Human Rights --- A Simmering Pot

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Getting a letter here in Switzerland at the end of last May was a surprise. It was a journey into the past. Usually, my contact with people is through e-mail, Skype, texting or phone. Electronic gadgets have replaced the post. This was the first letter I received since coming to Geneva… a sign of the changing times! The fact that the letter came from a confrere in America gave my pulse a stir. Could this be the hoped-for financial support for the Vivat project? Alas, it was a request to write for Spiritan Horizons about my experience over the past twelve months. So here I am, at my laptop, scanning my hard drive and trying to make sense of the year gone by.

Into the...

A whole new adventure opened up for me last September with the accreditation badge of Vivat International. When I was asked, a few months previously, to take up the new role of Human Rights lobbyist in Geneva for Vivat, I knew little about human rights, and less about advocacy. Still, I was prepared to give this fresh area of activity a go. At sixty, there is nothing like discovering a new expanse of sea in front of one, inviting you to explore its depths. Yes, in many ways this past year has been like jumping into unknown waters and exploring all the hidden wonders and challenges. So far, it has been an eventful dive, and I’m still in the water, swimming among its murky shadows.

Vivat International will be ten years old in November 2010. While the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS) and the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) are the founders of this new organization, we Spiritans became permanent members in January 2009. Prior to that, we had associate membership for a few years. At present, ten Congregations, mostly missionary, are members of Vivat. As a Non-Government Organization, it is accredited by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. The website: www.vivatinternational.org will give you plenty of information about our membership and work.

For me, the novelty of a NEW role also carried a great sense of freedom. No one had this job before! It was new, a welcome opportunity to think ‘outside the box,’ as the saying goes. That in itself was a challenge as there was no box to fit into or to ‘think outside’ of. The freedom to give shape and direction to


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a new venture is exciting: no living up to the expectations of an established audience, no looking over one’s shoulder to see who is checking on me. It is also a moment for me to check my vision of world and service and to test my own readiness to live out that vision of service that inspires my life. My basic approach has been the Kiss principle – “Keep it Simple, Stupid”.

Finding my way

My best experiences of ministry have been when I have been given a job to do and then allowed to get on with it. In Pakistan I had that experience and now, here again with this job, I had another such opportunity. For the first year I set myself the goal of getting to know in a general way the UN system in Geneva and, more specifically, learning about the Human Rights Council and how it functions. Later I would establish links with people in the field and share with them some of my learning. I proceeded to give my short-term goals my best shot. My initiation into Swiss life was helped by living with two Spiritan confreres, Jean Varone and Patrice Gasser, who had been active for a couple of years in pastoral ministry in the Vernier Commune of Geneva. Our home in Bouchet is convenient to the public transport system, something that is very important for my work.

Focus, Focus, Focus.

In my early days in Geneva, I learned one very good lesson from a Christian brother. Someone had given me his name before leaving Ireland so we arranged to meet. After listening to me patiently as I explained in very vague terms what I PLANNED TO DO, HE pointed out in clear and unambiguous language that I NEEDED TO HAVE A FOCUS.

I discovered that all NGOs have a clear mandate. Some concentrate on training, others on policy formation or report writing. The smaller ones will focus on one issue, such as disability, development or formal education—to name a few. This specific focus enables them to become more professional in their chosen subject. This is how they have chosen to work, and by doing so they are providing what the UN system calls “added value.” As you can see, a new terminology began to creep into my life.

In the absence of a readymade office in the city, I decided to work with a laptop on a daily basis. With this mobile office tucked into my knapsack, I began to attend meetings in Room XX of the Palais des Nations, the principal UN building in Geneva. (There are basic facilities for laptop use in the chamber—but not up to
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21st Century standards.) This was to be my centre of operations for many weeks during the year. This is where the Human Rights Council (HRC) meets three times during the year, having two 3 week and one 4 week session in all. The meetings of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) are also held in this room. All the heavy jelly discussions regarding Human Rights are conducted within this circular space. There are many different conference rooms within these buildings where a great variety of multi-lateral negotiations and decisions take place. The following two websites will give you a good introduction to the HRC and UPR listed above. http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/ http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/UPRMain.aspx

A tentative start

For the first year I was working alone, making the introductions, contacting other NGOs (secular and religious), taking initiatives, and deciding where to put my energies. There were many helpful voices along the way. It was usually the most recent arrivals who were prepared to sit and share the difficulties, frustrations and challenges they were facing. Mandat, a Swiss government funded NGO, has been the most supportive, offering helpful information on getting settled in this multinational city and learning how to negotiate the complex UN system. Not all NGOs have a backup office like Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and International Federation for Human Rights. With other Catholic NGOs, such as Pax Romana and Franciscan International, I was able to have a few meetings during the winter months, where we shared some of our questions and learning. I have also been involved in the organizing of a monthly meeting of Catholic religious working at the UN in Geneva. These gatherings have been much appreciated by all involved.

The positive aspect of not having an office is the great flexibility it gave me to be out and about a lot more than if I had a fixed location where I would meet people. It usually meant that I arranged to meet people in the cafeteria at the UN building or some other public place convenient to both of us. Another benefit was that my time was not taken up with a lot of administrative work related to maintaining an office. It is possible to work in such a way while I am on my own. Rather than a daily trip to the office, I was making a journey to a meeting room in the Nations building, going to another conference centre or spending time in the extensive library at the UN.
Inter Mutanda Constantia...

The setting for my work is very different from the Pakistani towns and villages of South Punjab and North Sindh, where I learned about extreme poverty and oppression over many years. Exploitation and a total lack of concern for the rights of the people were and probably still are ingrained practices among the feudal class of the Indus plains. And there are not many working to change that situation. Child labour, violence against women and the inadequacies of health and educational facilities were so widespread that they were an accepted part of life. Too many people are still struggling for survival while too few concern themselves with the common good. I am hoping that these same struggles of the weakest and poorest in society would inspire my work here. Working among state representatives and professionals in the field of diplomacy is not the easiest context for someone like myself. I feel an uneasiness about their secure and comfortable lifestyle while trying to encourage them to address the injustices in their countries.

A few weeks ago I heard a longtime Swiss campaigner for human rights compare the Human Rights Council meeting to a Liturgy—a place you go regularly, a place where you meet your friends, share stories, enjoy their company, hear a lot of words, don’t remember anything and nothing changes as a result. This may be a cynical view of the proceedings, but no doubt it sums up accurately how some members of the house relate to events there. They know nothing about victims of human rights violations, have no knowledge of or interest in the subject of Human Rights and have never dreamed of changing the situation. They have a duty to represent their country at this body, and they will do so with politeness, charm and efficiency.

For whatever reason, the Catholic Church has in the past been cautious when it comes to the work of promoting Human Rights. It seems that it was easier to be involved in works of charity and establishing institutions for health and education than to campaign with and for those who were denied their rights. Is the Human Rights movement too questioning of the status quo for the Church? Is it seen as too confrontational? Might involvement in this important area of human activity be too much of a challenge to the Church itself? The reluctance of the Church to be involved in the murky political world of international relations may have many causes. These days that situation is changing fast and may continue to do so over the coming years. There are now several religious congregations...
engaged in advocacy for the rights of people around the world. The Holy See itself has an observer seat at the Human Rights Council.

The UN System—A muddle seeking clarity?

At first contact, the world of the UN sounds very complex and complicated. But first impressions can change. With some patience, study and reading I have come to have a clearer picture and a greater appreciation of the system. There are six principal organs in the organization: the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the International Court of Justice and the Secretariat. (The Trusteeship Council is defunct.) This is the basic structure, and all other related bodies fit into this schema. Each section has its own mandate and independence.

Here again a couple of websites can help our understanding of how the UN works. This is the main website, http://www.un.org/, so it is good to start here. When you enter the site, you are welcomed with the words: “United Nations—It’s your world!” And it’s certainly a challenge to make it “our” world! The following site provides an organizational chart of the principal organs. It also lists the bodies under each section and shows how they are interconnected within the UN system: http://www.un.org/aboutun/chart_en.pdf

My World—Human Rights

The Human Rights Council is the main body within the UN system where issues of human rights violations are addressed. Forty-seven state representatives make up this body and are responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights around the world. Vivat International has chosen to locate itself in Geneva to do advocacy work with this council and its related bodies. Human rights is about establishing just and fair relationships between people. It is involved in setting standards for working and collaborating with and among people the world over. It takes time to establish these standards, partly due to the fact that our world is made up of citizens from different socio-economic backgrounds, cultures and religions. They have different histories and values. Discussions and the approach to discussions across all these divides take time to develop. There are no short cuts when it comes to building trust. Awareness about human rights is a process rather than an event, and involves engagement with the various instruments and conventions of the UN Human Rights system. As stated in a recent brochure from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “The
Standing in the square in front of the UN building in Geneva can be a hugely significant experience. As you face the rather unattractive buildings, you look down a colourful avenue of one hundred and ninety-two national flags. Pausing here for a moment, you can sense the seriousness of the task that is undertaken within the assembly halls ahead. On the square itself, there is this very large piece of sculpture, the Broken Chair. It is there to commemorate those who have been injured in landmines. They were painting it recently so my attention was drawn to it once more. The street between the “square with the chair” and the UN building is called Avenue de la Paix (Avenue of Peace). This is noteworthy because one of the founding aims of the UN is to work for the advancement of peace among all peoples around the world.

If you ‘Google’ the words *Human Rights* you will come up with 348,000,000 sites with information on the topic. That was the number last June when I did a trial trawl. Allowing for the rapid multiplication of information on any subject nowadays, the number of related sites will be around half a billion at the moment. How are we to cope with such volumes of information, you may enquire. And do we need to? Can all of it have relevance to our work or lives? This work with secular organizations, and with people who do not necessarily have a faith perspective, demands that we upgrade our learning. The more knowledge we have about human rights, oppression and injustice, the better equipped we may be to engage with them to effect positive change. For those of us who are overwhelmed, there are online resources to help us manage the libraries of information about human rights stored on the net.

**Where are WE?**

As Spiritans, our approach to human rights appears to be ambiguous; we like to benefit from the rights enshrined in our constitution and legal documents, but we are slow to engage with the topic on a sustained basis. Our overall attitude is negative rather than positive. We haven’t made any serious statement of commitment to the promotion of the rights of indigenous peoples, for example. Many confreres work in situations where abuse and violations of human rights is extensive. We work extremely hard in solidarity with the people. But do we speak out sufficiently in their defense? My own experience is that we don’t. We are not opposed to the idea of human rights, but we seem

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happy to have other people do the campaigning and advocacy work. Human rights is about the betterment of the lives of those who are trampled upon in our society—so why are we not more vocal in our denunciation of situations of violations? I am hopeful that our involvement with Vivat will enable us to add our voice to that of the multitude of victims on this ravaged planet. The Distance Learning Project in Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation developed by John Kilcrann with the cooperation of Duquesne University during this past year will, one hopes, provide a major stimulus to all our students in formation to become knowledgeable and skilled in this neglected area. To repeat an old saying: “The Church’s social teaching is its best kept secret.”

Beset by questions

As I have sought to locate myself within this new context of government representatives and international NGOs, I have at times questioned our engagement with this topic. For instance, how interested are we, Spiritans, in human rights? As an international organization, what level of interest do we have in the world of international affairs? When did we last organize a gathering with human rights as its principal focus? When was it an item on the agenda of our meetings, Community, Provincial or at the international level? Worldwide, do we have anyone experienced in the recent human rights movement? Has any confrere obtained a qualification in International Humanitarian Law? How involved are we in seeing that people’s rights are respected and protected? At a local level, are we ready to take a human rights approach to our work? What might this mean for us? How will such a focus change the way we function in the world? How would it impact on our work with children? As a first step, we would need to read the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Knowing about children’s rights is essential if we wish to comply with the standards set out in this Convention. We may have a lot of ground to make up, but let’s make a start.

This absence of human rights on our agenda is surely a major gap in our efforts to position ourselves on the side of the disenfranchised in a globalized world. We talk a good story and we are very involved in development work and education. Are we ready to walk our talk? I think it is time for us to educate ourselves about the UN, its Declarations and Conventions, and make a substantial and enthusiastic contribution to the Human Rights movement.
Changing perceptions

My own impression of the UN has changed in this past year. Prior to coming to Geneva, I considered it to be a large, amorphous body—doing some good work in the area of humanitarian aid, development and peacekeeping operations. It seemed like a big overpaid bureaucracy in need of serious reform. Now I see it as an indispensable organization for the human communities on our planet. Its range of activities is extensive, including serious involvement in setting standards for relations between peoples; its concern for victims of our society is being addressed through the various mechanisms of the Human Rights Council. The Human Rights movement has been mostly a secular enterprise. Since the Second World War, it has developed within the ambit of or closely related to the UN. As such it has been an inter-governmental endeavour, providing a forum for all nations of the world to engage in a conversation about standards and values in the human community. This is one of its strengths, and at the same time, one of its weaknesses. If it didn’t exist we would need to create it; yet it sometimes works against itself, when a political agenda takes over from principled action in favor of the most vulnerable in our society.

The values expressed in the various foundational documents of the Human Rights System are universally accepted. Respect, equality, human dignity, peace and security form the basis of all the Charters, Conventions and treaties that have been developed over the years. These principles and values haven’t fallen from the skies but have been developed slowly over the centuries. In the past 60 years they have been systematized into international and regional human rights instruments. A well-codified system of values needs protection and implementation. This is one of the challenges facing us.

Democracy, for instance, has taken firm root in many countries and cultures, not to the same extent in all. We cannot afford to be casual about this shared value in our midst. We need to develop it where it is weak, protect it where it is threatened and deepen it in nations where it has strong roots. The incessant desire for participation in the decision making process of human affairs is not about to stop at the beginning of the 21st century, yet there is always a need for us to be attentive to ways to improve existing institutions and structures in our world.
Where to begin?

There is need for all of us to concretize our involvement, and so I make a few tentative suggestions about how we may engage with the world of human rights.

Today’s reading from Amos seems like a good place to begin. Amos tried to get the kings and people in authority (of his time) to face up to the reality of their situation. They were tampering with the weights and inflating the price of goods. In our day the banks have caused a financial crisis and governments get the people to pay. Awareness of the realities of our world is a first step. Responding to those realities can lead us to the world of human rights for assistance. The various instruments and standards developed in the area of human rights can be used to address violations and abuses. So, a second step is to become more knowledgeable about the system of treaties and conventions to which we can make an appeal. At a very local level we can write factual and accurate reports about real violations. These materials can be sent to me or to a variety of UN offices here in Geneva. It is important to remember that in all our reporting, we must first protect those who are victims and those who report. We should not put them in danger. Awareness, Knowledge and Reporting are the three steps that I propose. More information on how civil society can engage with the UN can be found online at the following website: http://www.ohchr.org/EN/AboutUs/Pages/CivilSociety.aspx The civil society handbook that can be downloaded from this page has sufficient information in a clear format to engage with the system. If you have questions contact me: geneva@vivatinternational.org

Endword—to begin again.

The 1st Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood.”

(italics mine)

Let me conclude with a quote by Seamus Heaney on this Article. “So even if this FIRST ARTICLE cannot guarantee what it declares, if its writ cannot be made to run in China or Zimbabwe or Guantanamo, it nevertheless gestures so confidently towards what human beings desire that it fortifies a conviction that the desirable can in fact be realized.” (cf: From the Republic of Conscience, page 16.)