Justice, the heart says … “The Challenge of Living Gospel Justice from the Heart”

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I was asked to address the theme: Justice, the heart says … How can we, as witnesses of Christ’s love -- alive in 2014, live the Gospel challenge more effectively?

Justice, the heart says …

For weeks, as I thought about what I could possibly say to all of you, whose deep, rich experience at the margins of our world surely surpasses my own, I found myself sorting through the hundreds of powerful stories that have become part of my soul in the past 30 plus years -- reliving in many ways the great gift of a passion for justice that I have received from thousands of people struggling to survive, to heal, to live with dignity, to contribute in real ways to the transformation of the world in extremely difficult circumstances: in extreme poverty; in the midst of war; in the context of deteriorating environmental conditions.

You know as I do that this country too is mission territory where our hearts are often broken and the call to do justice is strong (think of Ferguson, MO; migrant farm workers in Ohio; Nogales, AZ). I was quite literally invited to do justice by specific people along the way -- I suspect it has been the same for you. In my life, the invitation came from the West family who lived in the shadows in one of the most affluent counties in the country; from Frances Russell, whose little house in the foothills of the Appalachian mountains looked like it belonged in a favela of Sao Paulo or in Kibera, Nairobi; from Virginia Johnson and Catherine Harris, who live in the inner city of our nation’s capital. All of these women whose friendship has blessed my life, for different reasons, live in poverty surrounded by wealth and overconsumption, some with great dignity, others with frustration and dehumanization. Forty years ago, the presence of endemic, dehumanizing poverty in the backyard of our fairly affluent neighborhood reset the fundamental direction of my life. And living fairly close to the margins at Assisi Community in Washington D.C. for 28 years has helped me understand the deep and ugly roots of racism and economic injustice in our own country.
But my heart has most often been broken in other parts of the world -- in circumstances that were not my own. Unlike many of you who have lived and worked in communities long enough to call them home, my own journey overseas has been most often as guest. Thanks to Maryknoll and to Pax Christi International I have been blessed with the opportunity to visit (though much too briefly) hundreds of communities where the reality of daily life set ones heart to aching and created a collage of memories that were always painful, often hopeful, and regularly demanded action for justice.

Perhaps better than anyone else -- at least in my own life, the example of Archbishop Oscar Romero sets the stage for this conversation. He is surely not alone -- but his witness is powerful and his story is clear. He simply encountered the Gospel in living color as he accompanied individuals and communities who were impoverished and brutally violated in El Salvador during the years of horrific political violence there. Romero was evangelized by those experiences; his heart was broken open by the people who came to him day after day to tell of loved ones disappeared, tortured, brutally killed.

*With this people it is not hard to be a good shepherd*, he said -- words that speak directly to our topic today. *They are a people*, he continued, *that impel to their service us who have been called to defend their rights and to be their voice.*

Justice … the heart says…

Romero came to see life through the eyes of the people he accompanied so faithfully. He was drawn into their stories and walked in their shoes. “He examined and judged the systems and structures of Salvadoran society according to what they did to, and what they did or did not do for, these communities. He found the system in El Salvador to be sorely lacking in justice and in need of transformation. And he clearly challenged the powerful people -- even very good friends -- who maintained and/or benefitted from that system.” *(Spirituality of Archbishop Oscar Romero)*

Romero cried out for an end to the repression, an end to the horrific intersection of brutal violence and socio-economic injustice that was structural and systemic in his country at that time.

With Archbishop Romero, the heart says … poverty and repression, death itself, will not have the last word. To give witness to the power of life we are called to work for justice.

If you want peace, work for justice.

Like many of you my heart is pressed up against, reaching out to, broken by so much of what is happening in the world right now.

In Africa and throughout the Middle East the reality is exceedingly painful and very urgent. From Israel and Palestine (particularly Gaza), to Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan to Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey -- horrific violence seems to be spreading like a tsunami. The edge to this violence takes ones breath away. It makes me think of *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path)
in Peru 20 years ago, but it has much greater access to weapons and money, and a deeply disturbing driving ideology that is attractive to young would-be warriors from around the world.

In Africa, the tsunami of violence is likewise devastating. Sudan and South Sudan are trapped in a web of bloody conflict and political greed that are devouring the hope that was recently so new and fresh. The Central African Republic, Mali, Nigeria, the DR Congo, Yemen, Somalia, Egypt -- all seem bent on utter destruction.

The scenes and stories are heart-wrenching, literally … … a Dominican sister from Mosul searching for her lost family … a mother in Gaza holding the body of her one year old child … the parents of the journalists beheaded by ISIS … the Syrian refugees crowded into a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut … thousands of Ysidi women kidnapped.

Justice, the heart says. What is justice in the context of such violence? What is justice for the Christians in Mosul and Qaraqosh; what is justice for the Ysidis? What is justice for the Syrian refugees? Once our hearts are broken open by the stories we hear and the reality we see or live, a fair question, I think, is how do we get our arms around the challenges we face? Where do we begin?

The heart says … every human life has dignity and value in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. To honor the value of every human life we are called to work for a just peace -- for holistic, inclusive peace that is rooted in justice.

We all know missioners -- some of them sitting in this room -- whose hearts are full of compassion; whose lives bear witness to the power of love. You have served in Cambodia and El Salvador, Bosnia and Colombia, Guatemala, South Africa, Peru and Rwanda -- where atrocities and suffering do not, will not have the last word -- where ordinary people, often led by people of faith, insisted that justice be done, and where slow, often painful processes have, with mixed success, begun to birth a just peace.

It is a great challenge to wrap our arms around both the stories and the roots … the local and the global … the human and the whole earth community.

At this point in history, war and violent conflict seem to be claiming the headlines, but violence and war are intrinsically interconnected with poverty and threats to the survival of our planet. Wherever you begin, as you approach the root causes of a given injustice, you will encounter the other two. War and unrelenting violence are major contributors to poverty and social dislocation, as well as to environmental destruction and climate change. Extreme poverty, huge gaps between the rich world and those who are excluded or impoverished help set the stage for violent conflict and war, as does the fact that millions of young people -- including those who are well educated -- cannot find a decent job and have no sense that they will have a meaningful future. I know it is simplistic to say this, but I don’t think it is irrelevant: If you assume you will be killed by a rival gang before you are 20 years old or that you and your family, guilty or not, will be forever in danger of being killed by a drone strike out of the blue -- why not join ISIS and go out in a blaze of glory? To date something like 300 young people from Flanders alone (that’s half of the tiny country of Belgium) have gone to Syria or Iraq to join ISIS.
Why do those in power, even good people in power -- seem unable to listen to their own hearts crying out for justice when they see the devastation and the danger? Your experience -- the stories that you share -- can help them understand that only social justice and right relationships with the rest of creation -- not more war -- can pave the way to peace.

Let me turn for a few minutes to the devastation of Ebola. Some of you may live and work in the affected countries. In many ways the pain there seems beyond human endurance. To have lost a loved one suddenly and then to be told that you could not touch their body to prepare it for burial is unimaginable. At the same time, we have been witness to amazing courage and love. I cannot stop thinking about the doctors and nurses and especially the burial boys -- young men who risk their lives to bury the bodies safely. Many have been ostracized by family and are unable to find a place to live because people are afraid that they carry the virus.

In response to the Ebola crisis, the heart surely says justice. Protracted wars and violent conflict, extreme poverty and public sectors weakened by debt and structural adjustment left Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, the countries most seriously affected by Ebola, extremely vulnerable without an adequate health care system to meet such a serious challenge.

Charity and justice demand that we respond by shoring up the international capacity to help in times of crisis -- but also by addressing the root causes of poverty and violence that exacerbated the crisis.

The world learned a lot about justice in relation to health care through the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Many of you brought the lessons home over and over again -- insisting that every human life is valuable, that every person has a right to access essential life-saving medicines and that their right supersedes the right to profits of pharmaceutical companies. That there is a social mortgage on private property became very clear. Because you knew and loved so many who were dying of AIDS you insisted that international trade agreements and aid programs be more just. You demanded that governments -- our own included -- invest in research and in effective programs for treating those living with HIV and AIDS. You held UNAIDS and WHO and other multilateral agencies to account. That work is not over, but it was a beautiful example of Justice, the heart says …

Faced with deep suffering, our hearts first feel empathy, compassion, hurt, anger, frustration. Our hearts then rightly ask … Why is this happening? How can this be? How can people do this to each other? What can I do?

Empathy, compassion, hurt, anger, frustration is enriched by accompaniment -- people and communities who are suffering become our friends and we can see that they are subjects of their own lives, with all the hopes and fears the journey of life entails. Then compassion and frustration become hope, solidarity, love. What you who have given your lives to accompanying people at the margins of life know is that the first movement of the heart when we begin to see (as Jon Sobrino says) the “real,” has to be sustained and transformed by efforts to see that reality through the eyes and the experience of those harmed by injustice.
We have to keep moving to the margins, crossing borders to know, to feel what reality is like there. Empathy, compassion, hurt, anger, frustration enriched by accompaniment, can then become hope, solidarity and active love.

From that place of hope, solidarity and active love comes the impetus to do justice, but that instinct has to be nurtured, deepened and trained to identify the root causes of specific situations of injustice, of poverty, of war, of ecological destruction. And for those of us who are called by faith to do justice, I believe that the work for justice also has to be informed by faith and tested in community. If the impetus to do justice is not challenged and enriched in these ways, we may be busy; we may even be well informed, but we are much less likely to find answers or contribute to lasting solutions.

We are called to be faithful (as Mother Teresa said), but we also are called to be as effective as we possibly can be in our work for justice, peace and respect for the integrity of creation. That, I think, is the kind of “long haul” commitment for which you missioners are particularly well suited in this age with its instant communications and short term, inadequate solutions that fall far short of doing justice.

In recent months I have spent more time in Central and Eastern Europe than I had previously. As Pax Christi we visited Vukovar, a Croatian town utterly devastated by Serb forces in November 1991. We gathered for prayer in an open field near Vukovar at the site of a massacre where Yugoslav army and Serb paramilitary forces executed 260 of 400 people who had sought refuge in the town's hospital, hoping that they would be evacuated in the presence of neutral observers.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina we visited Srebrenica, to commemorate the slaying of more than 7,000 Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) boys and men -- a massacre perpetrated by Bosnian Serb forces in July 1995. In addition to the killings, more than 20,000 civilians were expelled from the area in yet another example of ethnic cleansing.

In Warsaw and Auschwitz we heard heart-breaking accounts of the holocaust from survivors of that diabolical crusade and we saw powerful evidence of incredible courage, including acts of resistance by hundreds or thousands of prisoners. We know the names of only a few, including Maximilian Kolbe and Roza Robota.

What was most shocking to me as I listened to heart-wrenching story after story was the deep animosity simmering just under the surface in a region of the world that I thought had found peace. Many were still working their way through the horrific wounds of World War II and deep divisions of the Soviet era. When people present at the Pax Christi meeting in Warsaw talked about difficulties in Ukraine and Belarus, I had no sense that an outbreak of war was possible. In Bosnia-Herzegovina it was crystal clear that anger and resentment between the Serbs and Bosniaks that survived the Dayton Accords could reignite conflict, even war, in the former Yugoslavia.

Justice, the heart says … without justice there is no peace. Almost always, the road to sustainable and inclusive justice is long and circuitous, but I still believe it is possible.
In many countries, impunity has slowly given way to truth and accountability. Each step on the journey has been exceedingly difficult. Truth has been elusive, doggedly pursued most often by women -- the co-Madres in El Salvador; the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina; Mothers of the Disappeared in Guatemala; the Women in Black in the former Yugoslavia; the Soldiers’ Mothers in Russia. Bosnians, Serbs and Croats are coming together to insist that the truth be told, that justice be done for those who were killed -- that the long process of reconciliation begin. Almost always the road to justice and reconciliation has been long and very hard.

What’s more, we live in a time that is breathtakingly complex. We are just beginning to understand the immense beauty, order, and diversity of the universe in which we live. Even as we struggle to respond with integrity to the heart wrenching realities we encounter every day, we are increasingly aware that the struggles of the human community for justice and peace are intrinsically interconnected with the struggles of the earth community for survival.

It is easy for me to be captured by the big picture -- the new cosmology, the mega-threats, the policy debate. So I owe all of you a huge debt of gratitude. The grounding that you who are in mission bring is essential -- whether from the margins here or overseas. The challenge before all of us is to connect the two -- the stories rooted in realities at the margins of life and the most at risk places on the planet -- and the big picture theological reflection and deep socio-political-economic-ecological analysis that enables us to grasp the possibility of transformation and potential routes to making transformation a reality.

You have listened to and yourself lived the stories inside and underneath -- at the very heart of the news that floods out and permeates the warp and woof of life every minute of every day. You bring home those stories -- stories of violence and courage, horrific suffering and hope, creativity and determination. You bring the stories home because you have been forever changed by your experience in mission and your heart impels you to do something about the poverty, war, environmental destruction you saw.

The heart says justice …

For over 30 years I have been standing in this space where the heart is deeply touched and we are impelled to ask -- given this experience or that story or this amazing relationship with someone living on the margins of survival, what can I do? How do I work for justice? And what is justice in this context or that situation?

Like you I am still asking the questions. That, in fact, is my most honest conclusion. As we have been challenged to do by every thoughtful theologian, social analyst and community organizer -- ask why. Tell the stories that burn in your hearts over and over, and every time ask “why?” Why are there poverty and war and ecological devastation? Where are decisions being made that will make a difference? And how can I tell this story that is burning in my heart where it will touch another’s heart, help another understand, move our world to a more just and sustainable place?

There is a tremendous gulf between what ordinary people in the US think about and the great needs of our times. There is a crying need for stories, but not ONLY for stories. Thoughtful
questions have to accompany the stories -- questions guided by faith, by Scripture, by the best of our Catholic tradition of rich social analysis and by reality itself that help us see what we must do.

Years ago in *The Soul of Politics*, my friend Jim Wallis wrote:

> At times I think the truest image of God today is a black inner-city grandmother in the United States or a mother of the disappeared in Argentina or the women who wake up early to make tortillas in refugee camps. They all weep for their children, and in their compassionate tears arises the political action that changes the world. The mothers show us that it is the experience of touching the pain of others that is the key to change.

Day after day, year after year, you who have given your lives to mission touch the pain of others -- the pain of the human community and the earth community that is the key to deep and lasting change toward a more just and peacefule world. As one who has so often been guest in the sacred places you regularly inhabit, all I really can say is thank you and adelante!