

International Consultation
"Transforming Communities: Christians and Muslims Building a Common Future"

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From Conflict to Compassionate Justice

Geneva, 2 November 2010

Experiences from history as well as the present prove that it is harder to win the peace than to win the war.'

Lasting peace is dependent on a just peace. Just peace is a precondition for the acceptance of a solution between former conflicting parties.

A compassionate justice for me means that a winner of a conflict cannot dictate the conditions for the solution.

Furthermore, compassion must be part of solution. Justice without compassion is perhaps possible – but it is not desirable.

Through dialogue the parties must listen to each other, understand the needs of the other, and try to implement an agreement that takes into account the different interests and needs.

An armed conflict always results in deep wounds. To heal the wounds will take time. Generations.

Healing, compassion and justice must be based on ethical values. For me as a Christian Jesus is the personification of what ethics is in practice. He showed compassion by meeting people in difficult situations and by understanding and supporting them and consequently helping them out of their difficulties.

Jesus summed up all other commandments in one; the double commandment of love. And he told the story about the Good Samaritan to explain what he meant by loving your neighbor. That is also a story of compassion.

So for me one leading ethical value is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Let me mention two other main Christian ethical values:

Man is created by God, in God's image, and has an inviolable value. This idea of the human being – human dignity – will in turn lead us to protect human life from conception to a natural death and to fight for the human rights.

The principle of sound stewardship. God gave us responsibility for taking care of his creation and for distributing the sources in a just way.

So – for me human dignity, sound stewardship and love are three main ethical values that any just peace must be built on.

Building a just peace

To move from an armed conflict to compassionate justice starts with a ceasefire. But that is not enough if we shall build peace based on compassionate justice.

Ceasefire should be followed up by dialogue, in order to understand each other better, and to pave the way for further negotiations leading to a just agreement.

To get there, dialogue between the parties must be established. I would argue that dialogue is not only a meaningful tool; it is perhaps the only tool to build better relations. It's a tool for the building of shared societies. An effective peace – and reconciliation process requires dialogue at different levels; at the national level between politicians, but also at the local level, between people in local communities

So let me share some few reflections on dialogue with you. Dialogue is by some people regarded as a soft or weak approach without the capacity or commitment of challenging the real issues. I could not disagree more. Yet – it can be easier for people in conflict to engage in dialogue than in give-and-take negotiations. In a dialogue you do not need to give up your positions. The outcome of dialogue is not necessarily agreement. Dialogue – in my view – is a way of communicating which aims at understanding “the other”, rather than convincing them that you are right. It allows the parties to build knowledge about each other and to acquire the trust that is needed to explore alternative views and ways of thinking.

In dialogue, people with different background can compare notes, share the explanations they have to different events, confront each other with alternative frames of interpretation. Dialogue can turn out to have real and radical effects because it challenges the very self image and worldview of the participants.

A well facilitated dialogue can potentially lead to a shift of focus from mutually excluding and non-compatible positions to a formulation of shared interests. It can make the participants realize that they have common interests such as economic development, qualitative education, safety and improved job opportunities. Such a shift is a starting point and a prerequisite for peaceful co-existence.

Hence; I believe that dialogue is a courageous choice and indeed also a prerequisite for reconciliation.

We know that peace begins at home – and at school!

Enemy images are transferred to children at home. The stories are told by the people closest to them; parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Children born in conflict areas know before they are five who the enemy is.

In the schools, the knowledge is reinforced. Divided schools are the dominant feature in many multi-ethnic communities in post-conflict areas. The school is one of the key indicators of the dividedness of a community. Divided schools impact directly on children; compared to their teachers and parents, children show the highest readiness to discriminate a member of the other group. In divided schools children learn different versions of history.

A segregated schooling system has lasting consequences on the process of social reconstruction and reconciliation. Children attending segregated schools have never experienced an undivided community and grown-ups do not encourage them to have social contact outside school.

To turn divided institutions into inclusive and integrated ones requires responsible political leadership. And it demands the inclusion of- and dialogue with - people in local communities: parents, teachers and local leaders.

Just peace, and compassionate justice, requires fairness between former conflicting groups at regional, national and sometime at international level. It has different dimensions:

- Fair distribution of economic, social and natural resources between the groups concerned
- Respect for ethnic, cultural and religious differences and identities
- An inclusive democratic system with free and fair elections and just representation for the different groups in democratic institutions.

I believe it is important and necessary to move from conflict to compassionate justice, and build a culture of peace, replacing a culture of conflict and violence. Religious communities share essential responsibilities in this regard. And if we take it, we will have great opportunities because we reach out to so many.

Just peace must be based on a broad spectrum of human needs and political factors. President Roosevelt acknowledged this when he conceived a United Nations System with the aim of dealing adequately with security, poverty, health, education, and so forth. The new and powerful structure was to be, guided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in December of 1948.

In 2005, in the Objectives of the Millennium +5 Summit, the Heads of State and Government, unanimously decided that the Declaration for a Culture of Peace as well as the Plan of Action for the Dialogue among Civilizations should be rapidly implemented.

Conclusion

As children of God I believe we are called to be instruments of justice and compassion in all our capacities. We bring this responsibility with us in our local communities as well as in our wider engagements in the world. We are meant to use our voices and skills, professionally and personally, to address human needs: poverty, injustice, insecurity and dignity.

Our responsibilities include all people, whether outcasts in our own communities or powerless, insecure and poor people in other parts of the world.

We need to develop politics of compassion. Value-based politics may serve as another term for what we are talking about.

Allow me to share with you an essential reminder stated by the Northern Irish Nobel Prize winner Mairead Corrigan:

“We frail humans are at one time capable of the greatest good and, at the same time, capable of the greatest evil. Change will only come about when each of us takes up the daily struggle ourselves to be more forgiving, compassionate, loving, and above all joyful in the knowledge that, by some miracle of grace, we can change as those around us can change too.”

As religious leaders we have a challenge and an opportunity to contribute to realize this vision!

Compassion takes courage. It is what is required of us as religious leaders. Compassion should be part and parcel of valuebased politics. Let us join forces to promote it. The world needs it!

Thank you.