

# **A Covenant That Deserves To Crown Your Journey**

**by Dom Hélder Câmara**

Message to the Mani Tese [Outstretched Hands] youth movement, at the climax of its 1972 march, Plaza Michelangelo, Florence, Italy, November 5, 1972. Spanish version appears in *Helder Camara: Proclamas a la Juventud*, ed. Benedicto Tapia de Renedo, Pedal. 64 (Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 1976): 187-92. Original Portuguese version appears in Dom Hélder Câmara, *Justiça e paz: viagens 1972-1973*, Servicio de Apostillas 36 (1973). Translated from Spanish by Maria Markovich and Dr. Gerald W. Schlabach, University of St. Thomas (Minnesota), strictly for the purposes of classroom use. Professor Schlabach ([gwschlabach@stthomas.edu](mailto:gwschlabach@stthomas.edu)) asks to be notified if better translations exist, or if copyright recognition is due.

## **1. Young people, citizens of the world!**

God puts words of truth on my lips, but it is a truth soaked in love. When it is hard to tell the truth, it is all the more necessary to understand that whoever speaks, speaks in the name of friendship and love.

God puts words of hope on my lips, but not an illusory and lying hope. They are words of hope, because a young person without any hope is not young anymore; but has already grown old! They are words of truthful hope because I know you will not tolerate falsehood or lying.

God puts words of faith in God and humanity on my lips, faith in eternity and time, faith in heaven and earth. Do not allow an alienated faith. Understand and love Christ, Son of God, who is incarnated, becomes a man, assumes the problems of humanity and becomes our brother. For you know that when God created human beings in God's likeness and image, giving them the divine ability of intelligence and liberty, it was not meant to be a game. It was serious.

It was very easy for God to create the world perfect and completely; after all, but from the very beginning God wanted human beings to be the ones to rule the natural world and bring the creative process to completion.

Here and now, you represent the best ideals of young people throughout the whole world. I hope we will prove worthy of this time, this quest, and this encounter!

## **2. We adults have a lot to be ashamed of**

Adults, pay attention! It would be a huge mistake to imagine that all experience, all prudence, all wisdom belongs to us, that it is our inheritance; and that young people lack wisdom, prudence and experience.

Who decides to go war – wars where young people die and stupidly kill without any glory?

Who decides on classes and teaching programs? Even though these classes advance knowledge of science and technology, those resources only end up serving an increasingly exclusive group. All we get is more science and new techniques that create even more oppression and a larger gap between poor countries and rich countries. Nowadays, despite more technology, synthetic products and travel to outer space, more than two-thirds of developing countries, which constitute the so-called "third world," have found it impossible to eradicate misery and hunger. Some people are already talking about a "fourth world," a world without hope or any possibility of development.

Who runs the companies? Though they are a monument to organizational and technical skill, they are also masters of selfishness and ambition. The multinationals and conglomerates get stronger together. They are increasingly automated and modern, transforming themselves into powerful empires. Who does not know that before the year 2000 less than three hundred companies will control the planet? We also know the price of this quick process as it translates into crushing the humanity of entire countries and continents.

Who runs our political system? The capitalistic powerful nations as well as the socialists offer a degrading show of ambition and injustice. The conservative and opposition parties know very well how to exploit their apparently unsolved mutual divergences. They know how to walk arm by arm with each other when it comes to dividing up spheres of influence and dominion!

Who controls the powerful media of social communication? Even though the press, radio and television usually enjoy many liberties, these leave off where government interests, and the interests of companies that finance their broadcasts, begin. Almost always the first victims are reporters, editors, secretaries, and even directors, who are a long ways from being able to say what they want, in the way they want it, when they want it....

Who leads our religions, humanly speaking? What we see is that religions adapt themselves to the present situation and help to maintain the so-called "social order." They are manipulated, and in certain way they are considered prestigious. And when they do consciously feel the need to denounce injustices, to stimulate authentic human development and promote a liberating education, then they must prepare themselves for incomprehension, scorn and even persecution.

### **3. Would young people do better? Will they do better?**

Youth, pay attention! Do not rush to condemn today's adults, who are the youth of yesterday! Can you guarantee that tomorrow when you grow up, you will run the world in a more humane way?

At the moment, naturally enough, your complaints do not demonstrate much confidence or maturity. How to see clearly when the night is dark? How to come up with solutions when all of us step gingerly amid shadows?

It is easy to understand the protest of *hippies*, but oh the insecurity it reveals! They stick with vague themes of love and peace, but never move on to justice and peace. Often they take refuge in drugs because hallucination offers escape. Often they either undervalue or overvalue sex; consequentially they never manage to find the appropriate place for sexuality in the life of human beings.

It is easy to understand (which is not the same as approving) when young people lose all patience and throw themselves into violence, even terrorism. Even if we merely speak in terms of efficacy –without delving into a deeper reasons to reject violence– it remains difficult to convince them that turning to violence means ignoring the fact that the oppressors have on their side the producers and owners of armaments and of war itself!...

It is easy to understand why some young people turn cynical – as though cynicism were compatible with youth – even though cynicism is anti-authenticity and authenticity is one of the most beautiful signs of youth in our times!

What should prevent young people from throwing stones at today's adults is the grave – very grave– danger that they face when they start to get situated in life, when they finish their studies, and consider marriage. How many young people maintain their fire, their audacity, their drive to work and even sacrifice for a world more satisfying and humane?

#### **4. Preparations for a great covenant**

What young people and adults must both understand is that it is possible to be 18 years old yet pessimistic, defeated, sensing no reason to live – an old person indeed! Also, it is possible to be 18-times-many years old, to have aged on the outside, yet still preserve a youthful spirit, mind and heart. The youngest person that I have ever met along my own path in life was 80 years old and his name was John XXIII.

And here we have our first alliance – valuable and much needed – among those who are truly young in spirit and body, together with those who are aged on the outside but still have a thousand reasons to keep on living!

There is, however, a greater and no less indispensable alliance being forged between those minorities that I call “abrahamic.” They already exist; it is not necessary to create them. The Spirit of God raises them up deep within every race, in every religion, every nation, every human group. Who belongs to these abrahamic minorities? All those who,

like Abraham, hope against hope and decide to work to the point of sacrifice for a more just and humane world.

Each abrahamic minority can and should conserve its name. Each abrahamic minority can and should conserve the religious or simply humanist inspiration that enlivens it. Each abrahamic community can and should continue with its own leaders and methods. What is indispensable is not to be unified, nor to be uniform, but to unite. What is indispensable is that we agree on certain primary objectives. To that end, you may wish to discuss the following fraternal guidelines that I leave you with:

*a) Fight for justice, the great tidal wave of our times*

When they approach rich people or rich nations, all those who tell of misery and come seeking help are readily understood and heard. But when they approach rich people or rich nations and do not ask for help but instead denounce injustice and demand that their rights be respected, they will be branded as revolutionaries or communists.

Never mind the misunderstandings and insults! The truth is this: without justice there will be no peace. Great injustices exist in poor countries, and great injustices exist in rich countries. But greater injustices exist in the relations between rich and poor countries.

*b) In order to understand global injustices, there is no better place to begin than by understanding local injustices.*

At the end of 1971, the employment situation in Italy was roughly as follows: 19,500,000 people employed; 1,200,000 people unemployed; 3,700,00 in temporary positions; 1,000,000 people working in the countryside; 300,000 people in industry and 400,000 in other activities.

A million and a half people leave southern Italy in order to look for a job in more industrial cities such as Turin and Milan. Three million people (80% from the south of Italy) were forced by circumstance to look for a job in another country, especially throughout Europe, forcing them into precarious conditions.

If we study seriously what happens in the south of Italy it is going to help us understand the situation in underdeveloped countries as well as in underdeveloped regions of rich countries. Why do 80% of the young people from Sicily, Calabria, Lucerne, Apulia, Cerdena and Campana emigrate?

If we study seriously the situation of the Italian people who forced to look for a job outside Italy, that will help us to understand the situation of foreigner workers in Europe, who nowadays are called "European blacks."

If we study seriously the slow down of the highly industrial areas as a result of automated services that are available only to very limited groups, it will help us to understand the current drama that confronts workers.

We must repeat and underscore this truth: in order to feel the world's injustices as if they were our own, the best path is to begin with local injustices.

*c) How to overturn the structures of oppression*

We will work in vain to change the structures of oppression in poor countries if we do not make the same effort in industrialized countries too.

There was a time in which very honest people with generosity and purity of intention gave everything of themselves in heroic actions. However, they were far from understanding the global economic, cultural and political dimensions that give birth to local situations of injustice and only ended up spinning their wheels, since they hadn't gotten down to the deepest roots of the worldwide mechanisms of oppression, or even reached their national and local repercussions.

I can guarantee you that nowadays those who are hungry for justice are much more conscious of the need to completely renovate these global structures. Moreover, I can guarantee you that these people are committed. These "abrahamic" minorities are growing constantly in number, and they are becoming more coherent and efficient.

Your own march is a great "abrahamic" gesture, which will echo not only throughout Italy but throughout the worldwide youth movement as well.

Endeavor more and more to move beyond mere words, beautiful as those words may sound. If the violence of the peaceful [i.e. active nonviolence] does not show that it works – if it does not solve the structures of oppression – then armed violence will win. And if this happens, the empire of injustice that oppresses most of the humanity will continue to exist for a very long time.

*d) Demand much of religion, especially our own*

You have every right to demand that the world's religions assume the debt they have incurred with humanity by proclaiming their belief in the Creator and Father of humanity. Whoever has the same father is a brother or sister. Yet who really is working as a brother or sister to humanity, starting with their neighbors, their *barrio*, their community, until they reach their sisters and brothers of every race, every language, and every religion?

With humility and love, let us be demanding, especially with our own Christian religion: What a responsibility to have met Christ on our journey! What have we done with the gospel of Christ and the example of Jesus? It is sad and contradictory that the small elite which owns most of the planet's resources planet is Christian, at least in origin.

*e) Refuse to let false and absurd solutions become permanent – they are no more than pseudo-proposals for the problems of humanity.*

A typical example of an absurd solution that becomes permanent and worsens is war.

How long will young people continue leaving for war, especially nowadays when we know that wars only serve the interests of arms producers and war makers, who would so readily lead humanity to mass suicide, kill millions of people and destroy morally as well as physically those who return from the fields of death and destruction.

More typical examples of false solutions and deceptive proposals for the problems of humanity:

- Talk of overproduction! What we have is under-consumption and exaggerated selfishness. There is no surplus food production. There is a surplus of selfishness, which does not give two-thirds of humanity access to the necessary means to acquire food. Their lack of food produces more death than the worst war and deforms as much as any nuclear bomb.
- It is not right to talk about environmental pollution without being brave enough to recognize that the greatest of all pollutions is misery, which keeps two thirds of humanity living in precarious situations.

## **5. A summary of all suggestions**

Let me present to you a summary of all possible suggestions that I could give:

- as a sign of the decision we have made to fight for justice, which is the great tidal wave in our times...
- as a sign of our decision to start noticing the local injustices first in order to reach and solve worldwide injustices...
- as a sign of our decision not to waste our time working on reforms that go nowhere, and instead to attempt the peaceful but effective transformation of structures, especially in rich countries...
- as a sign of our decision to demand religious coherence, especially from our own Christian religion...
- as a sign of our decision to reject absurdities that only lengthen and deepen our problems – false solutions and deceitful proposals for solving the greatest problems of humanity...

let us abandon definitely the concept of "development". We have treasured it, for it ignited so much hope throughout the world, but it has quickly become contaminated, and now lends itself to unacceptable errors.

The concept of "development" spent itself very quickly because after the first decade of development, rich countries became even richer, and poor countries even poorer.

The concept of "development" now lends itself to unacceptable errors, because our ideal should not be to transform a situation of poverty and misery into a consumer society, which simply creates new areas of misery, racism, and precarious conditions at the heart of rich countries themselves.

Let us adopt immediately a new concept, and make it our banner for a struggle that is peaceful yet sure and effective. Let us hold with both hands the flag of liberation!

Liberation from selfishness and its consequences!

Liberation from all systems of slavery!

Liberation from wars!

Liberation from all forms of racism!

Liberation from misery, which is the worst, the most hypocritical, and the bloodiest of all wars!

Liberation from half solutions, from mere reform, from band-aid measures that amount to nothing more than paternalism

Liberation from fear and false prudence!

Liberation, just like the one Moses experienced and that God personally led, which enlightens all of salvation history with the liberation of God's people from slavery to the pharaohs!

Liberation, just like the one that Jesus brought about on the cross, so that there would no longer be superhumans or subhumans but simply humans, children of the same Father, bound together as brothers and sisters in the redeeming blood, guided by the Spirit of God!

Let us sign a covenant to fight peacefully for justice, and for love, by proclaiming three times:

Liberation, liberation, liberation!

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