

In memory of Mahatma Gandhi

On the 30th of January India remembered Gandhi's 60th year of being assassinated.

What does it mean to be an Indian and Catholic together?

To be an Indian and a Catholic is a challenge. In my country, Catholics are a minority. It is a pluralistic, multi-cultural society. Christians are only 2.3%, Hindus are 82%, Muslims are 13% and the remaining 3% are people of other faiths. With growing fundamentalism in the world and in India, it has become more and more challenging to witness our faith.

In January 2008, on their recent trips to India, Gordon Brown and Nicolas Sarkozy were shown all that is positive about India, which will soon take its place among the world's leading economies. There was no reference to Hindu nationalists that are terrorizing Christians in many areas, for example the poor Christians in Kandhamal, in the eastern Indian state of Orissa. During the Christmas season, a time of rejoicing for Christians, there was a vicious and unwarranted attack by fundamentalist forces. Some hard-line extremist Hindus, armed with guns and knives went on a rampage, setting fire to churches and chasing Christians out of their homes. By December 26, nine Christians were killed; churches, convents, presbyteries, hostels and seminaries were destroyed, affecting 5000 people. The All India Christian Council, an umbrella group of churches called the attack the worst case of anti-Christian violence in India since independence in 1947. There is a total breakdown of law and order machinery intended to prevent such crimes against humanity. According to the All India Catholic Union report, there were four cases a week of reported attacks against Christians in 2007.

The National Minority Commission reports that the attacks against Christians in Orissa's Khandamal district in December were "preplanned" and the state government was "negligent" in controlling the violence.

Former Chief Justice A.H. Ahmadi remarked that minorities were being marginalized and their voices silenced by instilling fear and insecurity.

You work for justice and peace. What does this mean at this time?

With the onslaught of globalization, more and more people are marginalized, not only in the South but also in the Northern hemisphere of the world. In India, you can see that after 1991, the door was open to a liberal market economy. Only 30% benefit from globalization. What about the other 70% who do not benefit at all? For me, to work with the 70% is very important. It is crucial to be in solidarity with this group. The victims of the profit-making system are many so we need to collaborate with many people to bring about needed change. They include the faith community, people in the media, NGO's, Trade Unions, as well as the affected population.

Many groups are giving some responses but there is no concentrated effort. We are not clear about our focus or needed action and we often "miss the boat." There seems to be a complacency with charitable works,

"a culture of contentment" as British economist John Kenneth Galbraith would say. There is a strong need to go beyond charitable and development work and look at the causes of the problem and address them in an effective and holistic manner.

In this task, how important is Gandhi's thought?

There are four levels in our involvement. At the local level, there are many good projects and actions. They can be seen as works of justice if they promote not only social justice but also human dignity and a development of the whole person in his/her community.

We Dominicans are present at the United Nations, where we have a friar as a permanent delegate in Geneva and a Dominican Sister represents us in New York. We are also active participants in the World Social Forum. These actions at a global level raise consciousness of a wide group of people toward the major issues threatening our world.

We also need to work at a structural level, where the causes of the problems are named, such as economy, discrimination, politics... The fourth level is theological. Which face of our God is discovered and proclaimed? Which type of church is promoted?

-How can we form communities of brothers and sisters who involve themselves in social action to address issues at a global level and address the causes of the problems?

-How can we creatively respond to the needs of the poor who live next door to us? In the 40th plus + 1 Anniversary of Populorum Progressio, can our mission as Preachers be incarnated in this work for development? Can peace ever come by war and terrorism as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of Gandhi's assassination? How can we live in peace with our earth? How can we practice non-violence in a violent society?

With all these questions, I can only turn to Gandhi's Talisman: "I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man (woman) whom you may have seen and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him/her; Will he/she gain anything by it? Will it restore him/her to a control over his/her life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj (freedom) for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away."

This is a challenging statement that inspires and challenges me to think more about the choices I make on a daily basis.

You lived a long period in two Ashram founded by Gandhi, in which to promote Naturopathy (Alternative Medicine). Why are you interested in this kind of medicine founded by Gandhi?

Yes, I lived in Gandhiji Ashram in Maharashtra as a student for a short time. That was a long time ago. I was inspired by Gandhi's way of life and

his thoughts. "Simple living and high thinking!" I discovered the value of simplicity of life and holistic living. Gandhi was an integrated person. He was able to spearhead a movement and he always had space for God in his life and combined spirituality and justice very well.

Love of humanity was the unifying elements in his holistic vision of life. "I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of humankind, and that I could not do unless I took part in politics. The whole gamut of our activities today constitute an indivisible whole. You cannot divide social, economic, political and purely religious work into watertight compartments." My second experience was to live for some time in the only Ashram that Gandhi founded for healing. He established a Nature Cure Hospital in Pune, Maharashtra which is still functioning. He taught people how to live with nature, and have a healthy body and mind. He believed the body possesses self-healing powers. His was a holistic approach to healing and wellness.

Gandhi reevaluated everything in his life. While he became a lawyer by profession, he retained his passion for healing. He turned to natural remedies for himself and his family. He advocated a simple way of living in harmony with self, society and the environment.

I think that our conference¹ can be a great opportunity to meet a different point of view about peace, the world, humanity. We Europeans have a lot to learn! Can you give some examples? In what field can we exchange ideas?

Conflict, chaos, divisiveness, destruction and hatred have all become a part of our

lives today. More than ever, we need the qualities that Mahatma Gandhi embodied – qualities which are crystallized in his philosophy of ahimsa or non-violence that he bequeathed to us: optimism, activism, love for people, a holistic, all embracing vision. He said: "I remain an optimist, not because I give evidence that right is going to prosper, but because of my unflinching faith that right must prosper in the end." For Gandhi, at the deepest level of the human spirit, non-violence is never defeated. Violence, in contrast, inevitably ends in defeat.

The pursuit of peace doesn't necessarily make us feel better . It often leads to misunderstanding, attacks and insults and legal jeopardy. It leads to the cross. This seems to be the way it has always gone, from Jesus to Gandhi and the early Christians.

In a culture of war, if you speak for peace, your life will be disrupted. In a world of hunger, poverty, racism, nuclear weapons, global warming, if you take a public stand for justice, your life will be disrupted. It is much easier to sit back and not get involved, not challenging systems and structures that dehumanize.

The Gospel story is the primary motivation for our resistance. Jesus often stood up and spoke out, and marched to Jerusalem, where he confronted the culture of injustice, the empire and its religious supporters. He paid a high price and his life was disrupted, wrecked and shattered.

This week as we celebrate the 60th Anniversary of Gandhi's assassination (30 January 1948), Gandhi maintained that the pursuit of truth and the practice of nonviolence require public confrontation with the system of injustice, trusting that the acceptance of suffering in love will win out in the long run.

"Nonviolence means courage of the highest order and therefore readiness to suffer," Gandhi wrote. "Let those who believe in non-violence as the only method of achieving real freedom, keep the lamp of non-violence burning bright in the midst of the present impenetrable gloom. The truth of a few will count, the untruth of millions will vanish even like chaff before a whiff of wind."

With such words, and examples, I take heart, count my blessings, and keep on saying NO to war, hoping that some day, we will be able to finally say YES to a new era of peace and non-violence. Let us believe 'THAT ANOTHER WORLD IS INDEED POSSIBLE.' Let us begin today courageously.

Fr Prakash Anthony Lohale op
International OP promoter for Justice and Peace.

¹ Held in St. Dominic's Priory, Bologna, Italy, on February 5, 2008.