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THEME: PROPHETIC TESTIMONY FOR UNIVERSAL COMMUNION –

MISSION IN CONFLICT ZONES AND HEALING

SEDOS Residential Seminar, 6-10 May 2024, at Arricia.

INTRODUCTION

I should like to express my gratitude to the management of SEDOS for inviting me to take part in this Residential Seminar and share my ideas based on my experience as a religious missionary priest. As a pastor (Archbishop) of the local Church in the Archdiocese of Bangui, Central African Republic, I have first-hand experience of missionary work in areas torn by conflict, war and violence. I should like to congratulate SEDOS for organizing this Residential Seminar on a very important theme.

Our intervention is structured around the following points, namely: *prophetic courage, prophetic testimony, the advent of peace, and finally the language of truth in the service of universal communion*.

“Always be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (1 Pt 3:15).

Peter’s solemn declaration the day after the Resurrection of Christ stands as a true *Magna Carta*, a testimony to the Christian faith. The Christian faith is founded on the testimony of the death and Resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 15:14). Thus, the Christian identity draws its essence from witness, that is to say, from the particular way of living the *Sequela Christi* and responding to its call.

To testify is to confirm or attest to the truth, to the value of something, by one's words or by one's actions or simply by one's very existence. The Greek word *martus* means witness. The witness is a person who undergoes martyrdom, that is to say torture, inflicted to make one renounce one's faith, and accept death rather than recant. Often, Prophetic Witness is lived out in a contradictory world fraught with conflict.

The universal communion we are sincerely calling for will only be possible when the authenticity of our prophetic witness is manifest in the courage to proclaim the Good News of Christ in a world hostile to the truth, but also in our determination, as consecrated people and missionaries, to care for and heal the wounds violence inflicts in order to build true universal communion.

1— Prophetic courage

Prophetic engagement necessarily involves courage. The prophet is a whistle-blower as he alerts people, and a sentinel. The prophet always stands on the ramparts because he watches over the city. His position as a guard and watchman often exposes the prophet to incomprehension and disrespect and even to the supreme sacrifice. We can evoke here the martyrdom of John the Baptist, who died as a martyr. Not a martyr for the faith – because he was not asked to deny his faith – but as a martyr of the truth. “A man sent from God ... who came to bear witness” (Jn 1:6-8) as a “holy prophet” (Acts 3:21), put to death for his freedom of speech and for fidelity to his prophetic mandate. The Holy Father Pope Francis said that “life only has value if we give it, if we give it in love, in truth, if we give it as “the sincere gift of self to others” in daily life. If someone “claims to be self-

sufficient", saves his life to keep it, "death prevails" (FT, n. 87), life withers. The prophet John the Baptist, the witness to the truth, could not say anything other than the truth contemplated, the truth encountered, the truth proclaimed as he indicated Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:29).

Apart from the difficulties and contradictions inherent in the prophet's mandate as a witness to the truth, he also appears as a torch-bearer, a bearer of hope, the one who is the voice of the voiceless, the one who voices aloud what people are mumbling from fear of reprehension. Thus, John the Baptist's example must be our model of prophetic witness to bring about true universal communion. Universal communion requires everyone's strong commitment in the defence of human dignity.

In his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis stressed the need to focus attention on the serious violations of human dignity/rights in our time (FT nn.22, 37-41). He emphatically underlined the fact that this "intrinsic dignity" exists (n. 39) "in all circumstances", asking everyone to defend it in every cultural context, at every moment of a person's existence, regardless of any physical, psychological, social or even moral deficiency.

The Declaration "*Dignitas Infinita*" (on human dignity), dated 2 April 2024 and released on Monday, 8 April 2024, by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, based on an original analysis and in-depth study of the question of human dignity in the Encyclical Letter "*Fratelli Tutti*", speaks of the "transcendent dignity of the human person" (FT n. 273) as "infinite" (*dignitas infinita*), in reference to Saint John Paul II's words at a meeting with people suffering from various limitations or disabilities,² in order to show how this value recognized by all "prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state or situation", beyond all external appearances or the specific characteristics of some people's lives. The prophet, friend of truth, is also the friend of peace.

2 — Prophetic Witness and the advent of peace

In his Message for World Mission Day on Sunday, 23 October 2022 on the theme "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8), Pope Francis reminded us that "Every Christian is called to be a missionary and a witness of Christ". "And the Church, community of Christ's disciples, has no other mission than that of evangelizing the world by bearing witness to Christ. The identity of the Church is to evangelize." Therefore, the call to bear witness to Christ through an exemplary Christian life goes hand in hand with the proclamation of Christ.

At times we are called to bear witness to Christ in areas of conflict. Today we see a whole range of conflicts, wars and violence; from personal discord to community conflicts, political unrest and regional wars. And in this kind of context, we question ourselves about our true role as disciples of Christ and above all, about what it means to be a missionary and a witness to Christ, in the context of violence and war?

True peace is not only with friends but more so with those who are considered enemies. We must invent words that budge the lines, words that liberate, words that bring forgiveness.

Once human language creates its own words relating to peace, harmony, living together, love, then our humanity will be restored and we can sing the hymn to love anew and let life pulsate in each of us. Our language today is loaded with aggressive words that refer to war, violence, hatred, resentment, revenge. The prophet, peacemaker, is the one who must invent a new lexical vocabulary devoid of hatred and any warlike expressions.

I am often irritated, even outraged, when the television transmits rhetoric tending to fan the flame, asking for weapons to be sent. Let us not forget that violence begets violence. We must learn to get

out of this spiral, this logic of war which wants to settle everything with arms. The survival of humanity is at stake today.

I have the impression that human beings have not yet learned the lessons of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The logic of war and supremacy constitutes a real threat to the human species and to our world held in thrall/suspense by the unbridled appetite of the nuclear powers. Everything is happening as if humanity were preparing for the last war against man. Martin Luther King said: "We must learn to live together as brothers, otherwise we will all die together like idiots." This assertion clearly shows the need to create positive conditions for life together, between the different peoples, between different nations. It is here that the concept of conviviality expresses itself fully, in all its depth and all its meaning. To achieve this conviviality/harmony dialogue is necessary, speak openly, talk to each other, to build a fraternal world, a world of peace and true universal communion.

More than ever today, our world needs more missionaries and witnesses to Christ who accept the challenge to dialogue and pray tirelessly with those who ceaselessly create or maintain situations of conflict and war. The need to make disciples in conflict zones will not cease. And the missionary mandate calls for "missionary disciples", to use Pope Francis' expression, as well as missionary men and women religious to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). Thus, the community can act in any situation, peace or conflict, using the Gospel as its foundation of peace and fraternity.

In a world where people are no longer open or frank with each other, where it becomes impossible to converse, to address others, where dialogue is disappearing, is a world in conflict, it is a world at war, it is war that is taking hold of us. War is the inability to meet the other as an equal; war uses the argument of force instead of using the persuasive and penetrating power of dialogue, of employing strong words that can cross the lines **and bring about peace** and universal communion. **CHECK**

In 2013, when a full scale war was being waged in the Central African Republic, I met a 16-year-old youth in the *bush* who had been made a "General". I spoke to him about education for peace. To my great surprise, even bordering on astonishment, he replied: "here, when a person does not obey, I kill him!". What a threat! But what ignorance! What perdition and what moral depravity.

This young man is lacking education in the use of speech as a weapon of persuasion. He still has biceps to bulge, that is to say the power of violence.³ God's lament through the mouth of the prophet Hosea immediately resonated in me: "**My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge**" (Hosea 4:6). This is why I make this plea, I ask in the name of God and in the name of peace, in the name of universal communion to have the courage to move across the lines to promote a culture of non-violence/war no more, a culture of peace for our humanity. The prophet Isaiah warns us that: "**He (God) shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more**" (Isaiah 2:4).

3 — The language of truth at the service of universal communion

True peace cannot be achieved solely through the use of force. True peace comes once the causes of conflict and war are known. Conflicts generally arise from situations of systemic injustice. Globalization must not be perceived today as the exclusion of the less strong, the exclusion of the weakest or even the extinction of nations long despoiled and dominated. On the contrary, globalization must be an opportunity for all nations to contribute collectively to the well-being and happiness of all, to bring about peace and *ultimately* universal communion. Now, the destiny of humanity as a whole is interconnected; namely what affects a single human being, affects all of humanity. We have only one human nature. The numerous conflicts, past and present, waged in

Africa and elsewhere must challenge our human conscience and call for universal communion. In fact, the construction of walls and alliance blocks in the West should remind people of the urgent need for solidarity with Africa, Asia, the Middle East and everywhere else in the world.

Our world needs a language of truth that advocates justice for all. Every human being has the right to justice and must benefit from the riches that our world offers us. Wars arise when this universal and inalienable right is trampled upon.

International diplomacy must also employ a language of truth valid for all nations.

Certainly initially, the crisis we experienced in the Central African Republic derived from endogenous causes fomented by part of the population's frustration at feeling excluded. In fact, legitimate demands pushed some of our compatriots to take to arms to claim their right of access to the State's basic public services, such as: running water, electricity, hospitals, schools, roads, etc. Very quickly, these demands were exploited by certain endogenous and exogenous agents who began to publicize the conflict, and attribute a religious connotation to it. Fortunately, with the help of divine wisdom and thanks to the language of truth employed, we resisted this dangerous rhetoric which had already begun to allude to the interreligious conflict between Christians and Muslims in the Central African Republic.⁴

Diplomacy is not synonymous with demagoguery or hypocrisy. International diplomacy must learn from its past mistakes and build bridges of justice and equity between the nations and peoples to bring about peace. I am convinced that all the funds deployed today in the arms race could contribute instead to forestall future international hostilities by investing in the education for peace in order to achieve universal communion.

CONCLUSION

We think that our prophetic witness with a view to universal communion requires the real and authentic commitment of each and every one in the service of peace. This commitment is not without obstacles or difficulties which may even lead to the supreme sacrifice of the prophet. But apart from the adversities inherent in this mission, the prophet is a man of faith who knows how to count on God and who always keeps the flame of his faith burning in order to convince others to discover/rediscover the providential, loving and reassuring closeness of God.

Universal communion is only possible when our humanity realizes that no one should be left by the wayside (Lk 10:25-37: The Good Samaritan).

Prophetic witness requires that the Good News be proclaimed "in season and out of season" (2 Tim 4:2) to our world torn by conflict and exposed to new ideologies. Finally, the prophet is the friend of the truth and he/she never tires of seeking it and proclaiming it.

FOOTNOTES

1. Pope Francis' Homily at Mass at St Martha's, 8 February 2019.
2. St John-Paul II, Angelus, Osnabrück Cathedral, for people with physical disabilities, 16 November 1980.
3. Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, *Je suis venu vous apporter la paix. Le combat d'un cardinal au coeur de la guerre*, Douala, Médias Paul, 2021, p. 85.
4. Justin Ndema, *Le dialogue Islamo-Chrétien en Centrafrique*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2014, p. 22.