

HAITI: LIVING LETTERS TO A BRUISED AND BRAVE PEOPLE

24-28 November 2008

Our "Living Letters" delegation was warmly welcomed by the Haiti Protestant Federation. The president, Pastor Sylvain Exantus, and General Secretary, the young Pastor Fritz-Gerald Romulus, a recent graduate of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, had carefully arranged our visit, and accompanied us throughout the week. The programme, which was both heavy and detailed, went off without any incidents, and the welcome we received everywhere, including by the many representatives of the media during the final news conference, enabled us to see how much this expression of international ecumenical solidarity was appreciated in this critical period the country is living through.

A very intense week of meetings with very diverse people and organizations – ranging from a small Baptist community in the countryside to the Prime Minister – and visits on the ground (in the capital and its suburbs, and in the south of the country, devastated by the latest cyclones) allowed the delegation to hear the authentic voices of the Haitians, to see many examples of the economic and ecological disasters which are devastating the country, and to understand a little better the complexity and seriousness of the challenges confronting the churches, those running the state, and organizations of civil society.

Our delegation was one of the teams of Living Letters sent within the context of the "decade to overcome violence"; our mission was to listen, to learn, and to discuss the approaches and challenges of fighting violence and building peace, and to pray together for peace in the community and the world.

Within the context of the "decade to overcome violence", the situation in Haiti needs to be read and understood in the context of a country in which the most fatal kind of violence is extreme poverty, and food insecurity is the most serious insecurity. A sad illustration of this is that during our visit it was announced that 42 children had died of starvation in a rural area in the south of the country.

The delegation agreed to draw some observations from the great amount of information and many impressions gathered during the visit, and to offer some recommendations.

1. The most striking observations

1.1. A dangerously weak and weakened country.

Thirty years of the Duvalier father and son "life dictatorships", followed by 20 years of governmental instability mingled with periods of violence until 2007, have contributed to greatly weakening the country's economy, social fabric and institutions.

Nearly three-quarters of Haitians live below the *poverty line*, and for many the fight for day-to-day survival does not guarantee the minimum required to live.

This sad reality is blindingly obvious simply by walking through the streets of Port-au-Prince or in the huge poor area of Carrefour: men, and women in particular, are sitting on the potholed pavements or roadside selling fruit, charcoal, used clothes or shoes, and a whole range of small household objects. How much do they take home at the end of the day? It is easy to believe that most of them hardly earn 40 gourdes, or less than a dollar, which is the threshold of extreme poverty fixed by the international community.

We were told that the situation is even worse in the countryside, where the rural population no longer even manages to feed itself, even less to ensure the country's food security. Food riots in April 2008 were an indication of the alarming extent of the deterioration of the economic situation. This is the heritage of decades of irresponsible and disastrous national and international policies which have ruined the country's economy, particularly in rural areas where the peasant farmers, left to themselves, are unable to compete with subsidized agricultural produce, such as rice, dumped on the market from the United States.

To this is added a lack of communication and business infrastructures on land which is increasingly vulnerable to violent hurricanes, because of *a lack of policy of protection for the natural environment*. It is reckoned that 70% of the population still use wood charcoal as cooking fuel, as there is no alternative. Cutting down the trees on this mountainous island means that any tropical storm quickly turns into a catastrophe, taking earth, fields, houses and inhabitants in its wake. The toll for 2008, in which four cyclones battered the island in the space of a month, is sinister proof, with more than 500 deaths, a million Haitians seriously affected, thousands of homes destroyed, drowned livestock, and ravaged fields. According to the head of the UN emergency team, 2.3 million Haitians needed emergency food aid at the end of 2008. An appeal for 108 million dollars was made, but at the current time less than a third of that sum has been promised.

"We feel as though we are living in a country where everyone is in transit", the president of the Haiti Protestant Federation told us. In transit from the countryside to the towns (or rather, towards the shanty-towns of the cities), in transit from the country overseas: to the Dominican Republic, the United States, Canada, Europe (more than three million Haitians have become expatriates, with eight million still in the country).

The whole world is in agreement that this instability and social precariousness are largely due to the *failures of the state and the weakness of democratic institutions*. This observation, which is not new, as it goes back at least half-a-century, has led the **lessors** of international funds to turn away from a state which is seen as unreliable and to give priority to NGOs, to the extent of the current imbalance, where 90% of international public aid is transferred to NGOs (most often international) against 10% to the Haitian state. This situation only aggravates the weakness of national institutions, which, starved of means, are ineffective or powerless, and are losing all their credibility in the eyes of a population, whose frustration is reaching dangerous levels. The collapse of a school in a shanty-town in Port-au-Prince on 7 November, which left nearly 100 dead and more than 150 wounded, further raised the fears of the residents and their complaints against a failing state, which is unable to control illegal construction and to fulfil its obligations of providing basic levels of hygiene and safety and to get help to those in danger. The intervention and establishment over the last four years of the United Nations mission MINUSTAH, whose role is to ensure internal security, further illustrate the state's loss of sovereignty in a significant area. It is increasingly viewed with reluctance in the country,

particularly now it is known that this United Nations operation costs a thousand million dollars a year.

As the heads of human rights organisations emphasized to us, Haiti's situation is not that of a country in conflict, or "post-conflict", but that of a country where the *state of law* does not function well. So, "to overcome violence" – which in Haiti means in particular attacking the glaring structural violence which leads to poverty – it is essential to strengthen the state of law and to enable political, administrative, economic and social institutions to work for the common interest by providing public services worthy of the name for everyone, starting with the poorest.

In this context, the question of *justice* takes on a capital importance. To re-establish confidence in a state of law, we were told everywhere, it is essential that citizens can see that the country is governed by laws which have been voted for democratically (not by force or by money), and that these laws are applied equally and effectively to all. This is still a long way off.

The legal system and police have an unsavoury reputation for corruption, and impunity continues to corrupt the institutions whose duty it is to make the law respected. Unfortunately we know only too well that the rule of impunity is a fatal cancer for democracy, and that injustice and crimes which are not sanctioned by law continue and get worse over time.

However, change is to be hoped for in this field. Three laws reforming the legal system have just been voted in and procedures for "verifying" the integrity of the police ("vetting") are in place. The success of these reforms now depends on the government's political will to implement them effectively as soon as possible.

1.2. Despite all this, a people who do not give up

One thing which really struck the delegation was the shocking contrast between the disgraceful living conditions which most Haitians suffer, and the human *dignity* which they demonstrate.

In every area we went to, in the region of the capital as well as in the towns and villages of the South which we visited, we were amazed – and admiring – to meet children in impeccable school uniform, young girls with colourful ribbons tied round their ponytails, young boys in white socks, coming out of revolting lanes, run-down or half-built houses, leaping over the rubbish heaps which strew the ground, in the midst of the chaotic traffic.

These thousands of schoolchildren seemed to us to represent a symbol of the dignity and life-force of this people, where parents make every effort to enable their children to go with dignity to school, despite the high cost which that means for them. In fact, more than 80% of schools are private and fee-paying, because of the lack of public education. The quality of education, unfortunately, does not meet the families' aspirations, for in many cases, the teachers in these small private schools are poorly trained and only have limited resources.

We also encountered this dignity in adversity in commitments to associations in civil society and in the faith convictions which drive the Christian organizations which we visited.

There are many people in Haiti who refuse to give up, as shown by the *many creative initiatives* which we saw or heard about. These are in every area: education, health, promotion of human

rights, civic education, the defence and protection of children's rights and women's rights, rehabilitation and protection of the environment, accompanying those uprooted by catastrophe or poverty, defending the rights of Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic, without mentioning development projects in rural areas and community organizations in the shanty-towns. The artistic gifts of the Haitian people for painting, music, and crafts are also thriving, as one can see and hear every day while walking in the streets.

This reality, which is all too often overshadowed by news of drama and catastrophe, seemed to us to be something we had to emphasize. "You can hear the sound of the tree falling, but you can't hear the sound of the wheat growing", says the African proverb. In Haiti, in particular, it is important to pay attention to signs of life which do not make a sound.

But it is clear that all this energy, all these various works, carried out with the best will by local groups, parishes, associations, or NGOs, are not enough to bring the country out of the dramatic situation in which it finds itself. It is vital that they are supported by coherent policies from a functioning state, which is the only thing able to ensure the construction of the necessary infrastructures and to promote a real collective change, by fixing priorities for the common good.

1.3. A critical historical moment

The impression which we all took from all the meetings and analyses which we shared during our visit is that Haiti is at a critical point in its history. The challenges to be overcome by everyone – the government, political parties, civic society, the Churches – are huge and complex: problems of governance and managing human and material resources which have not been resolved for a long time and which have led the country to the verge of economic catastrophe and political paralysis. The people's expectation – or impatience – of finally seeing change take place, not only in discussion, matches the sufferings they have endured – it is immense, and focused as a priority on the state. There is an urgent feeling that things must change, and now: there has been too much suffering, for too long.

Now is the critical time.

- Either the potential for dynamism, courage, and creativity which exists in the society is valued by the state's leaders to re-start, rebuild and consolidate the economic and social structures in the sectors which are vital for the people, so that visible and useful transformations can give the population more confidence in its future and its institutions;
- or the *status quo* is maintained for various political interests, and the risks of ending in violent social explosions (whether spontaneous or planned), and of a haemorrhaging of the life-forces of the nation, seeking to flee the country, become serious.

The main responsibility falls on the state leaders at the helm. But other members of the political, economic, social and religious world also have an important role to play, each in their own area of responsibility, to avoid the second scenario plunging the Haitian people, once again, into a cycle of violence and suffering.

2. "Progress is slow, but there is hope"

During our visit, the ecumenical team learned how the Haitian Churches analyse, understand, and confront violence and conflict.

Put simply, the fact that the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC) will meet in Jamaica, a neighbouring Caribbean country, offers a unique opportunity to draw attention to the peace initiatives which the Churches and organizations of civil society have undertaken in Haiti – sometimes with little or no support from the international community.

We really hope that a major Haitian delegation will be able to take part in the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation to speak about the Haitian Churches' courageous peace initiatives in the fields of education, the promotion and defence of human rights, health, the rehabilitation and protection of the environment, accompanying those displaced by natural catastrophes or poverty, defending the rights of Haitian migrants to the Dominican Republic, the work of community organizations in shanty-towns, and development projects in rural areas.

2.1. A theological reflection

The Haiti Protestant Federation (HPF) undertook a theological reflection on the question of violence, from which we can draw valuable contributions for the Decade to Overcome Violence and the IEPC in Jamaica in 2011. This is the *Theological Reflection on violence and kidnapping in Haiti*, a document of the HPF, edited by Jean Dorlus, Junie Hyacinthe, and Semirea Tullus, with the support of the World Council of Churches.

According to the HPF, violence in Haiti has economic, ideological, political, and legal roots, and is also influenced by external factors, in particular: a critical economic context, which continues to deteriorate, with unemployment among young people reaching 70%; migration from the countryside towards urban regions and neighbouring countries such as the Dominican Republic, which upsets the traditional support networks within the community; a corrupt and ineffective legal system, which sometimes leads some people to take the law into their own hands; family disintegration; lack of education; criminal organizations, impunity, and the fact that the country is a transit point for cocaine destined for the US and Europe, with drug traffickers overwhelmingly favouring Haiti for their financial transactions.

The HPF refuses to solely attribute the phenomenon of violence to social and economic factors, stating that Haiti has known poverty since independence, but that never before in its history has it known theft, kidnapping, rape and murder on such a scale. From the Federation's perspective, those mainly responsible for the current violence are individuals, although it recognizes that any effort which aims to eradicate violence must take account of "elements which make up the ferment of the phenomenon", in other words, the underlying causes mentioned above.

Through a hermeneutic of Genesis 4 (Cain and Abel), the HPF's analysis identifies four stages in God's action to deal with human violence: i) he warns humanity of the danger of feeding sin in their hearts (Gen 4.6-7); ii) he judges and punishes misdeeds, although without applying capital punishment (Gen 4.10-12); iii) he prevents taking the law into one's own hands (Gen 4.15); iv) he establishes principles which are to be respected to contain the violence of sin.

The HPF's report asks a serious question: that of the need to promote a profound change in the country through a radical change in values. Changing social values is not the exclusive responsibility of the state, but also depends on the family, school, civil society and, above all, the

Church. The churches can play a vital role through preaching and liturgical life, as well as in their noteworthy presence in the country's education system. The HPF's leaders emphasized one fact which deserves to be highlighted: in Haiti, education is mainly offered by the private sector. Some 85% of schools are private, and most of those are run by the churches.

Among the values to be rejected, the HPF's report mentions intolerance, survival of the fittest, the principle that "the end justifies the means" and general mistrust, an attitude which seems to have its origins in the pro-slavery system imposed by the French colonial masters. On the other hand, values to be embraced and strengthened are respect for life, solidarity, equality, freedom, responsibility and courage. These values should be the basic pillars of a national code of ethics.

2.2. The churches' reaction

A reflection on violence and nature – the serious damage to the environment, and the likelihood of more frequent and more serious natural catastrophes – has led to a "green theology" in some church circles, with the aim of drawing attention to the urgent need to preserve and rehabilitate an environment which has been seriously damaged. The churches in Haiti, both Protestant and Catholic, have often been the first to react collectively with urgent help (shelter, food, etc) for the victims of hurricanes.

In response to the fact that macho attitudes and domestic violence remain very present in Haitian society, some churches have launched programmes to strengthen and develop female leadership.

The churches' response to conflict and violence also includes a significant pastoral and diaconal dimension. Confirmed testimonies report that local churches have played a positive role as mediators in kidnappings. In addition, the faithful work as volunteers within their community, helping with building accommodation for the homeless, helping advisers to look after young people, promoting conflict resolution and mediation techniques in the community, and pressurising the government to implement laws which reflect the Gospel values. The HPF emphasizes the importance of accompanying victims of violence, without forgetting the perpetrators, who also need spiritual comfort and support.

Among other concrete measures which have been taken, we can mention in particular seminars for young people on the peaceful resolution of conflict, organized by the HPF, and dialogue between the Churches of Haiti and the Dominican Republic on the difficult situation of Haitians in the Dominican Republic, which, in particular, enables the teaching of tolerance and dialogue in the border cities which are often the theatre of violence for Haitian migrants.

In terms of defending causes, we should also mention the work of the Haitian chapter of the Micah Challenge, whose aim is to deepen the Haitian churches' commitment to indigenous and marginalized communities, and to encourage Haitian political leaders to meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

In addition, some church radio and television stations, such as Radio Lumière, play a major role in civic education and handing on moral values.

"Progress is slow, but there is hope" in the fight to overcome violence, the HPF leaders stated.

3. Recommendations

3.1. For the government, political parties, organizations of civil society and churches in Haiti

In this critical context, the first recommendation which the delegation formulated is *an urgent call for the consolidation of a real, operational and constructive dialogue* between the leaders of the state and those of other sectors in society, representing the political, associative, economic, and religious worlds, in order to bring concrete responses to the people's urgent needs and to undertake long-term programmes to eradicate extreme poverty and to consolidate democratic institutions which will work and be respected.

The churches in particular have a specific contribution to bring to this dialogue by making themselves promoters of the values of justice, solidarity, tolerance, and care for the poorest.

This appeal is also *an appeal to the media* – to the radio stations, the press, and television stations – to contribute to the awareness of the importance of strengthening a state of law, through their reporting and analyses, and that they, too, should emphasize initiatives, whether from the government, civic society, or the Churches, and successful dialogue between the different parties.

3.2. For the World Council of Churches and ecumenical organizations

Given the size and the urgency of the needs, it is, more than ever, necessary to help Haitians to help themselves. For this, it is necessary to increase *financial support and accompaniment in solidarity* for the Churches and for the various Haitian partners engaged in the fight against poverty and for strengthening democracy.

What is more, this support should accompany actions defending causes which aim to *combat the stigmatization which Haiti is a victim of* on the international stage.

At the level of the United Nations: through Resolution 18540 (2008), and acting on Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter¹, the Security Council decided to establish a stabilization mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), because "Haiti continues to represent a threat to the peace and security of the region".

This description is felt by Haitians to be a humiliation and a kind of stigmatization, for it is not part of today's reality. As a country, Haiti poses a danger to no one, certainly not to regional or international peace and security. Its people are in danger of dying of hunger, which is another story.

¹ (<http://un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sc9471.doc.htm>)

Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter is entitled 'Action with respect to threats of the peace, breaches of the peace, and acts of aggression', and Article 42 allows the Security Council to undertake any action it judges necessary, by air, sea or land forces, if the measures provided for in Article 41 (eg., interruption of economic or diplomatic relations) are inadequate. (United Nations Charter)

Haiti's president, René Préval, is currently fighting for the United Nations to stop being in Haiti under chapter VII of the Charter, and we recommend that the WCC appeal to bodies of the United Nations that Haiti should no longer be considered to be a threat to the peace and security of the region.

At the level of the images which, consciously or unconsciously, we impose on Haiti, we recommend that we are very careful not to contribute to the stigmatization of the country by circulating clichés about the country as the poorest, the most corrupt, most violent, etc, but, on the contrary, that we seek to see and understand the efforts and initiatives of those who have the will to pull through with dignity.

Geneviève Jacques – France
Els Hortensius – Netherlands
Marie-Claude Julsaint – Haiti/Switzerland
Elsy Wakil – Lebanon
Michael Burke – Canada
Manuel Quintero – Cuba