

# Let us live!

A reflection on violent attacks on innocent civilians  
as a spinoff of armed struggle  
and proposals from a Christian standpoint



Under the direction of Bernard Ugeux M.Afr.

Preface by Veronique Margron op

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Strategy Group on Health and Healing  
(COE-WCC-Geneva – Difäm-Tübingen).***

## Participants

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Mr. Didier **Bimule Buhendwa**, qualified in Law, specialising in Public Law. Has post-university training in Transformation of conflicts, Education for Peace, and Good Government. He is an advocate for Human and Economic rights. He works in the Network for Organisational Innovation of the Church of Christ in the Congo (a consortium of Protestant Churches) and represents them.

Mrs. Marie-Noël **Cikuru**, directress of the ONG « Action for Hope » at Bukavu (Congolese Organisation at the service of populations which are survivors of conflicts). Has worked at the OLAME Centre, in the Service for Listening to and Accompanying Traumatized Women. Has a diploma from Italy in religious and human sciences.

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Fr Jean-Baptiste **Kabazane**, a diocesan priest, diocesan animator for the Pastoral of health care and chaplain to the provincial referral hospital of Bukavu. Launched the initiative « Helping hands », to give health insurance to the poor.

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*(in chronological order of the meetings)*

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***He has shown you, O man, what is good:  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness  
and to walk humbly with your God.***

***Micah 6, 8***

## **Preface**

*« From where will come my help? »*

An experience which was as much human as faith-related—or, rather, an event which made an indelible impression on me—has spurred me on.

Over the summer, 13 people, men and women, Congolese and European—myself included—spent two weeks together in Bukavu, in southern Kivu which is in the eastern DRC. It was in a place where three murderous wars had raged throughout the last 20 years. Armed groups there terrorise a population which is forced to endure miserable conditions of life, while the powerful and the traffickers enrich themselves more and more, plundering a land which is rich in deposits of gold. As if that list were not long enough, crimes, torture, sexual mutilation—things one would not even dare to describe on one's return to Europe—are inflicted on women, on girls of every age and even on grandmothers.

All this is happening in the heart of magnificent landscapes endowed with a temperate climate, with prosperous earth which could give every family a peaceful livelihood.

Torn between anger, shock and bitterness, I do not know which to choose. All three, most likely.

The horror of one day was continually overtaken by the even worse horror of the next.

Those innocent faces, ravaged by pain, sorrow, sadness and incomprehension, torment me. I agonise over two questions:

How can one still believe in man? The person who knowingly does evil for the sake of evil, in order to destroy the very core of a person's being, the deepest expression of their life, their future, their integral worth.

But equally, how can one continue to believe in God? God is the one of whom we say that his love is stronger than death, that he has created us human beings in his image of goodness.

The credibility of God is put in question as radically as that of the human being.

How can one dare to think and live hope at the heart of a land so devastated by humans? It is a wasteland out of which rise up the mournful cries of these martyred children. My spirit and my soul seem totally lost as this pain tears my heart apart.

*From where will help come to me?*

It has come to me from catching glimpses of other faces, and they are unforgettable also. I have seen the faces of men and women who are saving the humanity of humankind. They listen to the word that cannot be spoken; they « repair » and care for the wound that appears impossible to heal. They rise up like free men and women while the butchering executioners' prowl abroad and among them. They confront the intolerable, exhausted but resisting pure evil. Without pausing to rest, they carry and support children, women, men and families. They steer them towards life in all their fearfulness and chaotic confusion. They are there, goldsmiths of goodness in flesh and spirit, doctors, psychologists, listeners, carers, friends. They are warriors fighting with bare hands against the power of the fire of evil which wears the mask of a foul beast. These fragile beings—and with them an army of peace-loving nameless men and women who risk their lives to protect a wife, a neighbour, a child—lead me back towards the goodness which pulsates unceasingly in the blood, towards a justice which refuses to lower its eyes before evil, towards our shared humanity which demands that we will never put up with the ugliness of what is before us—shameful and indefensible.

Their faith in God is in turmoil and shaken. Their faith in humanity also. But in the deep darkness of doubt they refuse to give up and they go forward with a prayer in their hearts. They put their trust in a loving God in spite of everything. And they count on us. In spite of everything.

It is these faces which give us the courage to face up to this evil where we are and allow us to believe in and give thanks for the grace of loving a God who risked being vulnerable and saved us through love. If these do not walk away, how can I? No more than you can, dear friend who are reading this?

Today the all-important duty is to witness to them. It is to give flesh to our meetings, to our arduous attempts to think through our responses. It means being engaged in taking steps towards having a respectful and sensitive conversation—through writing—with victims who have been attacked, with those close to them, their community and with an even wider circle of people. It is a modest contribution, admittedly, but is offered as a sign that our commitment must go further.

Our heart remains torn apart. And active, because it is impossible and unthinkable to turn the page and forget...

Finally, I myself, like all of us, must beg the God of pity and human beings that we believe we are, to stop this massacre and refuse to be brutes.

Véronique Margron op



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## Foreword

From the beginnings of humankind, in most cultures, woman has had to submit to man. Man often advanced the vulnerability of woman as child bearer and mother to justify the need to protect her, which frequently appears to be more domination than protection. What is more, as we see from stories handed down from antiquity, it was customary for women to be part of the spoils of war which the victors had a right to quite as much as territory conquered and the fruits of plunder. The 20th century has progressed no further in this regard, as the attitude of the various victors in two world wars has shown. Violence against women is much of a muchness in both the West and the East<sup>1</sup>. More recently, both the events in Kosovo and the genocide in Rwanda have shown, that it is above all in the context of armed conflicts, that women and children are the first victims of violence. Since 1994 the countries in the Great Lakes of Africa have been the theatre of a level of violence beyond anything witnessed before. In the DRC for more than the last 15 years women have been not only victims of rape at « gatherings » in the presence of their husband and children, but also tortured. Besides, children and men have not themselves been spared from similar actions which go beyond total barbarity. Since the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and the infiltration of the perpetrators into the Congo, crimes of violence, sexual and otherwise, have gone beyond anything one could imagine.

The Churches and NGOs denounce violations of human rights and organise support networks for victims. They can only do so to the extent that victims themselves dare to go public, despite the fear that they will be rejected by their spouses and stigmatised by their community. And this is precisely the problem and allows violent attacks to proliferate: the silence of the very numerous victims and the quasi general impunity of the perpetrators. In those societies which are very largely Christian, believers need to have points of reference in both pastoral and ethical fields. Whatever the reasons, the Churches are seen by the faithful to be too cautious in dealing with all this cruelty, suffering and banality of horror. They are lacking in a point of reference confronted with this absolute evil which has gone on for so long in the whole Eastern Congo. In fact the victims of all this violence include children and men as well as women. The perpetrators themselves are often wounded and manipulated people.

This is the reason why a small group of Christians (Christian Group for Reflection and Action), made up of Protestants and Catholics, gathered together from the 17th to the 27th of July in Bukavu, in the eastern DRC, to reflect together on what message they could bring to communities, victims and perpetrators, as well as what Christian attitudes they could highlight.

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<sup>1</sup> We remember the gang rape perpetrated by the Japanese Army in Nanking (1937).

The meeting was supported by the M. Afr. Society and the World Council of Churches (WCC<sup>2</sup>), with the support of local Churches, both Catholic and Protestant. The working group—restricted by agreement—was made up of 12 persons, almost equally men and women, laypeople and religious, Congolese and expatriates (French, Malian and Belgian). Almost all the university personnel among them and those involved in the work of receiving and listening to victims had experience on the ground in Africa or Europe. The various disciplines represented were medicine, psychology, sociology, anthropology, law and moral and pastoral theology, not to mention a variety of expertise in the field of receiving and accompanying victims of trauma, as well as making communities more aware of the issues<sup>3</sup> involved.

The work proceeded in three stages. The first one lasted a year. The future participants received ten files about the situation of violence in the Great Lake areas. The files bore on studies about cases of violent atrocities, their causes, the behaviour of the regular Congolese army, trafficking of minors in the region, the causes of the atrocities in the view of the local population, texts from the French Secours Catholique (2009 colloquium in Paris<sup>4</sup>), from the EOC, together with theological memoranda by different authors, etc.

The second step consisted of four days of « exposure » on the ground, going to meet persons involved in the reception and care of victims as well as in measures of prevention. This meant going to the Protestant general hospital, to the Catholic psychiatric center, to centers for listening to victims... The experts just as importantly met with the participants to explain the situation of the country and the action taken by the diocesan JP commission of the Catholic Church. This was a very rich time through the discovery of immense and sometimes harrowing dedication, listening to the cry of activists involved over the last 15 years: « that's enough! It's far too much ». There was also their entreaty to no longer limit help to caring for victims but go much further and face the real causes and deep roots of the evil. Their expectations for the Churches were expressed in a heart-rending way, for the Churches stand for a network of moral, social and spiritual influence of incalculable value in these regions of deep Christian belief<sup>5</sup>.

The third stage consisted in a week's work to come up with a Christian declaration of hope, constructive attitudes of compassion and prevention, as well as denunciation in the name of the Gospel. Interchange of personal work between small groups and the big group led to the production of a draft document intended for communities and for religious authorities. It was a kind of « toolbox » for reflection and action. One will find in it a range of personal letters both to God and to victims, to the criminal perpetrators of violence and to the various activists against violence. Then follow proposals for action for Christian communities, suggestions about attitudes to be adopted by religious, as well as files on sensitive ethical themes like conscience, dignity, purity, the will of God, etc. While rooted in the concrete experience of continuing violence and

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<sup>2</sup> *Strategy Group on Health and Healing*

<sup>3</sup> [www.bethasda.org](http://www.bethasda.org) , [www.ifhim.ca](http://www.ifhim.ca)

<sup>4</sup> A member of the Preparatory group of the Colloquium attends the Bukavu Meeting.

<sup>5</sup> There is a shortage of statement from the Catholic Church about this topic at the African and the international levels.

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the general traumatised state of society in East Congo, the documents look much further, however. They want to bring help and support to all persons in the world faced with violence, especially the violence that follows in the wake of situations of armed conflict<sup>6</sup>. This is why the working group would hope that many people in the world will get a copy of their work and will benefit from it, both for themselves and in their struggle, so that violence against vulnerable people can be brought to an end and a true peace be put in place in our societies, a peace that cannot be kept separate from justice towards women. This is why Christians are called on to have the courage to perform prophetic actions over and above the numerous and indispensable gestures of compassion and consolation which are already to be found today. Such prophetic actions will be fruits of solidarity and can sometimes have an overwhelming impact on the lives of those most affected by these never-ending tragedies.

My deep appreciation goes to all the participants who—with a heart and a half—interrupted their activities for two weeks to commit themselves with such conviction to our encounter for reflection and action, especially those who came from far away. They have also contributed to the editing of this document which is a collective enterprise.

Bukavu-Rome, October 12, 2012<sup>7</sup>,

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**Since the aim of this publication is to help everyone concerned with victims of violence, particularly women and in the context of armed conflict, it can be freely reproduced and distributed. If extracts are used in other publications, we would be grateful if the source were acknowledged.**

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<sup>6</sup> The results of the Bukavu meeting are published in French, English and local African languages like Swahili. They are destined to support other churches of countries in the world suffering from the same violence. **This publication is a contribution to the 125th Anniversary of the Anti-Slavery Campaign of Cardinal Lavigerie.**

<sup>7</sup> 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the opening of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Ecumenical Council.

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## Introduction

Addressed to Church leaders

### *A never-ending tragedy*

For over 15 years the Eastern DRC has been ravaged by endless conflicts and the inhabitants are convinced that the war is continuing, despite official talk of a post-conflict period.

Throughout all this time, a countless flood of victims have fled home, fields or workplace to find refuge « elsewhere »... and have done so sometimes several times repeatedly in some years. Not only this, they have nothing any more, but during these repeated exiles they are exploited in their extreme weakness. All the statistics show that it is women and children who are most affected, even if men too are victims of the situation. Everyone falls victim to violent aggression, when uprooted and in the places where they take refuge. The inhabitants of villages and neighbourhoods, as well as members of Christian communities, who showed themselves welcoming at the start, no longer have the wherewithal to manage displaced people decently and feel threatened. The refugees have no other future than to beg from Caritas or NGOs, who have more or less lost interest in them.

Besides the fragility of the displaced people, there is the situation of those who have remained and try to survive for good or ill. In certain zones they are permanent prey for all sorts of armed men in uniform, who come from a whole host of groups, including the Mai-Mai<sup>8</sup> and FARDC<sup>9</sup>, made up however of sons of the soil. The most serious issue is that women are the first targets of this violent aggression. They are not only raped, but gang raped by groups of men, most of the time in front of their husband and children, who are obliged to be witnesses of these horrific scenes. Women's torture involves also their reproductive organs. Sometimes the husband is assassinated, the girls abducted as sexual slaves and, to finish with, all their property is pillaged and their dwelling destroyed. These horrible deeds have been repeated for the last 15 years and more. Families, communities, culture, social life, everything has been destroyed by this kind of behaviour. One cannot stop thinking that, on the part of certain assailants, the aim is to erode the honour of the husband, to destroy the family, its dignity and all moral values. It is a process of dehumanisation which wrecks everything... Creation itself is no more! No doubt, the authors of this mayhem do not realise that they are the first to be affected themselves by this dehumanisation which they are inflicting on others. Some of them, moreover, are themselves also victims of acts of violence committed by their armed group and are compelled to act in the same way.

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<sup>8</sup> Self-defense Armed groups which became as violent as their enemies.

<sup>9</sup> Congolese National Army

What makes the victims'suffering worse, especially that of women and girls, are the feelings of guilt and blemish. There is also the fear of being stigmatised by the family, the social group or even the Christian community. There is also the painful question of what decision to take about pregnancy resulting from rape. They are confronted with a choice where they are alone with their conscience, are ill prepared for that, and they will carry the consequences for their whole life. Some bring a child into the world whose father is completely unknown. Often they do not feel themselves backed up by their Church but pressured or judged... Added to this turmoil is the shame and fear that the husband experiences: shame if he was present at the moment of the horrible happening and did nothing or did not dare do anything, fear of contamination by STD<sup>10</sup> or of having to assume paternity of the child of the rape, the child of a stranger. There is also the trauma experienced by the children who witnessed the rape, that of girls subjected to slavery or boys enrolled by force, without forgetting that of the child of the rape who is often abused and rejected and given no civil status by the father.

### *Tentative answers*

Is there a single family in Eastern Congo that has not been affected in some way, big or small, by this tragedy ? We can look on this whole region as being in a state of post-traumatic stress. What makes the situation even more serious is the quasi-impunity of the perpetrators and the incapacity of the security and justice forces to re-establish peace. *How is it possible that such cruelty and dehumanisation could flourish on such a scale for so many years? So many years, in the face of the almost total indifference of the great world powers?*

For the information about these horrific events is there for all to see and readily available today. The NGOs concerned with human rights (local and international), the experts at the United Nations, the press that specialises in these matters, all speak of them. The statistics are accessible on the internet: the gang leaders names, the mining areas that they control are known; so too are the local, national and international mafia networks that profit from the disorder to enrich themselves at the expense of the population. Plea exists and Diocesan Commissions for Justice and Peace bring to it important and often unpublished elements. One has, however, the impression that there are many people in high places who have a vested interest in maintaining this general disorder.

There is in place, most certainly, an important investment to care for the victims. There are NGOs which bring real support, while other people out there are profiting from the phenomenon of rape to enrich themselves. In the management structures of the Churches there are centers of care, of listening, of welcoming victims which are doing admirable work and doing their best to link psychological help to social and economic support. The full time members of these listening

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<sup>10</sup> STD Sexually Transmitted Diseases.

centers of the Church are truly worn out after the 15 years and more they have invested in this service, while the number of victims appears to be growing. In fact, consequent on the erosion of moral values and the destruction of family structure, sexual violence has become widespread in civil society, including « good families » and schools... and the agents of evangelization themselves are not always beyond all suspicion. Once again, with complete impunity.

« It is all too much », we have heard the carers and welcoming personnel say. How will one find the strength to care for the victims, however, if one does not attack the causes, which for the most part are known?

We have also found that Christian communities themselves are in disarray, although there are many generous persons among them; events have overtaken them and they are sometimes morally disorientated. People speak a lot about « anti-value » in the DRC. On the one hand, people are ill at ease in talking about sexual questions in public (during community gatherings), and on the other hand, people speak of nothing else but of these crimes in houses and neighbourhoods whenever new cases come to light. At the same time victims are stigmatised and many victims (almost half of them in rural areas) do not dare to speak out or seek care for fear of being rejected by their husband or community. The work of detraumatization of children who have been present when terrible things were done to their families is almost totally absent. In short, the whole of everyday life is pervaded by these sexual crimes raining down on them constantly. This results in an indescribable poverty which basic communities cannot bear any longer.

*Confronted with these limited results, an appeal to the Churches...*

When you ask the people: what is left then? They answer: only the Churches, which are so influential in the country, could reverse the trend, for they have moral authority and they are present at every level. But people do not hear the Churches enough. There are papers spread about pleading for the rule of law, they organise groups to act accordingly, or offer care which benefits a certain number of victims who have spoken out. However, strong prophetic words and clear direction are lacking for communities, agents of evangelization, educators, carers...and families. A forceful word of consolation for the victims is indispensable, as well as precise directives about receiving and reintegrating stigmatised persons. Women who have been savaged, men who have been humiliated, children who are in despair or rejected, all need to hear that, in spite of the horror that they have endured and the cruelty inflicted on them by barbaric criminals, God does not abandon them, the community does not reject them, they are unique and irreplaceable. They are not impure, or punished, or guilty. They are victims of crass human idiocy which wounds God himself. « Whatsoever you do to the least of my children... ». And it is not enough just to say it, the Churches must demonstrate it as a community and individually through gestures of compassion, comfort, solidarity, actions for justice *in the name of believing in Jesus Christ*, who is the good shepherd who does not want a single one of his sheep to be lost.



*There is no peace without justice.*

From the moment that Eastern Congo in mass was sucked into this spiral of violence, many Christians, of every confession, have been longing for more support and accompaniment at the level of faith, to be more capable of bringing a word through action of consolation and denunciation. Some ask for more Christian teaching for communities and for all the social and Christian activists who are responding to the consequences of these tragedies. Others have lost their faith because the violence has been too overwhelming and they have felt excluded.

We know that these are sensitive questions. It is not acceptable to speak of sexuality in traditional society or elsewhere in communities, and the clergy (both Catholic and Protestant) are often embarrassed by these questions. But must one allow the butchers to occupy the high ground through their barbaric actions and torture? If there is a risk that by speaking out the Churches will not salvage their own standing politically, is that enough excuse to muzzle the prophets?

In any case, the leaders of the Churches have no other alternative but to speak out a word of consolation or of indignation confronted with these evils, in the name of the Lord and being faithful to the Gospel. There are words being spoken and actions taken already and they are bearing fruit. But a further step must be taken. Many Christians from the different Churches expect the Churches to take a public, official, moral and pastoral stand.

That is why our Christian group for reflection and action, *starting from the tragedy of the Congo, but not limiting ourselves to the upheaval in the Great Lakes*, wishes to bring a little building block to the reflection and action. It is an interdisciplinary, international and ecumenical group and addresses its reflections *to all the Churches and to all men and women of goodwill throughout the world*. It does not set out to give lessons to anyone in particular and marvels at the courage and generosity of so many of the activists in the DRC. So it proposes to join humbly with them to address to their brothers and sisters in the DRC, the Great Lakes and more widely all victims of violence in the world, a word of consolation and of indignation, encouragement and proposals for action, as well as spiritual and theological reflections. The texts can be taken up everywhere where Christians and all those who want the good to prevail are confronted by the same challenges.

Thank you for accepting our fraternal sharing in this spirit.

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Jeremiah 14:17-19

Revised Standard Version (RSV)

<sup>17</sup>“You shall say to them this word:  
‘Let my eyes run down with tears night and day,  
and let them not cease,  
for the virgin daughter of my people is smitten with a great wound,  
with a very grievous blow.  
<sup>18</sup> If I go out into the field,  
behold, those slain by the sword!  
And if I enter the city,  
behold, the diseases of famine!  
For both prophet and priest ply their trade through the land,  
and have no knowledge.”

<sup>19</sup> Hast thou utterly rejected Judah?  
Does thy soul loathe Zion?  
Why hast thou smitten us  
so that there is no healing for us?  
We looked for peace, but no good came;  
for a time of healing, but behold, terror”.

Ezekiel 16:4-6

Revised Standard Version (RSV)

<sup>4</sup> And as for your birth, on the day you were born your navel string was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor swathed with bands. <sup>5</sup> No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you; but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born.

<sup>6</sup> “And when I passed by you, and saw you weltering in your blood, I said to you in your blood,  
‘Live, I said to you ‘live! (Twice in the text).

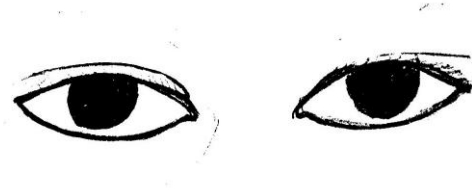
Benedict XVI in *Africae Munus*

56. ... There are still too many practices that debase and degrade women in the name of ancestral tradition. With the Synod Fathers, I urge all Christians to combat all acts of violence against women, speaking out and condemning them. In this area, the conduct of the members of the Church ought to be a model for society as a whole.

57. When I visited Africa, I insisted that: “we must recognize, affirm and defend the equal dignity of man and woman: they are both persons, utterly unique among all the living beings found in the world.” Unfortunately, the evolution of ways of thinking in this area is much too slow. The Church has the duty to contribute to the recognition and liberation of women, following the example of Christ’s own esteem for them (cf. *Mt* 15:21-28; *Lk* 7:36-50; 8:1-3; 10:38-42; *Jn* 4:7-42).

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# LETTERS



## **Introduction to the letters to different categories of people**

It is very hard indeed to find words when one is confronted with situations of injustice and extreme suffering. What can one say when faced with despair, outrage or anguish which would not be superficial or hypocritical? Would one not simply be adding to the deep pain felt by the victims, the communities and sometimes by the very perpetrators themselves?

Maybe that is the reason the Churches find it so hard to express themselves publicly when confronted with such senseless evil, all the more so as the tragedies we are talking about mostly concern sexuality, the taboo subject par excellence.

However, as Christians of various confessions, we have not the right to be silent. It is not enough to denounce this evil in the name of human rights, nor even to take care of the victims physically and psychologically in the name of human and Christian solidarity, however necessary that is. The many actions to allow victims to be reintegrated economically and socially are also indispensable. But that is not enough. Nor is it enough to give back to victims their hope and a taste for life, nor that communities stop stigmatising victims of sexual violence, children who have witnessed it or been born from rape and a rapist father.

Hence we have taken the risk of writing letters to different categories of people, God included, for he also disconcerts us at times. These letters can be read in different ways. You could read them *personally* and allow them to touch you and invite you to act with a view to sharing in a concrete search for solutions. You can also use them in a group: a group of welcome for victims, a group of carers, of chaplains, of pastors or of religious.

You can translate and simplify them in order to use them to galvanise, encourage and mobilise basic communities so that they will better understand the sufferings and challenges facing the Churches and society today. They will then feel stronger in taking up their responsibility and fresh initiatives... All the more so as the criminal perpetrators are just armed men. Nowadays even civilians, and sometimes fathers of families, commit violent actions against women and girls.

You can also put adapted versions of them in the hands of the very people to whom the

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letter is addressed<sup>11</sup>. In this case it is not enough to spread them about as just another document. The letter would need an introduction, together with a personal explanation of why you are giving the letter to this person, and maybe explain also the intention of the group that has written it. It is a very sensitive subject and reactions to certain statements might be too drastic to simply pass on letters without an explanation. It will be sometimes necessary to be actually there when a letter is being read and take note of the various reactions to the content, whether agreeable or painful. Maybe it would be good too to pray with or for the individual who gets the letter, so that he will understand that it is actually in the name of the compassionate Lord that the letter has been sent to him.

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<sup>11</sup> As there are different categories of people one can find some repetitions in the text.

**If a group wants to use a letter at a meeting, here are some questions that might help promote a deeper discussion.**

- To whom is the letter addressed and what does it emphasise?
- What touches me most in this letter?
- What is it asking for?
- Does the Word of God make it clear to us what answer to give?
- How can we respond to the demands being made on us (either personally or in community), e.g. revising our judgments, changing our behaviour, doing something concrete?
- What concrete gesture will I—we—decide to take right now personally or as a community? (What means will we take, who does what, how, when...?).
- What Word of God can I—we—rely on to decide and put a decision into action?
- When and how are we going to evaluate the results of the decisions that we are taking today?
- Other questions...

*Let us, in prayer, present to the Lord, what we have come to live and to decide. Let us rely on his Word to begin to act and to be faithful to our decisions.*

### ***Trust in God was stolen from them...***

It is in the name of victims that we dare to write these lines, victims who no longer feel able to speak of a God who appeared to be absent during their calvary. We would want to stay as close as possible to their words and their weighty questions, hoping fearfully to be faithful to them.

Since the Church is « our mother », as we like to repeat, the pastor, the priest, the bishop are therefore in the position of a parent, father or mother, who is devastated to discover that a member of the family, of the community, of the neighbouring village, has abused his child.

Who can these children of God turn to, these children, women and men who have been abused and sometimes tortured, since the Church has not come to defend them and protect them enough? Who does one turn to if particular Christian communities remain silent, possibly even complicit in criminal violence inflicted by people actively involved in our parishes. Yes, the Church has done a lot. But, faced with this disastrous situation, not enough.

There is something else. In reality for the victims, for all these women, there is a further abyss. What God could they believe in? They have the impression that the God our Churches proclaim has abandoned them; he has turned his face away from them during their calvary. God should be accepted with a faith that has no shadow or doubt. This all-powerful God has simply imploded.

Our faith is for them, as it were, in chaos. Faith is shattered, that faith that consists in handing over one's life placidly to a God who became simply human, one of us, trusting that our Saviour would never forget us.

To what Lord of life and of joy can they still turn to, what trust can they hope to have, when a number of their attackers call themselves Christians?

The predators have stolen God from too many children and women in this country; one can no longer keep silent.

What words, what care and awareness of their situation, what hope can we patiently offer so that these innocent, broken women and children can begin again to believe in goodness in the human heart and in the presence of the loving God who has stooped down low to us in our brokenness?

What trenchant word could cut through like a sword to rip apart a complicit silence, forcefully denouncing this barbaric violence?

It is high time, late as it is, for believers, and Christian leaders first and foremost, to bring all their

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strength to bear on dressing the wounds again and again, but also to rise up as a single body and put solid flesh into our preaching and the God we proclaim.

We are responsible for the face of a God of tenderness and pity, of justice and of peace—a God who is infinitely respectful of the steps each person is taking, of their doubts, their angers and their cries of pain.

Our actions will maybe restore in the victim a faith which sustains her life and allows her to believe in humanity in spite of everything, and maybe in Christ too, the good shepherd.



## ***Letter to God***

*Dear God,*

Forgive me my familiarity. There are times when one no longer has the courage to mouth polite formulas or trite roundabout phrases. Because the time I am living in is burdensome, my life is unique, and most of all because I believe that you will welcome my approaching you with humanity.

You can see what is happening in this world that you love. You have loved this world from its start, a world where your resurrection is a new beginning for every human life. You have seen clearly how tragic the situation in our world is. We are talking about wars, but also about armed groups that never cease to oppress the civilian population in our regions. We are talking too about poverty because they have plundered our belongings and about the corruption of too many of our leaders. As if the list were not long enough, add the sexual violence to which so many children and women are subjected.

*It is all too much. All your children who are victims plead with you. So also do the women and men who are trying so intelligently, with tact and goodness, to give them back some life at least.*

It is yourself who have told us, in your Word, through the life of your Son, that human being, in order to become human, must decide in favour of sharing affirming stances and against violence. It is this decision which allows humankind to rise beyond brutishness.

In our Africa which loves so much to discuss and argue endlessly, we should be used to it; it should be common practice and come easily to us. However, that is not the case.

We are the sad witnesses of that fact in our awareness of the tragedies that our people have been living through for so long. Men, perhaps educated, often indeed having a family, even saying they go to pray in the church, have left aside all justice, concern for the common good and human dignity.

Not content with torturing their victims in the most intimate parts of their bodies, their actions are a living lie to your name and even invoke your name sometimes as an excuse for their murderous cause. Yet you have left us your testament, the Decalogue, which we repeat again and again with our Jewish brothers. It offers us ten clear statements on living under your direction and living among ourselves with mutual respect and harmony. It implores believers not to use the name of God in the cause of evil. *You shall not take my name against your brother.* Nor against your sister, your mother, your daughter or the woman who is your neighbour,

Torn between anger and infinite sadness, I no longer know what saint to turn to and the men of

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the Church do not always give me reassurance. So I prefer to talk to you directly. I have picked that up from a friend of yours who has become something of a friend to myself too: Job. He is the one who dared to say to you, in the midst of unspeakable misfortune: « cursed be the day on which I was born ». So many victims can make that complaint their own.

Dear God, your Son, your only child, who came to gather the little ones together and love them, was put to death because what he said and his way of life did not fit in with the prevailing religious attitudes of the time. He was murdered because he opened up another way to go to you, that of the heart, that of justice and peace, and not the way of purification of the body or sacrifices.

How is it possible, dear God, that we have forgotten that you revealed your power on the seventh day of the creation of the world: in the sweetness of repose and contemplation of a world made for humankind, for woman as much as for man, equal in dignity and worth. It is so true, your strength is not in armies or in the savagery that massacres lives, hopes, futures, but nestles in the quiet goodness of the human heart, entrusting your name to us and the world that you have made. My God, you are a defenseless, unarmed God. Is that why you do not show yourself ? And yet you are our only refuge in distress, our only defender before the enemy and the aggressor.

I beg you, in the name of so many of your children, please stop being silent, please vent your anger on those who are shattering humanity, destroying bodies, hearts, life stories and families. Dear Lord, wake up! Do not abandon us !

Speak!

Speak: give us courage and the boldness of your words and of your Father's heart. Make us return to your true face. Show your true face to the living so that they can really live; show your true face to the very least of your children so that they will be protected, loved, enfolded in your arms.

Our hearts—as indeed our bodies too at times—are bleeding from the wound of our powerlessness. Lift us up so that we can look for justice, practice mercy and love you humbly.

Please forgive me for telling you things you know much better than I do, but your prophets like Job—who « stood alone in speaking well of you » while refusing to give meaning to his sufferings or to confess to a sin that he had not committed—have all led me to be confident that you never tire of listening to our poor tales of woe. For you have decided, in Jesus, that it would be your

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own story of suffering until the end of time. It is a story of too many tears, longing to be finally transformed into joy.

I know that you can work marvels.

Do so now in the name of all your children whose faces are ravaged by suffering and no longer know what the word « hope » means.



## ***A letter to women who have become pregnant after being raped***

I have deep compassion and respect for all of you women who are victims of sexual violence.

I have come to know what you have been subjected to, how wounded and afflicted you have been, deeply bruised at the very core of your being through this violence. At a single blow your life has been turned upside down as you lived through pure horror. I join you in saying emphatically that you did not want this to happen. You bear no responsibility for it. You are victims.

You have been subjected to aggression. You have been ridiculed, humiliated and violently attacked. You have endured unspeakable horror and felt yourselves dirty and tarnished. You are dead, in a way, on the inside.

From now on the trauma of this tragedy is part of your life story and your life. You will never forget. These deep scars will remain with you forever, in your thoughts, in your heart, in your body too.

These men had no right to treat your body as thrash, or steal your intimate self or your integrity. It was a hateful crime. My hope is that they will have to face up to their responsibilities one day and answer for their barbaric and shameful actions.

It will take time, reassuring words and patience, but you are alive, and that life wells up in you and gently reasserts itself. You can put your trust in the life force in you. Even when everything in your life appeared to be dead, crushed, obliterated and destroyed, the shoots of new life reappear out of the ashes. They are most certainly there, calling out to you that a new life is beating strongly in your heart and mind. Step by step you will lift yourself up again and remake your life because you have an inner strength and have kept it alive despite everything you have experienced.

There are those among you who need special care because you have been infected by sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Some are going through terrible psychological suffering such as depression. I beg you, look for help, have yourself taken care of. Do not be afraid: it is not your fault; do not delay.

There are others among you who have become pregnant after being raped. You were afraid of this; you knew it could happen. Perhaps you have lived with this fear in the pit of your stomach. Maybe you strenuously suppressed this fear and pleaded with heaven that it would not happen to you. Yet it has happened and you have to live with it today.

I can well imagine what turmoil you are in. Your mind and thoughts and feelings go over these painful and terrible experiences again and again. You relive them with anger, fear and suffering. You, as the woman that you are, did not choose this, yet there is a child growing within you and you have the heart of a woman and a mother... Within yourself you suffer torture and are torn apart.

What can you make of this life buried inside you, pulsating in your body? I say to you with all the

conviction that I can muster that you are fully entitled to go through a whole gamut of thoughts and feelings about this baby, and no one can sit in judgment over you. No one but yourself can face your situation. No one is authorised to preach to you and tell you what you should do. No one is entitled to moralise about the way a « good » person should handle it.

Various thoughts jostle with each other and race through your mind. Your head and your heart cannot bear it any more. You lean towards one solution, then another. You no longer know what to do. How can you find even a little peace?

If you are at the very beginning of your pregnancy, maybe you ask yourself should you keep this child or not. It is a terrible question and can go completely against your values, your respect for life and your faith in God. Faced with a similar dilemma, I would ask myself the same question, and who could say in all truthfulness what they would do?

Maybe you are carrying this secret desire—often unable to admit that you are entertaining it—to get rid of this growing life in you that you can resent as an intrusion which recalls for you the horror that you have been subjected to, together with the fear that the child will look like your attacker. You can also feel yourself unable to accept the child, care for him, educate him... If that is the case, know that he is in the heart of God and, if you can, entrust him to our God of all tenderness.

In all kinds of ways so many contradictory feelings are swirling about in your head and heart. Because this child is also your flesh and blood. He is part of you and you recognise very well that he is innocent. He has not chosen to come into life like this any more than you have. It is not towards him that you are directing your rage and anger. It is not from him that you are seeking redress.

Or it could be that your pregnancy is advanced. You may have been taken into the forest and only released when you were already several months pregnant. You carry this child, he is there, he is growing, he has taken shape as a human being inside you and you have no other choice than to keep him until you give birth.

Who could say which is the easier decision: to keep or not to keep this child? No one. Maybe the delay gives you just the time you need to accept him and let him become « yours ». You did not choose to have him but maybe you can choose to keep him, in spite of everything and all the uncertainty over the future.

But maybe you have come to a different conclusion: you cannot accept this child who is coming. Your memory of what has happened has left you too traumatised and anxious. You then consider the possibility of handing him over...

In any case, it is important that you should respond to the child and talk to him. Very slowly, at your own pace, you establish a relation with this child in your most intimate self. He is more than the horror you have experienced. He belongs to life itself, with its strength and its frailty. Both of

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you are in the heart of God.

Each story is unique and each person lives through these events in an individual way. Each person responds in a way that she believes possible for her, following her conscience.

I passionately hope that all of us, families, communities and Churches, can respect your decision, no matter what it is.

From the depths of my heart I wish that you have found a place of welcome and acceptance in your suffering and deep confusion, with people to listen to you, respect you, responding with compassion and gentleness. May you know a place where you feel safe and receive comfort and kindness. May you find carers, parents, friends who are by your side at this painful and decisive moment in your life.

Rest assured that I am thinking of you, and as a woman and a mother I keep you in my heart. I trust you.

***Letter from a man of the Church  
to women who have been victims of sexual violence***

To you, Furaha, Faida, Catherine, Neema, Bahati, Nathalie,....

To all of you: mothers, pregnant women, grandmothers, teenagers, little girls, ... you who are also my sisters ...

I am writing to you who were struck one day in your deep intimate self by being violently attacked by one or several men. You who have been victims of rape, torture, humiliation, dishonour— and sometimes paraded as shameless before your very own children... And you too who have been dragged into the forest as sexual slaves, and who have returned from there with a child or with AIDS, and above all with the memory of the horrors visited on you there and still seeing the faces of companions who did not return..

I am reaching out to those of you who have lost your possessions, your family and your reputation. What is more, you feel yourself guilty over what has happened to you, perhaps because your husband has rejected you, public opinion has condemned you or the community has stigmatised you... And you stand there alone, wounded in body and heart, maybe having a child you did not want and who is rejected by others. You do not even know yourselves if you will be able to love him...

There are those among you who still have not dared to talk about what has happened to you and are overwhelmed by physical, moral and psychological suffering... Others have been warmly welcomed in the various caring and listening centers, they have got psychological or material help and that allows them at least to have a supplement to meet their economic needs and those of their children... This is especially important for those who have lost their husband or have been hunted away by him.

In spite of this help, however, your suffering remains immense, as does your loneliness also, for your whole self, and not just your body, has been torn apart... You seem to have lost your identity since you cannot find a place any longer in the family or community. Sometimes you are no longer really the wife any more of the man you love. He was not able to protect you. Sometimes he has hunted you away. And you suffer also from knowing his sense of shame and helplessness as spouse and father. And yet you women are the primary bedrock of a community. You are the carriers of new life, the guardians of values, those who maintain the unity of the family and initiate the children into the riches of culture from the moment they learn to walk.

There are those among you who cried out every day to the « all-powerful » God to intervene on

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your behalf or on behalf of your family, but have finished up by concluding that He is not the protector or good shepherd of your childhood, or the loving master in whom you put your trust. You no longer understand any talk about « the will of God » because you are deeply convinced that our God has to want life and love. It cannot be his will to see his beloved daughters destroyed by the cruel stupidity of men. But what then does he want for these men, for you?

*Confronted with this tragedy, you simply do not understand. You no longer know who you can believe in from now on, or if you have even the right to continue to exist...*

I address myself to you with a heavy heart, I who am a man, a priest, a pastor. When you tell me your story my eyes fill with tears, my heart with shame, my body with anger... How is it possible for human beings to treat other human beings like this, especially those who are physically the weakest, women, girls, children? How can human beings lose their dignity to the extent that they act with a cruelty that no animal would inflict on another animal? Are there men whose behaviour is worse than that of wild animals? When you summon up the courage to trust and can tell of the things they have done to your body, sometimes after raping you, wanting to destroy your femininity and capacity to be a mother, I also want to cry out to heaven : *Lord, where were you ?*

All I simply want to say to you here is that, even if we say in our prayers that God is all-powerful, since he created human beings free, he takes the risk of letting us act, even when we sin and do evil. So he cannot stop men using their freedom to stoop to the most evil actions, denying even their own humanity. When that happens, God suffers with the victims, with the weak and humble ones. He carries no weapon in his hand. On the contrary, he stands there, silent, that is true, but he is within you in your deepest plaintive cry of pain and, in spite of everything, he hears you.

Of course you are entitled to doubt, to be angry, to find your situation incomprehensible, and to be living in the darkest night. The Bible, again and again, portrays men who are believers and who are tortured by doubt or by anger, men like Job, the prophet Jeremiah and so many others. Do not be afraid to face your honest feelings. The Lord accepts them without judging you. His heart goes out to you, longing that you will take another small step towards him, believing that he is quietly there for you in the darkness of your night, loving you passionately. He takes you just as you are. He simply wants you to find peace again in your broken heart. When you are able to take this first step of trust in him, do not hesitate to beg him to give you his peace in your heart.

I must also admit, as a man, that I hardly know how I should reach out to you. I do not want to play the game of being a « Job's comforter »; words can appear so empty. I would just want to open my heart and listen to you with tenderness and compassion. I would want to show my rage and my determination to do whatever I can, concretely, in the Christian community and in society, to enable you to take back your life, your personal worth and your place in society and in the Church.



But I want to tell you also that I feel deeply ashamed when I learn that men like me use their physical strength in such a horrible way. They were given it to work and feed their family, as well as to protect their wife and child. Yet they have used it to destroy life and hope, sometimes a whole people, profiting from the vulnerability of the men and women entrusted to them. I can understand so well that you have lost confidence in men or that a number of you have thought of committing suicide...

I ask you for forgiveness for what men like me made you suffer... I ask for forgiveness for all this brutal and savage cruelty. What is more, I ask for forgiveness because we men, most of the time, have not appreciated your real worth, we do not give you your proper place in the family, in society or the Church. We want to control you and either use you for our pleasure or exploit your courage in finding something to feed your family. I ask you to forgive us men for any injustice and contempt there have been in treating you. You are precious children of God, created by Him in love, chosen by Him to be his presence at our side as life companions with equal worth and rights. We who are men of the Church, priests and pastors, implore you to forgive us for all the times we have imposed our patriarchal ways on you in order to exert power over you and refused you your right to speak up and share in decisions which affected you as much as ourselves. This dominating attitude goes very far back in time and already laid the foundation for the violence that you have had to live through at this period of armed conflict... It is at those times of armed conflict that you have been reduced to objects and prey for the predators that the combatants often are... As if this list were not enough, we are well aware too that even in the city and in families, in schools and sometimes also in Church settings, you can be silently abused and humiliated.

In sharing this sense of shame and of rage with you, I pledge to you my determination to repent in my own name for being complicit in your suffering, but also in the name of the « others » - my brother men and sometimes assassins – hoping that the day will come when they themselves will beg for your forgiveness and will change. I want to assure you that, as much as I can, with the help of the communities and the networks that I know, and above all relying on the grace of God, I am fully determined and committed to do all that is in my power to make sure you get all the help you need. You simply must be helped to find a secure place where you can live and talk openly about what you have been subjected to, so that you can rediscover meaning in your life and a place in society and in the Church.

With my brothers and sisters who are from everywhere, I also want us to attack the deep causes in order to eradicate the violence that is in us and around us, so that all of us can cry out: « such evil, never again! » You are our sisters, our mothers, we need you to be ourselves. Each of us is, for God, a sacred personal story. We are not entitled to forget that.

Thank you for being alive and wanting to continue to live in spite of all you have been through.

## ***To men whose wives have been subjected to violence***

As a woman, wife and mother, as well as a Christian, I would like to tell you how much I think of you and how deeply you are in my heart and thoughts. I do not know if I can put this well, but I imagine or try to imagine how much you have been affected, hurt, humiliated because of the way your wives have been violently molested. I can only sense the outrage, the shame maybe, the helplessness you must have felt confronted with the horror unfolding before your eyes. It is important that you should find places to say what you felt then, in front of these men, in front of your wives and perhaps with your children present. How did you go through it and how are you managing to live today, churned up inside with all these images and emotions? It is good to be able to open up your heart, so as not to keep it buried deep inside yourselves like a poison which would continue to be so destructive. It would be a great relief to you to have someone listen to you and hear you speak your pain.

### **And what can we say about your wives... ?**

You did not know how to protect them from this evil at the time it happened, or were not able. Maybe you feel guilty at having done nothing and feel yourself a failure as men in your role as protector of your wives and children. You were all petrified and, in any case, what could you do against armed men...? I have never had to face that, I can say nothing, I myself would surely be petrified by fear, horror, the terror of facing death... I just do not know how you got through it all...

What is clear to me is that it must be incredibly painful for you as men not to have been able to protect your wives and have to live out each day knowing that you were brutally confronted with your limits and weakness. Maybe that is where your sense of guilt has come from? What would we ourselves have done in such a situation? Who would dare to judge you or throw the first stone? I for one could not do that.

But what can you do about it, since the tragedy and savage violence are a fact? Should you just run away and reject your wives...? Or perhaps we should say to you that, although you were not able to do anything yesterday or did not know how, today you can do it. You can choose to take your responsibility as man and husband and protect your wives. How? By welcoming them, opening up your house and your arms to them, if you can and when you can.

In the name of whom or what are you in fact rejecting them? How can you treat them as being responsible and guilty for something they did not want to happen? How can you have the heart to hunt them away? How could you, how can you, as a man, a husband, as a Christian, pile on even more violence on the violence they have already endured?

They do not expect the worst from you but the best. They still expect it even if you did not manage to protect them, for they do not hold that against you. To welcome them home to you, deeply bruised and broken inside, suffering, wounded: that is what they await from you. That is what your children expect too, that you should stretch out your hand to your wife, to their mother. That is essential for them and nothing else will do. It is the most important and tender thing you can do for them to allow them begin to emerge from this horror and step by step come back to life. No one can do that in your place, it is up to you alone to do it. You have this responsibility—I would almost say the power—to give them justice in a sense right away, recognising that they are victims and that they have lost nothing of their place in the house and that you yourself and the family are there for them as much as ever.

To act in this way, being deeply Christian, deeply human, utterly good and just in your treatment of them, would work wonders also for you in becoming reconciled with yourselves. This would give new heart to your wives and also to yourselves and your children. Doing so will allow your children to find a safe place, your protection and attentiveness to them, after the horror they have witnessed.

Acting like this can allow you to rediscover your place as man, as husband, as father. I am addressing myself to your heart and I believe that you are just and honest enough to sense that what I am saying to you is absolutely right and solidly based.

I do not pretend that what I am proposing to you is particularly easy, and I do not know what your first reaction is in hearing it. My heart and my arms are wide open to anyone who is wounded and is a victim and I appeal, if not to the feminine side of you, at least to the love which you bear for your wives, as well as to your compassion, your sense of justice and your faith.

And without pretending, from my standpoint as a woman, to know exactly what is going on inside you, churned up emotionally as you are continually reminded that your wife has been raped, I dare to put this question to you even though I could not answer it myself: Could you ever justify or explain your rejection of your wife and not taking her back?

### **The future of your relationship**

At the same time I know and recognise that you can have legitimate fears. Maybe first and foremost about contracting sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, etc. It is important to face that fact. One must have the appropriate examinations to detect any problem that could come up and work through these questions, even though they are highly uncomfortable for both you and your wife and for your relationship.

Maybe you did not know what to say to your wife or how to take her after what happened to her. Maybe you do not know how to approach her. Maybe you need more time too to go back to her and open wide your arms and your heart to her, including renewing a sexual life together? She too needs time after what has happened to her.

There are certainly plenty of other things biting at you which I am not aware of. I am ready to hear about them and will try to understand. But I cannot see how all of that could justify you rejecting your wife and chasing her away...

Surely you should open up the house to her, which is her house, and take her in together with your children.

Maybe it would be good to get help in order to understand her and understand what she is going through, even though it is very hard for her to talk to you about it. It would be good to have helped also to face your own suffering, your fears, your difficulty and clumsiness in talking about how you feel. You should not have to wrestle alone with all your fears, your bewilderment and your mental blocks. Maybe it would be worth considering seeing someone as a couple, your wife and yourself together. With the help of such mediation you might be able to begin to listen to each other, hear each other and come closer together. That is my dearest wish for you, for your own good and that of your whole family.

And that brings me to the question of your children who may have seen their mother being raped. It is simply unimaginable, impossible, to leave them to grapple on their own with what they have seen, the traumatised life they have been living since that moment, with the shock at seeing their mother treated in this way.

### **What then can you do, as fathers, for your children?**

It would be a comfort for your children for a start if you took their mother back. How could they possibly understand it if you did not take her back? What kind of man or husband or father would you be then in their eyes? If you were not a person who took care of his wife and children, who would you be? How could your children ever build up a clear human identity as men or women? How could you, and in the name of what, subject your children to the violence involved of seeing their own mother rejected by their father and they themselves rejected in their turn? We would be far away then from the portrait of the father such as the gospel speaks to us about. I believe it is up to you, the fathers, to give your wife her place back, after she has been tossed on to the ground, stripped naked, ridiculed and humiliated under the eyes of your own children. Who but yourself can save her?

You are important for your children; it is you who give them their bearings. Welcoming your spouse back home allows them to realise that they do not have to bury the whole horrible experience in their subconscious and shy away from their mother, because she has still a place, her place, in the family. For us adults, she can be rehabilitated as mother and that is your responsibility before being that of the community.

The responsibility is yours as fathers to reestablish in your children a proper appreciation of their mother by setting her once more at the heart of the family. And if you can, make it clear to them

as well that she is a victim, she has been subjected to treatment that she did not choose. She is not responsible for what happened and continues to suffer because of it. She is still their dear mother, as precious as ever and to be respected as much as before.

You may find it hard to talk about it with your children in these circumstances and perhaps are afraid that you will not find the right words. In that case it would be important to ask for help, but, whatever you do, do not try and cover it up by saying nothing. You must listen to them talking about it and must speak about it to them yourself.

What did they really live through when it was happening; what are they thinking about it now? What have they heard about they saw with their own eyes? Have they ever heard any talk about anything like that having happened before or about the women victims being rejected by everyone? How do they see their mother now? Your children are traumatised, shocked, lost faced with so much violence and horror. These are images they cannot cope with and which haunt them. They need you to help them or find them help.

You have an important responsibility, that of building up your family again, of weaving together again the fabric of the family that others set out to pillage and destroy. It is up to you to make sure that they do not succeed and that your family recaptures a steady balance and harmony. This is a noble cause and a noble task.

### **About the community**

Lastly, I would like to talk to you about communities and about their responsibility. Maybe you are afraid of the finger being pointed at you or at your wife and family and that you will all be judged and rejected. What kind of community would that be? Could you still call it a community...? Could you really call it a humane, Christian community made up of members and families? What is its responsibility for its members? What kind of attitude would be just when one of its members is wounded and suffering? If it is a question of a humane, Christian community, the very minute we use the word community we are talking about being part of one whole, of the same body. We are unique individuals with our differences, but we are members of the same body. Let us take the example of our own body. It is a whole, a unity, each part is important and plays its part in the proper functioning of the whole body. If my hand is hurt, am I going to ignore it or, on the contrary, am I not going to pay extra attention to it and make sure it gets the care it needs to function healthily again... If one of your children is sick or hurt, you are not going to look at him as if it was his own fault or throw him out of the family... no, you will redouble your care for him because he is weaker.

It is the same for your community, if it a genuine one. When your wife or someone else linked to the community is violently attacked in one way or another, the community should be a privileged place of welcome and solace. A genuine community would be attentive and compassionate towards a victim, giving recognition and respect to her as a person and fellow-member, having her unique, specific and personal place. Each member is precious, with her own qualities and

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values and able to contribute towards maintaining balance and harmony in the community. If you reject one of its members you are amputating a part of the body and undoing unity.

I cannot conceive of you, as a man, husband and father, taking part in dismantling this body that you are part of. Your wife and yourself are a cell of this body; your whole family is.

It could also be part of your responsibility as a couple, your wife and yourself, to challenge the community to carry out its basic duties if it has forgotten them.

You have a big job to do, to show that you deserve to be called a real man, and it demands courage and perseverance. You are being asked above all to have respect for all life, your own and the lives of those entrusted to you.

You will get the grace to go through with it.

## ***Letters to children and young people affected by all the violence that has accompanied the wars in the DRC***

*This letter is not like the other ones. It is not meant to be handed directly to children and young people themselves, but to everyone who is dealing with them. It needs to be adapted to the age and sex of the young people, as well as the circumstances they are in. It is also meant for communities. It is a long letter because it is dealing with different categories of children and young people. So it should not be used wholesale or all at once. It can be used bit by bit, depending on the situation of the young person concerned. So it is not a matter of distributing it but being inspired by it in order to have an exchange with a particular child or young person on a very sensitive topic which is often taboo.*

Dear children and teenagers, boys and girls, I know you have either been savagely attacked yourselves or have at least seen such attacks carried out on others.

*You children* have the right to go through childhood laughing and playing, protected by your big brothers and sisters and grown-ups, even if these sometimes ask you, especially the girls, to look after the little children or help in the housework. You have the right to move into the world of the grown-ups little by little, but without being rushed and especially being kept away from all violence, at home, in your neighbourhood as well as at school.

*And you boys and girls* are beginning to discover the world, with its joys and troubles. Sometimes you dream big and think about getting married and preparing for it, as well as what career path you will follow and what you can do for your people and your country. You are entitled to be guided and helped in your development by adults who respect you. They should teach you your rights and your duties. They should open up the big questions of life and love for you step by step as you grow up. You also have the right to be protected from adult violence, both in peacetime and when there is a war on.

It is frightening to think that, right at this very moment of time, *adults are robbing you of your childhood and youth* in the midst of armed conflicts and acts of aggression which are breaking out constantly all around us. At the very time of your life when you are still frail and on a journey of discovery, certain adults attack you violently and draw you into conflicts which do

I would first of all like to turn to those of you, ***children and young people who have been forced to witness horrible things done to your mother*** by men who were often in an armed gang, while your father was absent or unable to protect her. You have seen what they did to your mother by force. Your father and mother privately act like this lovingly because they want to be very close to each other and you are not allowed to look on. Worst of all in what these men did to your mother was that you had to look on and you were terrified. That is a horrible thing for a child or a teenager who loves his parents and cannot protect them. You felt helpless, and

anger, fear and deep sadness welled up in you without you being able to do anything. Since those unbearable moments you see yourself in a different light at home. At times you feel ashamed of your mother and you sometimes hear that other adults are accusing her or that she herself feels guilty. She is ashamed and feels dirty, cursed. You are ashamed also of your father because he was not able to do anything or did not want to. Worse still, maybe he hunted your mother out of the house immediately and, perhaps, you children with her. *And you do not know whom to talk to...*

Let me tell you *that nothing of what has happened is your fault*. Nor is it your mother's fault and maybe not your father's fault. You must not begin to blame yourselves for not having been able to do anything about seeing things you were not supposed to see. Do not end up feeling ashamed for yourselves or for your parents. Your whole life has been turned upside down, and sometimes even destroyed, because you have come face to face with something that children and boys and girls should never have to see: sexual violence. The intimate life of couples should be surrounded by modesty and gentleness. I beg you, do not blame yourselves, do not retreat into your own shell, do not cut yourselves off from others and remain alone with those ghastly memories and nightmares, afraid at night, afraid that « they » will come back... Try and speak with grown-ups who can listen to you and take you seriously. Do not stay closed in on yourself with your secret burden, maybe with a longing for revenge and with images that seem to remain vivid in your head. Not all adults are like this, not all of them want to harm children, or women or girls. There are plenty of people in your family, in your Christian community, or even in the dispensary, the hospital, the parish, the school, who are ready to listen to you, to console you, with whom you can cry without shame and let out all these painful feelings in your heart. But maybe they themselves do not know how to begin to speak of it to you and so they remain silent... However, if you speak to nobody, you risk never finding peace again or trust in adults, in life, in the future. You are in danger of being more and more alone, feeling hopeless and unhappy, maybe even becoming more and more violent. I know that some of you have joined armed groups to get revenge for what they have endured, even though they are not old enough to do such a thing. For some of you have also been subjected to violent bodily abuse.

I would also like to say to you that these vile and violent actions which you have seen perpetrated have nothing to do with love and marriage. That is not the way in which traditional African customs or the Christian religion, or God himself, want married couples to unite bodily together. These intimate acts in marriage are meant to express and share a tender love and create new lives... They share the joy of bringing a baby into the world, which is the desire of every woman. Do not believe that this brutality inflicted on women is the will of God; do not believe that that is the way normal men treat women.

*Girls*, in spite of everything you have seen and lived through, I dare nevertheless to beg this of you: try not to be afraid of men, even though you have to be very careful, especially nowadays. Not all men are so evil; one day, I hope, you will meet a man who will love you and respect you, who will be your life companion and father of your children.



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*Boys*, do not think that this is the way men should behave with a woman, who is often weaker than them, above all when these men are moving about as an armed group to gang rape women. Respect women and girls in your family and those you meet. Protect them especially in the evening time, or when they go to the fields, to the river or to the market. Keep a careful eye on them, do not imitate the vile behaviour you have witnessed; women and girls have to be able to count on you. Likewise, do not answer violence with violence. Do not look for weapons to avenge yourselves, even if it is a terrible temptation after all you have seen. You must look around you for people and places, NGOs, parishes, in your family and communities, who can speak with you about what you have experienced. You will get a different outlook about women, girls, marriage, the responsibility of the man in the family and society, as well as the role of young people in their milieu. That was what was in days gone by the reason for initiation rites: to teach young people how to become responsible adults. Do not do more harm to yourselves by setting out to destroy others in your turn. Do not carry your terrible suffering all alone by yourself, deep pain which maybe you have not yet been able to speak about with anyone.

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Let me now turn to you ***girls who have been abducted by armed men*** to become their « wives »... sometimes even the wife of several of these men. You have been treated violently, often as slaves, without respect for you and sometimes for the child you have had to give birth to. Some of you managed to escape, or were chased away because you had become pregnant and were infected by sicknesses like AIDS. How could you dare go back home, ashamed of the pregnancy, afraid because you had contracted infections, feeling guilty and soiled? And questions weigh on your mind sometimes about your dire condition: are you going to be able to keep this child born from rape? Would it not be better to have an abortion? if the child is already born, will you be able to love him ? ... Especially when you hear that other children born from rape are hunted away by other children and insulted by being called different names like « snake child»... I want to repeat to you as well what I said above. It is not your fault; you do not have to blame yourself for what happened; you are not tarnished, no matter what people say who are stuck in old traditional attitudes. Those men who did all this to you are the ones who are dirty. You are not impure or unworthy of being married one day. You are not being punished by God. The Lord loves you and wants you to be happy like all the other girls... I know, it is hard to believe that after everything you have gone through... How far away from you God can seem sometimes... You cannot find peace any more, or respect for yourself, or serenity, trust in life, love... all the attitudes that would help you. Do not give in to the fear of being stigmatised. Not everyone will reject you. There are places where you will be welcomed and cared for, without having to pay for it. And above all present yourself at a health center where they can take care of you right away and treat you for anything that can harm your health. Do not delay! You too must not remain

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alone with your terrible secret, even if it is harder for you than for others to open up about your condition. Other women have gone through the same trials and they help one another. There are groups where you will be warmly welcomed and where you can talk about your situation without being afraid. It will free you from your prison of fear, shame and silence... You most certainly deserve to be loved just like all other girls who have not had to endure what you suffered; you deserve such love all the more as you have become so frail in heart and body.

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What about you, ***the boys who have been soldiers*** and have managed to run away or were demobilised? You too carry, buried inside you, a memory of terrible experiences. Whether you enrolled out of despair or bravado, or were forced to enroll, you had to carry out acts which haunt your memory and your nights. You were often drugged by alcohol or hemp, they made you believe that you were untouchable, they taught you to kill, like playing a game... They often compelled you to kill someone who was close to you so that you could no longer go back to your family. You saw yourselves as being very strong, heroes... and now you are back in poverty like everyone else, often without any professional future. Sometimes you had got a bonus payment to reintegrate in society, which only kept you going for some months, or a moto-taxi to support you in your needs. And you rush around like crazy in the town, as if you were still defying death...

You too risk being locked into your secret of violence, murder, rape, unlimited brutality... Sometimes you do not remember clearly what you have done, but you know it was serious, even if you were not fully aware of what you were doing. I say this to you also: do not remain alone in your despair, your thirst for revenge, your taste for violence and power, which leads you sometimes to return to an armed band or a gang of hooligans in the town. You are still young; society, your family still needs you. Do not condemn yourselves, but recognise your responsibility for tomorrow. Look for help, join up again with groups of young Christians, as with welcoming centers where you can share... Violence has stolen your youth; do not let it continue to be a living death for you... In the eyes of God you will always remain dearly loved children, like the prodigal son who went back home after doing so many stupid things. Make sure you get yourselves checked for STDs like AIDS, so that you can plan to have a solid partnership one day, which you certainly want and you have a right to that. Get good medical treatment for body and mind if needs be. Go to Confession too, if you can; that could be a wonderful way to hand over your burden once and for all to the loving God. *Please do not remain alone. Get up and do something!*

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I would like to finish off this message by turning to you, ***my little sisters who have been***

***accused of being witches...*** Some of you have been thrown out on the street by members of their family, neighbourhood or village. Some have even just escaped being burnt alive while others were dragged along forcibly to false « pastors » in so called « prayer rooms », where they were obliged to fast, were subjected to exorcism, were beaten in public : » to chase evil away », they claimed. Those are often the people who denounce the children and then demand money from everyone around them. Let us repeat: you are not witches, you are not bad people. There is nothing more strange in you than in other young girls of your age (and maybe also other boys, because some boys are also accused). What is happening to you is not your fault. Refuse to admit that you are witches (sometimes you do so that they will let you alone, or to make people afraid of you). Do not tell your dreams, do not give others an opening to persecute you. Do not remain alone outside in the streets, rejected by the other children of the street who are afraid of you. Go to the dispensaries, to the parishes, to the sisters, the priests, the catechists, ... They will listen to you and bring you to places where they will look after you. You are entitled to live in peace, to be protected and be able to go to school like everyone else. Do not believe what people who believe in witches dare say of you. They are driven by fear more than hatred... Maybe you will understand bit by bit what is wrong with them; they might be able to change their mind and accept you again as you really are. Over time you might be able to forgive them even if you cannot forget everything they have done to you. It will take time; you need a companion on the road. The Lord Jesus, who loves you, wants to be your companion on that road back to a normal life. The first step is to get back to a safe place with other children where you will be respected and helped to get back to a normal life. I want to repeat to you what I say to all other children: do not close in on yourself; do not stay alone. You will find good people everywhere who will take you in and watch over you until your heart settles down and also the hearts of those who have accused you... Do not be afraid any longer. We will not abandon you.

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### **And what does the Lord say to you?**

Matthew, 18, 2-7 So he called a little child to him whom he set among them. <sup>3</sup> Then he said, 'In truth I tell you, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. <sup>4</sup> And so, the one who makes himself as little as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. <sup>5</sup> 'Anyone who welcomes one little child like this in my name welcomes me. <sup>6</sup> But anyone who is the downfall of one of these little ones who have faith in me would be better drowned in the depths of the sea with a great millstone round his neck. <sup>7</sup> Alas for the world that there should be such causes of falling! Causes of falling indeed there must be, but alas for anyone who provides them!

Matthew 11, 25-28 <sup>25</sup> At that time Jesus exclaimed, 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of

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earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children. <sup>26</sup> Yes, Father, for that is what it pleased you to do. (...) <sup>28</sup> 'Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest.

Luke 15, 20: talking about the prodigal child who used his father's riches badly:

« So he left the place and went back to his father.'While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him ».



## ***Letter to families and communities***

When they return...

These women who come back to us, to you, their families and communities, are victims of sexual violence. I have listened to them, I have heard their story. I am a friendly ear and I am going to try and pass on to you what they have told me, what they never possibly dared to tell you.

Their life was turned upside down when their assailants entered their village. Their names are Mapendo, Furaha, Faïda, Sifa, and so many others... They are not unknown to you, they are your daughters, your nieces, your sisters, your sister-in-laws, your neighbours or cousins, your aunts, mothers or grandmothers, your wives... in a word your very own people, members along with you in the body of Christ.

What they have lived through is indescribable: for them, nothing will ever be as it was before. They have done nothing and yet, at the very thought of the way in which they have been treated, they feel themselves an object of shame for others, for you. They feel like lepers, who at the time of Jesus did not dare to approach other people for fear of hurting their feelings.

Now that they are back among you, they can suffer from the way some people look at them and the attitudes they have... They feel so defiled that they live in fear and think that when you look at them you are judging them... They find it hard to join with others in quite ordinary activities, such as fetching water, going to the fields, taking part with other women or girls in gatherings, joining in the joy of a marriage or someone's new baby.

As I listen to them, I ask myself if our communities were not beginning to lose the kindheartedness of brotherly life...

Luckily, some of them have benefitted from the warm welcome and tenderness of those close to them, especially their spouses who agreed to welcome them back and not judge them, which went some way towards saving their honour in the bosom of the family. It was sweet joy and comfort for them, rehabilitation.

If you allow me a stray thought, I would say that this gesture, which appears quite natural to someone coming back to her own people, and she even expects it, goes very deep in fact. It means giving life back to the person, to the family and to the entire community. It is rooted in a deep love which refuses to judge or allow itself to be poisoned by rancour, a bitterness which is not justified in any case because these women are victims. They did not choose what happened or wanted it, yet they carry the weight of it. This gesture of openhearted welcome makes me think of that same compassion in the heart of Jesus when he says in the Gospel: « Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest ».

To the men who have welcomed them back home despite this tragedy these women say thank

you from the bottom of their heart. But I join them in asking even more: that they should be also « missionaries » to the other men, those who struggle with taking a decision.

These women are very much aware of how hard it might be for them to decide to take them back, but, really, nothing could justify the rejection of an innocent person and wife.

When these women sense an attitude of rejection, the gaping wound inside their hearts is simply widened further.

For you, families and communities, to take up an attitude of rejection is just sowing division inside each one of you personally as well as in your family as a unit. That is not good. You are keeping the wound alive, you are keeping the evil alive that has already been carried out instead of bringing relief to the bruised and broken woman. That is not the attitude Christ asks of us when he says: everyone will know you are my disciples by the love you have one for another.

Maybe it would be good to foresee meetings between the men in the small Christian communities where they could have a discussion and exchange views on these matters, so that the women who are already victims do not become so yet again (through your attitudes). And why would they not...?

I have seen and heard women, who became pregnant after a rape. They are living in a state of total confusion which can bring them at times to the brink of suicide, seeing in the child at first just the prolonging of their agony. Then with time, step by step and despite the pain, our friends finally see in the child their own flesh and blood; he is ours.

They struggle with the weight of feeling that this burden is too heavy to carry. They are haunted by the fact that they will never be able to give an honest answer to the child about his origin and who his father is. They are haunted by foreboding about the way people in the community will look at them and their child. It is an absolute nightmare for them to realise that the child they are carrying will never have a real father.

In the name of our shared humanity, dear brothers and sisters, I make bold, on behalf of all these victims, to ask you to examine this question.

With the support of the community, guarantee to these children born from rape the chance to grow up and become fully integrated human beings. On the one hand this could only strengthen our own genuine human dignity. On the other hand it would mean taking part in building up our society of tomorrow, which must be a society respectful of the person, a society which has a welcoming attitude and is tolerant. Already from today on we can contribute towards this in our wounded country and society.

The preoccupation and desire of these mothers is to invite the adults of our communities to watch over the safeguarding of a good environment for all the children to help them grow up and flourish in a safe space.

We are called on to act with demonstrations of openhearted welcome.

We can rely on the values which have been lived out in our communities from time immemorial.

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These are values which give meaning and flesh to every community, so that the evil which touches one member threatens the integrity of the whole body. We have lived through and are living through savage shocks to the system. We as communities must find the time to revisit our shared story and absorb the painful experience of these years into our attitudes and outlook.

Through what I have been able to share with you, I hope that, like me, you have listened to those women and have heard their story. In their suffering but also their desire to live and to protect life they still want to hold on to trust in turning to you and counting on you.

I thank you for having listened to them.

**IMPORTANT OBSERVATION: TO THOSE WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR LAW AND ORDER**

There is no letter here addressed directly to those responsible for public order and protection of the weak: **police officers, magistrates, politicians, etc.** Yet one of the reasons why this culture of barbarity is so widespread is the impunity that criminals enjoy in most cases, with some notable exceptions.

Those responsible for law and order at every level should scrutinise their own attitudes and behaviour, as parents, spouses, members of a community... or as, maybe even, perpetrators themselves of violent crimes. Do they not themselves bear some responsibility before God and humanity for the horrendous situation we find ourselves in? Surely in reading the letters here they will be forced to recognise that their own irresponsible failure to apply the law in many instances has contributed greatly to the plight and suffering of victims.

It is our fervent wish that the publication of these letters here will show all those responsible for law and order who are courageous and struggle against injustice that they have our full support and will encourage them to go even further. May these letters cry out to their conscience and their indignation and call on them to be even more committed in the actions they take, relying on their community for support.

## ***Letter to the assailants***

I have hesitated a long time before addressing myself to you, whom I call « perpetrators of evil » and others call butchers, rapists, criminals... having seen what you have done. I just call you « perpetrators », « assailants ». That does not take anything away from the odious, senseless, inhuman things you have done. You have subjected human beings like yourselves to atrocities, pitching them into a nightmare of horror and worse.

I will not say much about these men, women and children who have been your victims, just that they have lost nothing of their dignity and humanity in the midst of their suffering, their terror, their calvary. You have inflicted all this on them; you have wounded, humiliated and massacred them in their deepest selves.

What has it meant for you? What has it done to your dignity and self-worth as human beings?

I will never know what persuaded you to commit such acts and I cannot understand them. I dare only hope that you were not fully aware of what you were doing and that it was not fully deliberate... how otherwise could it have happened...? How could you have done such things?

You yourselves are sons, fathers perhaps, some of you are part of this people...

I would like to think that you were swept along blindly in this whirlpool of murderous folly and were not fully aware of what you were doing.

Maybe it is only now that you realise the horror and gravity of your actions... and that must be as terrible for you as it is inconceivable for us...

Just what happened to you?

You were armed, drugged perhaps, maybe you had been drinking and were drunk, or were you under the ruthless authority of a bloodthirsty leader and so were afraid for your life...? Maybe too you wanted to take revenge for what others had made you or those close to you endure... I cannot begin to think that you were normal at the time... I can conjure up all sorts of explanations... without ever being able to understand, I admit.

You were armed, you looked on yourself as being strong and powerful, crushing others, subjecting them to you, without realising clearly at that time, I dare to hope, that your actions were so pathetic, hateful and degrading for yourselves that they made you lose your self-respect and your dignity as a man. In your own eyes and those of your companions, hiding behind the power of your weapons and sowing terror, maybe you thought you were real men. The truth is that, in the eyes of your victims, people and the whole world, you were just despicable thrash.

What then can I say to you as I see you as you really are in your sad and sorry state... knowing



that you should recognise your guilt the moment you become lucid and realise what horrible things you have done.

You have lashed out to undermine life, human dignity, humanity itself. There is a heavy burden weighing on your shoulders and on your conscience today: I challenge you in the light of faith to face that...

If the idea of God is still there for you in your interior torment, and I hope it is, then despite the innumerable crimes you have committed—and I often feel devastated when I think of what you have done—I still rely on God's Word to say to you again and again: you are God's children and will always remain so.

It breaks my heart every time I think of the suffering of all your victims and what they have had to endure. My heart goes out in respect and compassion for them.

When I think of you, I have to dig deep in my faith in God, in my faith in man too, created in the image of God, that you are not to be reduced to the criminal actions you have carried out. It is only in that perspective that I can see your misery, sense your misfortune with some compassion. As you can gather, it does not come easy for me to have any sympathy for you. Everything in me feels revulsion for you and what you have done. I react to you with anger, dread, sadness, deep pain.

But I want to keep my faith in God, so I pray that the Lord will give you the strength to acknowledge the criminal actions you have carried out and not live in denial, but face up to the fact that you are guilty and responsible for what you have done. I can easily see how the weight of these deeds committed against other people can return to haunt you, destroy you and devour your life. It is essential that you do not battle through it alone. You must find help, either medical or psychological and spiritual.

To have any hope of finding a modicum of peace once more and reconcile yourselves with your own conscience you must clearly admit your guilt, repent and ask forgiveness for what you have done. Then you have hope that you can be an honourable man once again. It is a hard step to take but I believe you will find the strength to do it. You have got to escape from this deadly silence which is holding you prisoner, so that you will not be forever haunted by the specter of guilt. That is the price you have to pay to be rehabilitated in your own eyes and in the eyes of the world and find some peace within yourself.

I underline what I have said: it would be unjust to reduce your whole worth to the things you have done, and I do not want to do that. You are not purely evil and nothing more. It is up to you now to say what you are really worth and prove it. It is up to yourselves to become truly human once more.

## ***Letter to women leaders***

From woman to woman

Congolese women have been the first target of the violence that has raged in the DRC from the time the war started in 1996. Yet they are the bearers of life and indispensable players on the stage of social life, as well as being the leaven of unity in the family and community and the cement of culture and values.

There is no need, I feel, to present you the situation in detail, rape and other kinds of sexual violence, mutilation, torture and other actions of atrocious savagery. Some Congolese women have had to endure all this day after day for the last fifteen years. It is intolerable, unbearable and has gone on far too long.

Through what has been done to them, lives and families have been broken and the whole community destroyed, the culture of a whole people ridiculed and trampled upon, and social life completely disorganised.

The fightback of Congolese women is extremely important in wanting to preserve their dignity, their independence and participation in economic and social life. Their inner strength and courage are amazing, as is their calling to protect life.

Today this woman feels blemished, humiliated, she is jeered at, robbed of her dignity as a woman, wife and mother.

And the world pretends not to see her. Nobody turns to look at her or hear her plaintive cry. Nobody realises what is happening. She feels she is ignored, forgotten about. How is that possible? In our world where communication and information are everywhere? .... Numerous reports have been issued about the situation, expressing deep concern and sounding the alarm. The UN has been informed and the blue helmets are in place. The world knows what is happening.

How then has this situation been allowed to continue? And over so long a time?!... What is behind this wish to sweep all this violence and savage horror under the carpet... !? Political and economic expediency, yes, but what else ?...

How is it possible to continue to live one's life in tranquility faced with such tragedy, looking somewhere else and letting things remain as they are ?... Why is there this awful silence?

This deafening silence is overwhelming and leaves us baffled, furious, torn apart and crying with pain in our heart and mind.

Lets us live!

The women of the Congo turn to you, they appeal to your conscience, to your dignity as a woman. They beg each one of you to denounce the evil they have suffered and join them in pleading for this violence to stop and that every effort be made to bring peace to the DRC.

Let each one of us have the courage to speak out and use our influence where we have it: within our family circle, in our milieu and workplace, in our Church. Let each one of us denounce this situation and stir up people all around us to demand peace. You have a crucial part to play in allowing these women to stand tall again and find a new life. They need your support to build up their family and community again; they need you in finding their way forward again, in family and in social and economic life.

These women appeal to you to do something concrete to show solidarity with them. Join them in the steps they are taking to emerge from a nightmare of horror and walk in the way of peace.

We look towards a Congo which will be united and at peace, where women can go about their life every day without being afraid, where they can play their own part in society and take care of those who belong to them, especially in bringing up their children. In this new world women will also be able to take part in economic and political life and in the struggle against a poverty that is spreading like a cancer over the length and breadth of the country.

The women of the Congo long to contribute towards the happiness and flourishing of their families, their communities and the nation.

You can help them. They appeal to your humanity and courage.

# PROPOSALS FOR A PLAN OF ACTION FOR LOCAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES



## PROPOSALS FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

### Introduction

*Christian communities can play an irreplaceable and vital role* within the framework of the human, psychological, moral and spiritual tragedy which we have described. First of all, because the institutional and hierarchical organisation of the Churches gives them a weight and effectiveness which are often greater than those of civil society in Africa (in areas where Christianity is deeply rooted, as in the Great Lakes). The Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches and the Church of Christ in the Congo<sup>12</sup> are accepted as real spokespersons by the civil authorities. Hence they have also socio-political impact. Besides, they maintain a unique network of local communities covering the whole of the DRC. From ecclesiastical provinces to dioceses, parishes and local communities (sometimes called small Christian communities or living ecclesial communities), they gather their faithful together regularly for liturgical celebrations or more focused meetings where they tackle sensitive issues in the life of the Church.

The small Christian communities are places where the faithful study the Word of God, pray, live in solidarity together, share their life and act together to better their neighbourhood. They can be called privileged places for Christian formation, for preventing attacks on innocent people during periods of armed conflict, as well as consoling and welcoming victims of such violence. They can also play a unique role as mediators and offer valuable service of compassion and justice (aspects of prophetic witness and love)<sup>13</sup>.

These communities have been shaken and traumatised by the immensity of suffering they have had to deal with and by the extent to which this unending violence is causing disruption to families and the normal way of life of people. Their mutual help services are swamped and their faith shaken by the trials they have experienced. Moreover, cultural or social pressure influences them in their attitude to the victims and the men of violence. The victims are often stigmatised and the children born from rape likewise. The husbands of victims are often tempted to reject their wife (sometimes the children with her) and take another one—without talking about the thorny question of adolescent girls being prematurely pregnant, some being so because they have been raped or were sexual slaves. It is a very delicate matter to talk publicly about sexual questions in any culture, but especially in most African traditions. Despite that, we would like to

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<sup>12</sup> ECC (Eglise du Christ au Congo) : a Federation of 65 communities or denominations in DR Congo.

<sup>13</sup> Important actors are the diocesan Caritas and the Diocesan Justice and Peace Commissions (active mainly in **advocacy**).

propose *some lines of reflection and action to Christian communities*, convinced that if they face up to these challenges seriously they can bring about a renewal of hope in society. Indeed they have begun to face the challenges already, even though they have found that very hard.



**Some proposals for animating and training in catechetics in dealing effectively with victims of violence, directly or indirectly (sexual and other sorts), in their human and Christian community, so that they will be able to receive victims well, rehabilitate them and rebuild their life.**

- First, there must be a community meeting to identify the precise problem to be tackled.

*Some of the letters presented above, e.g. to communities, to men, or the letter in which raped women express what they feel, can serve as an introduction to opening up the topic, because these letters put the challenge very clearly of how to respond to victims properly after their terrible experience.*

Our village communities, CEV<sup>14</sup> and families are developing in an environment marked by a whole array of violent aggression over the last fifteen years and more. One form of it is the phenomenon of sexual violence against women, girls and men. Sometimes it is practiced as a military tactic, that is to say, raping a woman with the clear aim of humiliating the adversary and breaking his morale, rather than just to satisfy sexual needs. Sometimes the woman is seen as spoils of war, i.e. the woman is « stolen » just in the way material goods are stolen, and eaten and drunk just like captured food and drink through rape, which is often gang rape. Rape can also be seen as a war fetish, i.e. the militias think they are getting vital energy through raping old women, young girls, even babies at the breast. Rape is used too as a weapon to destroy families and society, striking at the stability of society and culture. All this sexual violence is destabilising our village communities, our CEV and our families. Married women have been shamed in front of their husbands and children, children have been forced to dishonour their mothers, fathers forced to dishonour their daughters, women carried away into the forest to serve as sexual slaves for the combatants, children have been present at these rapes, men are ashamed because they were incapable of defending their family and so have lost their standing as men. Besides all this, thousands of children have been born from this rape...

- What attitudes must we promote at the heart of our human and Christian communities in order to receive these direct and indirect victims of violence with open arms, rehabilitate them and give them back their unique personal dignity, able to live once more in a community with their head held high ?
- How do our communities spontaneously react right away to victims?

Our human and Christian communities do try to welcome these numerous victims with open arms, treat them tenderly and support them, but deep down they still have ambiguous feelings and attitudes.

- ✓ Rejecting women who are victims in the name of ancestral tradition, for they see the victims as impure and having disgraced the family. All this develops a feeling of guilt in these women as if they were responsible for what happened. The community looks askance at them. Woman is reduced to being nothing more than a genital object. But she is worth much more than that!
- ✓ You find the same attitudes of rejection regarding those thousands of children born from rape, as they are seen as bringing back memories of the horror and the face of the hated enemy. Besides, there is the serious problem of their legal status, their parentage... What can one say too about the children who have been witnesses to these horrible happenings? Do we just say nothing? Will anyone ever ask them how they got through that experience?

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<sup>14</sup> CEV: Small Local (basic) Christian Communities.

- What attitudes must we adopt in our communities as Christians and as normal human beings?

*Putting our faith in Christian formation*

- In the eyes of God, being raped is neither a sin or a stain or an impure act, because the victims, both those directly involved and onlookers, are not responsible for what has happened to them; they did not choose to be raped. This is the stand of Jesus in the Gospels; this is the social teaching of the Church on human dignity; it represents the outlook of all mature human beings.

- Several passages in the Gospel challenge any negative attitudes we might have about people's sufferings. Here are some passages to explore with the community:

John 9: the man born blind: who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should have been born blind?'<sup>3</sup> 'Neither he nor his parents sinned,' Jesus answered.

See also John 4: the meeting of Jesus with the Samaritan woman;

John 9: the woman who committed adultery;

Matthew 25 + Acts 2,42-46: strengthen solidarity at the heart of our communities.

It would be good to recall here also the privileged place of woman in society and in the Bible by looking at figures like Judith, Esther and the Virgin Mary.

In actual fact, in this context the victims are not at all responsible for what they have had to endure. It is simply not their fault.

Rejecting them is inexplicable because we all share the same human nature; as community we must find a genuine human word to say to them to help them stand up with their heads held high, the way Jesus always spoke and acted. (Look at the whole approach of Jesus to outsiders, the weak, etc.). Foster actively positive attitudes in the community: welcoming victims back without judging them, offering friendship, compassion and a listening ear, respecting their dignity as women, as children... It is so important for the community, the family, the Churches and society in general, to stand by these victims on their painful journey towards finding a new life<sup>16</sup>.

- Pope Benedict XVI writes in his apostolic exhortation *Africae Munus* (following the African Synod and addressed to all Catholics in Africa who are working for reconciliation, justice and peace, both bishops, priests, religious and laypeople): « I call on all disciples of Christ to fight against all violent deeds perpetrated on women ; denounce them ; condemn them » (n° 56). This is the clear social teaching of the Church<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See next section: Theological and Pastoral Documentation.



The human and Christian community must continue to accompany the victims respectfully and in a holistic manner. It must help them to become reconciled with themselves and can do so by adopting evangelical attitudes in dealing with them and journeying with them on their road towards human and Christian renewal of life. Because the victim tends to have low self-esteem and can develop a deep sense of remorse and often inner revolt and anger. It is so important to offer them a word of compassion in their doubt and darkness,

*Actions needed in human and Christian communities to enhance the welcome given to victims, as well as their rehabilitation and rebuilding them as persons so that communities can live together in harmony.*

- Activities to mobilise communities and make them sensitive to these issues :

*At leadership level:*

The various religious leaders, bishops, priests, pastors, catechists and community chairpersons can be effective through pastoral letters, guidance and homilies in helping communities see the challenges more clearly and address them. They can do so within their respective Churches, in Christian communities and also address a wider word to all Christians and to all women and men of goodwill.

They could also meet with traditional leaders and political representatives to get them involved in resolving this problem, as well as sending letters to various individuals who are known to have a positive influence on the population.

*Using the media*

A worthwhile tactic would be to produce films and circulate them widely to create more awareness of the problem and challenge people to act. This is what Liberian women did in order to mobilise people for peace and they effectively brought the civil war to an end by non-violent means<sup>16</sup>. Using the media should always have a follow up of putting out questionnaires in order to get reactions and stimulate reflection.

*Animating and forming communities:*

It is equally necessary to inform communities as to how they should act within 72 hours of a person being a victim of sexual violence so that the woman concerned will make it known and can get medical care as soon as possible.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. the movie: *Pray the Devil back to Hell*, Fork Films, 2008, about the role of women of Liberia in the fight against President Taylor.

Communities must also put together different ways of protecting the women in their daily activities as well as having defense mechanisms ready to unleash in the case of an attack on a village or family. Furthermore, communities must be trained in strategies of non-violent resistance.

*The goal of all these activities is to make the local community more sensitive to the issue of open-hearted acceptance of victims, so that they will have the confidence to begin to build a new life, as well as develop effective measures for preventing fresh attacks.*

- Organising demonstrations in the various Christian communities and in society.

- It would be good to organise interconfessional gatherings to pray for victims and for an end to violence.

- In the DRC, profit from the date of the assassination of Mgr. Munzihirwa, former Archbishop of Bukavu, the 29th of October, to mobilise all the Churches as well as people of goodwill, because he belongs to everyone and his life is a witness which speaks to us in our situation today<sup>17</sup>.

- Declare a day of mourning on the 28th of December, the feast of the Holy Innocents. Like Rachel we weep for our victims of a violence that has gone on for too long.

- Let all the Christian Churches approach the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity from the angle of the struggle against all forms of violence, in the name of Jesus Christ who is our Peace (Ephesians 2,14).

The 8th of March is World day for Women. Mobilise all Christian women on that day to hear a different voice remonstrating against all violence to women. Women are not there passively just for certain politicians to make money out of them:

- Guaranteeing a safe place for everyone in the community, especially the most vulnerable.

As Pope Benedict XVI says in *Africae Munus* n° 57: « Giving women opportunities to make their voice heard and to express their talents through initiatives which reinforce their worth, their self-esteem and their uniqueness would enable them to occupy a place in society equal to that of men – without confusing or conflating the specific character of each – since both men and women are the “image” of the Creator (cf. *Gen* 1:27) ».

It is a question, therefore, of creating a place of welcome, love and gentle respect for these victims, both directly and indirectly affected by violence. We must ensure that they have a safe place in the community, the family and the Church; they must be able to trust and know that they are being treated with confidentiality<sup>18</sup>. They will be in a safe place to the extent that they are shown how to claim their rights and duties, in which they are acquainted with the major themes of the social teaching of the Church (human dignity, the common good, solidarity,

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<sup>17</sup> About Bishop Munzihirwa, see Annex 1.

<sup>18</sup> About Safe space, see Annex 3.

preferential option for the poor, the principle of subsidiarity, the values that underpin a Christian family). It is in such a situation that women can also organise themselves to engage in public demonstrations (peaceful marches, sit-ins), as well as engage in common activities in order to safeguard their independence (such as maintaining a collective field). Such activities bring them some income, and this challenges the men. It should be a place of mutual support for them in managing their lives. Acting securely together should be a help to women to pool their energies into becoming one of the forces for change in their society.

- Develop Family Pastoral Care with the help of reflection groups and sessions for couples, such as Love and Truth, Foyers of Our Lady, Marriage Encounter, animated by teams of laypeople, accompanied by priests or religious.

Its objective is to give the role of the family its proper worth as a « sanctuary of life » and basis of society. It means promoting a framework of support, giving room for exchange and solidarity for families in a life setting scarred by violence. It means also reinforcing equality between men and women by fostering good communication between couples and building up trust, while respecting difference and the richness entailed in complementing each other.

This pastoral approach is based on the social teaching of the Church about family values. It should be a framework for family mediation as well as the place where people can broach the difficulty of accepting wholeheartedly direct or indirect victims of sexual violence in a situation of armed conflict, trying to find families that will welcome orphan children, having small Christian communities organise pastoral visits to families, fighting against victims being stigmatised.

- Highlight the life and message of witnesses of the faith who have come from within the community and whose life story speaks to everyone without exception, such as that of Mgr. Munzihirwa Christophe: this can be done through tapes, plays or radio broadcast about his life... (See below). Mgr. Munzihirwa always demanded in his preaching that communities should transcend ethnic or religious divisions. Differences should be embraced more as enrichment than threat.

Develop rituals inspired both by Christian symbols and the various traditional ones to be found in different cultures.

- A ritual expressing open-hearted welcome back home to community and family of victims of sexual violence.
- A ritual celebrating the reality that children born from rape are close to the heart of God.
- A ritual to receive converted criminal aggressors back into the community.

## **Annex 1**

### **Address to Christians who are losing hope Through the intercession of Msg Christophe Munzihirwa<sup>19</sup>**

**« I stand watch over you »**

Texts from Church leaders, worked on, clear, enlightened, are more than just nice words. Their words are closer to us. There is a watchman that has embodied them. Perhaps somebody we have known or even we have come across without recognising him. A life as humble with an exceptional outcome.

A man from Bukavu who was inspired by African proverbs in his speeches to people.

A man we can rely on in prayer whenever we feel overburdened.

He is the living proof that a prophet has arisen, can rise, will rise.

His messages to local, national and international authorities are a model of clear-sightedness

He died a violent death, but in so doing, he gave us a powerful witness that allows us to stand fast and to keep going: let us be strong in faith.

He encourages us not to give up in front of our fruitless effort in order to attain peace. He makes us understand that our ideal of peace, though unattainable, all our efforts, our small steps, contribute nevertheless to the growth of peace.

Yes, we weep salt tears, but our soul friend tells us that our tears can transform and make good our look.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Tonino Falaguasta Nyabenda, *Mgr Christophe Munzihirwa, Evêque et martyr du Congo*, Afriquespoir, 2010, 95 pages.

**Msg Munzehirwa's quotations,  
Thematic excerpts**

*Priest, Pastor*

« He (Jesus) challenges each one to begin to reflect on the evil which is in him: "Why do you hit me?"; but he doesn't utter any threat.»

«The Bible is inextricably a human word and Word of God.»

«Christianity is a religion of the Spirit of Christ.»

A testimony about him: he restores our trust in our priests by his simple way of life.

*Suffering*

« We cannot become judges of suffering. Our intellect is limited; our horizon is short, particularly at the moment of suffering.»

*Family, education*

« A child is born to us, tomorrow won't be the end of the world. » NTU Proverb

«Where family didn't deeply do its mission, the presence of a police officer becomes the only conscience of the citizen. »

*Hospitality (welcoming the stranger)*

« Let us keep our dignity as Christians, let's never encourage ethnic, tribal or racial discrimination. »

« We, Christians, should know that the most powerful weapon is charity. »

« We welcome rwandan refugees without any discrimination. »

*To encourage one another, to help each other to resist*

« In these days, what can we do? Let us be strong (solid) in the faith. »

« Be courageous; do not leave (desert) your homes. »

Lets us live!

« Let us remain united in order to save our country. »

*Simplicity*

« I must be like everybody else. »

*Non violence*

« The last word belongs to God. »

« Dear Christians, even though we cannot prevent violence, we must always condemn it: we must say an absolute « no » to violence. »

*Peace*

« Threatened, questioned, peace in this world is an effort and not a success. »

## Annex 2

### Ritual scheme proposal to be adapted according to place, to public

This scheme can be used as a way of journeying with the victims and also with vulnerable families. Let us remember that victims can only accept to participate in this scheme -. Hence being identified as victims – only if they are assured of the goodness of the community and that there is no risk of external stigmatization for them or for their family. In this regard, the entire community must solemnly commit itself and let it be known the victims.

- Entrance song
- Welcoming word by the celebration's president explaining the meaning of the gathering and the community's commitment. He concludes by a gesture or a symbol of welcome by the Christian community<sup>20</sup>.
- Pardon petition : « We come from far away because of what has happened to us made us lose the sense of being human beings and Christians: we have forgotten to open our hearts to the members of our community and also of being each other's guardian.» Then, one or another community's member is invited to express his/her pardon petition because of their negative attitude toward the victims of these tragedies.
- Prayer: « God, you who are our strength in our weakness and our consolation in all our distresses, grant your people hope: may your people grow through these trials and get his breath back in your love. Through Christ our Lord. »
- Reading of the word of God according the various categories of victims (women, children, men or tormentors).
- Gospel commentary or, if possible, a testimony of one or another victim on what they have undergone during and after their ordeal. This will enhance the cohesion of the community or the family.
- The community or family's response: To use a strong gesture or symbol of welcome by the community towards the victims. This is in order to show the victims that they are welcome and recognized as full members of the community.
- The Our Father (holding hands)
- Special blessing by the community on the victims.
- Concluding prayer
- Blessing of the entire community
- Thanksgiving song

The celebration is followed by a shared meal by all the members of the community or of the family. This meal is a strong sign of communion. N.B.: It is necessary to note this ritual doesn't necessarily require the presence of an ordained minister. However, if it is a priest presiding it, the ritual will bear a more sacramental character.

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<sup>20</sup> In West African culture one will usely offer a kola nut.

## Annex 3

### **Making Christian communities secure environments (safe spaces)**

**« *It is good to give one's seat to one's brother* », Benedict XVI, (*Africae Munus*<sup>21</sup>, § 30)**

**Do Christian communities in fact offer welcoming space to those excluded from society?** Do they ensure a protective environment for those who have no place in which to express themselves and be themselves? Can they all find persons who are ready to welcome them as brothers and sisters and treat them as they deserve, respecting their dignity? Can we seriously claim, we who belong to religious communities, parishes, various movements and dioceses, that we treat everyone respectfully in the same way? Here we are talking about a person suffering from a handicap ( physical or especially mental), those who are HIV positive, immigrants, women who have been victims of sexual violence, down and outs, children who have been abused (sometimes by members of our communities and families, even priests), the sick, prisoners... Can we say that as communities we are concerned with defending their rights? Do we even dare to speak of them? Is this a question that is posed on a regular basis for council meetings of communities, movements or parishes? Do these disadvantaged persons take priority in our pastoral projects or do our communities gravitate only towards people of their own kind, avoiding the problems of relating to those who are too different from them?

**What in fact is a « safe space » in the Church or in society?** It is a matter of providing a situation which generates a sense of trust and confidentiality, thus assuring physical and psychological security. It is a place where no one will have reason to be afraid of others, or feel ashamed or intimidated. It is a place where a person will not need to feel she is under suspicion or threatened but knows she is protected. An atmosphere is created where the integrity and dignity of each individual, created in the image of God, are respected. Individuals are not judged and are seen as being of more value than anything they may have done, or the plight they find themselves in. In such an atmosphere individuals are able to rebuild their lives, develop a new self-confidence and sometimes be fully healed. They can also travel the road of forgiveness and reconciliation. Each person is called on to take personal responsibility for their own life and encouraged to stand on their own feet. This is indeed the true path to justice and peace.

Those who find themselves in this positive space will also find that they are included, not outcasts. Everyone is welcome. Those who serve these broken brothers and sisters and have an influential position must never see themselves as privileged people or abuse their position. This service should never degenerate into patriarchal domination. With all our varied gifts and differences we complement one another. We should all remain answerable to one another in the way we treat people and use the power we have over others. We do not run away from conflict but absorb it together and transform it into more creative living. Each one will then be able to admit his own weaknesses without being afraid of being judged negatively... It is a good place to be in, where spirituality and theology will take shape *within* the most vulnerable and not be seen as something done *for* them.

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<sup>21</sup> Post-synodal Exhortation.



Lets us live!

**“I am a man and nothing human is alien to me... I am a man; injustice towards other men revolts me. I am a man; oppression is an insult to my being... I am a man and what I want for myself I want for the unfortunate children of Africa: freedom, honour and the sacred bonds of family”.**

Cardinal Lavigerie, Founder of the Society of the Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers) and of the congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (White Sisters), when speaking in the church of Gesu, Rome, December 23th, 1888.

## **PROPOSALS ADDRESSED TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES**

### **Introduction**

#### **The need for spiritual renewal and pastoral involvement**

Both priests and religious men and women are especially exposed to the happenings and accounts of inhuman violence endured by those who come to confide in them—if they have not themselves been victims. Often it is not easy for them to find the right gesture or word which will both console the victim and denounce the crime. They have not been trained to treat traumatised persons and sometimes lack the pastoral directives to confront the indescribable suffering which they come up against and which has such a devastating effect on themselves<sup>22</sup>.

This part of the document is addressed to everyone but above all to priests and religious men and women to give them some orientations in order to face the tragedies<sup>23</sup> they come up against, incarnating more and more the merciful face of the Father for those who come to confide in them, sometimes feeling needlessly guilty.

In the first part, priests are invited to get in touch with their own weakness, so that they can truly empathise with those who come to them and genuinely help them experience the divine mercy.

The second shows how the consecrated life should also be a vehicle for prophetic words and actions demanding fearless courage, formation and evaluation.

The third part proposes the attitudes to adopt confronted with ever more widespread violent attacks on the vulnerable and the weak. These attitudes must promote risk-taking in the Churches. The Churches must take the risk of being there with the victims, with words, with gestures, physically present, caring for the wounded and the traumatised. This is a time for courage and creativity.

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<sup>22</sup> In the Kivu Provinces of DRC, priests, sisters and bishops have been assassinated in several wars since 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Jeremiah 14:16: <sup>16</sup> And the people they are prophesying to will be thrown out into the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and sword. There will be no one to bury them, their wives, their sons and their daughters.

## 1. Priests of tomorrow, a man with the heart of a child?

Could there be a new priestly holiness for our times? What kind of priest do we need? Most certainly, the very essence of the ministerial priesthood will never change, but does not the priest need a particular "inculturation" to touch the heart of the men and women of today? More precisely, must there not be a renewal in the formation of future priests so that they can effectively respond to all the deep changes they are faced with?

In 1967 Jean Guitton, the great Catholic philosopher, was asked what the priest of tomorrow should be in the light of Vatican II. This is what he said: "One could specify certain characteristics of this new kind of priest: simpler, more approachable, less aloof in his attitude, in the way he speaks and acts. He will depend less on "the way it has always been done" and be less propped up by set structures. His authority will be seen more clearly as a service. He will let go all pompous, stereotyped, rhetorical eloquence, so as to speak more authentic truth with simplicity in his words and actions. People will not be afraid to approach him, because he will reject social barriers as much as he can and rid himself of pretentious social conventions, in order to live a more simple and fraternal life. He will put the accent on respecting persons, not on giving orders or intruding on people's freedom. He will be there as a loving presence, like a perfume, like yeast, discreet and nurturing like the Holy Spirit". (In *Le Christ au monde*, 1967, p. 160-164).

***The priest is indeed a man chosen by God, a man of God.*** But he is chosen from among men. He inherits from his family and education something unique and mysterious which stays with him, shapes him and has a positive or negative effect on those who cross his path or who confide in him. That means he has his qualities and his defects. He can also, just like all mortals, suffer from a lack of balance in various ways. This is a scandal in the eyes of men! But this is the way of God in sacred history, visiting him and calling him in his fragile humanity, sending him out to announce the Good News of salvation to his brothers and sisters, giving an account of the hope that he has. This paradox belongs to the "laws" of the spiritual life. These "laws" are essential for our own spiritual growth as well as necessary for our priestly ministry, inasmuch as the priest is the spiritual companion of the people of God.

Indeed, if there is a lot talk nowadays about wounded persons, let us not forget that the priest himself is called to endure and dress his own wounds. The priest is a fragile human being who can have his own problems in managing crisis situations which surprise him often on his road of life. Contrary to the image he portrays or can clumsily project, the priest is not a "superman", an "extra-terrestrial". Indeed everyone who travels the road of the spiritual life goes through difficult moments at times where *the nights and the struggles* are sometimes terrible and

humanly unbearable. Every priest also goes through human crises like the "mid-life crisis" (usually between 40 and 55) or that of coming to terms with old age, etc.

### **The priest, a wounded healer, sent to wounded persons**

These persons are in our families and schools and frequent our churches. They often cross our paths at a moment when we ourselves are in quest of meaning in life: the way of life we have chosen, what the mission asks of us to revisit and rethink, because the "world is in upheaval"! Our helpless eyes look at other brothers and sisters who are discouraged, scandalised and have lost their way. They have gone elsewhere, far away from our churches, just as the disciples once lost heart in following a master who was close to the poor and to sinners and the only food he had to offer them was to share his word and eat his "flesh"!

We are forced to rethink our priestly ministry to this wounded world whose despondency is plain to see. The world is longing for priests who, like the Good Samaritan, stop and approach the wounded in their wretchedness and lead them towards healing of body and soul. Let us be reborn in a true personal baptism and become children again, though not childish. We are just feeble children who allow the divine Mercy to burn deep into our being so that we can reflect this merciful tenderness among our brothers and sisters.

### **The priest, a man who is flexible, with eyes and heart wide open to the world**

*« God is not looking for those who are virtuous, but for children whom he can take up in his arms as one would lift up a small child, because he is light and has big eyes » (Emmanuel Mounier).*

« Light », that is to say supple, flexible, so as to negotiate the sharp bends in the dramatic developments in the Great Lakes region. A pastor who genuinely cares for the people he serves cannot be indifferent to the tragedy that is unfolding. He is forced to cry out in the name of God that God never loses sight of the suffering of his children. He is not far away but close to his suffering children, He wants us always to see beyond this present misery. His Love is infinitely great; his Mercy goes from age to age.

« Big eyes », eyes wide open, able to see further, knowing how to read the signs of the times. They are the eyes of a prophet, eyes which are able to read the Word of God in life situations, calling to conversion and consoling broken hearts. For this Word to be distinctly heard and to touch hearts, it must draw its inspiration from the One who is the living Word of God and reveals himself to his chosen ones.

***These ministers of the Word will appear to be weak and vulnerable in the eyes of the world, but they will be irresistible because they will have been stripped of their power, know-how and expertise, remaining purely and simply instruments of God's grace.*** If they are too strong they will appear to be like a well-armed soldier, risking being on a pedestal of superiority and generosity. As such, they would not appear as true representatives before their brothers and sisters of a Jesus Christ who is obedient, gentle and humble of heart. They risk rather being careerists in the service of the Church, making their impact purely through efficient organisation and the clarity of their teaching and preaching. In every epoch, just like our own, when the priesthood has lived through a "crisis of faith", the Holy Spirit raises up saints who found new communities and courageous bishops who foster new vocations to the Church. God can still give us other holy priests and bishops, true "fathers" who exercise their fatherhood with simplicity and courage. They will be a bond of unity for communities, quietly putting teeth into the best of human ideals, being architects of peace. To achieve this radical transformation of religious leadership we need new evangelisers, new priestly vocations.

***« The true witnesses of our times will be like the prodigal child. They will have had an experience of God in recognising their misery. The greatest need of the men and women of today is to meet persons along their road of life who, having accepted their poverty, can then say: "Don't be afraid of your poverty and weakness, even of your vulnerability. Go down into your deepest self and discover this treasure which is incomparably more rich than anything you have already"» (Jean Vanier)***

## **2. Consecrated life and the way of the prophet**

In the history of salvation, there have been men and women chosen by God who emerged from their own life setting to call people once more to be faithful to God's covenant. They have set out to awaken and reawaken the conscience of the people towards the practice of justice and doing good, and have denounced the attitudes of unfaithfulness of this people which God has chosen. They are the prophets, that is to say, men and women who speak in the name of God at times of deep anxiety and crisis, or even at a numbing time of complacency, to awaken the faith of those who are spiritually asleep despite having a veneer of religious practice. These are the people who profess the name of God but who, in daily life, are dead to truth and justice, have little love for God and little interest in carrying out his will.

Our world needs prophets who will engage effectively with these men, women and children, to enable them to see the light and journey with them in choosing wisely and living a full life. It is a demanding mission, for it means being ready to face the consequences of one's radical commitment. Though it will bring a deep interior peace, it will not be without humiliation, even martyrdom and being treated with contempt.

### **What steps can religious take to be better able to exercise a prophetic role towards women who have endured violent sexual attacks?**

#### **1. Information**

It is hard to act effectively if one does not have exact and credible data about what is happening on the ground. Hence the need to be well informed before committing oneself to action. We are well aware that some of our religious communities are not well enough informed about the extent to which a whole host of socio-political factors are involved, both local, national and international. These lead to groups and governments taking up a stand and taking decisions which we can find impossible to understand and do serious harm to our own work in the field.

#### **2. Denunciation**

To be more credible, we are called on to denounce the various forms of violence which poison our human relations and sacrifice the lives of the innocent. The question is, how do you go about denouncing violence effectively? Such a move supposes that there is common stand in the community and a minimum of legal training.

#### **3. Commitment depending on the charism of each congregation**

Each congregation is called on to read the signs of the times, with a view to an effective commitment which will bring concrete responses to the most urgent needs of our human

community which has been disfigured through violent attacks on women, men and children. These unfortunate victims have to be helped to rebuild their strength and recognise their own gifts in order to move forward in spite of their wounds.

#### **4. Competence**

We cannot talk about being effective without talking about being competent. Hence the need for multidisciplinary training of religious men and women engaged in this pastoral service of accompanying the victims. With proper training one can avoid making certain pastoral mistakes: the right person in the right place. One example would be the training proposed by the IFHIM, the objective of which is to revitalise the human resources which pastoral and social workers need, to be better able to accompany traumatised persons. It is also important to know the laws of the country very well.

#### **5. Collaboration**

« Unity brings strength». To make proposals for actions concrete, the different congregations, institutes and religious communities are called on to combine their efforts, as well as collaborate with lay people, because networking is effective and should not be limited just to the Churches.

#### **6. The follow up and evaluation of the projects that have been achieved**

This commitment of religious communities and Institutes requires evaluation and ongoing formation of the members: this will guarantee that the work is effective in the long run and will make those involved strong enough to continue being the “voice of those who have no voice”.

#### **7. Conclusion: on the road to Jericho**

The Eastern DRC can be compared to the victim which the bandits left dying on the side of the road to Jericho (Luke 10,25-30). Just like the Levite who avoids contact with the wounded man abandoned on the roadside, we often do nothing, because we are afraid of what could happen to us if we took a stand or committed ourselves. And yet, history gives us the example of numerous men and women who have risked their life because of their faith.

**3. Faced with ever-growing acts of violence, the Church is summoned to be at the coal face of risk-taking: to risk speaking out, making a gesture, being present, being committed to the wounded victims on the road to Jericho. But how?**

1. Become a courageous Church, a Church which is watchful and wakens all those of goodwill to moral and spiritual awareness. Priority tasks include:

Stressing communion both within the Church and between ecclesial families have increased synergy in actions taken.

Having the courage to face up to its responsibilities, not keeping quiet when one should speak.

Having the courage of truth in charity: vigilant and aware of dangers, without being vicious or aggressive.

2. Base preaching and catechetics on hope. It means breaking down the loneliness of men and women through hope-filled groups. St. Paul, in fact, in addressing his disciple, Timothy, asks him: "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort". (2 Tim 4.2)

3. Take up a positive attitude towards cultural problems.

The man and woman of the Church should listen to the culture of peoples in a welcoming and open manner, sympathetic and putting trust in humanity, while at the same time having a critical spirit enlightened by the Gospel.

From that starting point, set out to evangelise culture. God passes through it to meet up with us again.

4. To become a herald of human development, the consecrated religious is called to :

Struggle against injustice expressed in the exploitation of the poor and the weak. That is the price to be paid for "the preferential option of Christ and his Church for the poor"!



Lets us live!

Become an anti-establishment protester against the "established disorder", so that social relationships will become just.

Be interested in and take part in community and group activities within the Church.

Make Small Christian Communities places of vigilance and awareness, safe places for everyone.

Champion the growth of a responsible and strong laity which will itself be instrumental in forming high quality political leaders. These will be yeast in the dough and a transforming force in the world.

Ensure that the poor (the victims) participate in their own liberation by being a central voice in the watchdog committees.

Concluding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, Paul VI said: « the man of today listens more to the witness than to the master, and if he listens to the master it is because he is a witness ».

Within this perspective, consecrated religious will recognise that what is built up without God is a waste of time. "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn 15,6). Indeed, a certain type of philanthropic activism, in the name of fighting for man, risks diverting the apostolic worker from his mission if he does not cultivate, at the same time, the interior life, nourished by prayer and a judicious choice of moral values such as:

Don't be afraid of difficulties and be ready to face obstacles (cf. Ps 30,25)

Fight against the temptation to collaborate in exploiting the misfortune of others out of a frenzied quest for material advantages (cf. 1 P 5,8-9)

Live an interior martyrdom, not as a witness of blood but out of fidelity in the practice of virtue (cf. 2 Tim 4,7)

Be reserved and clothed with discretion, with sandals on your feet, ready to go out and announce the Gospel of peace, being as simple as the dove and wise as the serpent.

Be humble and do not project yourself as stronger than others or immune to the attraction of the "idols" of the time (power, honours, looked up to because you are rich, living a life of comfort and pleasure).

Give witness through living a good moral life. "The way of life of those living at the very heart of the Church should be a model for the whole of society", says Pope Benedict XVI in *Africae Munus* (no. 56).

Living like this, religious will offer a fruitful witness and will shape a Church which will sing and live the Beatitudes: « Rise up, you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours. Rise up, you who weep now, for you will laugh" (cf Luke 6, 20-21).

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# BIBLICAL AND PASTORAL DOCUMENTATION FOR DEEPER REFLEXION

## Introduction

The tragedy which has unfolded, on account of all the savage attacks on innocent victims in the wake of the various armed conflicts, poses formidable pastoral and theological questions.

**These biblical and pastoral documents**, which may contribute towards a deeper reflection on the issues, are intended especially for pastors and persons having a certain amount of biblical and theological formation.

Faced with something which appears to be just « pure evil », even the Christian is often dumb. That is true not only for the victims themselves but also for the pastors, human rights activists and those who accompany the victims. They have heard the victims relate their suffering. They have come face to face with the horror of how grotesquely human beings can treat others. We do not offer this documentation as answers to questions rooted deeply in the mystery of faith and the enigma of evil. The scope of this publication would not be able to cover that and, in any case, we are talking about open questions... The documentation sets out rather to offer some guidelines which may help everyone involved to deepen their personal and community reflection. We must avoid coming up with pat answers to the problem of evil and suffering and, indeed, the will of God. Such readymade answers do more harm than good and throw no light on the terrible experiences which the traumatised victims are going through. We wish to open up four themes.

### [1] THE WILL OF GOD

When people are deeply traumatised they lose their bearings completely and their beliefs are also threatened. They then try and give an answer in spite of everything. For many African Christians, the way they try to give some meaning to what has happened to them creates a terrible dilemma: they will say it is God's will, and that answer brings with it all the risks of fatalism and passivity. Moreover, it distorts the face of God which the Bible, and especially Christ, reveal to us: God who is Creator and Father, with a mother's heart, who wants us to be fully alive, in spite of trials, and is not an all-powerful being, who wants to make us suffer in order to purify or punish us.

### [2] THE TWOFOLD HUMAN DIGNITY

Our dignity is, first and foremost, that of Jesus himself. We are in the hands of God, created in his image, and we belong to the family of Jesus. To attack the dignity of a child, a little one, a

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man, a woman, a community, is to mock the face of Christ. It is to crucify him again and again. Furthermore, in moral terms, we are all called to respect the dignity of the other person. When a tormentor attacks another with blind violence, it is he himself who loses his dignity.

### [3] CONSCIENCE AND FAITH

To appeal for respect for personal conscience means trying not to add evil to evil, making a victim feel guilty over and above living the misery of having been totally violated and crushed in her intimate self as a woman and life bearer. Over against the Law there is personal, sacrosanct conscience.

### [4] PURITY AND PURITY OF HEART

The Old Testament often speaks about women being impure in the sexual sphere, as does traditional African religion. Moreover, women who have been violated feel themselves polluted and dirty and hence impure, while in fact they are not responsible for what has happened to them. Jesus rejected every kind of ritual or social impurity. Authentic purity depends on the quality of love that abides in a person's heart, in the way she wants to live and act, and not on what she has had to endure physically.

## [1] THE WILL OF GOD

« ***May your will be done*** »

*How are we to understand this supplication of the Our Father at a time of misery, crimes and tears? What is the will of God?*

### **Faith in the Incarnation**

To confess that God became man, died, rose again and ascended to the Father is to affirm that we know his will through human ways.

Christ charged his disciples to proclaim the true God.

Human beings, through their words and actions, are responsible for witnessing to the will of the Father.

To say so is to underline the fact that no one, including the leaders of our Churches, is fully competent to carry out this mission.

For not one of us can say truthfully that his life is completely holy and fully in conformity with the gospel. And so not one of us can claim that what he says and does bears faultless witness to the will of God.

So it is that we must live humbly, for we will never be fully authentic witnesses of the Gospel.

But at the same time a huge responsibility falls on our shoulders: becoming day by day more conformed to Christ and to the love that he bears for everyone. It is up to us to listen to his Spirit, the one who asks us to take care of the weakest among us and build a more humane and just society.

### **The gospel remains the absolute witness of the will of God.**

The will of God manifests itself in the way of life of Jesus. It is there that we will find the way, the path, to mirror what the Father wants for each one of his children.

The real and true will of God is to believe that we are loved without limit. For Jesus gave his life purely out of love, to witness to a God who is close to each one, beginning with the least among us, with the lowly.

In Jesus, God is a defenseless God, not a God of armies. He wants nothing more of us than a full life, which entails also living in peace and in justice.

The God of the gospel wants no misfortune or destructive violence to be visited on his children.

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Faced with evil, he stays close to those who suffer, walking beside them and at their side. He cannot take away evil, including the evil in the heart of man. His strength is that of love, nothing more, nothing less. It is a love that never rests. Christ does not save us from misfortune or injustice by his Cross. But he stays with us in our suffering, he does not abandon us.

His will is that we can find new life and believe in the future, believe that we are not abandoned, whatever the appearances. This is what he shows on the Cross in his promise of life to the good thief. This is his word spoken on the Cross to Mary, his mother, and John, speaking of their future.

And so, the **infinite power of God** in Jesus Christ is none other than the limitless power of love. We know how fragile that is when confronted with weapons and men on drugs. But love can also be "as strong as death" when it is the cement of solidarity, mutual support, friendship and justice. It is then, like Easter morning, stronger than death.

Listening to the will of God means believing that God wants the good for us and never evil. To affirm his "infinite power" is to call to mind that it is expressed in his weak tenderness, being a disinterested creative love without limit, shaping the way his children can relate to each other.

Our God does not have a readymade plan for our life, less still a plan whereby one must be subjected to violence and have to endure it. No. It is up to us, together, to mould our existence. And when this plan is broken by the murderous foolishness of men, his will is to gently give us the hope that a new future can open up for us, if others reach out to us in love with hand and heart.

No. God does not want misfortune to be visited on a family; he does not want a woman or child to be victims of blind barbarity. He does not want to see a child abandoned or a woman rejected. Striking out against a victim is a blow to the heart of God. For he is there at her side. His love does not have the power to block the murderous fist. But he will never abandon the poor. They are the face of God and of the suffering Christ. What God ultimately wants from us is that we will denounce these atrocities and commit ourselves to bringing them to an end.

## [2] THE TWOFOLD HUMAN DIGNITY

In his book *If this is a man*, the great writer Primo Levi tells his relationship as a camp inmate—in a Nazi concentration camp during the second world war—with Lorenzo, an Italian civilian working with the prisoners and who, for no apparent reason, brings him a tin of soup every day: for no apparent reason, without any personal self-interest, simply because he is a man. And Primo Levi can write “*Thanks to him I happened not to forget I myself was a man*”. Human dignity is radically at stake in the sincere and disinterested relationship that Lorenzo engages in at the risk of his life. He shows how, once the other person cannot live as a man, the man that I am myself is denied and I lose all respect for myself.

*How much more true this is in our Great Lakes region after more than 15 years of armed struggles, horrendous happenings, massacres, sexual attacks and sexual torture.*

**Let us recall the meaning of human dignity.**

**1. Christianity affirms above all, like the great currents in philosophy, the dignity of man in principle, at the origin of who he is.**

It is based on two great mysteries of faith.

**Creation: Man is created in the image and likeness of God**

The texts are not naive; they represent a whole wealth of theological reflection, based on the faith experience of Israel. This is the case in the first chapter of the book of Genesis.

*“Let us make man in our image, in our likeness”, 6<sup>th</sup> day. “And God saw that it was very good”:* (v. 26)

If one does not find the word “dignity” in the poem of creation, something stronger still is expressed there: man alone is to be seen as having divine status. He alone is made in the image of God. A man to whom all creation will be entrusted.

A man who is immediately plural: man and woman. “God created [man](#) in the image of himself, in the image of [God](#) he created him, male and female he created them.” (v. 27)

Woman and man share the same dignity which comes from God. It is a dignity which men have no right to besmirch or ridicule, by murder, violence, attacks against fundamental human rights.

Lets us live!

These first verses of the Bible challenge our actions and our attitudes—the opening sentences in a book are always of primary importance, for they speak already of everything that will follow. Not respecting the other because she is a woman, a child, someone from another culture or religious tradition is unworthy behaviour in the eyes of God himself. The State owes the same commitment to the promotion and defense of human dignity which cannot be gainsaid. There is no one who has less dignity than any other. Dignity obliges us, our rulers and everyone in authority, to take care of it, because doing harm to it is spitting in the face of God himself.

Let us stress that chapter 1 of Genesis highlights the fact that the sexual reality of the human being—“male and female he created them”—is blessed by God. It is blessed because it makes possible desire, love, the child and because it shows just how unique each person is in the eyes of God. It is an attack on the image of God when a woman is raped and husbands and children are forced to look on at these revolting scenes. These assailants are committing a crime and a grave sin. It is the same thing when these sins are committed in the bosom of families, away from all armed violence.

A second mystery of faith further reinforces this deep rooted dignity which every person possesses.

### **Salvation in Christ**

The Gospels relate the definitive Salvation accomplished by Christ, Son of God, Son of man. The coming of the Lord, his life given for those who love him, his passion and resurrection introduce us to the dignity of the Son himself.

In Christ the fulfillment of Salvation reconciles man with his primary dignity where it had been taken away by sin.

Salvation in Jesus Christ makes us children of the Father, but also friends of the Son: « I will no longer call you servants but friends ». He makes us brothers and sisters of Christ, as Paul says.

Dignity is therefore that of Jesus himself. We are in the hand of God, created in his image, and we belong to the very family of Jesus. To tamper with the dignity of a child, a little one, a woman, a man, a community, is to hold the face of Christ up to ridicule. It is to crucify him again and again.

It is clear that dignity is something « sacred » for the Christian faith. To attack a human being is to pierce the heart of Christ with a new lance.



### **1. There is a second way to speak of dignity. It has to do with ethical or moral dignity.**

It is a dignity which has its source in the responsibility and freedom of the human being.

It is built up by education: learning to love, to keep one's word, not to hurt another, becoming responsible for one's actions, paying attention to others, being ready to help them. The more a child is awakened to this sense of the good, the more this moral dignity will grow.

In the adult moral dignity is revealed, among other ways, by the uprightness of our actions, concern for the weakest, honesty and integrity, by the will to build up justice and peace around us at whatever level we are functioning.

We can do harm to moral dignity, sneer at it, even deny it by attacking other people, especially the most vulnerable, and killing them, whether physically, morally or spiritually. Sexual violence, looting, brutality in all its forms, not respecting workers, etc., are so many ways of damaging our true humanity and dehumanising ourselves. Every time that we see a person just as an object, an object of sadistic enjoyment, of power or exploiting him for our own profit, we are mocking our human dignity.

### **Conclusion**

***Between an aggressor and a person who is a victim, therefore, there is a distinct difference in dignity.***

Aggressor and victim both possess a basic dignity in principle. Every man, even the worst, should retain his rights: the right to a fair judgment, the right to care, to human relationships, to have the wherewithal to reenter into normal society. Nevertheless the aggressor has treated his own moral dignity with contempt. This the victim has not done.

The aggressor might be able to rediscover his moral dignity through a change in his conduct. That would depend on the exercise of his freedom, his will and his sense of responsibility.

Where we sometimes say that the "victim has lost her dignity" because she has been "tainted" by her criminal attacker, the reality is that it is the attacker who has lost his moral dignity and not the victim. She is not in the slightest responsible for the evil visited on her.

If there is anyone who has the right to be always considered a full member of the community it is the woman who has been victimised.

Lets us live!

The community must also demonstrate that it is worthy of the victim by welcoming her with love.

If a murderous attacker is ever to find a place again in normal human society he must manifest a radical change in his behaviour.

“Lead a life worthy of the Gospel of Christ” (Ph 1,27) Paul exhorts us.

It is up to us to live according to the example of Christ, fighting against all deadening influences and, with Christ as our model, rebuild bonds and relationships where they have been damaged.

### [3] CONSCIENCE AND FAITH

#### ***Conscience, fragile yet invincible***

*Those who have been victims of rape, women above all, live through a deep personal and social tragedy.*

*In calling for the Church and its pastors to respect personal conscience, we are trying to say that we must not compound the evil done by imposing yet another evil. We must not heap a sense of guilt on top of the victim's misery of having her deeply intimate feminine self as a life-bearer torn apart.*

*Therefore we appeal to the Church and her pastors to respect the conscience of these women, respecting what they want and above all what they do not want.*

The women concerned are not just victims, they fully remain persons. Evil men may have made her an object of sadistic pleasure and barbaric power, but she is still a person and remains a subject. In her inner self she is free, she is mystery that cannot be fathomed. That is true even when she has been laid low by torture, inflicted by butchers who know precisely what they are doing.

One cannot have real respect for persons without being attentive to the individual history of their injuries, their sensitivities, their culture and education. It is essential that those who attend to a woman victim should treat her with the greatest respect, be completely non-threatening and in no way try to dictate to her what she should do. For she is entrusting her deepest story to them as well as her silence. Often words will not even help in trying to reach out to her and reassure her.

The importance of the appeal to conscience is a deep-rooted tradition in the Church. Conscience expresses something of the living God in every person. From Paul, stating that "Even Gentiles, who do not have God's written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it" (Rm 2,14) , through the great theologians such as St. Thomas Aquinas, to the Second Vatican Council, the eminent place of conscience has been highlighted and stressed. In point of fact, the Constitution "*The Church in the modern world*" reminds us in no 16: "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience... Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths".

*No matter how bruised it might be, because of the terrible situation she has been put in, the conscience of the woman-victim will truly be guided by God's living presence in her, as she finds herself facing a choice which will have weighty consequences for herself and maybe for the child she is carrying. We simply must believe that God will be there for her in a mysterious way at this*

*tragic time in her life and at this moment when she has radical choices to make.*

Our Churches are institutions which are highly respected in our country. They are an influential voice throughout the whole of our society. They often multiply directives. Without abandoning their role as moral guides, they must first help Christians to form their conscience and develop a mature personal faith informed by the Gospel and Christian tradition. This assumes that each person, no matter how weak she may be in various ways, is capable of looking for the most just way forward in the fog and ambiguity of complex situations, where she is faced with dilemmas, uncertainty and fears.

There is no authority higher than conscience, not even that of the Church. The role of the Church, of its pastors and pastoral agents, is that of offering humble guidance, "by witness more than by words"<sup>24</sup>. The guide should keep close to the woman but never try to take her decisions for her. That would be a total lack of respect for her as a free agent.

It is not only educated and cultured people who have a right to their basic human dignity. One must also take seriously and respect the dignity and conscience of victims, of the poor and the neglected.

In the eyes of the all-merciful and tender God they are royalty. Barefoot princes and princesses no doubt, but royalty nevertheless, heirs of a Kingdom where, at the end of the day, "there will be no more tears".

No one asks leaders and pastors of Christian communities to agree with the decision taken by a woman in the depths of her own soul and following her own conscience.

But the imperative for the Church is this: to walk side by side, unobtrusively, with friendship and perseverance, with every woman who has been a victim, never sitting in judgment on her but, on the contrary, allowing her to go forward again with her head held high, without feeling ashamed or rejected.

What about our conscience? It demands of us that we take away, once and for all, from these too many devastated lives anything that would break the "bruised reed". It calls us to take a stand unflinchingly in favour of the most fragile and most vulnerable.

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<sup>24</sup> Paul VI said to a group of lay people, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." *Address to the Members of the Consilium de Laicis* (2 October 1974): AAS 66 (1974), p. 568.

## [4] PURITY AND PURITY OF HEART

*All victims of sexual crimes feel themselves condemned to be forever tainted, impure, defiled. They have been assaulted at the core of their body and being by a barbaric attack. What is even more tragic is that the woman's family and even the Christian community feel the same way about her, although she is not in the least responsible for what has happened to her. This negative attitude to her is not Christian, and if it is deeply embedded in the culture it must be evangelised and rooted out. Otherwise the victim has no chance of remaking her life and realising that the God who prefers the weak and the suffering to the powerful is holding her in his loving arms.*

We propose therefore to make a brief excursion through the Bible to contrast ritual purity with the very different purity of heart which Jesus speaks of and is the only purity which is significant in the eyes of faith.

In biblical Hebrew<sup>25</sup> we find two different roots for the word 'purity': *tmét* and *thr. tame'* is the one more frequently used. The root word *tm'* appears 283 times in the Hebrew Bible. It is very significant that it is concentrated in three books: 148 times in Leviticus, 36 in Numbers and 30 times in Ezekiel. It is intimately associated with the ritual surrounding worship. It is the duty of the priests "to separate the impure from the pure" (Lv 11,47) and it is they whom Ezekiel takes to task for not knowing how to do this (Ez 22,26; 44,23).

The legislation concerning ritual concerns four major fields – nutrition, birth and death, sickness, sexuality. It determines what is required in order to have access to the sanctuary and worship and what excludes one from the cultural community, as long as the impurity is not lifted by the appropriate rituals of purification.

At this stage impurity is neither moral nor even directly religious. It is first and foremost a lack. It is neither a "defect" (*mûm*) nor, in itself, something improper, in the hygiene-related meaning that we give to it.

The references to *tm'-thr*, clearly situated in the field of ritual, acquire a religious dimension especially in the book of Ezekiel. It concerns denouncing the contamination of the people of Jerusalem through importing idolatrous practices: "because you have defiled (*timme't*) my sanctuary with your idols and your sacrileges" Ez 5,11. See also 36,17-18; 9,7; 18,6.11.15, etc.

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<sup>25</sup> See *Nouveau Vocabulaire biblique*, ss la dir de J.-P. PREVOST, Bayard, 2004, art « Tamè » (impur), J.-P. PREVOST auteur, p. 209-212.

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The roots *tm/thr* bring us to the meeting of the holy (*qadôsh*) and the profane (*hol*), which distinction is expressed no doubt in a welding together of the priestly code and the law of holiness in Lv 11, 43-45.47; at the conclusion of the law on impure animals: "so as to separate the holy from the profane and the impure from the pure".

Moral purity, that of the heart or of the hands, is expressed rather with the terms *bor, bar* (Ps 18, 21.25 ; 24, 4 ; 73, 13 ; Jb 11, 4 ; 22, 30). Likewise the nouns *tum'ah* and *tom*.

In our vocabulary « tainted » and « purity » have often a moral meaning which the biblical Hebrew also is aware of, but in the Old Testament less often to the fore and frequently ambiguous. The ethical meaning is more prominent in non-worship contexts such as the story of Noah or in the books of Wisdom (In Job, it is to do with the moral qualities of the wise man. 2,3).

### **The books:**

Let us take a look at how these notions evolved already in the Old Testament

#### **- Psalm 51**

v. 2 « Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin".

v. 7 "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow".

There is a juxtaposition between impurity and sin, between sanctification and purity. The psalmist, whose heart is torn with remorse and is conscious of his moral misery, begs God to purify him and renew him interiorly, so that, with joy restored, he may himself work for the conversion of sinners.

This then is purity seen as moral integrity, which is foremost here, with one essential qualification:

v. 5: « Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me".

It is not a question here of the concept of original sin, but of an ancestral, quasi congenital, tendency. Illustrated by Gn 8,21: "every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood" (see also Jb 14,4 ; Jr 17,9) and which leads almost irresistibly to sin. As for hyssop, this was used as a sprinkler in the various ceremonies of purification (Ex 12, 22; Lv 14, 4-7; Nb 19,6). Psalm 51 is among the oldest psalms and was composed before 587 B.C. It was traditionally attached to 2 S 12, David being identified as the sinner who says he is ready to teach people the right way to go and because the adultery he committed with Bethsheba was the worst sin the king committed.

#### **- Second Genesis**

(Calculated as edited in 950 B.C. as a text of the ancient Near East)

Let us take note of just a few verses, especially « Adam and his wife were both *naked*, and they

felt no shame (2,25). It is a verse to tie in with what is said later: "*they realized they were naked*" 3.7. Without forgetting the author's play on words in talking of nakedness and the serpent (3,1) (*arom/arum*). While the nakedness of the man and the woman binds them to each other, that of the serpent evokes rather his isolation, he is the only one of his species. But the nakedness of the serpent alludes to something else too. For the serpent converses with the woman and no one finds that strange. Maybe it is saying obliquely that the man, who should have been there to protect his wife, was absent.

Shame and impurity here seem to be close to the sense of being tainted, stained, dirty. It recognises the inextricable mixture in us of evil and unhappiness, that we never fully escape from.

But the biblical text gives an account also of a passage from the "pre-ethical" to the ethical. Gn 4 portrays the advent of conscience. Even though it is ridiculed, it is there: "Am I my brother's keeper? ». And already in Gn 3,9, there is this question addressed by YHWH "where are you?" which we find again, for example, in the book of Job (38,4: "where were you?").

*Let us continue our journey, as a detour to enable us to understand ourselves better and to discover what the Lord expects of his friends.*

### **- Leviticus 11 - 16<sup>26</sup>**

It is a very complex book and the way it presents topics is quite foreign to us, which does not help in trying to understand it.

Nevertheless, in the context of our study, we can note the following:

The injunction « Be holy because I am holy » states a clear requirement. It does not demand withdrawal from the world, and even less so withdrawing from other people, but to be like God in his goodness and justice. Work to ensure that the world remains God's creation.

In other words, work to ensure that human beings do not cause chaos and destroy creation. They do so through plundering, through all kinds of violence, rejecting children and women. God's work of creation is undone whenever a human being is taken as an object and no longer seen as a unique being who is in the image and likeness of God and to be respected absolutely.

This means already, from the very start of the Bible account of God's dealing with men, making the earth habitable for us humans, beginning with the most vulnerable. *Tohu bohü* from the start of creation has made the earth a hostile place, and we ourselves have added to this evil by killing, torturing, excluding and rejecting people.

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<sup>26</sup> The book probably dates from the Persian period in the fifth century. The chapters that interest us are much older but were assembled in collections to the VI<sup>th</sup>.

Finally, for Leviticus, the actions which it calls "abominations" [tô `ēbôt] pertain to immoral actions (Lv 18, 30) such as murder and incest. This is "moral impurity" which makes the one who carries out the act impure, not the victim and, moreover, it contaminates the earth (Lv 18, 25) and the Temple of the Lord.

### - Job

A massive work: an ancient story which opens up in prose to introduce some 38 chapters in verse. It dates from the early 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

*Who can bring what is pure from the impure? No one!* (14, 4). A struggle ensues between self-accusation and self-justification which will only cease when God himself joins the argument. A menacing idea hangs over the question in the speeches of Job's friends: that of letting oneself be taken over by the sense that man was impure from the beginning of his creation: that man was contaminated by evil which he was not responsible for. That would explain everything and allow us to find peace of mind before the evil that is in our world and in the human heart.

Holding to the view that the world and man were innocent at the beginning of creation meant a titanic struggle for Job with his adversaries. He is able to hold out because he maintains the only dialogue on the subject which is worthwhile: his discussion with his God, whose face he cannot see—or, rather, whose features change as the dialogues with his friends move on and he rejects their arguments, especially that of retribution. Yes, *Who can bring what is pure from the impure?* No one, not even God. For what God wants is not purity but to see human beings coming together, with all their needs and wants, in dialogue with one another, struggling together to raise themselves up and live a full life. (ch. 40 ...).

### The Gospels, or purity of heart

This is the only extensive episode in the gospels which treats questions about impurity. What is a true offering? After debating with the Pharisees, with his disciples present, Jesus turns to the crowd (v 14), as a way of universalising his message, while ritual purity concerned only the Jews. The use of the word *anthropos* in these verses is important as stressing universality. It is a matter of saying what is truly pure and impure in the eyes of God. Opposition interior-exterior: the determining factor is the heart. The alimentary laws (Lv 11: Dt 14,3-21) are abrogated, showing the very strong authority of Jesus who abolishes the distinction between pure and impure foods and, in doing so, removes a major socio-religious barrier between Jews and Gentiles. This law of Jesus is indeed part of his New Law: purity of heart. It is not a vague concept but comes into relief in Jesus listing vices (21, 22). He enumerates twelve forms of wrongdoing, of which the first six relate directly to the Decalogue. The last one sums up all of them: foolishness. Thus authentic purity is not ritual but ethical. For Jesus the Jewish master—



showing his knowledge of the Scriptures—the sphere of the exterior, what one can see, is abandoned in favour of that of interiority, of what will make actions and ways of living just or unjust.

- **Mk 5, 21-43: the loss of blood and finding new life**

A meeting with a woman who was impure almost from birth, as she had long suffered from loss of blood; she was as good as dead. Her plight is described at length, twelve years of misery. She is no longer looking for a doctor, but a saviour. All she has to do, she thinks, is to touch Jesus in order to be finally cured. Deprived of all contact because of her impurity, she simply wants to touch. Just touch. Her gesture, moreover, is going to succeed (v. 29), with a play on words in Hebrew with the verb *yavesh*, which means “to become dry or barren” but also “to be ashamed”, as it is shameful to become barren. But here everything is turned upside down: the dryness suppresses shame instead of giving rise to it. Jesus “sensed” what has happened, so she comes forward and blurts out the whole truth (33b). She is able to point out the truth in a way the disciples could not recognise. In a reversal of the order of things, it is she who is in communion with Jesus, saved by her faith. She has infringed the rules of legal purity and, lo and behold, Jesus has given her a new life: « *thugatèr* », “my daughter”. She belongs to the family of Jesus, to those who listen to his word and put it into practice.

And so, with the gospels, the final saying of the Decalogue is fulfilled: « you shall not covet ». It is a saying that emerges from social codes of behaviour to enter into the inner righteousness of a person. Purity is the harmonious merger of the heart with one’s way of living and loving. Every sort of social and ritual purity is rejected in favour of the expansion of the heart and of courage, just as in the case of the woman suffering from loss of blood.

It is love and love alone which purifies the « impure » heart. The challenge, therefore, for each one of us, community and families, pastors of different Churches, to enter into this movement, in the sense of marching towards solidarity, protesting against everything which is an attack against persons, adults and children. Let us take up the struggle for justice and respect, above all in defense of victims.

It is in this way that purity of heart will be achieved. This is the only purity that matters in the eyes of Jesus and which opens us up to the goodness of God: “happy are the pure of heart”.

Each one of us and all of us are automatically called on to follow this way of purity of heart through our commitment to build human society into a civilisation of love.

***But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. <sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. <sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. <sup>4</sup>Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, <sup>5</sup>Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you.***

***Isaiah 43:1-5***

## Working documents

### Discussion material for persons and institutions visited by the Groupe Chrétien de Réflexion et d'Action de Bukavu

1. Please introduce yourself briefly and explain to us what is involved in your work for those victims of violent attacks whom you receive or care for.
2. What pleasant and unpleasant experiences do you have in the course of your work/commitment?
3. Have your faith in God or Christian beliefs been shaken by the evil and the suffering you have come up against in meeting with and caring for victims?
4. What do the traumatised persons whom you encounter say about God and their faith? What is their outlook on life, during and after treatment?
5. Have their Christian beliefs and traditional cultural values been affected by what they have been through?
6. What do you say to the suffering victims as a word of consolation or to answer their questions if they blame God?
7. What do you say about « the will of God » in these ordeals and about his love?
8. Other points you would like to bring up.

*N.B. The meeting will take the form of a free exchange where the participants can ask questions and react as they see fit.*

### Extracts from « The spirit of the meeting », Bukavu, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2012

#### The spirit

Sometimes we end up unable to utter a word, confronted with the gravity, the complexity and the extent of the evil we have been faced with for so long<sup>27</sup>. We can only contemplate the damage done (to the extent that we ourselves have come up against it!) with deep sadness and

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<sup>27</sup> "Faced with the worst that humans can demonstrate, reason and imagination are sometimes struck with stupor, dazed – at a degree of evil, cruelty, such as that achieved in the genocides of the past century; brains fail to understand it idles. They refuse to go farther; dizzy to face the abyss opened before them. " (Editor's translation), Sylvie Germain, *Rendez-vous nomades*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2012, 100-110.

revulsion, feeling ourselves very small and helpless, and even sometimes discouraged. *Which is why it is in a very humble spirit that we are invited to come together, and to listen first and foremost.* Some among us have an experience and/or expertise which give them certain insights that they will be able to share with us, but no one has an answer to this tragedy or a comprehensive explanation. Our faith is also put in question and calls us to dig deep to find hope.

LISTENING is without doubt the first fundamental attitude to adopt during this entire meeting. First of us, we must listen to one another, listen to the reasons why we are here in this group, our various motivations, our expectations, our fears, our questioning, our insights and our lack of clarity. In doing so we will be able gradually to build up a fraternal group where we will complement one another in our diversity and where the Spirit can be active at the heart of our hopes for the meeting.

Marie-Noel Cikuru expresses it this way: « In creating a space for exchange and sharing, the meeting will allow all the members of the group to better understand the problem of rape and violent attacks, to grasp its gravity, in order to formulate concrete proposals underpinned by the strength of our belief in Jesus Christ”.

We will follow this by listening to those we are going to visit on the spot or who will come to speak to us. It will be a listening with compassion, with a sense of outrage most certainly, in a spirit of solidarity. It will be a listening with the heart, a heart in which the Spirit dwells. It will be a critical listening, working out what is at stake and looking for answers.

A sharing will then follow—which will mean another stage in listening—where each one will be invited to recognise their own vulnerability and truth. May we do our utmost to share in depth in what spirit we are living, what gives us light and dynamism on our path, what makes us anxious and weighs heavy on us. Continuing our sharing, we are invited to carry out an analysis and deepening of our self-examination following the visits we have made, our exposure to the Word of God and to the experts who will complete what we will have already studied in advance, thanks to the documentation we have already received, as well as the bibliography. In this work, the expertise of each participant, as well the experiences they have lived through, will be in demand, so that we can refine a message for the Churches and for those directly involved with victims. This message will be presented as a set of concrete proposals.

Finally, I believe it is important that we should come together without any a priori or preconceived idea about what we are going to discover or about how we are going to react. I am convinced—from my experience several times with different groups—that in a meeting of minds and a variety of expertise, and working in a genuine listening atmosphere, which we are invited to, we will come up against the unexpected. This ‘unexpected’ will have come out of our critical reflection and our study in common. It will also come from the Holy Spirit who alone is able to make “all things new”, even when it seems that there is no hope left. Hence, with respect for the particular road that each one is following, we are invited to live through this experience together in an attitude of interior listening and of prayer. We will be able to take time to pray together, if the group so desire. We can surely bring this project to prayer and intercession, and I know that

Lets us live!

very many of you are doing so already. We can pray for each other and put all this victims and those who are caring for them before God. It is for them that we are here.

**Need one add that such a group session, which we hope will be very fruitful and of high quality, will only be successful if each one of us commits him/herself to participate wholeheartedly in the full nine days journey together?**

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