemployment. In the Democratic Republic of Congo 5% of the population of working age have a permanent job in a small or medium-sized business. But that does not mean a secure livelihood. In the Civil Service, in mining, in the army there is sometimes up to 18 months delay in payment of salaries. Teachers earned \$20 a year in 2003, as much as the monthly rent for a modest home (without electricity and water) and since 2007 they have earned \$40.
- 80% of children no longer go to school because they cannot afford the school fees.
- Since 2003 the province has spent between 0.5 and 2 % on health and schools.
- Life expectancy is around 45 years of age (compared with the African average of 51).
- Some mines have now been taken over by foreign companies (India, Pakistan, China). Exploitation happily continues as during colonial times, without complying with any ecological standards (ground water is systematically poisoned and will soon only be “potable death”), without any safety precautions at all for labourers. Street children are hired as day labourers, and get lunch instead of wages. At night they sleep under the bushes outside the factory, so as to be the first in next day. Those who denounce these abuses soon suffer the effects of corruption and human rights violations.

The IFOR group came together after a visit by Jean Goss 20 years ago and has been active ever since. Hildegard Goss-Mayr and the French MIR (IFOR), and recently also the MIR in neighbouring Congo, 2000 km and more away, keep up the contact to this distant city and the GANVE. The group has done a lot over the last 20 years. Here are two examples, to give you an idea of the atmosphere. We should not just remember the anecdotal side of such actions, however impressive they may be, but perceive their deeper meaning for our topic:

It was, for example, generally known that the examination questions for the school leaving certificate were available at a price. That was just one aspect of the corruption, but perhaps the most accessible for a start. So the group scraped up all the cash it could to raise the necessary sum for the examination in physics. It found a courageous pastor who one Sunday declared from the pulpit that today the examination would be available not just for the rich but also for the poor, and that all those interested should come to the church the next day with paper and pen. Then he read out the questions from the pulpit. The news immediately spread, even to Kinshasa, the capital. The state authorities acted as though they were terribly shocked; the examination was cancelled all over the country and postponed until autumn. The actual result of the action, however, was that people were able to talk openly about corruption for the first time. That marked the launch of an anti-corruption campaign and with it the first open criticism of Mobutu's dictatorial regime.

Even more complicated and dangerous was the action with respect to the famine that prevailed as a result of the lack of the rainy period and its instrumentalisation by politicians. This was an example of acting as a community and of community as a sign. It was still at the time of Mobutu. He wanted to use the situation to split the two big ethnic groups in the population. The town was full of refugees and the situation was explosive. GANVE is made up of members of both ethnic groups. It was not easy for them

either. Relatives forced mixed couples to divorce, parishes and groups split up. The 12–15 members wrestled with a decision. It was not about ethnicity, it was about hunger and instrumentalisation by the dictatorial regime.

So they went from religious order to religious order, from church to church and convinced the leaders of their proposal: making their land available so that people could plant something themselves.

The churches cooperated. However, the conditions were such that GANVE took responsibility for

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distributing the plots. It did so in such a way that the ethnic groups were alternated from one plot to another. That way people got to know each other and their distrust waned. The rains came and the famine receded. These fields still cover every free piece of land in the town and are called “peace fields”.

The next step was then to get the mayor to release the river banks for planting rice. But he had orders from above not to do so. A few courageous supporters of GANVE – about 100 people – decided to march from the city council to the river and, against the orders of the mayor, to start tilling the fields as an act of civil disobedience. Because, they said, the river did not belong to him but to the people, and they did not need to obey unjust orders. Crowds of people stood by the roads waiting to see what would happen next. Before long they were surrounded by armed soldiers. They were prepared for this situation. The soldiers were too. One of the GANVE women was on the outside of the group and found herself confronting a soldier with the barrel of a gun on her chest. The soldier said to her: “Don’t be afraid, we are hungry too. You are doing the right thing! We will accompany you to the

river now.” And the planting began with an escort, so to speak. Thanks to this action the city has survived to this day. There was no civil war.

This group has thus gained a lot of experience. But the demands of the last few years, particularly trying to save the drinking water supply, brought a lot of hostility and strain. In a campaign to raise public awareness they called for the relocation of the company that was built on the city’s greenbelt and groundwater providing the drinking water supply, and that should never have received planning permission. The consequence was the loss of drinking water (a human right!) and serious diseases breaking out in the population. The judges were bribed and the members of the group were sentenced to pay unaffordable fines. They went to prison for a time and the laboriously constructed representation of civil society was undermined and collapsed. They had to suffer much disappointment. There came a point where they just could not continue.

"DON'T BE AFRAID, WE ARE HUNGRY TOO. YOU ARE DOING THE RIGHT THING!"

We from MIR France wanted to support them in this situation, or at least, show our solidarity. I was thus able to spend two weeks with them in summer 2008. We spent the first four days in retreat in order to take time out. Everyone was preparing for a sharing session during which they talked about what they had personally gone through during previous two years. Some were able to raise matters for the very first time. They had always kept them back because they did not want to burden anyone even more. It was already hard enough. But even though there were no serious conflicts among the group members it was still necessary to meet one another at another level: to put off actions, to let themselves go in a safe setting and talk about themselves as persons.

That was an encounter of individuals following non-violent Jesus with their struggle, their despair, disappointment, confusion, anger – and then in the evening, under tears, the liberating, thankful recognition: “And we are still here!”

**SOME WERE ABLE
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After that we spent three days with the songs of the suffering servant: we approached the text through a biblical interpretation from South American non-violent groups; there were long times of personal and common prayer; examples of how different aspects are lived out in other parts of the world, above all in alternative programmes, and always linked to the question: what does that mean for me and for us?

It was impressive to see how deeply and easily they were able to identify with the suffering servant. From the first song, some said: “That was written about us!” This statement became a kind of refrain. Only that the defeats were now different, interpreted now as experience with the cross, interpreted to bring out a meaning. And there were moving testimonies: “Do you remember this or that situation? Do you remember what you said or did? That was important to me, I would have given up otherwise.” And as happens so often in life, the person spoken to had long since forgotten ... Being a sign to one another – and being a sign with another, far beyond failure. That is the community that comes from discipleship. That is also discipleship that is possible through community.

On the 3rd day there was an unexpected visitor. A longstanding member, who had worked in a ministry in Kinshasa for five years, was travelling through Lubumbashi and had tracked us down. They had not seen each other for years. They told him of the series of defeats. But he countered: “Do you call that defeats? Haven’t you understood that the government is afraid of you? Who has ever

demanded that you pay the fine? They know perfectly well that you are in the right! Or do you believe that the Minister of Mining travels to other factories as often as he does to the one here? It is not because of the factory, it is because of you. You are forcing them to walk a tightrope!" (Incidentally, the said factory financed the electoral campaign of Joseph Kabila, the current President of the Republic.)

**"DO YOU CALL THAT
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THAT THE GOVERNMENT
IS AFRAID OF YOU?"**

I was not present at this conversation. This time under the palaver tree was to belong to the others alone. Quietly I thanked God for this visit, which came at the right time. No one else in the world could have said what he said. One day before, the same message would not have cut any ice, because they had been still too tied up in working through their own experience of suffering. One day later, and we would not have had enough time to evaluate this conversation.

It was not possible to evaluate everything immediately. In order to understand some things we would have needed another visit by another person in the following days. From which I conclude: genuinely nonviolent action is the fruit of discipleship, community and the workings of the Holy Spirit. It is and remains a gift of God, who directs what happens through us.

Everything went very fast after that and almost by itself. In conclusion, we meditated on the text of 2 Cor 5:14–6:2 from the angle of being “fellow workers with God” (6:1). The old courage, also the old humour, was there again and there was no lack of ideas.

We concluded with washing each others’ feet, an act into which we laid the future plans and actions, and which we

gave a triple meaning. I would like to bring you, too, into the ritual of foot-washing:

- It is about each and every individual on the path of discipleship: in washing each others' feet we serve one another – and serving, when I give myself rather than a thing, creates community⁴³; as was the case with Jesus, this removal of our outer garment is the symbol of self-giving, a sign of the acceptance of death; but just as he puts it on again, so do we, in the faith that a new life will come to us and envelope us – us personally and all those before whom we kneel, to wash their feet in the literal and figurative sense;
- as a community we want to wash the wounded feet of our society, serve it, do good and help people to get back “into the way of peace”.
- Jesus performed all of this and left us the foot-washing as a sign “that you may do as I have done to you”: becoming more like this Jesus in and through the service of non-violence.

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FOOTNOTES

Jn 21:22 (all biblical quotations here are from the New Revised Standard Version)

² Xavier Thévenot, quoted in the introduction to Simone Pacot's: *Evangélisation des profondeurs*, Cerf, Paris 1997

³ Cf. 2 Cor 1:4

⁴ Jn 14:12

⁵ Ps 103:30

⁶ Col 1:15⁶

⁷ Dt 30:14

⁸ 2 Cor 5:19

- ⁹ Gen 4,7
- ¹⁰ Wisdom 6:14
- ¹¹ Jn 1:3
- ¹² Rom 12:14
- ¹³ Matthew Fox quotes Erich Fromm in : *Original Blessing*, Bear Books, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1983, p.18
- ¹⁴ “Meeting Thomas Merton”: lecture by Jim Forest for the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2003
- ¹⁵ Lk 11:28
- ¹⁶ “En marche”: French translation of the Bible by André Chouraki for “blessed”
- ¹⁷ 2 Cor 6:1
- ¹⁸ 2 Cor 5: 17
- ¹⁹ Rom 8:22f.
- ²⁰ Lk 3:22; 4:1.14.18
- ²¹ 2 Cor 4:7
- ²² Gal 6:2
- ²³ See Lk 24:26, where Jesus says: “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”
- ²⁴ Gaudium et Spes, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Second Vatican Council, 1965 (para 1)
- ²⁵ Lk 22:32
- ²⁶ Cf. Jn 18:10
- ²⁷ Mt 26:52
- ²⁸ Jn 21:15-17
- ²⁹ Lk 22:32
- ³⁰ Lk 18:41
- ³¹ Mk 5:1-20
- ³² Jn 8:1-11
- ³³ Mt 5:38-42
- ³⁴ Myriam Revault d’Allonnes : *L’homme compassionnel* ; Seuil, January 2008
- ³⁵ In an interview on France Info (radio), March 2009. My explanation: Democracy is a framework for the right to difference, also providing and guaranteeing rules for life together. It allows individuals to be different, to think and act differently, which can be life-threatening in a dictatorship.
- ³⁶ Thomas Merton : *Monastic Peace p. 5, 1958 Abbey of Gethsemani*
- ³⁷ 2 Cor 5:20
- ³⁸ 1 Jn 3:2
- ³⁹ Ps 45:7
- ⁴⁰ Lk 1:79
- ⁴¹ Mt 5: 9
- ⁴² GANVE (Groupe d’action non-violente évangélique) - a Christian non-violent action group.
- ⁴³ Cf. “The Beloved Community”, Martin Luther King: <http://www.thekingcenter.org/>