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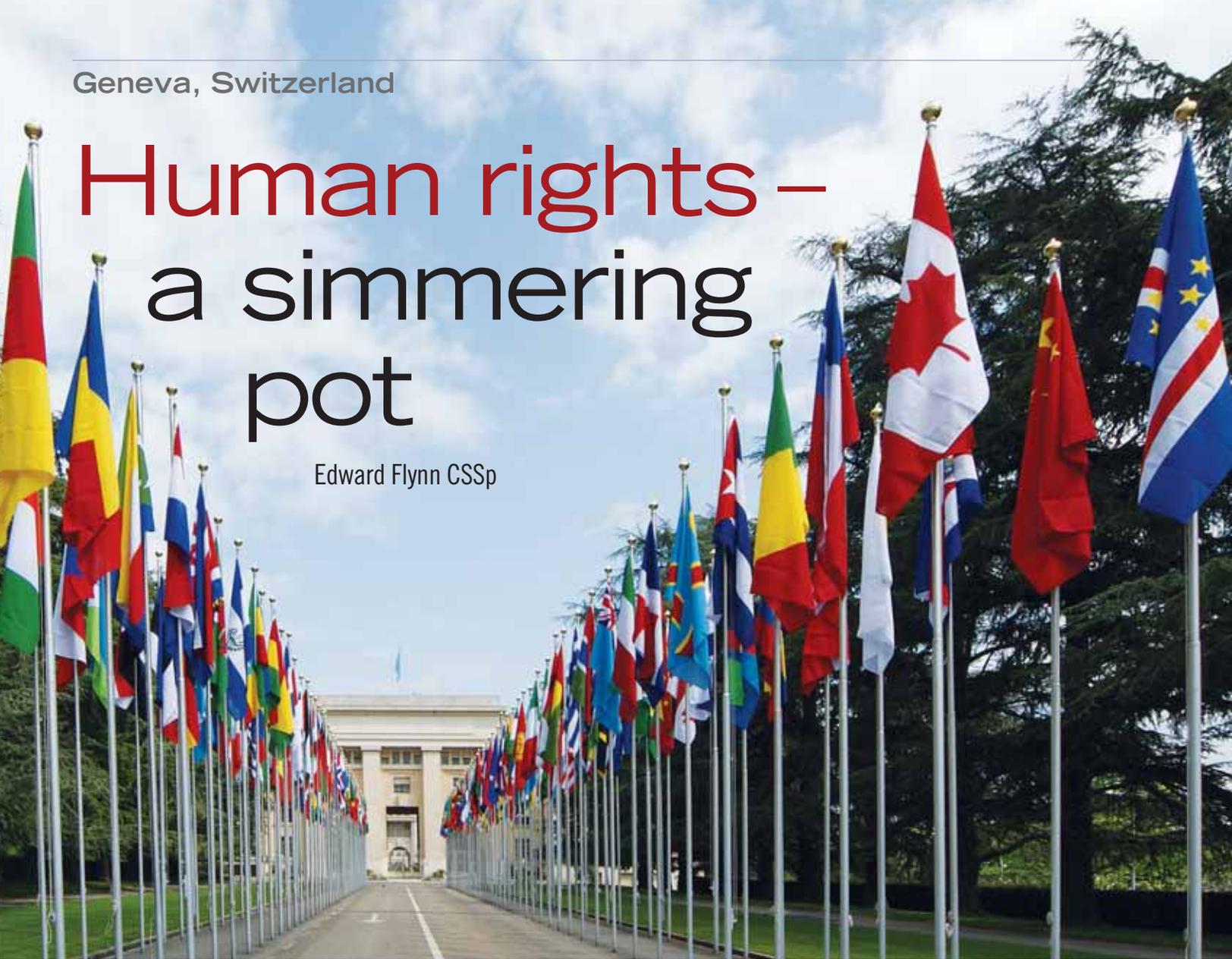
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Human rights – a simmering pot

Edward Flynn CSSp



A whole new adventure opened up for me when I first wore the accreditation badge of VIVAT International. I had taken up my new role as a Human Rights lobbyist in Geneva. I knew little about human rights — and less about advocacy. Still, I was prepared to give this fresh activity a go.

In your 60s there is nothing like discovering a new expanse of sea inviting you to explore its depths. It's like diving into unknown waters and exploring all their hidden wonders and challenges. So far, it has been an eventful dive.

VIVAT (“may s/he live, may all persons live, may all creation live”) is now ten years old and ten religious Congregations, mostly missionary, belong to it. We Spiritans became a permanent member in 2009.

Thinking outside the box

The novelty of a new role gave me a great sense of freedom. No Spiritan had this job before! It was a welcome opportunity

to “think outside the box” — in fact, there was no box to fit into or to think outside of.

That in itself was a challenge: no living up to the expectations of an established audience, no looking over my shoulder to see who was checking on me. Rather, a moment for me to check my vision of world and service and to test my own readiness to live out the vision of service that inspires my life. My basic approach has become the KISS principle — Keep It Simple, Stupid.

Finding my way

As a Spiritan missionary in Pakistan I had been given a job to do and then allowed to get on with it. Now at VIVAT I had another such opportunity.

Early on I learned one very good lesson from a Christian Brother. After listening to me patiently, as I explained in vague terms what I planned to do, he pointed out in clear and unambiguous language that I needed to have a focus. All NGOs

(Non-Governmental Organizations) have a clear mandate — with a specific focus e.g. disability, development, formal education. Their focus enables them to become more professional. They aim to provide what the UN calls “added value.”

My mobile office

I decided to work on a daily basis with a laptop. It became my mobile office tucked into my knapsack. I attended meetings in Room XX of the Palais des Nations, the principal UN building in Geneva. For the first year I worked alone, making introductions, contacting other NGOs, taking initiatives and deciding where to put my energies. Mandat, a Swiss NGO, has been the most supportive, offering helpful information on settling down in this multi-national city and learning how to negotiate the complex UN system. I have also been involved in organizing a monthly meeting of representatives of Catholic religious congregations working at the UN here in Geneva.

Not having an office gave me great flexibility to be out and about — my time was not taken up with a lot of administrative work. I arranged to meet people in the cafeteria at the UN building or some other convenient public place.

The way it was in Pakistan

My current setting is very different from the Pakistan 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.

Child labour, violence against women and inadequate health and educational facilities are an accepted way of life. Too many people are still struggling for survival while too few concern themselves with the common good.

The world of diplomacy

Working among state representatives and professionals in the field of diplomacy is not the easiest context for someone like myself. I feel uneasy about our secure and comfortable lifestyle as I try to encourage them to address the injustice in their countries.

They know nothing about victims of human rights violations, have no knowledge of or interest in human rights and have never dreamed of changing the situation. They have a duty to represent their country at this body and they do so with politeness, charm and efficiency.

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 to regularly, a place where you

meet your friends, share stories, enjoy their company, hear a lot of words, and don't remember anything. The result? Nothing changes.

A Challenge to the Church

In the past, the Catholic Church has been cautious when it came to the work of promoting Human Rights. It was easier to be involved in works of charity, to establish 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? Might involvement in this human activity be too much of a challenge for the Church?

But things are changing fast these days. There are now several religious congregations engaged in advocacy for the rights of people around the world. Such advocacy is about establishing just and fair relationships between people. So VIVAT International has chosen to locate itself in Geneva to do advocacy work with the Human Rights Council.

Standing in the square in front of the UN building in Geneva can be a highly significant experience. You look down a colourful avenue of 192 national flags. On the square itself there is a very large piece of sculpture, The Broken Chair. It commemorates those injured by landmines. The street between “the square with the chair” and the UN building is called Avenue de la Paix: one of the UN's founding aims was to work for the advancement of peace among all peoples.

The more knowledge we have about human rights, oppression and injustice the better equipped we are to engage with others to effect positive change.

Where are we Spiritans?

The Spiritan approach to human rights appears somewhat ambiguous. Our overall attitude is negative rather than positive. We work extremely hard in solidarity with people who suffer from abuse and violations of human rights. But do we speak out sufficiently in their defence? Are we happy to have other people do the campaigning and advocacy? Why are we not more vocal in our denunciation of situations of violence?

As an international organization, what level of interest do we have in the world of international affairs? How involved are we in seeing that people's rights are respected and protected? How would such a focus change the way we function in the world? How would it impact on our own work with children?

We have a lot of ground to make up. Let's make a start. ■



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