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Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

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Equipped disciples: embracing the cross – Testimony on “Carrying the Cross of Poverty”

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Dear friends, sisters and brothers in the Spirit of Jesus!

I come from southern Brazil, from the city of Porto Alegre known for having hosted the WCC Assembly of 2006, but also various gatherings of the World Social Forum. I am grateful for the challenge that this Conference poses to me, as a missionary, to witness from a continent assailed by poverty which affects millions of people, besides minority ethnicities and many vulnerable groups, such as people with HIV/AIDS and others. I request permission to speak dressed in this *Kuzma*, a cloth made of cotton by the women of the Ashaninka indigenous people, who live in Amazonia between Brazil and Peru. I used this vestment when I was ordained, in 1986, to the ministry of the Gospel in the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB), when I was working as a missionary among the Kulina indigenous people in Acre, on the border of Peru and Bolivia. On that occasion, I explained to the small congregation that I decided not to use the *black traditional clergy robe* as a sign of insertion in the culture of the indigenous peoples and commitment to their struggle for life, human rights and dignity. Also, when we got married, my wife and I decided to use only the *tucum ring* as a sign of our matrimony and our alliance with the indigenous cause.

In this event, I propose that the *use of this vestment* be a symbol of the challenge which the theme presents to us: “Carrying the Cross of Poverty”. Freed by the Gospel of Jesus and his Spirit for a new life, to take on the cross of Christ – which frees us from sin, injustice and death – means more than just *proclaiming* his name. There is something inherent in the Christian faith which calls upon us to *carry the pain and suffering* of the people, in solidarity, communion and love. Ten years ago, I wrote that the love of God can and must be lived and experienced in *com-passion* (passion with) *for the other*. That is why I understand mission as *compassion*. *The mission of God* is not and has never been *neutral*. It places us in the path of those who suffer the most, of the people treated unjustly, of the landless or expatriated peasants, of the people who are worth nothing in the eyes of the dominant system, as the Classical Pentecostal Churches taught us over 100 years ago. One must take up the *cross of Christ* as the *cross of the crucified*, of yesterday and of today, as Leonardo Boff, Milton Schwantes and Dom Pedro Casaldáliga, bishop of the Catholic Church, who celebrated 90 years, wrote. Only thus will there be liberation!

Can you imagine the *weight* of this commitment? The burden is enormous compared with what is currently happening globally and in particular here in Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean. Indigenous people are seeing their lands invaded by mining multinationals, agro-business companies, hydroelectric projects of the national governments. Afro Brazilian brothers and sisters, descendants of enslaved Africans, who have resisted 350 years on communal lands which we call *Quilombos* struggle for dignity and the right to live communally on the freed-up lands of their ancestors. Women of all classes suffer daily from domestic violence. Thus, the house can no longer be, simply, *the sweet home* from the patriarchal

perspective. Femicide grows in Brazil, in Central America, in Mexico. A current statistic points out that – just in Brazil – in 2013, 4,762 assassinations of women were registered, approximately 13 feminine homicides daily. Sadly, Brazil is among the countries with the highest rate of feminine homicides: it occupies *the fifth position* in a ranking of 83 nations (data from the *Mapa da Violência 2015* [Violence Map] (Cebela/Flacso)). Doctor Lourdes Bandeira, sociologist and professor at the University of Brasília, the capital of my country, affirmed: “This situation is equal to a permanent state of civil war”.

In 2016 Brazil suffered a true *parliamentary coup*, conducted by the oligarchies which could not tolerate the fourth mandate of a popular government. Allies of the elites, of the multinationals, of the private banks, supported by a corporative media, took down a president who had been constitutionally elected in 2014, leading the country into a political and social crisis never seen before. At this moment, legislative projects are imposing severe losses for the workers, the consequences of which we will know in the near future. Following the global tendency, the loss of worker’s rights and the imposition of informality will define, for many years, the life of the majorities, with already foreseen results of increase of extreme poverty, of violence and of human and environmental degradation, making life not viable mainly for the Brazilian youth.

In this context, the Christian churches cannot step back nor omit to be involved. If the meaning of their existence is to become historically *an instrument of the love and of the compassion of God for God’s people*, the path to follow will be prophetic and in solidarity with the *pain of the world*. It is among the “smallest” of these that we will find Jesus, as he prophetically announced in his parable (Matthew 25). The meaning of the evangelizing announcement will propose a *trustworthy hope* which is rooted in reality. Hope that is incarnated in the life and in the expectations of millions of youth, women, children, elderly, as well as in the migrant people which are increasingly flocking to Brazil in recent years, e.g. such as from Haiti, Venezuela, Senegal, Ghana, Palestine, Syria. Thus, the main actors will be the youth, women, people without fame or power, as Elsa Tamez wrote in her history of the women in the Jesus movement.

I end my testimony honoring the *memory* of the indigenous leader and teacher **Marcondes Namblá**, of the Xokleng/Laklanõ people, of the state of Santa Catarina, brutally assassinated on the 1st of January of this year, as he was working on a beach of that southern state. Namblá, 38 years old, was married, had five children, leaving them orphans as well as the children of the indigenous school where he was teaching to strengthen the language and recovery of their autochthonous culture. He was an active member of the Assembly of God and was supported by the missionary project of the Lutheran church. He had recently concluded a programme in the Intercultural Indigenous Teaching Program of the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) and in preparation for a master’s programme. His premature death is a hard blow for that people. In recent years an unforgiveable regression has occurred with regard to the indigenous rights which are embodied in the Federal Constitution of 1988. The wave of racist intolerance, stimulated by the authorities, is also happening in other states of the federation, mainly against the Guarani-Kaiowá people in Mato Grosso do Sul, who are experiencing truly tragic days with summary expulsions from their lands and recurring assassinations of important leaders.

How to carry these crosses in such a difficult moment? I believe that if we trust only in our human strengths there is no way out. Poverty will increase and with it all the violence which accompany it. More than ever we need to pray and trust in the strength and power of the Spirit of Christ. And thus empowered, we need to **concretely wear the pain, the struggle and the hope of our peoples**. As Dr. Walter Altmann, ex-moderator of the Central Committee of the WCC, wrote: “Christ can already be found where those who are suffering are found.” The living God bless and keep you in the Peace, which is the fruit of Justice!