

## VI - ROUND TABLES

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### 1. The Signs of the Times

#### THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES TODAY

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Very dear friends,

I am particularly happy to speak to you at this General Assembly and in the heart of your jubilee year. 350 years after the death of Saint Vincent de Paul and of Saint Louise de Marillac their heritage lives in you and in your missionary concern. Yours is a beautiful history of love for the poor. Yes, you — and we — have a Gospel to communicate to the world, to make known the joy of love and free, gratuitous giving to the poor. This is good news in a world where all is the market, where everything is bought and sold. Our two families — the family of Saint Vincent de Paul and the Community of Sant'Egidio — have formed bonds of friendship and brotherhood from the end of the 1970s. Santa Maria in Trastevere and our evening prayer have opened the doors to previous General Assemblies, and numerous friends, members of your congregation, have personally taken part in serving in the canteen which in the very heart of Rome, represents a haven for thousands and thousands of foreigners, gypsies, and Italians wounded by misery and at times by violence.

Today, together, ideally we wish to view the roads of the world, which as Paul affirms '*groans in the work of giving birth.*' But are there still groanings in the world? Is it still calling out? Are there signs to be seen and heard? We wish to hear its groaning and take account of its sufferings, in order to respond with humility and courage: the whole creation is waiting — according to the apostle — the '*revelation of the sons of God.*' We might say: the peoples and the poor are awaiting the shining splendour of the charisms of charity and of love which we have received. Those who are suffering are waiting for us. We must be aware of this.

Today around us, there are no great visions for the future. In the dark years of Polish communism, Karol Wojtyla wrote '*man suffers for lack of vision.*' There is not much vision in this new century hardly begun. Two great feelings, among so many others, have run through the first ten years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and dominated hearts: ***fear*** on the one hand, and on the other the ***desire for betterment.*** This 21<sup>st</sup> century began with two events which seem to me to be revelatory. *The first is September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001:* the terrorist attack against the twin Towers in New York. It reveals and expresses a period of violence and struggle between civilizations and religions. There have been wars against terrorism and acts of terrorism. The first ten years of the third millennium, in which there were also positive happenings, were marked by violence: terrorist violence, and also organised criminality. September 11 inaugurated a time of fear. The clash of civilizations and of religions seemed to be confirmed. Dialogue was considered naïve. Suddenly war was rehabilitated. It was said that we must defend ourselves from others. The time of naivety and of generosity is past, as well as that of open doors. There was much talk about security. Little about justice, less about love, only security.... This security that was talked about, reveals fear in the heart of many of our contemporaries.

*Meanwhile the world became a global market:* just think of the entry of China to the world trade organization, on the 11<sup>th</sup> November 2001. At that time, 2001, much was expected of the global market, almost as if it had been the incarnation of providence: the market would bring peace and democracy everywhere. It has not been so, indeed in certain parts of the world poverty has increased.

The great world market, with its advertising, has created in each individual a strong expectation of goods and of well being. Today's expectations are material in character, and individualist: goods and well being. There is a new post ideological materialism.

### **It is the hour of fear, but also of very materialist and consumerist expectations**

In the face of this world, many become resigned and pessimistic. Others — even good Christians — do not know where to begin. It was said that little could be done without considering complex difficulties. Everything is connected in the globalised world. Should one be pessimistic? The first decade of the new century has not made history, unless a history of too much suffering.

I am thinking of what has happened in Haiti, this beautiful, poor country, with its history of hardship, which has experienced a

terrible devastation caused by an earthquake of magnitude seven. Thirty five seconds were enough to destroy a whole world. About 200,000 people buried and almost three million out of nine million inhabitants struck by the quake. As the media loses interest in the sufferings of Haiti, I am happy to know that for you Haiti has become a place of commitment to reconstruction and of hope. The Sant'Egidio Community in Port au Prince also as well as the Sant'Egidio Community world wide has chosen to invest human and material resources to help this people be reborn.

Truly, the earthquake in its shadow has revealed the fragility of human life. Psalm 11:3 describing the powerlessness of the just person says *'Foundations once destroyed, what can the just do?'* Much was spoken about solidarity with Haiti after the events, but now silence. This earthquake of the beginning of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been forgotten. It is an event which calls for a universal solidarity, which calls all to leave limited, selfish materialist attitudes. The globalisation of markets and medias is dangerous without globalised solidarity.

### **We must start from Haiti. One must start from the poor to reach the whole world**

In a world dominated by money, where everything is sold and bought, we must develop and ripen a great and beautiful vision of persons and peoples as one family. Christians, in this new 21<sup>st</sup> century, must place the poor in the centre, in the heart of this family: they are and they remain their first friends. Christian identity is profoundly linked to love of the poor. Not an ideological, nor a political Christianity, but one deeply rooted in faith and prayer. That is where the seed of 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity is planted. If we wish to travel with passion the world's roads, we must start from the poorest, from Haiti, not from home, not from our problems, be they internal or institutional. In this way we will become people of history and people of the spirit.

Each person if he loves the poor can become a mystic, that is a friend of God, for mystic means friend of God. Gregory the Great, bishop of Rome from 590 to 604, faced barbarian peoples who were invading Italy, the collapse of the world and its institutions, famine and poverty. Gregory had been a Roman politician, a prefect. Then he had lived in a monastery meditating on the Bible. But he had a mystical experience of the love of the neighbour. While the world collapses, Gregory considers the poor as a determining part of the Church family: *'In as much as a soul is wide in its love of the neighbour, so much will it ascend in the knowledge of God'* he says

(in Ex II, 2:15). It is not romanticism. The one who reaches down to the poor is born again from on high.

For Sant'Egidio 2010 began with the visit of Benedict XVI to the canteen where the poor of Rome eat. On that 27<sup>th</sup> of December, in front of Pope Benedict, on the occasion of his visit, I thanked the poor, for I am convinced that they are the masters and the protectors of the Community, like unknown angels. I did this with conviction. The poor in many of our communities, in all our communities, are the vicars of the Holy Spirit: they inspire and guide us on the way of love. Starting from the poor grows a vision of the world as a family for those without family, a family of families, a family of peoples. That is why I always say to our communities: when you join yourselves to the poor, you create free open spaces built on free giving, in a world dominated by economic interest.

Starting from the poor we change the world, for the Gospel shines out in a brighter fashion. Gregory says: *'By bending down to one's neighbour, one acquires the strength to stand up....'* We become strong. A Christian life, friend of God and of the poor, spiritual and social at the same time, without divorce between the sacrament of the altar and of the poor. That is how we overcome the divorce between, on the one hand spirituality cut off from people, and on the other social action without religious heart, which becomes politics, or ideology, or sociology. We return to the vision of the Fathers. In this time of market materialism, spirituality is the source of love, giving, solidarity. There is a common priesthood of the faithful in the service of the poor. Saint John Chrysostom says:

*'Do you not you consider it a great honour to take into your hands this sacred cup which even Jesus-Christ himself must drink, and take it to your lips? And do you not you know that only the priest is permitted to present you the chalice where the blood of Jesus Christ is? I do not rigorously examine, Jesus Christ says to you, the grandeur of the things I give you in order to compare them with what I receive from you. I will receive gladly what you will give me. Although you are only a layperson, I will never reject your gift, and I do not ask from you as much as you have received from me. I do not ask for your blood. I only ask for a glass of cold water. Think then who this person is that you give a drink to, and tremble in fear. Think that you have become Jesus Christ's priest offering him from your own hand, not your flesh, but your bread, not your blood, but cold water. He has clothed you in the garments of salvation, and by himself has clothed you; clothe him therefore at least through the one you serve. He has given you an honourable place in heaven, then free him from this cold he is enduring'* (Homily XLV on Matthew).

A person who loves the poor cannot accept that the world will always remain the same or get worse. That person keeps the hope of changing the world.

### **Changing the world?**

The world can change. It can become a family starting from the poor. But can this be achieved in a world which appears irremediably divided? Think, for example, of the antagonism with islam. It is said: will Europe invaded by immigrants be islamised? The West looks to Africa only to profit from it. The Chinese do the same. Disputes have arisen among countries and organizations which were meant to help Haiti. Many think that one should not change, only defend.

I believe that we Christians have a great task. At a time of antagonism and disputes, our duty is not to win, but to repair and patch the torn cloth between persons, groups, peoples. The world, invaded by the media (where everything is seen and known rapidly) suffers an absence of true communication. Speaking of dialogue: there are some who are against, others for. Is dialogue weakness? But the language of love becomes dialogue. To dialogue means to speak to the other, to someone different from a religious view point, as to a member of my family. There is no mathematical formula which gives immediate results. It is not a matter of winning but of cultivating love. I am thinking of the kind of high liturgy in the spirit of Assisi — John Paul II's heritage. It was at Assisi that the pope, as servant of humanity, took the initiative to reunite men who did not consider themselves brothers.

The language of love, over the years, creates a cloth of friendship and unity, a network across the world, so that the world does not divide. The results? The victory? *'In friendship, there is victory'* was the saying of the old eastern patriarch. I think of Tayyeb, a dear friend of the Sant'Egidio Community, named Grand Imam of the al Azhar, who has accompanied our journey searching for peace and encounter between the religions, beginning with their spiritual roots and their deeper traditions. In this regard, I also think of my recent journey to the Ivory Coast, where I met one hundred native imams, as well as their leader, in order to sign a pact of cooperation and together to uproot violence in this country. Much is possible!

### **Our ideal is peace**

Christians are — Clement of Alexandria taught — 'eirenikon genos' a peaceful race. Peace begins with the poor; peace continues in friendship. Peace today is threatened, many wars have opened up.

One need only think of the endless war in the Holy Land, of Iraq, of Afghanistan: tragedies which seem never ending. And then there are many other wars which are not under the projectors because they are being fought in regions which are not strategic for the current geopolitique. And then the threat of terrorism, the possession of the atomic bomb which is spreading widely, much more than in the cold war.... I think of ideological or political type guerrillas, now replaced by a *diffuse violence*, which becomes a way of life.

After 1989, with the end of communism, we hoped for a long and solid peace. Negotiations in the Holy Land had given remarkable results. In South Africa the apartheid regime had collapsed. In 1992 peace was reached in Mozambique which ended a forgotten war. In El Salvador also, after very hard years, peace was achieved. These are just some examples of these signs of hope.

But the 90s were unfortunately years of waste, as much of energy as of possibilities. Many national passions and nationalisms revived; many hatreds were stirred up; the beginnings of new conflicts were put in place. With time, the horror of the second world war was forgotten, its six million Jews dead in the Shoah, the many civilians killed by the violence of war, the use of the atomic bomb. We had believed that the free market would guide us quickly to democracy, to peace, to progress, provided that competition met no obstacle. But we were contradicted by the actual crisis. September 11<sup>th</sup> came, but the response to September 11<sup>th</sup> was not November 11<sup>th</sup>.

War is the mother of all poverties. War makes the rich poor but it especially strikes the poor, for it is the mother of all poverties. In lands where despair reigns States often fall apart. The lack of a state is an extra poverty for the poor who live outside any order. This is what happens in African countries, where resignation mixes with deep rage, a fertile ground for new violence. For many tomorrow's horizon is under the sign of despair. *But we can risk peace.*

What a heritage of peace the Lord left his disciples! Jesus expressed it in his last discourse in the Gospel of John: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you; I do not give it to you as the world gives it' (14:27). Gospel peace is the absence of war, of violence, of oppression; but it is something more, which is not subject to events. God is the author of peace, as the prophets proclaim and as the apostle Paul sings in the letter to the Ephesians: '*For it is he who is our peace*' (2:14).

Resistance to violence, to war, to hate, is profoundly rooted in the christian's identity: in imitation of the peaceful Lord, peace pours out from our humanity. The words of a great Russian monk, Saint Seraphim of Sarov, come to mind: '*Acquire interior peace and thousands, around you will find salvation.*' From the heart which receives the

Gospel of peace, flow energies of peace to the men and women around him.

The defence of peace is decisive, for, like everyone else, we allow ourselves to be carried away by passions, ethnicities, nationalisms, confrontations, fundamentalisms, vengeance and we finish by wasting miserably the great gift of peace. Being Christian does not immunise us from the intoxication of the passions. *Christian communities are fraternities of peaceful people, who before being pacifist are peaceable.*

Our duty is to achieve greater things! We are called to be peaceful and to live as peacemakers. In this world where everything is calculated, where everything is sold and bought, to be peacemakers means to generously spend one's life. Generosity sows something in history, even in the most complex contexts. Ecclesiastes affirms: *'Sacrifice your money for a brother and a friend, that he may not be ruined and lost under a burden'* (29:10). The peaceful man is generous. When I think of a community such as yours, I see it as a little globalisation (a community of men from different Countries) in the world, living peace and fraternity. It is not an institution, but a prophetic fraternity.... But you might say: there are problems everywhere... in our communities, about our future, our becoming older.... What will our and your future be?

Psalm 37 says: *'For the peaceful man a future lies in store.'* The future says the psalm will belong to men of peace, Christians are the wise, who do not let the passions or violence intoxicate them. In the Jewish prayer of Saturday afternoon one reads what Rabbi Eleazar said: *'The wise increase peace in the world.'* Yes, the Gospel of peace is not a fashion, but it is rooted in the heart of every disciple and in the foundations of the community. Our communities are free and peaceful places. Because of this Christians are persecuted. Formerly it was because of ideology. Today it is for a different reason....

I am thinking of the Christians in Iraq. They are not killed because they represent a threat, but because by their lives they oppose a climate intoxicated by violence, by a predatory economy, by disdain. They are a landmark of peace and humanity. Annalena Tonelli has said *'our task on earth is to spread life. Life is certainly not condemnation, the rights of war, accusation, vengeance, putting the knife into the wound, bringing up the mistakes and faults of others....'*

Peace is living together despite differences, for in history nobody is the same as another: man is not the same as woman, fellow citizens do not have the same religion, nor belong to the same ethnic group, nor have the same language, nor the same social class, or people. They live with difference.

Christian communities constitute a place and space of clean air in this world where one breathes in a heavy, selfish, bellicose atmosphere. Christian communities, with love and with a spirit of forgiveness, sew together again so many torn human communities, so many districts, so many city suburbs, so many peoples. Don Andrea Santoro, a Roman priest assassinated in Turkey in 2005, said: *'To overcome ferocity the intelligence of charity is needed and the mobilisation of profound resources.'* Peace is not reserved to the politicians. Peace is something too serious and cannot be reduced only to politics or to diplomacy. Peace is up to us: it concerns us and it is our mission. There is a daring of the imagination, the school of fidelity in difficult situations which engender possibilities.

This is something which happened less than two weeks ago at Sant'Egidio, where we signed an agreement for reconciliation in Guinea Conakry. To support peace and democracy in Guinea Conakry has been one of the most recent objectives of the Sant'Egidio Community's peace work. After last year's military coup, the situation in this west African country became much more complex: on one side the military hanging on to power, on the other a civil and political society pushing to bring the country — for the first time in its history — towards democracy. Guinea is a rich country, but its people became poor because of authoritarian regimes, corruption and violence since independence.

Sant'Egidio helped the dialogue between the parties and supported structures for transition, put in place in the midst of great difficulties. We wanted to support the thrust towards democracy by inviting to Rome all the political parties and the representatives of civil society so that they would agree on common rules for transition and guarantee transparent elections in a peaceful climate of reconciliation. Two important documents were produced, signed by all parties: the global political agreement which fixes the rules for handing over power and the Rome appeal which established respect between the political powers, the acceptance of results, guarantees for the losers. One had to avoid ethnic splintering and make space for governments of wide agreement so that no one would feel excluded from this important moment of reconstruction of the country. At Sant'Egidio, representatives who had not spoken to each other for a long time rediscovered a spirit of dialogue around the construction of a common future for Guinea. This is one case from our recent history.

If we are small, we must be big, big in love and in hope. The orthodox patriarch Athenagoras, father of ecumenism used say: *'If we know how to stay big, unity will happen.'* If we remain big, the human communities where we live will not tear apart, but will strengthen, the poor will no more be chased away, and humanity will flourish.

We will be big, if we become believers. Dreams will flower if we work with love. The great Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus said: *'Where there are no men, there force yourself to be one.'* You are small, you are a small community, force yourself to be a man, to be human...

Dear friends, in our communities Christian universalisation is truly experienced, as has accompanied Christianity since its origins, as one sees in the letters of the apostle Paul. Each community, like yours, is a globalisation of gratuity and of peace. Our universal fraternities are a sign and a response to the logic of confrontation between races, cultures, different civilisations. They are a sign that men and women, belonging to different histories and nations, can be a family without frontiers. Our globalisation is a space of resistance to the laws of the globalized market, even if one must sometimes negotiate with them.

And our communities not only comprise the members, but the poor (whom we care for and who connect themselves to us) are a part of our family too. Our fraternities are also, in certain way, the **international identity** of the poor, belonging to different countries and continents. Such is the experience of Dream, which treats those sick with AIDS: in quite different situations a same spirit unites different experiences of taking care of the sick and the suffering. Our fraternities are as well a universalisation of solidarity.

## **DREAM**

I know that you are familiar with the experience of meeting and of collaboration between the Sant'Egidio community and the Daughters of Charity, which in the diversity of our charisms, is built on the necessity of not giving up a vision of a different, better, more human world. I hope that, in the same spirit, we will find and seek new ways to battle together with you also. We need them, the sick need them. But our collaboration has not only been functional, but rather the sign of a friendship, which starting from the poor and the sick, has touched the depth of Christian communion. It is what I used say to our orthodox brothers: *in charity we are already united.*

We are two small international units without frontiers in many of the world's countries, friends of the poor, who still hold a vision of hope.

It is often asked how laity and religious can work together. Theory fills pages. The story of collaboration between church families with different histories and characteristics is tightly linked to the poor. Those who are sick with AIDS have allowed us to meet each other. This shows that each were searching to serve the sick and the poor. Dream, intended by Sant'Egidio for the care of those sick with AIDS,

started in February 2002 in Mozambique; in Choqwe, in the province of Gaza, the sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul adopted Dream for the first time, dispensing care to more than 5,000 sick: a small people of women, men and children who were condemned to die and found their resurrection. In 2006 a centre was added at Kubwa in Nigeria with about 1300 sick (in Nigeria they wish to open other centres in the future); then the Nairobi centre in Kenya opened in 2008 with about 700 sick; Dschang in the Cameroon opened in 2008 with about 300 sick; Mbandaka in the democratic Republic of Congo opened in 2009 with about 300 sick. The next centre to open in 2010 will be at Masanga in Tanzania.

This general agreement, by which we aspire to excellence in care, to formation, to the equipment of laboratories of molecular biology, allows a dream to be realised. It is what Benedict XVI said when he met the Community of Sant'Egidio in Cameroon: to dispense to those sick with Aids in the South the same care which is dispensed in the North, avoiding and overcoming the death sentence represented by the pandemic through care of the adults and of the children and through preventing vertical transmission from mother to child. This is a real sign of communion between laity and religious nourished by love of the poor.

It must be said that the Sant'Egidio community has a long history of friendship with religious, who were the first to take seriously its charism when Sant'Egidio was taking its first steps in the 70s in Rome. Among these religious were the consecrated men and women of Saint Vincent de Paul.

We are a community of laity, with professional and family lives, but we are equally called to be spiritual men and women. As St John Chrysostom said talking to the people of Antioch, *it is the laity who need the Word of God more than the monks*, for they live in the difficulties and uncertainties of daily life. We become true friends of the poor, in being spiritual men and women, in listening to the Word of God, in opening our hearts to prayer.

Several decades of listening to the Word of God and of prayer together have transformed the little Sant'Egidio communities into sanctuaries where many men and women looking for the meaning of life find a refuge. Those who come to pray in the evening in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, see it filled with men and women, not all members of the Sant'Egidio Community, but coming from everywhere ( among them numerous religious who live in Rome and are not simply passing through). I say this not to praise the Sant'Egidio experience, but to emphasise that our witness of welcoming prayer is often the greatest gift that we can give others. Places of prayer are sanctuaries of hope. In our houses, and churches

we must open spaces of prayer: may they be beautiful! Father Tavron used say: *'Let beauty be shown and people will come...'*

Of the numerous works we do, prayer has the first place. A welcoming place for prayer has been the first step which has marked the friendship of the Sant'Egidio community with many religious men and women. Many of these religious in turn supported us in economic difficulties.

The Sant'Egidio Community and you, together we venerate and love the poor in friendship and solidarity, in them we recognise the presence of the Lord: *there is a sacrament of the poor*, as Olivier Clement liked to say. For us the sacrament of the poor has also been a sacrament of unity, which has made us friends and fellow workers. This experience of fraternity in solidarity is for us all a sign of hope and a prophecy. Yes, prophesy that we ought not resign ourselves before a wall of impossibility. Rather we ought to pray, and feed our faith and hope. We must have visions of hope, for *'everything is possible to the one who believes.'*

I will conclude. Without history, the world 'suffers from lack of vision' — writes Wojtyla. Many do not know where to go, and cannot see the next day. But, starting from Scripture we have a vision. God says to Abraham: *'Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, to the north and the south, to the east and to the west. All the country that you see, I will give it to you and to your posterity for ever'* (Gen 13:14-15).

Abraham saw. *What you see will be yours!* What does that mean? You will gain and possess it? What you see with your eyes, with your vision, will belong to you. Possession to the limits of your seeing.

This faraway county, this distant poor person, that ignored person... will be yours. It is *the Christian's gentle possession, possession without possession*: to feel love for, to feel oneself responsible, connected. This gentle ownership, through love and taking responsibility, links those who are far, those who are divided, welcomes the poor, creates a family in the world. This is what makes history.

William, a young brother of the San Salvador Community of Sant'Egidio, in Central America, who was living in a district controlled by a mafioso type organization of gangsters, was killed. He was guilty of being a brave young man, whose honesty and generosity embarrassed their criminal activity, for it proved that one could be different in such a situation. It was an example of that diffuse but ruthless violence, without ideology or politics, which strikes so many men and women in many parts of the world. Christians also, are sometimes struck, because they are different.