

CHALLENGES OF THE CHURCH TO PROMOTE ACTIVE NONVIOLENCE, RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE AND TO LIVE IN JUST PEACE

By Archbishop Marcel Utembi Tapa of Kisangani*

For the Catholic Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), the challenge to promote active nonviolence, respectful dialogue, and to live in just peace has been present since before the country gained its independence up to our current time. Our country has experienced several types of violence through wars that are referred to with all kinds of names: independence war, liberation war, natural resource war, occupation war, war reprisal wars, etc. This situation has made so many victims, numbered in millions. Faced with this kind of situation, it is not easy to promote active nonviolence and respectful dialogue; it is not easy to hope to live in just peace. It is in this context that the Church in DR Congo tries to play its prophetic role for a people yearning for justice, peace, well-being, reconciliation, and rule of law in the DR Congo.

1. Commitment Strategies of the Congolese National Episcopal Conference

To carry out its prophetic commitment, the Congolese National Episcopal Conference (CENCO) has developed a series of strategies including commitment in dialogue, formation to the social teaching of the Church, and to civic education, messages, and advocacy.

1.1. Commitment in dialogue

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis indicates that “the Church proclaims the Gospel of peace (Eph 6, 15) and is open to collaboration with all national and international authorities to take care of this great universal good.” The first privileged means is “dialogue as a form of encounter, seeking consensus and agreements with the concern of a just society, capable of memory, and without exclusions.”

CENCO has observed, with great concern, the disagreements within the political class as well as the revival of tensions in the country which could, if no caution is taken, lead the Nation into implosion and chaos. These tensions are due to the standoff of the electoral process whose regularity and continuity have been interrupted. From the very beginning of the crisis, the CENCO urged the sons and daughters of the DR Congo to take the path of dialogue and inclusivity. The first dialogue was organised and was concluded with a Political Agreement that was signed on 18th October 2016. Unfortunately, this Agreement suffered from a lack of inclusiveness because some political and social actors did not participate in the dialogue. Then, a second dialogue was organised under the mediation of the CENCO. It resulted in the global and inclusive political agreement of the Inter-diocesan Centre, signed on December 31, 2016.

The Church committed herself in the mediation for a particularly important and urgent cause: national reconciliation, justice, and peace. She made it clear to the stakeholders that:

- Dialogue overcomes divisions and fosters a better understanding of the other with his/her differences;
- Dialogue is a human greatness pathway, it is urgent to deepen and extend it to other regions considering the need for reconciliation, justice, and peace in so many African regions.

1.2. Formation in the social teaching of the Church and civic education

1) Concern and respect for the common good

The CENCO believes that good management of the country's wealth in general, and of the natural resources in particular, is a determining factor for peace; to live together. Thus, in addition to the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace (CEJP), Episcopal Commission for Natural Resources (CERN) has been created to monitor the exploitation of natural resources and call companies working in the sector to respect human rights. Together with other bodies from the civil society, the CENCO denounces the unjust order that prevents the Congolese people from consolidating their economies.

*Archbishop Marcel Utembi Tapa of Kisangani is president of the Catholic Church's National Episcopal Conference of the Congo (CENCO) and a political mediator who engages in dialogue to promote the common good. Serving in the Congo since 1984, he brings many years' experience of working and living in this region. He is a strong advocate for the needs present in this region and has worked tirelessly in his efforts for his people.

2) Promoting culture of forgiveness and reconciliation

The Church teaches that true peace is only possible through forgiveness and reconciliation. The Diocesan Justice and Peace Commissions, with the direct involvement of the Pastors, work permanently to reconcile hearts, people, and communities in conflict. Forgiveness of the perpetrators by their victims is practiced in certain zones. In addition, prevention of conflicts between communities is part of the training given to young people.

3) Active nonviolence

In his message of peace 2017, Pope Francis appeals for “peace building through active nonviolence.” It is in this sense that the CENCO is committed to setting non-violent strategies for the promotion of peace.

To this end it has initiated, through its Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace, an awareness program on peaceful demonstrations and claiming of rights by non-violent means. For example, to call on the government to respect the electoral calendar, it was decided, in some dioceses, to ring church bells for 15 minutes, every Thursday, starting from 9 pm. Others have initiated novenas of prayer as well as processions for peace. The peaceful demonstration of Christians in Kinshasa on December 31, 2017 is a clear example of the practice of active nonviolence.

1.3. Challenges

- To put the person, created in the image of God, at the centre of political concerns;
- Dialogue as a permanent way of building peace together;
- Respect of commitment made individually and collectively, of constitutions, and of agreements;
- Respect of human rights and basic freedoms;
- Commitment to justice and to building a law-based state as the responsibility of the people.

1.4. Suggestions

To build peace together, we recommend:

- 1) Prayer (ecumenical)—“If the Lord does not build the house, the builders labour in vain” and “nothing is impossible for God” (Lk 1,37)
- 2) Act of reconciliation—as advocated for in the apostolic exhortation *Africae munus*, celebrating “a day or a week of reconciliation during Advent or Lent” could contribute to a collective reconciliation. Indeed, “to build a reconciled, just and peaceful society, the most effective means is a life of intimate communion with God and with others.”
- 3) Educating to peace—our Christian families, our schools, our communities, our parishes should become privileged places of initiation to culture of dialogue, peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation.
- 4) Independent inquiry on the human rights violations in the DR Congo—to establish a serious and objective independent inquiry to establish responsibilities for the atrocities committed in the DR Congo. It is necessary to promote respect of the right to peace: this right “promotes the building of a society in which power relations are replaced by relations of collaboration for the common good.”

Conclusion

As *Gaudium et Spes* asserts, humanity will “build a truly human world for all people and everywhere on earth if all renew themselves internally and turn to the truth of peace.” It is therefore possible to build peace together and consolidate it, with the help from the Prince of Peace, while resolutely committing ourselves to peace.

Kinshasa, January 10, 2018

Marcel UTEMBI TAPA

Archbishop of Kisangani

CENCO President