

## ***Christians and Muslims as Witnesses of God's Compassion and Peace in our World of Violence***

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### **Introduction**

I have been working in peacebuilding for a few years now in Nigeria and have given quite a few talks and written quite a few papers about it. Yet, in all my talks on Peace, this is the first time I was asked to speak about Compassion! We speak about Peace and Justice: Pope Benedict said peace for all is the fruit of justice for all. We speak about Peace and Development: Pope Paul VI said development is another word for peace (PP 27). We speak about Peace and Forgiveness: Pope John Paul II said there will be no peace without forgiveness. But Peace and Compassion! Few peace studies single out compassion as having a necessary role in Peacebuilding. Yet, surely, confronted with and living in the midst of this 'World of Violence', including what we often experience in Nigeria today, if there is no Compassion, can we expect Peace?

Hence, I thank the organizers for the invitation to speak on this theme. Compassion and Peace are not the same thing. But they are certainly related. Compassion is a human trait, a feeling of empathy that is expressed in action. The Witnesses of God's Compassion are moved by the effects of violence or injustice or evil or affliction on others which cause them to suffer and take away their 'peace' and they act so that this person or these people may experience Peace. Their action does not cause more suffering, since God's compassion is for all people. Hence their action, as a result of God's compassion, is of its nature necessarily non-violent action. If, in the name of compassion, my action cause further violence and suffering and hence disturbs the rightful good of another, then I cannot say I am being moved by God's Compassion or God's Peace. This can only be non-violent. I believe we see this more clearly by looking at the witnesses we have of God's peace and Compassion throughout history and in the world today, as I have been asked to do: *Muslim and Christian Witnesses to God's Compassion and Peace*.

Let me say from the beginning that there are witnesses of God's Compassion and Peace who are not necessarily Muslim or Christian. I think of Mahatma Gandhi, a very deep believer of the Hindu religious tradition, who recognised the injustices in his society, felt deep compassion for the sufferings of his people, and chose non-violent struggle to lead them in a revolution towards change and peace. We can think of Aung San Suu Kyi the revolutionary leader in Burma (Myanmar) who used nonviolence inspired by Gandhi and by her deep Buddhist faith. I am sure that there were people who practiced the African Traditional Religions and yet were authentic witnesses of God's Compassion and Peace during the days of slavery and of colonialism here in our own land. We can all try to bring to mind those who have been in our own lives a witness of God's Compassion and were actively engaged with this violent world to be an instrument of God's Peace.

## Compassion and Peace

Let me first look briefly at the relationship of Compassion and Peace. Compassion and Peace are certainly not synonymous but they are very closely related. Peace has been described in many different ways. It is not just the absence of war or of violence even though that is certainly a big part of it. By and large peace is 'that situation of justice and rightly ordered social relations that is marked by respect for the rights of others, that provides favourable conditions for integral human growth, and that allows citizens to live out their lives to the full in calm and joyful development' (Arinze, 2002, 1). So peace is a situation that we must work for in our relationships and in society.

Compassion is not the same thing as Peace, since compassion cannot be described as a situation but is a human characteristic, a human trait. Etymologically, compassion means 'suffering with'. It means sympathy, empathy, pity, but it is more than only this. Sympathy is to resonate with another's feelings. Empathy is deeper than sympathy and means more involvement, embracing another's situation and feelings. Pity is to feel sorrow or regret over another's misfortune. But compassion is more; it involves an action, a resolute will to do something in response to try to change, to improve the situation, for the other person. Compassion has been defined as a 'Deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it' (American Heritage Dictionary). So to be compassionate is not just to feel with and for the other person but to also be moved by the others situation to ask 'What can I do to help'? Hence, we can say that compassion is the source of taking action out of concern for others to make life better for them.

Undoubtedly, compassion as a human trait has a very important role to play in realizing a peaceful and a non-violent world. According to the Dalai Lama (global head of the Buddhist community), "Peace is actually an expression of compassion, a sense of caring". Compassion is also a sense of close connection; "Compassion is...the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too." (Frederick Buechner). We are interconnected. Hence, the suffering of anyone, not just the one close to me or the one like me, but anyone, is a suffering which a person of compassion, like the God of compassion, empathizes with and seeks to take concrete action to alleviate. This of itself implies that the one moved by the God of Compassion will respond in a non-violent way, seeking peace for everyone not just one side.

## The Golden Rule

All the major religions in the world teach that something must be done to alleviate human suffering, and they all teach a similar remedy, known generically as the Golden Rule. In Christianity, it is 'Do unto others as you would have them do onto you'. In Buddhism "consider others as yourself". In Judaism "What is hateful to you do not do to your fellow". In Islam "not one of you truly believes until you wish for your brother [or sister] what you wish for yourself". This Golden Rule informs our desire for and commitment to justice, peace, equal treatment of all people... and it provides us with a clear definition of Compassion: Treat others as you would like them to treat you. This is the Golden Rule and it is where we see the close and necessary connection between Compassion and Peace. That all major religions have this rule in common is a sure indication that the true inspiration and source of Compassion and Peace is God, whom people of all religions seek to know, love and follow.

## **Nigeria today: Peace or Compassion; or Compassion and Peace (non-violent action)**

If we look at Nigeria today, we can ask: which do we need most, Peace or Compassion? I think we could have an interesting discussion but I imagine that we would eventually conclude that if there was more compassion there would be more peace. However, who is not compassionate enough: the government towards the governed, the rich towards the poor... here we might all agree. But on other opinions such as: "If there was more compassion of Muslims towards Christians in the far North (?), indigenous towards the settlers in Bauchi (?), Fulani herdsmen towards farmers in Plateau (?), ... we would have more peace": On these issues, we would almost certainly not all agree on who is lacking in compassion but certainly we would agree that lack of compassion results in conflict, sense of injustice, poverty... and more compassion would greatly help towards greater peace.

An important criteria for our compassion in any of these situations is that it would be expressed in non-violent action! Violence begets violence. Some try to justify violence as being the only solution to overcoming perceived injustices, but since every side in any conflict perceive the injustice from a different perspective, then violence will only result in an added sense of injustice. God's Compassion and Peace cannot be expressed in violence. Similarly, God's Compassion and Peace is not exclusive, it is all inclusive. It cannot be a compassion that includes only those of my religious or ethnic group. God's compassion is all embracing, unconditional, for all God's children.

## **Witnesses of God's Compassion and Peace in a violent world**

### **The Good Samaritan**

The first witness of God's Compassion and Peace that comes to my mind is the Good Samaritan: A man was stripped naked, beaten up, lying on the side of a road, half dead. A Priest and a Levite travelling that way came upon him and passed him by. A Samaritan who was travelling that way came upon him, 'and when he saw him, his heart was filled with pity'. But – he didn't just pity him! He went over to him, poured oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them, then he took him on his own animal and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, told him to take care of him and that on his return journey he would pay whatever else it cost. This is compassion! The Samaritan, who Jesus calls good and gives us as an example of one to emulate, saw suffering and could not pass on without doing something to help. If he had passed on, he knew his conscience would not have allowed him to be at peace with himself. He did not ask who this man was, what his religion or ethnic group was. He did not question why he was on the side of the road beaten up. He was not afraid the man might be a thief or a murderer. He was a foreigner himself and he did not fear that maybe he was interfering in something cultural that he did not understand. He did not find an excuse not to stop; he was moved to compassion and he generously and fearlessly did what he could.

The greatest sin of the Levite and priest is that they did not act; maybe they felt pity and cried a tear, maybe they said a silent prayer for him, maybe they told themselves they had a very important meeting to attend, or they had no oil to bandage his wounds or no money to help him with, we don't know; but we know they did not take any concrete action to help the man and this was their greatest sin. Many of us today are like that. The problems in this

country are too complex, the governments are too corrupt, the tribal and religious issues too sensitive... better stay out of it, pray for those who suffer, mind my own business and simply do my best to survive! I think the Good Samaritan, as a witness of God's Compassion and Peace, challenges us to take a different attitude.

### **St Francis of Assisi**

Another Witness of God's Compassion and Peace is St Francis of Assisi whose compassion was so intense that it included not just all other human beings but all creatures and all of creation: Brother Sun and Sister Moon. His prayer, *Make me an instrument of your Peace* still inspires and guides people all over the world and of all religions to live the path of peace. As many of us may know, St Francis is also one of the earliest examples we have of dialogue with Muslims, when he went to meet the Sultan of Egypt to put a stop to the violent crusade of Christians in the city of Damietta. The Egyptian city of Damietta was a huge Muslim city and was the pathway to the Holy land from Egypt. Because of its location, it was frequently attacked and in 1219 became the focus of the Fifth Crusade. While thousands of Christian soldiers took up arms against Muslims, St Francis, sickened by the violence of his fellow Christians, decided to follow his heart and the example of Christ. He sought a way toward peace and understanding through dialogue with Malik-al-Kamil, the sultan of Egypt. His initial goal was to convert the sultan to Christianity or to become a martyr while trying. He met the Sultan and they had a very respectful dialogue. Francis did not consider whom he had been taught to be his enemy, as his enemy. He did not insult their prophet or religion. He spoke to the Sultan about why he was a Christian. He said brother/sisterhood was God's most beautiful creation and he saw the Sultan as his brother, too. This was the first real dialogue between Christians and Muslims. According to historians, the sultan was impressed with Francis as a servant of God. Francis appreciated Islam, learnt a little about it, valued how their daily rhythm was centred on prayer. When he returned to Assisi he encouraged Christians to have a mindfulness to prayer.

The meeting with the Sultan had a big influence on St Francis' own life. He was very concerned about future crusades which the Church launched on Egypt and the sultan's men in 1224. He prayed about it a lot, wrote a text on parchment very similar to the 99 names of Allah in Islam, and on it also drew a picture which seemed like the head of the sultan, showing that he was praying for the sultan, to protect him from harm. "Meeting the sultan confirmed to Francis that we are all brothers and sisters. Neither converted the other and yet they met each other as men of God." The meeting was important for the Muslims too who witnessed it as almost immediately we see some iconography in the eastern world showing these two men. One of the sultan's own spiritual counsellors had engraved on his tomb that what changed his life was the meeting between a Christian monk and the sultan in his tent.

So what does it mean to be a Witness of God's Compassion and Peace in the spirit of St Francis: engage in meaningful dialogue with people of other faiths, seek to understand each other's perspective, to understand the anger, sense of oppression and world of Muslims in different parts of our country and world, look beyond the slogans our political leaders give us and ask why. Of course, it works both ways. Muslims need to also try to know us.

The spirit of St Francis as a witness of God's Compassion and Peace is also summed up in his prayer: *Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where*

*there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not seek so much to be comforted as to comfort; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive; it is in forgiving that we are forgiven, and it is in dying that we are born into eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.* St Francis sums up for us in this prayer what we are called to as Christians and what he himself witnessed to in his life: where there is hatred sow love; where there is injury, sow pardon; where this is discord or disagreement, sow union; where there is despair, sow hope; where there is darkness, sow light and where there is sadness, sow joy. Do not put myself first: let me seek to understand, to forgive, to love... not to be understood, forgiven, loved. For this is the path to eternal life! I think here enough is said. Christians have been told how to bring peace in a troubled world; this is the path to peace in Nigeria; we know it, can we live it?

### **Mother Teresa of Calcutta**

A third example from the Christian tradition is Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 again shows us the close relationship between compassion and peace. Her heart went out to the poorest and most marginalized in society; she asked no questions about their religion or whether their poverty was their own fault or... she simply loved them, had compassion, that is she empathized with them, shared their suffering and did what was in her power to bring them love and peace.

Some quotations from Mother Teresa suffice: "Let us not use bombs and guns to overcome the world. Let us use love and compassion. Peace begins with a smile. Smile five times a day at someone you don't really want to smile at; do it for peace. Let us radiate the peace of God and so light His light and extinguish in the world and in the hearts of all people all hatred and love for power."

"Today, if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other—that man, that woman, that child is my brother or my sister. If everyone could see the image of God in his neighbor, do you think we would still need tanks and generals?"

"Peace and war begin at home. If we truly want peace in the world, let us begin by loving one another in our own families. If we want to spread joy, we need for every family to have joy."

"Let us not use bombs and guns to overcome the world. Let us use love and compassion. Peace begins with a smile. Smile five times a day at someone you don't really want to smile at; do it for peace. Let us radiate the peace of God and so light His light and extinguish in the world and in the hearts of all men all hatred and love for power."

### **The Nonviolent Soldier of Islam, Badshah Khan**

Badshah Khan was a Muslim, in Pakistan, born in 1890, a true witness of God's Compassion and Peace. He was greatly influenced by Gandhi and they both worked together on many occasions. Khan was a member of a wealthy and aristocratic Muslim family. He was moved by the illiteracy and poverty of most of his own people. Himself educated and inspired by British missionaries, he began opening schools among the impoverished and mostly illiterate villagers while still in his early twenties. In 1919, he led demonstrations against British rule and was imprisoned for sedition for three years in unusually harsh conditions that almost broke his health. Undeterred, he continued

devoting himself to education and reform work among the Pashtun, and claimed to have visited all 1000 villages over a period of about ten years.

In the late Twenties, after a long period of fasting and meditation, Khan came up with the idea of a “nonviolent army” of his Pashtun tribesmen who would renounce violence and the code of revenge deeply embedded in Pashtun society. His army wore red military uniforms (and were called “Red Shirts”), took an oath foreswearing violence, retaliation and revenge, formed regiments, trained and drilled, and devoted themselves to village upliftment, education and reform. Khan was a devout Muslim who claimed to draw his nonviolence directly from Islam. “There is nothing surprising in a Muslim or a Pashtun like me subscribing to the creed of nonviolence,” he wrote. “It is not a new creed. It was followed fourteen hundred years ago by the Prophet all the time he was in Mecca, but we had so far forgotten it that when Gandhi placed it before us, we thought he was sponsoring a novel creed.”

The oath that those who joined his army (Khudai Khidmatgars – Servants of God) took: “I am a Khudai Khidmatgar; and as God needs no service, but serving his creation is serving him, I promise to serve humanity in the name of God. I promise to refrain from violence and from taking revenge. I promise to forgive those who oppress me or treat me with cruelty. I promise to refrain from taking part in feuds and quarrels and from creating enmity. I promise to treat every Pathan as my brother and friend. I promise to refrain from antisocial customs and practices. I promise to live a simple life, to practice virtue and to refrain from evil. I promise to practice good manners and good behaviour and not to lead a life of idleness. I promise to devote at least two hours a day to social work”

Gandhi’s declaration of Indian Independence in 1930, ignited a massive civil disobedience movement across India in which thousands were jailed, beaten and some killed by the British. On the remote Northwest Frontier, the repression was far worse. “Red Shirts” were publicly stripped and beaten, their property confiscated, their crops burnt. Through it all, they remained nonviolent. Repression only gathered more recruits to the cause. At its height, Khan’s Khudai Khidmatgars numbered more than 80,000, the largest non-violent army ever to have existed.

Even Gandhi found the resilience of this army remarkable: “That such men who would have killed a human being with no more thought than they would kill a chicken or hen should at the bidding of one man (Khan) have laid down their arms and accepted nonviolence as the superior weapon sounds almost like a fairy tale.”

When a truce was signed in 1932, Khan’s brother, became the first prime minister of the Northwest Frontier Province. He himself remained apolitical, choosing to focus on village reform. He became a close confidante of Gandhi’s. After Independence his army was suppressed. During military dictatorships he was put in prison for long years on different occasions. He never renounced his non-violent action. Khan died at home near Peshawar in 1988, at the age of 98, having served thirty years in prison.

The author of Khan’s biography wrote: “Were his example better known, the world might come to recognize that the highest religious values of Islam are deeply compatible with a nonviolence that has the power to resolve conflicts even against heavy odds.”

### **Muslims and Christians in Nigeria**

We have examples of witnesses in Nigeria also. Undoubtedly there are charismatic figures who have witnessed even with their lives to God's Compassion and Peace. You surely know them better than I do. This country has had many years of suffering, first under the British colonizers, then during the civil war, then during the many years of military dictatorship, and now the years of progress and regression under a very much struggling democracy, with corruption, Boko haram, and many kinds of tension in our midst. Undoubtedly good people have been part of our history and that is why there is still so much possibility, so much good, so much hope, despite the difficulties. But we certainly need many more courageous and convinced witnesses.

The witnesses I focus on are those pairs or networks of Muslims and Christians who have come together and are not afraid to witness to togetherness and denounce injustice, prejudice, and all that tries to divide us along religious lines. We have the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna founded and directed by Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye. Undoubtedly, their togetherness has not always been understood by other Muslims and Christians in the north and they have been accused of being unfaithful to their religions, of being blinded by American money and of much else, but they have remained together and continue to make concrete and positive efforts to mediate where community conflict is brewing and to promote a culture of mutual understanding and collaboration. Part of their team is another very wonderful Islamic scholar, Imam Sani who works alongside Rev Bitrus. These two men are simple, unassuming, and evidently sincere in their preaching of peace and calling for right relations among the troubled communities in many parts of the North.

Cardinal Onaiyekan and the Sultan of Sokoto represent another pair of committed religious leaders. Being prominent leaders at national level, the togetherness of these two men speaks loudly and is undoubtedly heard by many people, changing hearts and questioning inherited prejudices and stereotypes. Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama and the now late Emir of Wase in Plateau state, were another remarkable pair, people who used their very prominent and influential positions to give concrete witness to the possibility of sincere friendship between people of different religions.

The Women of faith Network here in Abuja brings concerned Muslim and Christian women together who on many public occasions give concrete witness to women of faith giving of their time and energies, in friendship, collaboration, shared vision, shared and responsible commitment, for a better Nigeria across religious lines. The Women's Interfaith Council in Kaduna, a forum of women religious leaders from almost all the major churches and mosques in Kaduna state, are working constantly for peace and for the promotion of women in society. Their motto is "Women of Faith working together as mothers of a culture of peace". Today people in Kaduna, Abuja, Jos and some other parts of the country, know that Muslim and Christian woman are not voiceless, are very concerned about the conflict, are seriously analyzing and challenging the reasons for the conflict, are not prepared to be excluded from the responsibility of working for justice and development in Nigeria, and are doing what they can to be instruments of reconciliation, peace, security and justice.

## Conclusion

After his three-day trip to Lebanon in Sept 2012, Pope Benedict XVI said he was convinced that now is the time for Christians and Muslims to bear witness together against violence and in favour of dialogue and peace. "I believe the time has come to give a sincere and decisive witness together against divisions, against violence and against war." Everywhere he went during his trip to Lebanon, he was welcomed by Muslims; Muslims were present at all his public events; at all his meetings with Lebanese religious leaders, government officials and crowds made up of Christians and Muslims: all of this was for him a strong sign of hope for the future of humanity.

When Cardinal Tauran, the President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue came to Nigeria last year: he was welcomed by Muslim leaders in the national mosque here in Abuja; he had a very fruitful dialogue with Muslim and Christian leaders in Jos; in Kafanchan he visited a training centre where both Muslims and Christians are trained; he was welcomed in Sokoto by the Governor and by the Sultan in his palace; he was welcomed in Aso Rock by vice-President Namadi Sambo. At a roundtable in Abuja he said "I know the importance of dialogue in society. I have been in Nigeria for only four days and have been pleasantly surprised to know that Nigerians want to live together... Here, during my visit, in Sokoto and in the other parts of Nigeria which I visited, I have seen a very positive reality that is not often known abroad. Hence, after this visit I will be an Ambassador of the positive interreligious relations in Nigeria."

Many people would say that Pope Benedict and Cardinal Tauran just had brief visits in these troubled spots, Lebanon and Nigeria, and did not see the reality. But, I believe we must admit that what they saw and speak of was real; it was not in their imagination. There is a lot of violence experienced in both these countries, and they may not have seen that, but they know of it very well. Yet, what they saw was positive and this too is real. I believe that each one of us too, while we may have seen moments and situations in our country in which Muslims and Christians kill one another, destroy one another's property, discriminate against one another on a religious basis, so too we have seen the positive side. And this is what gives us hope. Also, the increasing number of people committed nowadays to courageously calling out for accountable leadership, adherence to the law, protection of human rights, promotion of women and the girl child, freedom of the press... and so on, is a reason for hope.

It is easy to be a *lover* of peace. I believe all of us here are. We all want peace. But, it is much more difficult to be a *worker* for peace. Yet, the true builders of peace in the world are ordinary people, usually unknown and unrecognized, transforming the world in their own little way, finding peace in their neighbourhoods and lighting the way to change. We can all become makers of peace. St Francis, Mother Teresa, Badshah Khan, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, Wangari Maathai, and so many others who we have not mentioned, were ordinary people. All of these were inspired by their faith, some Hindu, some Muslim, some Christian. They saw the suffering of those around them, they did not look for any excuse to preserve themselves and keep a low profile, but they stood up, moved by the Golden Rule, spoke out, in a non-violent but very active way and they each were instrumental in bringing very positive change to their societies. We can all do our part. We are all called to be Witnesses of God's Compassion and Peace. Peace begins with a

smile. It is remembering that every single person is my brother or sister. Nobody is to be outside my love as nobody is outside God's compassionate all-embracing non-conditional love. Trusting in God and allowing God to work through us, we can bring change to our country and to our world. These are echoes of wisdom from some of the words let us by our Witnesses. May God grant us the grace to be Instruments of Peace in our daily lives and in whatever way God is calling us to do.