

“From Conflict Prevention to Conflict Transformation”

- Fr. Cedric Prakash SJ

Introduction:

I feel very privileged to be with you at this Conference on the Future of Catholic Peacebuilding being held in the University of Notre Dame. I want to place on record, my deep and sincere gratitude to the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, to the other sponsors of this Conference and in particular, the Catholic Relief Services, who are instrumental in my being here. Thanks also to my dear friend Mr. Joe Bock of the Kroc Institute, for journeying with me these past years in many meaningful ways.

Having said this, let me get down to the task entrusted to me this afternoon and share with you my perspectives on the subject “From Conflict Prevention to Conflict Transformation”.

Situating Conflict Transformation:

Today, April 14th, is a special day for a large percentage of Indians. It’s the birth anniversary (born April 14th 1891) of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, one of the foremost leaders of post-independent India and widely regarded as the architect of India’s Constitution. A Dalit from birth, this multi-faceted personality gave India a vision based on liberty, equity and justice. Later on, like a true liberator, he led thousands of his people out of the Hindu fold, to embrace the Buddhist faith.

This very act heralded three very distinct but very related dimensions of a conflict which goes back to centuries:

- I. that the Dalits were no longer prepared to accept oppression which denied them their basic human rights
- II. that in free India, no one could be subjugated to a discrimination of any kind
- III. that in embracing a new religion, the Dalits would undergo a transforming experience of “self-worth,” and “dignity in life.”

In one of the most courageous protests in modern India, Dr. Ambedkar gave to thousands of his adherents, the power to move from merely preventing a conflict (in terms of accepting the status quo; not responding to a potentially violent situation) to a transforming experience which has truly empowered them.

Having situated this presentation in something that is germane to Indian society, let me now attempt to put across some fundamental aspects of this afternoon’s topic.

Conflict Prevention and Conflict Transformation:

Conflict prevention is, we are all aware, anything that prevents a conflict. It could be certain ad hoc measures, cosmetic overtures and sometimes even long term responses. We have several examples in our daily lives. A little child bawling for a particular sweet or a specific toy just because his elder brother has it and ofcourse, the parents “for the sake of peace” make

the elder brother to either give it to him or share it with him. There are ofcourse many examples in the reverse too.

Moving further, there is the fact of people accepting the status quo. It does not matter if some continue to be subjugated, oppressed or exploited. They are told loud and clear “this is what God has designed for you so just accept it.....no questions have to be asked because this is your lot”. We have seen it happening to the Afro-Americans of this country; we have seen it in the days of apartheid in South Africa; we see it in Columbia and in Kenya and in the Philippines. We see it as majority groups / religions subjugate and deny those who are in the minority of their rights and freedoms. We see it as women are stereotyped to their particular roles in their own homes and societies all across the world.

There is that old adage that “prevention is better than cure” but there is a more frightening type of response which tells one “what cannot be cured has to be endured”.

We have several other initiatives which have been put in place to prevent conflict. There are the early warning systems; some years ago, in the slums of Ahmedabad, we initiated peace committees which brought together leaders from different religions; we organized plays and programmes, festivals and competitions which attempted to transcend the narrow confines of one’s religion; we took the children of one religion to visit the place of worship / shrine of another religion and vice-versa; we encouraged young Muslim girls to dance the traditional Hindu dance called the “garba” and young Hindu boys to sing traditional Muslim songs called “qawwali” . In very sincere and committed ways, we did all this and more, in our efforts to prevent a conflict.

However, over the years, we realized that our best efforts often came to naught when vested interests (be it politicians or landlords), when those who control the lives and destinies of the poor and the powerless, decide that there has to be a conflict and in fact, there is pretty little that can be done when these groups bear their fangs and sharpen their knives. The conflict goes on.

Our efforts then geared towards conflict transformation. How does one define it? I have taken the liberty of providing an understanding from wikipedia. *“Conflict transformation is the process by which conflicts, such as ethnic conflict, are transformed into peaceful outcomes. It differs from conflict resolution and conflict management approaches in that it recognizes "that contemporary conflicts require more than the reframing of positions and the identification of win-win outcomes. The very structure of parties and relationships may be embedded in a pattern of conflictual relationships that extend beyond the particular site of conflict. Conflict transformation is therefore a process of engaging with and transforming the relationships, interests, discourses and, if necessary, the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violent conflict".*

Conflict transformation approaches differ from those of conflict management or conflict resolution. Whereas conflict transformation involves transforming the relationships that support violence, conflict management approaches seek to merely manage and contain conflict, and conflict resolution approaches seek to move conflict parties away from zero-sum positions towards positive outcomes, often with the help of external actors. ”

I am delighted that this Conference is being held here at Notre dame because Conflict Transformation theory is often associated with John Paul Lederach which is such an integral part of this campus and also with Johan Galtung who comes so frequently to Ahmedabad.

The Gujarat Reality:

Before I enter some of the key dimensions of conflict transformation, I would like to highlight the Gujarat reality in which I live. The year 2002 will go down as a watershed in the annals of our country. In the wake of the burning of the car of a train carrying some Hindu pilgrims where fifty seven of them were burnt to death, right-wing Hindu fundamentalists organized a systematic pogrom on the Muslims of the State. This was clearly with Government and official complicity. It lasted for several months and at the end, more than 2000 Muslims were killed, thousands were rendered homeless, several women gang-raped and even today, more than six years down the road, there is practically no justice for the victims of this carnage.

One will have to look into history and the role of vested interests, very specially the adherents of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and their supporters who are largely responsible for fomenting the conflict. But what is more important is the manner in which the hate, violence and prejudice has been institutionalized. This keeps the conflict on the perennial boil, simmering always, ready to break out at any moment, a virtual time-bomb.

Several of our efforts and initiatives these past years have been not mere to address the conflict but to transform it. We have not met with the desired results but we are confident that some day, there will be a total transformation.

A Multi-dimensional Approach:

Our efforts towards conflict transformation has been multi-dimensional. If one has to talk about conflict transformation, then, one has to necessarily accept, that the interventions that have to be in place are many, rather than a single approach. These include:

◆ to provide the victims a new identity / a new dignity in life :

We are in the post Easter season of the Church's Liturgical year and I would like to highlight the fact that the apparitions of Jesus to His disciples after His Resurrection were a transforming experience for them. Scriptures make it evidently clear that the disciples were in a state of hopelessness, in a way totally defeated with the death of Jesus, but with His resurrection, there is not merely a new lease of life but the empowering grace which gives the disciples the courage at Pentecost to go out to the whole world.

Dr. Ambedkar gave this possibility to thousands of Dalits as he led them to embrace the Buddhist faith.

Some may view this approach as an "easy way out", but I really do believe that when you truly empower (with non-violent means) those who are at the receiving end of the conflict, the conflict itself is radically transformed.

◆ to ensure that the warring parties come together :

We have seen several instances when the parties which are actually in conflict come together at a particular stage. This alters the course of the conflict tremendously, very specially if there is mutual respect, sensitivity and above all, attentive dialogue. The focus

should be on arriving at a lasting solution rather than on an exercise which is cosmetic or at best ad hoc.

In Gujarat, we have failed miserably on this score because very often, the attitude of the perpetrators of the violence has been either in a denial mode (it did not happen) or “they deserved it” (it was high time to teach them a lesson). When there is such arrogance, naturally, any effort for a meaningful dialogue gets bogged down.

◆ **to speak truth to power :**

For us, in Gujarat, we have the example of Mahatma Gandhi, who in 1906 launched his Satyagraha (the force of truth) movement in Durban, South Africa in the wake of apartheid and discrimination. Gandhi’s strategy was two pronged: let the truth be known; and let those in power on hearing it, act upon it. Our many efforts to reduce the tensions and conflict in Gujarat have been geared towards this.

In the height of conflict, we are often confronted by myths and lies, by rumours and by a very systematic demonization of the other side (obviously those on the receiving end). We have also realized that the powerful, the vested interests, try to cover the truth and even muzzle those who try to expose the truth. But if one is serious about changing the face of conflict, the truth can never be hidden or suppressed.

◆ **to shame the perpetrators of violence :**

We have been trying to do this in our own ways, in the wake of the Gujarat Carnage. Let people know what they have done is wrong and let them realize that what has happened should not occur again. This is in fact a double edged sword, because many think that such attempts are counter-productive and may even exacerbate the conflict.

However, from our own experience, we realize that the real perpetrators in a conflict are few in number and if they stand exposed, then perhaps others will realize that they should not imitate what they have done.

◆ **to involve civil society :**

Conflict transformation takes place when different stakeholders actually join in to address and change the actual conflict. One needs to involve civil society groups and organizations to address the conflict. These have to include apart from the warring groups, decision makers, religious and political leadership, human rights and social activists, eminent citizens and somehow or the other, the poster boys and girls of our times (unfortunately, more often than not, these do not take a stand for truth and justice).

Civil society groups / movements, need to provide the vision for transformation, the leadership to transcend the mundane and above all, the commitment to ensure that the conflict does not recur.

◆ **to ensure that the wheels of justice move :**

In several conflicts, the perpetrators are never brought to book. Whilst these conflicts are addressed temporarily, they are in fact not contained because the perpetrators continue to move around with impunity and also with immunity.

For six years now in Gujarat, this has been the scenario where those responsible for the Carnage do not seem to be within the pale of law. We have made efforts to ensure that the judiciary expedite the due processes of law and bring to book those responsible. This is easier said than done, but hopefully, when that happens, there will be a meaningful and effective change.

◆ **to create the environment of forgiveness and reconciliation :**

At the core of the Gospel of Jesus is “forgiveness”. Our God, we believe, is “one of mercy and of compassion”. For real conflict transformation to take place, there must be forgiveness, reconciliation and healing at every possible level. There has to be a forgiving attitude on the part of the victim, which is borne not out of fear but in fact, out of courage.

We are also convinced that forgiveness does not take place in isolation. One cannot forgive if those responsible for the crime / misdeeds do not ask for forgiveness or do not show the slightest signs of remorse. We have the classic example of Jesus, when he hangs on the cross, responding to the thief on his right side. We also believe that our merciful and compassionate God, also vividly narrates the Parable of the Last Judgment. Christianity in fact, would be meaningless if there was no repentance on the part of the sinner.

◆ **to look into endemic issues :**

Several of the conflicts which we have tried to address, have their roots in other issues which are endemic : stark poverty, no access to political or economic power, denial of rights, etc. These issues need to be addressed in a systemic and comprehensive manner.

When this is done, one will realize very often, those at the receiving end in a conflict are denied their basic human rights. Efforts should then be made to study the real causes of conflict and to put in place concrete mechanisms to address some of these root causes.

◆ **to promote Local Capacities for Peace :**

Promoting Local Capacities for Peace is another way of transforming a conflict. People need, and can be brought together, through “connectors”. These include : systems and institutions, attitudes and actions, shared values and interests, common experiences, symbols and occasions.

One must consistently enhance these connectors or Local Capacities for Peace, which in some small measure might help mitigate the tensions or dividers, the capacities for war or conflict.

The above are just approaches towards conflict transformation. They are not in order of priority and are neither exhaustive. There can be many other approaches in bringing about conflict transformation. These need to be tried. Some may work, others may not. For us in Gujarat, some approaches work and others have failed miserably. But as I said earlier, it has to be multi-dimensional and all along, there must be that hope that conflict transformation will take place.

Epilogue:

It is always difficult to conclude an open ended presentation like this. I would therefore like to invite you to visit one of the most enduring images from my city of Ahmedabad which is

the commercial capital of Gujarat, in North-west India. In the heart of the city stands the Sidi Saiyed Mosque named after its builder. The most exquisite craftsmanship in stone carving can be seen in this Mosque which was built in 1572.

The distinguishing features of this mosque are the ten intricately carved stone windows. One of the windows depicts the “**tree of life**” with delicate intertwining of the branches of a tree. For years, this motif was the symbol of Ahmedabad and in fact, of Gujarat. In a way, it symbolized all that India meant and stood for : diverse cultures, faiths, languages, traditions, peoples....yes, everything which indeed made up a great civilization. Very different but very united. A unity in diversity.

A unique tapestry, inter-woven with multi-colour hues as the light of the sun and the moon pierces the gaps of the window. It is a transforming experience and one would never have imagined that sometime long ago, an ordinary craftsman very painstakingly carved out a time tested symbol. It must definitely have been a conflict of some sort as he hewed, cut and shaped. But as we look through the gaps of this masterpiece, what one goes through is a transforming experience.

We need to transform conflict just as we have been mandated to change our swords into ploughshares!

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