

Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue(DID)
And
Institute of Jainology (IOJ), London, England
International delegation of Jains

By caring for the earth, the poor and the most vulnerable- A Christian Perspective¹

by
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Good morning and a cordial welcome to all of you, respected guests, speakers and participants, members of the International Delegation of Jains. I am very honored to be able to meet you.

First of all, I would like to thank the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, in the persons of Cardinal Miguel Angel Ayuso and Msgr. Indunil Janakaratne Kodithuvakku, respectively Prefect and Secretary of the Dicastery and Msgr. Michael Santiago organizer of the event, for having invited me to participate as a speaker in this meeting of dialogue on themes that are relevant today and touch the heart of our respective spiritualities.

Taking care of the earth, the poor and the most vulnerable is the concrete response that we can give, through our works of charity and service in the world, listening to "the cry of the earth and the poor"² who suffer the violence caused by unjust human systems and structures, with the aim of dominating and violating the earth. And such violence against creation is closely linked to violence against men and women, causing poverty and discrimination.

Faced with such a marked global 'systemic' crisis and the prevalence of a technocracy that is now trying to take over even our spaces of freedom and discussion, reducing man and creation to objects of the market and promoting the "throwaway culture", I believe we have reached a point where, as believers in God, we can no longer remain silent and have to support the great commitment of Pope Francis on these issues, with action, with theological reflections and more systematic studies that can contribute to a transformation of the men and women of our time, that is, to an integral ecological conversion.

But the "care" that we hope for is not based only on a mere sociological analysis, or an intervention external to the human realities and conditions experienced by people, or even a set-decision, but, as I said before, it must arise from listening to the weakest people of the earth, the most vulnerable and therefore through a journey with them. The two realities, the earth and the poor, are closely connected. Interdependence is in fact the character of our societies today. For this reason today we talk about "integral ecology".

¹ **The article is only for the internal use of the Conference**

² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 49

Walking with the poor is not a mere slogan for us Christians, but is a demanding expression, an integral part of the “mission of justice and reconciliation”, of the mission of Love of God. Walking with the poor is in fact the proposal of God who, in every fundamental moment of the biblical history of salvation, has recalled its prophetic significance, until seeing it incarnated in the testimony of His Son Jesus Christ who inaugurates His mission by recalling the words of the suffering servant of the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." . (Lk 4,18-19)

The famous expression “preferential option for the poor” has been reiterated several times by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church as a way of living the radical nature of the Gospel in the world and of facing the great challenges of humanity in our time. It has become a fundamental choice, a vocation of the Church that translates into being a Church of the poor, a Church for the poor, and, as Pope Francis stated: “a Church that is rich in Jesus but poor in means, a Church that is free and liberating”³.

A document of the Synod of Bishops in 1971, during the pontificate of Paul VI, on the theme of “Justice in the World”, is surprisingly still relevant and inspiring. The Church became more aware of the oppressive and unjust systems of the contemporary world and, conversely, of her vocation and of the need of Christians for a profound conversion in view of the fulfillment and plan of God for the salvation of humanity. Therefore, from a Christian point of view, no theological justification for oppressive structures of power can rely on, even if democratically approved. The document unequivocally took on prophetic characters on the relationship between faith and justice. Justice springs from faith, puts faith into practice and does not reduce it to a passive recitation of dogmas.

The document also did not fail to denounce a “crisis of international solidarity”. A crisis that continues today although with different scenarios than those of the time, with an increasing number of conflicts and the growing difficulties of international organizations such as the United Nations which should be responsible for hindering the hegemonic policies of the most powerful countries on earth.

Therefore the “preferential option for the poor” goes against the logic of power and economic domination that increases the socio-economic inequalities of individuals, communities and entire peoples, to reaffirm the need to re-establish justice and to activate processes of liberation, reconciliation and peace. There can be no peace without justice, reconciliation and forgiveness.

Walking together with the poor therefore takes on an essential theological-spiritual dimension for Christians. Jesus showed us and recommended the need to be alongside - for and with - the poor to walk in the perspective of the Kingdom of God. He himself considers the poor as “blessed”.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours. Blessed are you who are now hungry, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh". (Lk 6,20-21)

³ Papa Francesco, Omelia in occasione del 60° anniversario dell'inizio del Concilio Vaticano II, Basilica di San Pietro, 11 ottobre 2022.

In this paradox, Jesus shows a beatitude that does not indicate passivity but rather an access to the mystery of God's love. This is more important than material accumulation and any other form of power. The beatitudes of the poor peacefully subvert the human power because they are given to human beings to remember that the Kingdom of God, a perspective open to all, is reached by understanding the mysterious meaning of the beatitude of poverty. And material 'lack' is filled by the love of God.

However, we cannot overlook that walking with the poor and the marginalized means taking the responsibility for their condition of deprivation, healing their wounds, serving them, loving them, taking on their suffering and injustice. Ultimately, the reference to the poor in the Christian mission takes on a double meaning: on the one hand, being with and for them, accompanying them in their process of liberation from the condition of suffering, poverty and injustice; on the other hand, a spiritual dimension for all of us, taking on a life of evangelical poverty as an inner conversion to God, a sign of freedom and detachment from material goods and power, which challenges worldliness, to grow in communion with God and with our brothers and sisters, according to the Beatitudes. The cry of the poor calls for justice and, only if listened to, can allow reconciliation with a devastated land, with humanity, and with the Creator.

An interesting novelty, a ^{sign} ~~sign~~ of hope in this complex historical moment, comes from the meetings on these issues between Christians and believers of other religious traditions. The Abu Dhabi document written in 2019 by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam Al-Tayyeb, expresses in its singular introduction a special interreligious sensitivity for the poor. It is an appeal to Human Fraternity "that embraces all men, unites them and makes them equal" in the name of God, in the name of human life and... in the name of "the poor, the miserable, the needy and the marginalized whom God has commanded to help as a duty required of all men and in particular of every wealthy and well-off man. In the name of orphans, widows, refugees and those exiled from their homes and their countries; of all the victims of wars, persecutions and injustices; of the weak, of those who live in fear, prisoners of war and those tortured in any part of the world, without any distinction. In the name of the peoples who have lost security, peace and common coexistence, becoming victims of destruction, ruins and wars".

I would also like to recall that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the then Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the dicastery that is hosting us today, together with the World Council of Churches (WCC) published a document, a joint appeal entitled: "Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity". An appeal that remains very current because, starting from another Gospel story, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), it asks everyone what does it mean living today in a wounded world marked by suffering, "the scourge of religious intolerance, discrimination, racism, economic and ecological injustice and many plagues. We need too ask ourselves: who is wounded, and whom have we wounded or neglected? And might we be surprised by seeing Christ/like compassion in action? This story urges us to free ourselves from religious prejudices and cultural biases in relation both to those with whom we serve, as we strive to alleviate suffering and to restore healing and wholeness in a pluralistic world. At the same time, it gives us hope, that is central to our faith and the way we live it out, when we realize that it is Christ himself, that unexpected other - the Samaritan - who is offering His help to the wounded one." [See the Preamble].

Unfortunately, we have to recognize that sometime our hope is hold back by the many conflicts in the world, by a widespread violence. In the immediate post-pandemic period, human folly has burnt the heart of Europe with a new war and later the Middle East. Large amounts of economic resources have been immediately diverted to the purchase of weapons and the increasing of the military expenditures. Let us remember that weapons are always instruments of death and not of life and care, in contrast to the evangelical parable. Once again many governments show indifference in the face of suffering humanity in need of care and justice.

I conclude here by reporting the conclusion of the joint PCDI-WCC document:

«Ecumenical and interreligious solidarity enable our religious commitment to become a factor that unites, rather than divides, people. When we work hand in hand with believers of other faiths and with people of good will, we model the peace, justice and interconnectedness which are at the heart of our religious convictions, while at the same time recreating and reinforcing these values. For Christians, interreligious solidarity is a way both of living out Jesus Christ's commandment of love the other, and also of working with the other to seek peace, which is God's will for the world. Growing in love for those whom we help, for those with whom we help, and for those who help us, creates many ways for us to live fully into what God created us to be, bearers of the divine image, and sharer of this image with others. As we open ourselves to serving a wounded world [...] we may derive strength from the example of the one we follow, Jesus Christ. He came not to be served, but to serve (Matthew 20:28). Imitating the love and generosity of the Good Samaritan, let us seek to support the weak and vulnerable, console the afflicted, relieve pain and suffering, and ensure the dignity of all. May we, by opening our hearts to dialogue and by opening our hands to solidarity, build together a world marked by healing and hope».

This is how authentic liberation and self-giving for the liberation of humanity can occur. The Asian churches have long embraced this direction that intends to listen to the cry of the poor by promoting a mission of dialogue - a threefold dialogue, with cultures, religions and the poor - starting from the poorest and most vulnerable, which may involve everyone in the promotion of a path of hope, peace and brotherhood. This dialogue "of" works and "through" works in an interreligious solidarity nourishes the dialogue in life which is also a dialogue of experience of a living faith.