

Report by the Promoter for Justice and Peace of the Province of Toulouse

Br. Ignace BERTHOT op

For more than thirty years, Haiti has been living through major crises: political, economic, social etc. Over the years, the country has held several legislative and presidential elections. With the exception of the 1990 elections, however, every election has been contested. Protests were regularly accompanied by militia groups or armed gangs. Since replacing American forces in 1995, the United Nations has sent two peace missions, both of which ended in failure. The situation is gradually deteriorating. Even the state authorities are getting out of hand. The political crisis is unending. In this chaotic situation, the political class is showing no signs of willingness to find a sincere and genuine solution. Everyone seems to be interested in gaining power in order to enrich themselves and further impoverish the Haitian people. There has not been a single newly elected official in power since the terms of office of the last ten senators expired at the beginning of January 2023. There is no real willingness on the part of the vast majority of politicians to implement a collaborative path to democratic elections. The country's economic and social development has been forfeited by the permanent instability of the political and security crisis.

Haiti has also been experiencing acute economic crises for decades. The country is economically dependent on the outside world. The Haitian economy is now totally devastated. Even the private business sector is accused of colluding with gangs working on behalf of the country's five richest families to control and monopolise the market. This phenomenon of the criminalisation of the economy has not only increased, but is also generating new social inequalities. These can be seen, for example, in the lack of access to basic social services.

Political unrest and insecurity are hampering the movement of goods, people and services at every level. Haitians live with this disruption every day. Insecurity and violence are plunging more and more of our brothers and sisters into fear, terror and mourning. The shortage of petroleum products is causing almost all financial activities to break down.

Thus human rights in Haiti are not only being violated, but completely denied. The minimum right to life is not guaranteed, so how can one speak of peace and justice?

Peace is a value.¹ It is the fruit of justice² and is built progressively in the search for the order willed by God. Peace is possible when everyone is aware that they have a responsibility to promote it. In Haiti today, how can we promote justice and peace? How can we explain the Church's social doctrine, which is based on the Gospel? It should indeed be applied. Today, however, talking about justice and peace can have a negative connotation because of the

¹Cf. John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace, 1986*

²Cf. Paul VI, *Message for the World Day of Peace, 1972*

positions taken in favour of gangs. This is why it is more accurate to speak of the denial of human rights than of the violation of human rights.

What is the role of the promoter of Justice and Peace for the Province of Toulouse in this situation? Since my appointment as Promoter of Justice and Peace, it has been difficult for me to take concrete action in Haiti. The social situation is becoming increasingly desperate. Multiple crises and problems are appearing as major handicaps to the promotion of human rights. The country is experiencing a meteoric rise in insecurity, kidnappings, harassment, sexual violence, rape, internally and externally displaced persons seeking safety, and the cutting off of main national roads. Access is blocked to basic needs such as water, food, and sanitation services. All of this shows just how urgent is the need to tackle this humanitarian crisis. One might even ask whether it is possible to get through this without concrete, targeted international aid. This is a humanitarian emergency.

The brutal violence to which the people are subjected is the work of terrorists who “sow hatred, death, the urge for revenge and reprisals.”³ Criminal gang violence in Haiti has reached levels not seen in the country for some years. Gangs are creating a permanent climate of terror. The chronic political crisis, insecurity, and corruption of those in power, are turning the country into a living hell. As state authority is completely absent, power is left in the hands of gangs who sow unrest, terror and crime. One of the ways they obtain funding is by kidnapping, which they use to buy large-calibre weapons and ammunition. The frequency of kidnappings for very high ransoms is constantly increasing. Life expectancy in Haiti is now 24 hours renewable.

There is a lot of work for a Justice and Peace promoter. Yet it is not easy to carry out field work at present. The right to freedom of movement is almost non-existent. People are completely trapped in their homes. Anyone who leaves home does not know if they will return. In addition, mistrust reigns everywhere. In such a difficult context, it's not a good idea to go out and meet people.

Although this situation is paralysing some of my justice and peace work in the country, I am nevertheless establishing contacts and reflecting on these issues with other entities of the Order in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the Church in Haiti. As promoter of the Province of Toulouse, it seems important to work in synergy with these bodies as far as possible.

The Dominican International Commission for Justice and Peace in the Order has asked us to work on the themes of ecology with *Laudato si*, migration (forced displacement), and the Dominican Month of Peace. The Commission has chosen the Amazon region for this year's Dominican Month of Peace. This will make the whole Dominican family aware of the situation in this region. There may be proposals or recommendations to make for this month dedicated to peace.

³*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 513.

The exchanges with European promoters are enriching. They take place via zoom, email and WhatsApp. There was an initial meeting via zoom on 8 March, but the time difference meant that I was unable to attend. From 27 to 30 June, there will be another face-to-face meeting in Malta. I'm due to take part via Zoom.

We have a lot of interaction with promoters from Latin America and the Caribbean. To make our work easier, five committees have been set up, each with specific tasks. Meetings with all these promoters have already taken place on Zoom, as well as in committees or small groups.

We are in the process of identifying common themes: democracy, forced displacement of populations (migration), poverty, vulnerability, the need to preach the truth, environmental protection, the Amazon, corruption and social injustice, legal justice and the rule of law, peace-building, and so on.

- 1) We feel it is important to institute a day of the year in memory of Br. Francisco de Vitoria.
- 2) A great deal of thought is already being given to the Dominican Month of Peace in relation to the proposals of the Dominican International Commission for Justice and Peace.

Several meetings were held with Justice and Peace officials from the Church of Haiti. The insecurity crisis in the country is totally paralysing the work of Justice and Peace. I've had very few meetings with the heads of the national commission, with the commission of the archdiocese of Port-au-Prince, or with the commission of Les Cayes (South). All these commissions are experiencing the same situation. Currently, mistrust, forced internal displacement, hunger, education, insecurity, kidnappings, environmental degradation, the cutting off of towns, the proliferation of gangs and the total non-existence of the state are major concerns for justice and peace.

According to the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, "A war of aggression is intrinsically immoral. In the tragic case where such a war breaks out, leaders of the State that has been attacked have the right and the duty to organise a defence, even by using force of arms."⁴ So if the Haitian people, without rights or justice, are being atrociously attacked by armed gangs, can they respond with violence to defend themselves against their attackers? For several days now, the people have been seeking to defend themselves. There is often talk of self-defence. Given that the state is non-existent and even in collusion with the gangs, the question is whether exercising the right to self-defence can guarantee the conditions for peace. Moreover, the consequences of the violence make it difficult to achieve genuine reconciliation. One of the parties is acting like a terrorist and closing off any possibility of dialogue. If violence and peace cannot coexist, it is because God does not dwell where there is violence.⁵ Peace is in fact a divine gift offered to humanity. This is why promoting peace never runs counter to the

⁴*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 500.

⁵ Cf. 1 Chron 22:8-9

proclamation of the Gospel.⁶ Rather, it is based on good relations, on communion between people.

Finally, we are currently working on a small Justice and Peace educational training project, aimed at existing networks that we think will be easier to reach. For the moment, it's difficult to create new networks. The training aims to show that everyone's responsibility is to promote life and the dignity that belongs to every human being.⁷ Our aim is to raise awareness of the fact that our first right is to life.⁸ What leads to peace is the organisation of a stable legal order, the safeguarding of the environment and the provision of essential services to people.

I should also mention that I went to the Dominican Republic to meet the head of Justice and Peace. This enabled me to see the work of the brothers and to reflect on the possibility of taking joint action. It was a very enriching meeting.

⁶ Cf. Acts 10:36

⁷ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Past. *Gaudium et spes*. 27 .

⁸ John Paul II, Encycl. *Evangelium vitae*, 2.