THE VOICE OF A DOMINICAN SISTER ON THE VENEZUELAN CRISIS

On the framework of the meeting of promoters of Justice and Peace of the Order of Preachers of Latin America and the Caribbean (CIDALC, in Spanish) held in Brazil in November 2018, and wanting to bring up different voices on the situation of the country, I propose the notes taken from a dialogue with the sister Maria de los Angeles Perdomo, from the Venezuelan congregation "Hermanitas de los Pobres" (Little Sisters of the Poor), which is part of the community that carries out the intercongregational work "Casa de Recepcion Padre Machado", located in El Valle, one of the popular neighbourhoods of the city of Caracas (marginal zone, of poor sectors at the foot of the hill). This work serves homeless men and offers lunch two days a week and the opportunity for personal hygiene (usually between 40 and 60 men come to the house). The mission also carries out a program for reinsertion for those who decide to start a process of detoxification and social incorporation (between 7 and 15 inmates benefit from it).

I took these notes from a fraternal conversation, with no journalistic rigor. They are expressions aimed at sharing a point of view on how one lives and deals with the national crisis, from a witness of evangelical life and religious life committed to the most poor.

To begin the chat, I ask Sister Maria de los Angeles if she considers important to share with other religious persons abroad, Dominicans specifically, what is happening in Venezuela.

She strongly emphasizes that it is important that our reality is known in the world, precisely because of the help that can derive from it, not only in terms of prayer and consolation, which is very pertinent, but also in terms of material help to any of our missions or any other help in the world; this crisis is overflowing the Venezuelan territory and reaches out to many other countries because of the tremendous exodus from the Venezuelan misery.

The collection of Sister Maria de los Angeles' reflexion can be illuminating as a religious life, in the midst of the humanitarian crisis of Venezuela, which is the a consequence of the 20 year old political, economic and social degradation.

The first sentence of the religious sister, with her wise experience and a deep way of looking with her clear eyes and peaceful clear face, was a question:

“How did we come to this crisis?”

We must be able to discover the presence of God in this crisis.

In this crisis, do we, as religious people, give the best in us or the worst?
We discover the answers from our concrete lives, from the personal experiences, from our volunteering and from the life of so many volunteers that try to do something to change the situation.

It is also necessary to look inside ourselves and to see what is filling our hearts; is it hatred, resentment, rancour, despair, desire for revenge, etc.?

**When we donate, we are also giving what is in our heart; we will get that back as well, because when we give, we receive.**

If we are full of hope for a change, the poor will learn that form our daily life as well.

We cannot forget that generosity is always reciprocal; we all receive what we give.

Being aware of the presence of God is important so as to discern the reality with humbleness. By doing so, we discover that we are not alone and that we must have faith in the situations we go through. We ought to do our best with faith.

Sister Mariangeles remembers a day where she had to go to visit the homeless with not enough breakfasts to offer. To her surprise, the first homeless she encountered said: “Sister, you cannot go without me having prayed for you, because it is not only the food you bring what gives us life, but knowing that there is somebody who cares about us. With his hands on her head he prayed “Learn to have faith in the Lord, He will provide what you need…”

One can see that story as a mere coincidence or as the presence of God with us. For sister Mariangeles, it was the His presence, because it gave her peace and joy in her way, knowing that God works miracles in many way and that she only had to do her best. The day that started with anxiety, fearing scarcity, ended up with the confidence that generosity is always reciprocal; she ended up with more than she thought, in fact.

**To discover God in the midst of this crisis, prayer is necessary**; it will allow us to see more clearly what God is doing in the other.

Face to the transportation and medical crisis, country hospitals and clinics being so damaged and resourceless, people have the only option of going to the capitals for medical care. There is crisis in the capitals as well, but they go there hoping for more alternatives. In cases of hospitalization, the relatives cannot stay at the hospital or pay a hotel room; they cannot go and come from their homes. There is a group of university students that come to hospitals and clinics to provide care and assistance to the sick during the weekend so that the families can go to their homes, rest and prepare provisions for the next week.

There are so many people doing so much right now. Sister Mariangeles remembers a lady of a poor neighbourhood who, having not eaten a substantial meal for days,
when receiving a cup of soup from Sister Mariangeles, said to her “Sister, I cannot eat all this soup by myself, I have to share it with my neighbour.”

Thus, Sister Mariangeles reminds us: “when prayer does not connect me with my neighbour, it is a void prayer.”

She continues, “It is necessary to live this crisis in peace, not from lamentation, but neither closing the eyes to reality. It is necessary to see it the way it is, but from God’s eyes, taking the good and separating it from the bad. It would be so sad for us to see and live the crisis and not learning anything. We have to ask ourselves what the crisis is teaching us. It should teach change, conversion. As the Chuch’s representatives, if we do not feed the people’s faith and hope in this crisis, we are great sinners.

Hope is that God is with us in the way and that He is helping us to beat evil with good. That is the key sentence “beat evil with good”.

This people, at this moment is walking only with God, it is not the politicians or groups of power that accompany them. Today the Venezuelan people are walking only with God.

Thus, when people recognize the presence of God, they feed up faith and hope of the people.

Sister Mariangeles remembers the sentence of an old lady living in a very poor house: “This house is still standing, because I steep it with human warmth; I live only because God supports me.”

Sister Mariangeles remembers the sad increase of the numbers of suicides. Recognizing God’s presence in the crisis is important.

Finally, Sister Mariangeles shares with us the attitude we have to have in the midst of the crisis: “We have to become brothers and sisters everyday; we have to become listeners, we have to feel the other and become brothers and sisters. We do not have to become benefactors, but brothers and sisters. Remember that we have a Father, God. My relationship with Him is new and filial every day, my relationship with others will be therefore new and fraternal every day, with no exclusion.”

Why do I want to share this dialogue with Sister Maria de Los Angeles?

In the current crisis and before the alternative ways to face it, I wanted to share this with the International Dominican Family because I am afraid that the Gospel is taken to support ideologies and political and economic groups. That is my fear.

I discover in the dialogue with Sister Mariangeles that there is a light in her way of living the Gospel humbly and truthfully. With no other desire that that of becoming disciple and brother/sister.
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