

“The Way of God...of Christ.” Reflections on a Spirituality of Nonviolence.

Fr. Emmanuel Katongole

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I am grateful to the organizers of this retreat for bringing us together to reflect together on our call to nonviolence is a spirituality, a way of life, a strategy for social change, a universal ethic for the transformation of the world.”

I thank them for inviting me to share a few reflections. I would like to focus my reflection on the non-violence as a spirituality.

To say that nonviolence is a spirituality is to affirm that it is grounded in a journey with God – journey that leads into the heart of God, into “the way of God.”

That is why from a Christian point of view, we are committed to nonviolence not simply because it works; not simply because it is an effective social strategy for social change... Our primary reason for commitment to nonviolence is that it is the Way of God; it is the way that God creates, rules and redeems the world.

God is love. We are created in God’s image, which means we are created by love, in love and for love. Love is our true identity, and our vocation.

That is what we have come to see clearly in Jesus Christ, in his life, his ministry, his passion and resurrection. As the apostle says: Christ is the image of the invisible God. In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col 1:15ff)

What we see in Jesus is the fullness of God’s self-sacrificing love.

This is the revolution into which Jesus invites his followers – a revolution of love; a revolution of tenderness (Pope Francis).

Nonviolence is the eternal boundary of God’s revolution of love – a reminder that we must say no to violence if we are to be part of this revolution of love, the revolution of tenderness.

I want to briefly share 3 stories – all of them from Africa - and use these stories to highlight some crucial dimensions of the spirituality of nonviolence.

First, that nonviolence as a personal journey of conversation. This is connected with my own story. I was an angry and bitter young man growing up. My father had died when I was 12, and grew up during the brutal dictatorship of Idi Amin, when we

experience lots of suffering, people being killed, disappeared and a lot of economic hardship. The experiences hardened us and left many of us bitter and angry. After my high school education, I decided to join the 'liberation war' to fight Idi Amin. It was only by God's grace that I was saved from this lie of liberation through violence. The grace came by way of sickness that left me hospitalized for over a month. In the hospital, sick and very weak, I discovered love and care: love from the Medical Mission Sisters, from my doctors and nurses, from my classmates and teachers. In that love and care I received, I discovered not only how precious I was, but that God might have a purpose for my life; It is here that I discovered a vocation to the priesthood. My life as a priest, my work, my ongoing appreciation of the call to nonviolence is connected to this shaping experience of suffering, an experience through which I was drafted into the revolution of love.

How about you? How were you drafted into this revolution?

From my experience, came a clear conviction that nonviolence is not merely an abstract principle, not just a strategy for peace. It is a personal journey that is connected to discovering one's true identity – as a child of God and as "beloved, and a discovery of how precious one's life and the life of each and everyone's life is. It is this discovery that in turn helps to shape what Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls "disciplines of goodness" – everyday practices of hospitality, gratitude, forgiveness, reconciliation, gentleness, humility, patience. humility, gentleness, gratitude.

The second story I want to share is of mama Angelina, a mother and midwife in Northern Uganda, whose daughter was abducted, together with other girls, by the Lord's Resistance Army. Every Saturday, the parents of the abducted girls would meet to pray, fast and advocate for the release of their daughters. As they concluded each meeting they attempted to say the Lord's Prayer. They were however, unable to get beyond the words "forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us," for they were filled with anger and bitterness for their daughters' captivity. At one such meeting, feeling convicted by the Lord's Prayer, Angelina warned her fellow parents: "We are wasting our time.... How can we pray for the release of our daughters if we have not learnt to forgive the rebels?" However, after some time, the parents were able to say the Lord's Prayer in full. "We felt," Angelina said, "some measure of peace. The Lord's forgiveness had come over us, and with that we felt we were able to somehow forgive even the rebels." The parents also felt the need to share the newly found gift of forgiveness with others in the community. For her part, Angelina went to meet the

mother of the rebel commander who was keeping her daughter in the bush, and to extend forgiveness to her.

At the same time, the newly found gift of deepened the parents advocacy in the local, national and international community for the release of their children, and for an end to madness of war. One day, as Angelina spoke against the atrocities of the rebels on one of the radio shows, the rebel commanders called in and wished to meet with her. They offered her a deal. They would release her daughter if she would stop her advocacy which was drawing negative publicity to them. Angelina responded that she would do so only if they released all the abducted children, because, she told the rebels, "every child is my child." She went back home without her daughter to continue her advocacy on behalf of all children. Fortunately, after 7 years in captivity, Angelina's daughter escaped and returned home.

This story is important for a vision and practice of nonviolence for at least three reasons.

First, it shows how nonviolence, like forgiveness is a gift, which Angelina and her fellow parents received as they prayed the Our Father. A unexpected gift, which they wanted to share with the community One time Angelina spoke to a blind elderly woman whose only grandchild was abducted. blind woman whose only grandson had been abducted by the rebels. The elderly woman could not believe that given all the atrocities of the rebels, Angelina would still speak of forgiveness. She asked Angelina "Are you from another planet?" Even as we affirm nonviolence as a universal ethic, we must remember that, in a world used to violence, a call to nonviolence cannot but sound odd, something strange. It is indeed from another planet; it reflects another logic – God's way of redeeming the world.

Another dimension connected to Angelina's story is how nonviolence is not passive. It is a practical form of social engagement. It is a form of compassion – a movement of advocacy with and on behalf of the weak, the poor and voiceless. Thus Angelina's "every child is my child." As compassionate advocacy, nonviolence seeks to resist and interrupt the structures- the hard shells- of violence in the world, with the tenderness of God's self-sacrificing love.

But connected to Angelina's story is also the realization that nonviolence is a journey: - a long and painful journey. There is nothing romantic about this journey. In the end, Angelina summarizes her journey of forgiveness as "painfully sweet." The journey involved a willingness to sacrifice her daughter. Like Angelina's story of forgiveness,

Christian nonviolence involves sacrifice and suffering for it is a participation in God's own journey- in the journey of God's self-sacrificing love!

The final story I want to tell is the story of Archbishop Christophe Munzihirwa of Bukavu, in the context of fighting in Congo (DRC), which has claimed over 5.4 million lives and left many more displaced. When Munzihirwa became Archbishop, the genocide in neighboring Rwanda was underway, with millions of Rwandans fleeing into Congo. Every morning, Munzihirwa would walk to bridge at the border and welcome refugees into his city of Bukavu. In 1994, he issued an advent letter in which he addressed the refugees: "In entering the way of Christ, we will be able to wish each other a Merry Christmas – the joy of the son of God who was born in the gash of human history" and who "knows he will die on the cross to save the world."

Munzihirwa used this expression "the way of Christ" frequently and quite intentionally. What Munzihirwa meant by "the way of Christ" is Jesus' willingness to suffer violence rather than use violence to establish the kingdom of God.

But for Munzihirwa, "the way of Christ" was also a social vision – a vision of society founded not only violence but on nonviolent love. "War cannot be the foundation of true and lasting peace, he reminded the Christians of Bukavu: "We must remember that war is always something despicable. Those who love peace work to build structures of justice, forgiveness, and love."

What Munzihirwa meant by the "structures of justice, forgiveness, and love" were everyday practices and activities that interrupt the business of war and violence. As military forces surrounded his city of Bukavu, Munzihirwa encouraged the Christians to "avoid rumors of war," and encouraged them to go about daily lives, to "cultivate fields, open the markets and shops, replant trees, protect the environment, welcome refugees, and not to flee from their homes." ... reminding them that "the greatest weapon in the struggle for peace and resistance against violence ...is solidarity and charity toward everybody."

Finally, for Munzihirwa, entering "the way of Christ" is about embracing Christ's cross and a vocation that can lead even to death! But entering the way of Christ is the source of tremendous courage and genuine freedom. This was true for Munzihirwa. Entering the Way of Christ released Munzihirwa from fear and deepened his commitment to resist violence, which in the end cost him his life. But even before his assassination, Munzihirwa had discovered this "freedom" – thus his constant saying that "there are things which can be seen only by eyes that have cried."

Entering the way of Christ is a vocation for every Christian – the path to genuine peace. As Archbishop Emmanuel Kataliko, Munzehirwa's successor noted: "the only response to an excess of evil is an excess of love."

Conclusions

Let me conclude by highlighting the key convictions of what I have tried to share:

1. That nonviolence is a personal journey (of conversion) and invitation into God's revolution of love and tenderness.
2. That it is a gift – as if from another planet, but also an invitation, a vocation for every Christian to learn and participate into the "way of God - the way of Christ, which is the conviction that the only response to the excess of violence is through an excess of love (Kataliko)
3. That nonviolence is not passive. It is a form of practical engagement, a dynamic and creative cultivation of patterns of forgiveness, gentleness, dialogue, humility, gratitude and forms of everyday life that interrupt the culture of violence.
4. That it is a long and painful journey, which involves suffering and sacrifice. This I think is what St. archbishop Oscar Romero refers to as the "violence of love" when he writes: "We have never preached violence except the violence of love, which left Christ nailed to the cross.... The violence we present is not the violence of the sword, the violence of hatred. It is the violence of love, of brotherhood, the violence that wills to beat weapons into sickles for work.
5. But it is also a beautiful and joyful journey. For it reflects our true identity, and our vocation. As letter to the Hebrews exhorts us: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame." (Heb 12.2)

And so we too journey on with hope, with confidence and in joy, inspired by Munzehirwas's advent message:

"By entering the way of Christ, in [a few days] we will be able to wish each other a "Merry Christmas," the joy of the son of God, who is born in the gash of human history and who knows that he will die on the cross to save the world. It is this profound joy our true home, that I already wish for you and that, in solidarity we will construct together.