

# PASTORAL PRESENCE WITH SURVIVORS, FAMILIES AND ABUSERS IN SITUATIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE IN AREAS OF CONFLICT

By Fr. Bernard Ugeux, M.Afr.\*

I thank the organizers for inviting me to speak during this round table. I arrived for the first time in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 1971 and since then I live a deep alliance with this country. For many years I have been working in Bukavu (South Kivu) to welcome and reintegrate victims of gender-based violence, especially women and children. Currently, I am working with the Justice and Peace Commission of UISG / USG in the training of consecrated persons engaged in the reception, care and reintegration of victims of violence in the DRC.

My purpose today is not to describe the tragedy that the DRC has been going through for twenty years, which has caused millions of deaths that nobody talks about. Other speakers will talk about it.

I would like to evoke the unique commitment of the Church, and especially consecrated persons, in the accompaniment of victims on the ground. I will also discuss the inseparable link between compassion, indignation and solidarity.

Above all, I wish to pay homage to the countless (there are no statistics available) Congolese women who have been victims of violence, those who have been able to speak and be treated, and especially those who suffer in silence and in shame. (not to mention some men and many children). They are a living example of trust in God and love of life, resilience too. I am also thinking of the CENCO (National Episcopal Conference of Congo) and all its positions for justice and peace, which have at times been manipulated by politicians. Then to all Catholics, consecrated and laity, who fight for Justice and Peace in the DRC. Last but not least, Pope Francis, the Holy Father, spoke about our country on November 23, 2017 during the evening of prayer dedicated to South Sudan and the DRC. My intervention is part of what he said that night and that we live every day on the ground: “What hypocrisy to deny the massacres of women and children! There, the war shows its most horrible face”! He also prayed for “women victims of violence in war zones and in all parts of the world” and “children who suffer because of conflicts they are strangers to, but that steal their childhood and sometimes their lives” .

**Tonight, I want to affirm my deep conviction that, in this regard, the Church can make a difference, in the name of the Gospel. It is from a recently lived experience in the training of the consecrated by the UISG/USG<sup>1</sup> that I want to develop this conviction.**

## **1. The irreplaceable contribution of consecrated persons in the fight against gender-based violence.**

I would like to say at the outset that part of what I am about to say here can also apply to many lay people engaged in this field within the framework of Caritas or JPIC<sup>2</sup>. However, I would like to draw a number of lessons from a training experience recently organized by the JPIC of UISG/USG<sup>3</sup> in Goma in eastern DRC.

In May 2016, after a stay in North Kivu, a British government minister asked to meet with the JPIC Commission of UISG/USG in Rome. She noted the degree of involvement of religious congregations in the area of violence in this region. That is why she officially asked that religious to help her government to disseminate in this country the “International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict”. In October of the same year, it was decided to organize a training for consecrated persons engaged in this field in April 2017 in Goma (South Kivu), whose responsibility was entrusted to me. During this session, four days were dedicated to a pastoral and psycho-spiritual approach and two to the presentation of the Protocol by experts from the British government. About 40 consecrated persons and diocesan priests actively involved in the accompaniment of victims and survivors from the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi participated. This is the first time

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1. International Union of Superior Generals; Union of Superior Generals
2. JPIC Commission of Justice and Peace and Integrity of Creation
3. International Unions of Superiors General of Women and Men

the British government has made such a request to Catholic consecrated persons. It was a pilot experience. I then asked myself: why turn to Catholic consecrated persons for such an approach?

It is here I believe that consecrated people make the difference, even if some NGOs do a good job and are at times more professional: Devotees come from the center of the population and cultures, and have direct experience of the field from their own families. They are committed for life and not for a punctual project. They are supported by consecrated communities and by parishes and work in continuity, instead of working haphazardly on their own. The network of the consecrated is very dense in the DRC, they have the pulse of the people and in touch with the communities. The national and diocesan USUMAs and ASUMAs, in conjunction with the local JPIC and Caritas commissions, weave a complete network in the territory and operate a single dissemination of information and interventions on the ground, sometimes in inaccessible places. They also followed a long spiritual and human formation which gives them particular credibility. Without doubt, some people still need to be trained to be more professional, but their consecration to God gives them a priori confidence on the part of the population. In addition to and above all this, their model of commitment is that of Jesus Christ, their foundation is the Gospel, with the Social Doctrine of the Church, and their source is their daily life of prayer and sacrament. This last point is essential. It is not possible to be plunged daily in confrontation with absolute evil that represents the horrible violence perpetrated every day in our country on women and children without drawing strength every day in the contemplation of the cross of Christ in whom already “everything is accomplished”.

## **2. In the commitment of the Church, do not dissociate compassion, indignation and solidarity.**

A Christian committed to following Christ for justice and peace must walk on these two legs and use both his hands: compassion and indignation, besides he always acts in the Church, hence the importance of solidarity. The three aspects seem to me inseparable and that is what I read in the decision of the Holy Father in the creation of the new dicastery for Integral Human Development Service and in the Dakar Declaration of Caritas Africa.<sup>4</sup>

*About compassion.*<sup>5</sup> In the training given at Goma, by sharing our experiences we found that we were sharing also the convictions of Pope Francis who compared the Church as a “country hospital” with consecrated people present in the peripheries, accepting to take the smell of their flock. In a hymn of the breviary in French we sing: “who is God whom we can hurt so much by wounding man”. And Father Pierre, well known in France, said: “To love is: when you suffer, I have pain.” It is thus a question of refusing the trivialization of evil, the indifference and the scorn of the woman.

Certainly, we must cry with those who cry, but also and especially we must seek concrete solutions. True compassion is not just about empathy for a victim. This is only the starting point. Then there is the search for concrete ways to enable victims to rebuild their self-esteem and regain their autonomy and social identity. This requires medical and psychological care, but also tenderness and mercy, and also a lot of listening time, gratuitous patience and spiritual accompaniment. Here we can draw on the Apostolic letter of the Holy Father addressed to consecrated persons on the occasion of the year of consecrated life<sup>6</sup> and in the Bull *Misericordiae Vultus* of the Jubilee of Mercy.<sup>7</sup>

*About indignation.* Catholic prayer groups have sometimes been criticized for limiting their commitment to healing prayers and acts of charity that do not go to the root of injustice and suffering. It is not enough to treat or pray for the victims, we must act in such a way that there are no more victims. In the DRC, everything happens

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4. Dakar Declaration of African bishops and of Caritas Africa, September 20, 2017.

5. “To live compassion is to allow oneself to be profoundly touched by a person’s suffering enough to be concerned, called to action and at times moved in one’s entrails, while all the while keeping an interior distance so as not to allow this suffering to invade us.” Bernard Ugueux, *I believe in Compassion*, Paris, Bayard, 2015, p. 22.

6. “I expect from you what I ask to all members of the Church: to go out of themselves and go to the existential peripheries. ‘Go to the ends of the earth’, was the last word that Jesus addressed to his own and that he continues to address to us all (Mc 16,15). It’s the whole of humanity that awaits: people who have lost all hope, families in difficulty, abandoned children, youth for whom all future is close in advance, the sick and abandoned elders, the rich who are filled with goods who with empty hearts, women and men in search of meaning for their live, thirsting for the divine...” November 21, 2014.

7. 11 April 2015.

as if too many people do not want the violence to stop. It is here that the indignation, the anger of the righteous, the mobilization for justice that can go so far as to expose one's life to defend the rights of the smallest and the most vulnerable by acting with them. If political demonstrations are useful, the pursuit of abusers and murderers and the end of impunity remain priorities for the Church. It is here that the Goma training on the use of the Protocol showed us how much real competence is needed to take legal action and protect the rights of the poorest. Not everyone needs to be a legal professional, but we are all supposed to know the law, the social teaching of the Church, and try to practice true discernment in the midst of violence.

And that's why I end with the importance of solidarity. An isolated Christian is in danger of death. A Christian who limits himself to devotions and novenas forgets that the body of Christ is not only in the tabernacle, but in every brother, every sister who suffers. It is in the Church, in consecrated communities, in grassroots communities, in parishes and dioceses, that we can make a difference. This is how the Church can acquire and exercise real competence and be credible to ravaged people and governments. Especially when it is transparent when using the means it receives from elsewhere or which come from the solidarity of local communities.

This meeting in Goma was followed by a renewed commitment to the victims, of many participants in the quality of listening, follow-ups, the creation of small reflection and action groups throughout the DRC. It has also given birth to a manual that incorporates the methodology and contents of the workshop. Broadcast in French and English, it is intended to be adapted and used freely wherever people are victims of gender-based violence.

In short, I believe that Catholics, and especially consecrated ones, can bring an irreplaceable witness to a ravaged country. I also believe that we must never let go of the link between compassion, indignation and solidarity if we want to be faithful to the great intuitions and the teaching of the Holy Father and the example of Christ. He is the one who reminds us tonight: "What you did to the least of my brothers, sisters you did it to me" (...). Wherever we are this evening, those of us who are here, let's take initiatives so as not to leave our Round Table empty of concrete actions on the ground.

Today, in South Sudan and the DRC, and elsewhere in Africa, Christ continues his passion before our eyes. Do not leave him alone!

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