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Disarm the Hearts and Hands: Words matter! Overcoming Fear with Faith

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To “Peace With No Borders - Religions and Cultures in Dialogue”

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The Holocaust did not start with the gas chambers, but with vulgar jokes, provocations and social exclusion. — Hungarian Lutheran Bishop Tamás Fabiny¹

Words matter! It might be tempting for religious leaders to limit our focus to disarmament and non-violence in response to events that appear to be escalating out of control. There have been, and there are still, ongoing significant deliberations around nuclear disarmament, cluster munitions, as well as small arms and light weapons. We continue to persevere with the necessary measures, seeking to address immediate concerns that we cannot ignore.

However, Bishop Fabiny’s words in the opening line serve as a timely reminder that we — as religious leaders and communities — must intervene at an earlier stage when we discern that violence is already hovering around the provocative words being spoken, especially in the public space.

Today, in the wild world of social media and fear-based journalism, where a headline only “leads if it bleeds”, public discourse calling for social exclusion has dire consequences. Religious leaders can and should make use of social media platforms and the broader public space to interrupt hate speech and inject alternative narratives that can bring healing. They have a responsibility to speak to their immediate audiences, the believers, to halt the escalation in tone and intensity of violence. Because history tells us: where discourse and

¹ <https://www.lutheranworld.org/blog/asking-forgiveness-deportation-hungarys-holocaust-victims>

narratives are divisive, exclusivist, and aggressive, actual violence against people, particularly minorities, is just around the corner.

We have learned through the decade of overcoming violence against women that there are stages leading to severe domestic abuse. Even before physical violence occurs, verbal and non-verbal expressions of intimidation, coercion, isolation and threats are signs indicating a harmful trajectory where victims will get hurt. That is why, before we talk about saying 'yes' to forgiveness and reconciliation (which is core to longer term transformation), we must first say an uncompromising 'NO!' to hate speech — and any form of incitement to hatred against the most vulnerable among us. Words matter! Faith communities have a duty and a responsibility to counter these tendencies early, before any situation of controversy or conflict escalates into full-blown armed conflict.

As we remember the tragedy of the holocaust and also the deeply personal struggle of women across the world, we recognize that disarming hearts and hands work together with strengthening legal instruments and political will as part of the larger agenda of disarmament. It is still an uphill task. To some observers, even some faith communities, many may feel disempowered to do anything at all, especially when they do not possess the political power or legal expertise in the face of such a monumental problem. On the other hand, they may feel that only the voice of a heroic, iconic faith leader can have any effect.

Nevertheless, we must realize that we – collectively -- have spiritual and practical resources within our communities that can make a difference. No matter how impossible the task ahead of us may seem. We need to collaborate, not only ecumenically within our religious traditions; we must reach out and collaborate across religious traditions, to show solidarity in the midst of growing tensions in our societies.

Of course, we acknowledge that talk is never enough. Surely public declarations devoid of concrete action and accompaniment with significant actors on the ground make our talk sound empty and shallow. Within the Lutheran Communion, the perseverance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Colombia (IELCO) has inspired us at the LWF. Over the past 50 years, more than 250,000 lives have been lost due to armed conflicts in the region. In 2016, the LWF offered continuing support to the IELCO when the government of Colombia signed a peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). FARC fighters “pledged to hand in their weapons” and join the political process of the nation, in return for support to reintegrate into civilian life.

However, the implementation of the November 2016 Peace agreement faced a roadblock recently on 29 August, when several former FARC members released a video “calling for a return to armed conflict and blaming the government for betraying the peace process”. Immediately, the IELCO intervened publicly urging the government of Colombia “to maintain an attitude

of cooperation and open dialogue in order to achieve a complete peace". At the same time, IELCO strongly called on the nation to reject "forms of violence and in particular the rearmament of the FARC combatants" -- this call included an appeal to the combatants to "reconsider their call to arms, ... and instead to live out the peace that Jesus Christ proclaimed for the world." The church remained committed to the peace process also through her on- the-ground accompanying of the ex-combatants who have "opted to reject violence and pursue their goals through peaceful means".² The church continues to persevere in supporting ex-combatants as they seek to reintegrate into civilian life. The story in Colombia is not over yet. Here we want to highlight a faith community undeterred by this setback and offering significant intervention, in spite of the attempts to plunge the nation into a spiral of violent armed conflict again.

Next, (without ignoring the drive of the powerful to control using violent means,) I would like to draw your attention to the condition of "fear" that is one of the ingredients used to exclude the 'Other' who's different from us. This is particularly visible in majority and minority religious contexts, but increasing irresponsible actors or political opportunists publicly use hate speech to fuel phobias (irrational fears) against fellow residents and citizens of a country. How can faith communities speak to those fears?

Religious leaders are challenged in our complex world to go beyond decorative speeches of 'peace and harmony' that may camouflage the deeper, invisible frustrations of affected communities. It takes a delicate balance of reacting to immediate challenges with counter measures, and at the same time attending to longer-term engagement in the public space for the common good.

In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks, which targeted Christian places of worship and hotels in Sri Lanka, the LWF, through its President, Nigerian Archbishop Dr Panti Filibus Musa and myself, called upon religious leaders, including Christians, to:

- address and publicly oppose hate speech and justification for any form of discrimination, violence and extremism.
- continue engaging in the public space with the goal of seeking the common good and promoting equal protection and participation of all people.³

² <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/colombian-church-leaders-urge-former-combatants-follow-path-peace>; see also <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/08/how-to-keep-the-colombian-peace-deal-alive-farc-duque-uribe-colombia/>

³ <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/sri-lanka-lwf-condemns-violence-urges-religious-leaders-promote-peace>

The LWF statement reminds Christians that Easter is a season where “violence and hatred won’t have the last word.” More generally, I would like to also say that we must not allow “violence and hatred” to be the first word either. As religious leaders committed to non-violence, following the important reminder of Bishop Tamás Fabiny, we must detect and address provocations of ‘social exclusion’ early, before another tragedy comes around the corner. Inspired by our brothers and sisters in Colombia’s effort in their peace process, while engaging in the public space for the common good, we persevere with the spiritual resources within and across our religious traditions to address underlying fears that affect the coexistence of different ethnic and religious communities too.

The road ahead to disarmament is still long and winding. The path to nurturing a culture of non-violence will be plagued with roadblocks or setbacks. However, as faith communities, we must not be known as communities of fear. The defining feature of faith communities is ‘faith’ and not ‘fear’ – and surely not as a people who promote any form of phobia that dehumanizes the ‘Other’, our fellow citizens and neighbors. The LWF is committed to supporting and nurturing the collaboration of communities of faith that will model hospitality and hope to overcome fear. We can do no other, because precious lives matter.

Thank you.

[1271 Words; 10 Minutes]