

My experience of Nonviolence and peace in Tanzania

Personally I have hardly lived in an extreme violent situation, not only because I was born and grew up in Tanzania – a country which many people consider as peaceful in comparison to other neighboring countries which have lived in wars for many years. It's not because Tanzania has never been in war, there have been wars one of those being a war with Uganda during the rule Iddi Amin Dada in Uganda. While this war was going on, affecting my home village as well, I didn't live it on myself because I was in a school located about 900 kilometers away. I remember the anguish and anxiety among the people including myself, during the period of hostilities (1979-1984). Now I live and work in Italy where I have spent more than half of my time in ministry, a country which enjoys peace although there have been situations of violence like red Brigade and Mafia. My considerations will be based on my experience as a Tanzanian.

I look at peace and nonviolence from the social, political and economic realities of my country Tanzania. A United Republic (mainland Tanganyika and islands Zanzibar) which attained its political independence in 1961 without bloodshed. Socially Tanzania is a solidly unified country thanks to Julius Nyerere's 24 years government putting together more than 120 distinct ethnic groups; using the same language which initially adopted "Ujamaa" – a kind of African socialism based on traditional solidarism. Unfortunately Tanzania is one of the poorest countries in the world despite of it numerous natural resources. Now it ranks first among the most corrupt countries in the whole world.

If you conceive peace and nonviolence as a condition under which human life is respected, defended and protected, you will obviously conclude that eventually what people see as peace in Tanzania is in fact a negative peace i.e. the fact that there is no active war going on there. I understand that even this type of peace is necessary in order to create a minimum of order required for development of human life, but peace is not merely the absence of war (Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 2304).

I would like to underline some few historical facts that show how precarious is negative peace. The tensions between Moslems and the government forces at Mwembechai – Dar-es-salaam and the casualties that were caused by it; the political tension after the 1995, 2000 and 2005 presidential elections in Zanzibar, speak louder than words. Our political leaders try to find the "witch" outside our country every time such incidents take place, but the truth remains that the root causes of all this are endemic in our social, political and economic structures. If you don't uproot the causes of discord, tensions and injustices you cannot expect real peace. On May 21, 1996 a ferry capable of carrying 850 tons of cargo and 430 passengers sank near Mwanza port arriving from Bukoba killing about 800 people. After that terrible event in the history of the nation the captain of the ferry and eight senior officials of Tanzania Railways Corporations Marine department were charged in court for murder and the commission of inquiry was appointed by the Prime Minister to investigate their case, up to this date nobody has ever been held accountable for such a tragedy. After that event others similar negligence caused tragedies continued to happen: the Ifakara ferry accident (2002), Dodoma train accident (2002) prisoners sacrificed in Mbeya due to negligence and irresponsibility of the police and judicial system: the list can still go on and on.

Perhaps the point I am trying to make is that Nonviolence and peace is a process that needs cultivation within the social, political and economic fabrics of society. It is about promoting, defending and restoring fundamental human dignity through a democratic process. The political situation that has recently been going on in Zanzibar, for instance, where the ruling party (Chama Cha Mapinduzi) has been conducting blatant electoral fraud each time Tanzania hold political election, is not helping the country to build peace. Religious tensions that have repeatedly occurred can best be addressed through effort reconciliation. There have been a huge growth of the gap between rich and poor in East Africa and Tanzania is particularly leading because of failure to address good governance challenges that are mainly a result of corruption and poor use of national resources.

We cannot go on boasting for the absence of war in Tanzania while we will continue mourning for those innumerable lives that are taken every year in various ways because of negligence and irresponsibility. While in our neighboring countries such as Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo people die by arms, in Tanzania people continue to die by the arms of injustices and irresponsibility. There is a terrifying culture of resignation among the people of Tanzania; very few are able to react to such situation. Because of corruption, sabotage of public resources, excessive bureaucracy, open injustices and criminal acts, people have lost confidence, not only in politics, but also with themselves. Here is where I feel that there is an urgent need to invest in good governance, eradication of corruption and the Catholic Church in partnership with other stakeholders state and religious can play a big role. My experience of ministry among the youth as patron of pro life movements of secondary schools in Morogoro (2003-2006) tell me that if we want to build positive peace we need to begin by formation for right conscience and civil righteousness.

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