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CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND PEACEMAKING IN AFRICA: A TALE OF TWO TRADITIONS

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Big Five

Tourists embarking on a safari to Kenya usually receive tips on how to see the 'big five' animals in wildlife parks — lion, elephant, rhinoceros, buffalo and giraffe. Africa attracts media attention for various reasons. A recent random survey of British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) Africa Service reveal the following as the 'big five' issues on its flagship programmes, *Focus on Africa* and *Network Africa*, in terms of frequency of coverage: Darfur (genocide and human rights violations), Eastern D. R. Congo (military insurgency and forced displacement), Niger-Delta region of Nigeria (unrest and kidnapping of expatriate oil workers), Eastern Chad (violent power struggle and forced displacement), Northern Uganda (large scale atrocities by the rebel Lord's Resistance Army and the protracted quest for peace, conflict transformation and reconciliation).

The international media's penchant for sensational coverage of Africa's flashpoints appears understandable, considering the wider picture: Such relentless focus on the violent side of Africa fits well within the history of the continent caught in the throes of war and violent conflicts. Africa has a long history of war and conflict: from Algeria to Zimbabwe, one could almost construct an alphabet of wars and assorted violent conflicts (riots, rebellions, revolts, genocides, massacres and ethnic clashes), which have either left a lasting imprint on the continent or continue to convulse Africa. Such is the extent of this scenario of war and conflict that we could assert that it is rare to find an African who has not been affected by these crises, directly or indirectly.

In human terms, the toll of war and violent conflicts is incalculable, judging by visible and measurable data such as the number of forced migrants (refugees and Internally Displaced Persons [IDPs]), the intensification of poverty, the destruction of the environment and the permanent stunting of the continent's socio-economic growth.

This essay is not a philosophical discussion of war and conflict in Africa; it is not meant to depress the reader by reeling out sensational statistics. My primary purpose is to present and describe some African mechanisms of peacemaking alongside what I call Christian traditions of peace. By this I mean ele-

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ments of Catholic social teaching or doctrine and African beliefs and practices, which offer specific understanding of peace and peacemaking. Rather than pretend to solve the problem of war and conflict in Africa, I shall attempt to invite readers to see the situation of Africa from a more hopeful perspective in terms of the resources available for 'peace-weaving' on the continent.

In discussing the twin issue of war and violent conflict we need to keep in mind the following salient points. First, we are dealing with a very complex reality. Taken together, war and violent conflict always relate to remote and proximate factors, consequences and implications. Only by paying attention to this 'algebra of implication' (interaction of forces, factors and processes) can we hope to present a more accurate examination and analysis of the reality and, therefore, generate creative and effective responses. Second, as I have already hinted above, war and conflict in Africa are not distant realities. To borrow an analogy from the HIV/AIDS vocabulary, we are either infected or affected. If we are not caught in the snare of war and violent conflict, we experience their secondary consequences, such as refugee flows, negative portrayal of Africa in foreign media and stalled socio-economic growth.

Christian Traditions of Peace

The first step, then, is to identify some elements of a Christian, specifically Catholic, tradition of peace. We could also talk of 'culture of peace,' but given the intellectual baggage that the term 'culture' has acquired in recent scholarship, I have opted for 'tradition.' The latter term appears to me more open and inclusive. Another term we could use is 'symbol,' precisely because the constitutive elements of Christian traditions of peace point beyond themselves and evoke other pertinent realities.

We can understand tradition in different ways; essentially, I see tradition as *a cumulative body of knowledge and practices derived from shared experience for life and living*. It is not static or fossilised in a monolithic past; it evolves, which means we have important roles to play in identifying, interpreting and shaping it. Tradition is not an end in itself; it serves life and facilitates better ways of living as human beings.

Christian traditions of peace exist in various forms; the following is a brief enumeration. I will focus more particularly on Catholic social teaching.

People of Peace

To begin with, Christian traditions of peace exist in the form of people. These are people who have made the quest for peace the permanent focus

of their teaching and life. Not only have they taught consistently the value of peace and non-violence, they have also incarnated profoundly this value in their example of life. Among the people of peace we can identify Jesus of Nazareth, Francis of Assisi, Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Martin Luther King Jr, and Pope John Paul II. The last of these captured the sense in which some people could be identified as 'traditions' of peace when he wrote:

We cannot fail to remember the countless men and women who have contributed to the affirmation and the solemn proclamation of human rights, and who have helped to defeat the various forms of totalitarianism, to put an end to colonialism, to develop democracy and to establish the great international organisations. Those who built their lives on the value of non-violence have given us a luminous and prophetic example. Their example of integrity and loyalty, often to the point of martyrdom, has provided us with rich and splendid lessons (Pope John Paul II, 'World Day of Peace,' 1st January, 2000).

In the light of the above quote, we can make a long list of people of peace in Africa and the world in general, men and women who continue to bear witness to the value of peace and active non-violence.

Events of Peace

Another form of traditions of peace would be those events which aim specifically to generate a global consciousness of peace and non-violence. Some readers would be familiar with local events such as peace marches and demonstrations. On a global scale we can identify the World Day of Peace, which is celebrated annually on the 1st of January. This event was inaugurated by Pope Paul VI on 8 December, 1967, and has been celebrated consistently ever since. Another vivid and dramatic event was the Prayer Summit for Peace of World Religious Leaders in Assisi in 1986, under the auspices of Pope John Paul II. We should also include in this list of events of peace the pivotal role played by the Assisi-based Sant'Egidio Community in resolving the Mozambican civil war (1989-1992) which pitted two groups (Renamo and Frelimo) against each other in one of Africa's bloodiest conflicts.

Book of Peace

In many ways, the Scripture can be considered as a tradition of peace, though we could raise the objection that it documents a series of wars and violent conflicts. This would be a valid objection, considering the fact that many of these unjust wars were fought in the name of God, and some biblical chroniclers often gave a seal of approval to horrendous violations of fundamental human rights, as well as the destruction of human lives and property with impunity.

Notwithstanding, the Scripture is the source of some very poignant notions which, if correctly understood and applied, expand and empower our practices of peacemaking. These notions include: Jubilee, Shalom and the Beatitudes of Jesus Christ, to name but a few.

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) – Our Best-kept Tradition of Peace

I consider Catholic social teaching (CST) as one of our most valuable traditions of peace in the context of war and conflict, precisely because it can help us to understand better and respond more positively to our situation in Africa. Considered as part of Christian traditions of peace, CST inspires particular understandings of human reality and a 'vision for the future' that are specifically the opposite of war and conflict. Catholic social teaching offers resources for making and sustaining peace.

By way of introduction, CST can be considered as a body of ideals and principles. Ideals represent something we strive for. They play an empowering role; they allow us to envisage possibilities (the way things can be) and alternatives; that is, a new way of constructing and organising reality (be it social, economic, cultural or political). Principles, for their part, offer us some guidelines and a framework in view of attaining some practical goals and objectives. Taken together, principles and ideals give us a vision of how our world could be and ought to be. In other words, they indicate some values that we can apply to the construction and transformation of the context in which we find ourselves. This is precisely what CST does. Catholic social teaching forms a set of ideals and principles which enable us 'to analyse social realities, to make judgments about them and to indicate directions to be taken for the just resolution of the problems involved' (John Paul II, "*On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum novarum*," no. 5, 1991). 'As far as the Church is concerned, the social message of the Gospel must not be considered a theory, but above all else a basis and a motivation for action' (Ibid, no. 57). In brief, what we call CST offers us principles for reflection, criteria for judgment and guidelines for action (Paul VI, "*A Call to Action on the Eightieth Anniversary of Rerum novarum*," no. 4, 1971).

The underlying mechanism of CST involves a three-step scenario: problem — cause — solution. In other words, there is a problem that confronts us; we need to identify the cause(s) and find effective solutions. However, CST is not primarily a problem-solving mechanism. Another way of seeing CST is that it traces a trajectory: reflection — judgment — action.

Pope John Paul II suggested above that one of the goals or objectives of CST is 'the just resolution of the problems involved' in our world. In the consideration of CST the keyword is 'justice' or 'social justice.' One of John

Paul II's predecessors, Pope Pius XII, had as his motto 'Peace is the work of Justice.'

The foundational element of CST, therefore, is justice – how to attain it not just for isolated individuals, but for society as a body of interdependent persons and a network of structures. Hence we talk of social justice. According to CST, justice lies at the heart of the Christian commitment and the Gospel: 'Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel,' (Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, 1971). Such declaration underlines the centrality of justice to the Gospel, such that without this element of justice in words and deeds the Christian proclamation appears incomplete and distorted.

As contained in CST – and as a principle for reflection, criterion for judgment and guideline for action – justice implies the notions of equality, solidarity, preferential option for the poor and the service of the common good, notions too rich to exhaust in a short essay of this kind. Taken together, these notions form the antithesis of social inequality, intolerance, misappropriation of common resources and socio-economic and political exclusion which lie at the root of most violent conflicts in Africa. Here the words of Pope John Paul II are apropos:

One of the greatest injustices in the contemporary world consists precisely in this: that the ones who possess much are relatively *few* and those who possess almost nothing are *many*. It is the injustice of the poor distribution of the goods and services originally intended for all (John Paul II, *On Social Concern*, no. 28).

Justice is about guaranteeing the basic conditions of life for the most number of people, rather than for a privileged few. Its absence constitutes a trigger for war and violent conflict.

As practitioners of peace in search of non-violent lasting solutions to Africa's problems of war and conflict, we are not exempt from the demands of justice: the various forms of injustice that we perceive and strive to remedy in the world around us could also be present in our own local institutions. Thus, 'everyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes' (Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, 1971). The world needs teachers, said Paul VI, but it will listen to them only because they practice what they preach.

In summary: according to CST, justice is an antidote for war and conflict. To paraphrase the words of Pope John Paul II, peace is not just the absence of war; peace is the presence of justice among groups of people, communities and nations. No one should be deceived into thinking that the simple absence of war, as desirable as it is, is equivalent to lasting peace. There is no true peace without fairness, truth, justice and solidarity. 'Injustice, excessive economic or

social inequalities, envy, distrust, and pride raging among people and nations constantly threaten peace and cause wars. Everything done to overcome these disorders contributes to building up peace and avoiding war' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2317).

In the consideration of CST as a tradition of peace, the notion of justice does not stand alone. Another key component in this tradition of peace is 'development.' According to Pope Pius VI, 'development is the new name for peace.' Pope John Paul II also asserts that 'failure awaits every plan, which would separate *two indivisible and interdependent rights: the right to peace and the right to an integral development born of solidarity*' ('World Day of Peace,' 1st January, 2000). It is instructive that Paul VI chose '*development of peoples*,' as the title of his 1967 encyclical. War and conflict in Africa are both causes and consequences of underdevelopment.

Current scholarship does not quite agree on the precise meaning of this ubiquitous term 'development.' What does it mean for us? We can approach it negatively by identifying it by its absence or positively by identifying it by its presence – for Africans, usually elsewhere! Despite this difficulty of definition we can agree on the following basic presupposition: no one is content to live in a situation of want, deprivation, marginalisation and inequality. As long as these situations exist, people will be prone to adopt a variety of means, including violence, in order to overcome them, that is, to attain a state of development. Therefore, a lack of development can and does cause war, and one of the ways of preventing war and conflict or reducing its likelihood is to actively promote the development of peoples. To say that underdevelopment or the lack of development is a cause of conflict is not to suggest a deterministic link between both. There are political decisions and choices that need to be made in different contexts, which may or may not result in violent conflict. Hence it would be more accurate to say that underdevelopment constitutes a predisposing factor to war and conflict. There is a saying that 'if you want peace, prepare for war.' In the perspective of CST, we could reformulate it to read: if you want peace prepare for development! Peace, indeed, is the new name for development.

To build peace requires the active pursuit of the goals and benefits of development. The components of this development are many and varied. Essentially they would include the following elements: creating opportunities for human fulfilment, eliminating inequalities that polarise different groups, addressing social ills (unemployment, lack of social services like education, housing and healthcare), curtailing environmental degradation, and creating just and human environments of living and working.

What is suggested in the foregoing paragraph represents a holistic, inclusive and integral development. Development in the perspective of CST goes beyond

the need to provide economic and material goods to individuals and groups. It is inclusive and integral. In simple terms, this means that development has to take a holistic view of the person as both subject (mover/achiever) and object (beneficiary) of development in the economic, political, social, cultural, religious and moral sphere.

In *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI insists that 'development cannot be limited to mere economic growth. In order to be authentic, it must be complete, integral: that is, it has to promote the good of everyone and of the whole person' (no. 14). Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff articulate this point very perceptively: 'The poor feel hunger not for bread alone, but also, and above all and undoubtedly, for meaning and mystery' (*The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, 129). In light of this conception of development, we could assert that war and violent conflict, as well as their multiple concomitant effects, are the most poignant evidence of this absence of meaning and mystery (that is, development) on the continent of Africa today.

Traditions of Peace in Africa

In the same way that we have traditions of peace in Christianity, we can identify traditions of peace in the African context. I do not intend to suggest that Africa is homogenous; diversity characterises this continent. Yet there are some common strands of traditions, beliefs and practices that run through the diverse geographical, cultural and political compositions of the continent.

In one of Africa's best known novels, *Things Fall Apart*, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe describes a traditional practice known as the 'Week of Peace': 'no work was done during the Week of Peace. People called on their neighbours and drank palm-wine.' He continues: 'It was unheard of to beat somebody during the sacred week. Our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbour. We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessings our crops will not grow.' He concludes: 'In some clans it is an abomination for a man to die during the Week of Peace.' Achebe paints a picture of a tradition that may not exist any more. Whether it exists or not is irrelevant to the point that Africa has its own home-grown traditions of peace.

For the purposes of this essay, we can identify two basic elements of African traditions of peace. The first, like the Christian tradition, is composed of people. Africa counts several Nobel Peace Laureates: Albert Lithuli, Anwar al-Sadat, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Frederik de Klerk, Kofi Annan and Wangari Maathai. To repeat the words of Pope John Paul II, these are 'men and

women who have contributed to the affirmation and the solemn proclamation of human rights, and who have helped to defeat the various forms of totalitarianism, to put an end to colonialism, to develop democracy and to establish the great international organisations. Those who built their lives on the value of non-violence have given us a luminous and prophetic example.'

The second element of Africa's traditions of peace concerns the different mechanism of peace making, conflict resolution and transformation that we find in many parts of Africa. I mention three examples.

First, there is 'Gacaca' in Rwanda, which offers perpetrators a forum to own up to their misdeeds, offer reparation and ask for pardon from their community. This would be a form of restorative justice, which continues to be practised in Rwanda in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide.

The second example comes from Northern Uganda, which has suffered a series of violent conflicts instigated largely by the LRA. This peace mechanism is called 'Mato oput.' The term comes from the Acholi language. 'Mato oput' literally means drinking the juice made from the bitter root of an 'oput' tree. 'Oput' is a tree whose root is very bitter. The experience of 'mato oput' is the climax of a reconciliation process, which follows acknowledgement by the perpetrator, forgiveness by the offended party and involves the whole clan or family of offender and offended. In the ongoing debate that has polarised the quest for justice against the need for reconciliation in Northern Ugandan, 'mato oput' has been proposed as a viable mechanism for resolving and transforming the conflict. The nature of 'mato oput' makes it a form of restorative justice, because unlike in a criminal proceeding, where offenders plead 'not guilty,' here the offender is offered the opportunity to take responsibility for redressing the wrong to the extent that it is possible.

A final example is the much talked about African ethic of communication, 'Palaver.' This represents a way of resolving potentially conflictual situations through prolonged dialogue culminating in consensus. Because of the considerable investment of time, this mechanism has often been derided as a typically African exercise of unproductive talk. This prejudice aside, the underlying principle of 'palaver' affirms the priority of dialogue, mutual listening, wide consultation and consensus over confrontation, monopoly, exclusion and domination, which ultimately result in stalemate and violence.

In this essay I have presented and described some examples of Christian and African traditions of peace. While these may originate from different contexts and ideological presuppositions, they can be applied or practiced in a complementary manner. They are presented in this essay as helpful resources in the task of peacemaking, not as specific instructions for people to adopt and follow. In the midst of war and violent conflicts in Africa, we have Christian

and African traditions which promote values opposed to violence: Such traditions, as described in this essay, contain valuable resources for agents of peace and reconciliation in Africa. Peace-weaving need not be considered a foreign import. Local resources offer us important tools for realizing the dream of a peaceful and prosperous Africa.

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