

Trosly, June 2006

From June 2nd to June 4th, an important Conference on « Initiatives for Peace » was held in Paris, organised by Christian Renoux, former President of MIR (International Movement for Reconciliation). It brought together some 150 organisations involving thousands of men and women who are working for peace, men and women who are determined to move from the ways of violence and to the paths of listening, unity, dialogue and non violence. I had the joy of participating in a round table discussion with Adolfo Perez Esquivel (a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize) and Hildegard Goss-Mayr, who for the last fifty years has been struggling for non-violent solutions to conflict in various parts of the world. I shared about L'Arche and Faith and Light and how we want to be communities of peace. I was inspired by all the people who believe that they can do something for peace in different situations and who are also committed to humanitarian projects in areas of poverty.

We are living in the decade of the U.N. proclamation of peace, a decade where schools are encouraged to teach young people the ways of non violence. Violence breaks out in cultures of competition, where there is economic and political rivalry and the rivalry caused by civil war and international conflicts. Our education systems advocate success. To be successful in life is of course important. However, if it only means a frantic search to climb up the ladder at any cost and to show that we are better and superior to others, it is destructive; and if it means rejecting those who are weak and who do not succeed, it is also dangerous. Either we exploit other peoples' weakness and crush them as we try to reach the top; or, faced with the world of rivalry in and around us, we shrug our shoulders and give up, feeling incapable of doing anything useful to change the situation; or, we are discouraged and just seek compensation in things like alcohol.

A culture of peace, rather, implies an acceptance of each person with their gifts and their weakness, helping each one to rediscover his/her dignity and place in the human community. In a culture of peace, people who are stronger are encouraged to recognise and accept their own weaknesses, and to serve and give support to those who are more vulnerable and to help them discover their own capacities. In a culture of peace each person is seen as unique, important and sacred.

One of the big questions for each one of us today is how to turn our backs on the culture of rivalry, individualism, conflict or depression that surrounds us, and move instead into a culture of solidarity and cooperation, peace and hope. How can this transformation come about in us?

At the end of the round table discussion in Paris, we were asked a question: "Is it possible that one day there will be paradise on earth?" It seems to me that paradise on earth is not possible unless each one of us discovers the paradise within us, that little sanctuary hidden in the most intimate part of our being. Perceiving and finding this inner paradise of peace and unity implies a struggle against the culture of rivalry which is within us too. If I can catch a glimpse of this inner paradise, I will begin to see it in others. And then as several people come together who live it, we create community ... but all that implies a real struggle.

L'Arche and Faith and Light want to be communities of peace through our way of living, the way we welcome and share with people who are weak and vulnerable. Our communities can become places of transformation through the way we welcome each other, listen to one other and resolve conflict. Welcoming the weak, recognizing their gifts and helping them discover the meaning of their life is our way of building peace.

The danger for many today is to think that history is made without us, not with us. We often shrug our shoulders and say that we can't do anything about it. We forget that if we are together and give each other mutual support, we can witness to the strength of love and to the fact that life is stronger than death.

A good institution is defined both by competence and by the capacity of people within it to work together. There are many good institutions. Community life adds something else: the desire to live faithful relationships where each person is seen as a gift, where each one gives and receives life. Community is made up of relationships. Community life is formed and revealed through the quality of personal sharing; the quality of meetings (where each person assumes his/her responsibility); the quality of celebrations (where life and unity are celebrated); and the quality of prayer life, where we affirm together our desire to live in conformity with God's ways and to let God's love and wisdom form and mould our lives so that we can radiate hope and peace.

In May, in Chicago, I received the "Blessed are the Peacemakers" Award from the Catholic Theological University. I was happy to receive it in the name of L'Arche and Faith and Light and to realise that other people recognize that our communities are places of peace. To act for peace requires a whole new attitude, a new way of living and of encountering others, especially those who are different from us;

It means trying to create a society not in the form of a pyramid but as a circle, where the weak as well as the strong have their place and find dignity and meaning to their lives, and where there is mutuality rather than rivalry.

Last February, here in Trosly, we celebrated the life and death of Jeannine Vidal who died quietly in her sleep. She came to L'Arche more than 30 years ago with many physical as well as intellectual disabilities and much anger and violence. She gradually grew more peaceful both in her heart and body; and little by little she found her place in the community. Eventually, she discovered that she was loved, and especially loved by God. Last November, while on pilgrimage to Lourdes with the whole community to celebrate our 40th anniversary, she confided to an assistant that she hoped to die in her sleep as she was afraid of suffering. God answered her prayer. At the end of her life she had become a gentle, peaceful woman. When I went to see her, she would often notice my tiredness and say affectionately "pauvre vieux"..."poor old man". What a joy for L'Arche to be able to welcome people like Jeannine who have known so much pain and rejection and to become for them a place where they can grow in peace and give peace.

In March we celebrated the life and death of Lucien Meunier, a man with profound disabilities who had lived in La Forestière for the last 28 years. He was truly a great teacher for me. During my Sabbatical year at La Forestière, he showed me all the violence hidden deep within me, and how much I needed to be transformed in order to find greater inner peace and become a better peacemaker.

I am still profoundly touched and nourished by Etty Hillesum, the Dutch Jewish woman who was gassed in Auschwitz. She wrote in her diary during the last year of her life:

“Ultimately, we have just one moral duty; to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it onwards to others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world.” (p. 218 Etty Hillesum)

Yes, let’s begin by establishing peace first within our own hearts, and then in the hearts of others. Let’s create communities and families of peace. Isn’t that the responsibility of each one of us? That means that we have to work on ourselves and recognise our compulsions, self-centredness and depression. This leads us into a deeper respect for ourselves so we live our humanity more fully. Peace is not just a problem for political leaders, it is our problem. Peace comes when we live in truth and accept who we are, with our strengths and weaknesses, and when we help others with their strengths and weaknesses to do the same.

Peace also comes as we realise that we are not alone. God is with us, like a friend. God is watching over each one of us and each one of our communities; God is guiding us. And so in the midst of all our difficulties we can give thanks!

Happy holidays to those of you who are living above the equator. The word “holidays” comes from “holy days”. May these holidays be a time of peace, and a time to rediscover inner strength, so that we can continue on the path of love and wisdom. And happy days, also, to those who are living underneath the equator. Pray for the international meeting of Faith and Light in July, in Madrid, where we will celebrate together and name the next international leaders. Let us pray for one another, in the joy of God’s presence.

Jean Vanier