

BUILDING BRIDGES FOR A SUSTAINABLE PEACE

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Leo XIV is undoubtedly the bridge. Not only has he made peace the challenge of his pontificate, but also the choice of his name says that this peace will not be sublime but sustainable. The new pope demonstrates this when he tells us that the Church always seeks to be close, especially to those who suffer.

Having listened to almost all the presentations at this historic congress, and also because in the Global South 'life hangs by a thread,' as our bishops and cardinals warn us in the launch of the CELAM campaign of the same name (Holy See Press Office, 9 December 2024), I propose that we theologians also take up the challenge of building bridges for sustainable peace, because life really hangs by a thread in this social and environmental crisis of civilisation.

I propose that we do so as missionary apostles of a synodal Church that reaches out; that we go together from the peripheries to the centre, as Francis taught us; and that we do so together, looking at the Church from below, as Juan Jose Tamayo maintains. This is what Francis has put into practice when, as Alejandro Ortiz has said, instead of convening the bishops to a new episcopal council, he has initiated a synodal church process. This is the effective reality of a Church from below; the inverted pyramid that Francis speaks of and practises. This process depends on us, as a Church. Finally, I propose that we do so by building bridges of effective peace in the midst of a "war in pieces" against creation, that is, the planet, species and people. That is why the encyclical *Laudato Si* speaks of a socio-environmental crisis.

The Holy Father, in his first greeting from St. Peter's Basilica, says: 'Peace be with you all!' He says, in his greeting to the press in the Paul VI Hall, that this 'is the peace of the risen Christ, a disarmed peace and a disarming peace, humble and persevering.' In this context of crisis and socio-environmental urgency, his first words further encourage particular Churches to build transdisciplinary bridges to dismantle denialist discourses and take seriously the social and environmental consequences of a system of production and consumption without ethical regulations.

'Either we unite or we sink,' said Francis. Today, as always, we are all in God's hands. I propose that we make a firm decision to accompany our pope, Leo XIV, who says, 'Let us continue without fear, united, holding hands with God and with each other, let us move forward. We are disciples of Christ. Christ goes before us. The world needs his light. Humanity needs him as a bridge to be reached by God and his love.'

In line with this, we must discern how to build bridges between churches in the light of the Second Vatican Council, following in the footsteps of Aparecida, with the dynamic proposed in *Fratelli Tutti*: social dialogue as the best policy (FT, chap. V). Francis' dream was to build bridges of dialogue. Leo XIV represents the embodiment of that bridge. Born in North America, he has chosen Latin America. In his first words on the day of his election, he tells us that peace be with us; he invites us to build bridges of dialogue; and to seek justice faithful to Jesus Christ.

Francis' dream has been fulfilled today, because now we know that this is also Leo's dream, because he makes it his own, in distinguished continuity with Francis, in line with the new challenges of this second quarter of the 21st century. He confirms this when, in his first address to the College of Cardinals, he calls on us to 'renew together, today, our full adherence to that path, to

the path that the universal Church has been following for decades now in the footsteps of the Second Vatican Council'; because, as he goes on to say, 'Pope Francis has masterfully recalled and updated its content [that of the Council] in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*,' highlighting his commitment to 'the return to the primacy of Christ in proclamation (EG 11)'.

It was precisely the primacy of Christ, in preaching and evangelical practice, that moved theologians, theology students, pastors, educators and workers in the mid-20th century towards a new way of doing theology. It was a question of thinking about the impoverished from the perspective of Jesus Christ, in order to free them from the condemnation of structural sin - as Juan José Tamayo mentions - which takes the form of social injustice, colonialism and patriarchy.

Thus was born, not a new theology, but a new way of doing theology based on reality in a Christological and Trinitarian key, as a new way of thinking about moral theology and theological ethics. This Latin American theological innovation, which proved to be a significant contribution to other continents, comes from Jesus Christ to heal the world in the "flesh", that is, in body and soul, what we call mysticism. It is clear, then, that the apostolic evangelical mission, as expressed in *Aparecida*, proclaims Jesus Christ to care for the world and thus guarantee peace.

Finally, the preferential option "with" the poor, and "for" the poor, as Francis adds, is still a Christological way of church practice 'so that all may have life and have it in abundance' (Jn 10:10). In relation to this, Alejandro reminded us that Francis himself not only lived as a poor man, but also consulted the poor and took the *sensus fidei* seriously, as I know for a fact. Furthermore, he called on them to 'be indignant' in *Querida Amazonia*. The capacity for indignation presupposes mercy, enabled by the grace of love, but inhibited by the Enemy—with a capital letter, in the Jesuit sense—through hate speech that prevents the formation of a Christian conscience that is empathetic and compassionate towards those who suffer, to the point of indignation.

As the preamble to the new constitution of the Roman Curia, *Praedicate Evangelio*, says, where it does not speak metaphysically about the content of preaching but about the ethical way of preaching, it says that 'evangelisation is done by touching the suffering flesh of Jesus Christ in the people' (PE 1).

Leo XIV, a new American pope - in the continental sense - tells the College of Cardinals, reaffirming *Evangelii Gaudium*, that he seeks 'the missionary conversion of the entire Christian community (EG 9)' and 'growth in collegiality and synodality (EG 33)', thus recovering the synodal path we began at the Ecclesiastical Assembly of Latin America and the Caribbean in 2021, and he does so as a legitimate "missionary disciple" of *Aparecida*.

We do not need to be lifted up to walk; we simply walk through history without fear, like apostles, forward, not backward, without fear of facing the challenges of the 21st century, which are: the crisis of representativeness; the climate crisis and the phenomenon of migration as its direct consequence; and new digital technology, as Cristina Monge has pointed out. We do not hesitate, because we know that if we hesitate, we will sink. We imagine a future because we do not subscribe to the narrative of returning to the past as the only possibility, as Cristina also pointed out.

Leo XIV. His very name is already a sign of hope for the particular Churches of the existential peripheries, thirsting for social justice and a dignified life. His predecessor, Leo XIII, faced with the threats of the late 19th century, systematised Christian social thought and turned it into a doctrine. We also know that today, in the 21st century, that Catholic social doctrine is madness to some and blasphemy to others. But for us, those on the peripheries, it is neither one thing nor the other; it is simply a valuable tool that has helped us for more than a century to discern as a

community what to do in order to have a good life in abundance, faithful to the Gospel and confident that Jesus Christ walks with us because we see him. Each of us has a daily encounter with the Lord in every poor person, in every prisoner, in every sick person, in every malnourished person, in every displaced person, in every trafficked person.

The Social Doctrine of the Church continues to be an instrument of hope that helps us to listen, discern and dialogue with today's world. We are all missionary disciples and theologians, because we are all “priests, prophets and kings”, as the Second Vatican Council says, to which Leo himself commits himself by recognising it before the college of cardinals, quoting Francis, saying that he will carry forward “attention to the *sensus fidei*” (EG 119-120).

It is up to Leo XIV to guarantee the “human condition”, because it is in danger. What a task! But he is not alone. Leo XIII published the first of the social encyclicals, *Rerum Navarum*, in response to the “calamitous and urgent situation” in which workers found themselves at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. That was more than a century ago. In the meantime, humanity institutionalised structures of solidarity and subsidiarity to guarantee the human dignity of workers and their universal access to the goods created and developed. Our needs gradually became rights, and we had a more or less dignified life.

This was possible, as Leo XIV says, through “the grace of the *sensus fidei*”, “especially in its most proper and inclusive forms, such as popular piety (EG 123)”, because it was community social discernment that achieved these rights.

However, due to a strange mixture of greed and technology, in the 21st century that Industrial Revolution has been transformed into a productive and financial world that no longer needs workers and discards them. That is why we have no peace and, as Leo XIV told the cardinals, we need to create new paths to justice together, to ensure ‘the loving care of the weak and discarded (EG 53)’, -which today, in the midst of an ecological crisis, is all of us-; and that is only possible, as you rightly say at that moment, quoting the Second Vatican Council, through ‘courageous and confident dialogue with the contemporary world in its different components and realities (GS 1-2)’.

Things are the same, or worse, than at the end of the 19th century, because then there was hope of achieving civil and social rights for workers, which is all of us, since it is only through creative work that we realise our human essence in the image and likeness of God, father and creator. By working, we imitate the divine activity of creating, recreating and being citizens of his creation. It is creative work that makes us superior to angels. But now we can no longer work. We are told that the end of human labour has come, and we have become: discarded; migrants; trafficked; and even locked up without trial or reason in the new quasi-medieval system of confinement represented by private prisons. Before, we were politically enthusiastic and socially organised; now we are unemployed, disorganised, destabilised and, therefore, culturally hopeless.

Before, we were united in our differences, both in the Church and in the rule of law, because that is what Catholicism and social friendship are all about. Now, on a secular level, we are divided, isolated, frightened and manipulated by the media and new technologies. Before, we had loving discourses; now we have hateful ones. However, as a Church, we are armed with the theological virtue of hope which, as Francis said and Leo maintains, does not disappoint.

In the era of his predecessor of the same name, politics at least talked about civil and social rights and proclaimed social justice as its banner, even if it did not always pursue or achieve it. Now this is no longer the case. Politicians do not talk about rights, and they say that social justice is envy of the poor towards the rich. However, as we are also Christians, our faith in Jesus Christ and our trust in humanity activate in us hope as a theological virtue that makes us hope against all despair.

Therefore, even if those who waited with us grow tired of waiting, we Christians, moved by the supernatural weapon of hope - as Francis expressed to the popular movements - know how to 'turn passion into community action'. That is why we continue to wait, because in us, hope, by the grace of God, is a dynamic virtue that brings us out of isolation and moves us to organise ourselves as a community to achieve a good life in abundance.

Hope does not disappoint.

The peace that is so desired in Europe is also longed for in America and Africa, where it takes the form of a war in pieces, in its worst expression, because it occurs without borders and without a declared enemy. Nevertheless, here 'we are on earth' - a category coined by Rodolfo Kuch. There are many of us who believe in, proclaim and collaborate with Jesus Christ; who trust in humanity and seek social justice; and who, moved by the theological virtue of hope, unite to save ourselves, to make that good life in abundance a reality for all. There are hundreds of millions of us. The corrupt are few, said Cristina Monge. In the peripheries, we carry the cross on our shoulders, tattooed on our bodies and hung in our public spaces. We carry our martyrs in our "dangerous memory" - as Metz would say - and we carry our conciliar roots in our social dialogues.

However, although misfortunes abound, we know that grace abounds even more. The discarded, at the same time, astonishingly and inconsolably, cry and sing, study in the worst conditions, and yet still celebrate. That is the humour that sustains us in despair, as Alejandro has pointed out, and as has also emerged from the audience. This explains why Francis prayed every day to Saint Thomas More, so as not to lose his sense of humour, because joy sustains us in a miserable life. And irony, as Alejandro Ortiz pointed out, when it comes from the discarded, must be read in a social key: irony is the only sign of superiority they can afford to display.

That humour is incomprehensible, except by virtue of hope, the dynamo of the Church as a mystical body, and of politics. This can only be understood when one feels the joy of the Gospel, which is why there is so much joy among the discarded, despite so much war and destruction.

We, the discarded, are united in prayer, permanently. This blessed land is so great that when some finish, others begin. We pray when we raise our hearts and minds to God, but we also pray in other ways. We pray when we read and teach the Gospel. We pray when we sing. We pray when we work and study. We pray when we put the social teaching of the Church into practice. We pray when we organise ourselves to survive until the next day. We pray when we care for creation. We pray when we travel long hours to our workplaces in the worst conditions. We pray when we are imprisoned and sick. We pray when we create structures that guarantee civil and social rights. We pray when we develop science and technology to care for life. We are united because we are in prayer, and we are in prayer because of our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, which leads us to love and trust our brothers and sisters, and to move forward with the hope of building bridges for peace.

On the existential peripheries, we are an organised and praying Church that offers its help, its hands, its universities, its trade unions, its popular movements, its organised communities, its companies and its banks, building bridges so that the agenda for peace can move forward, steadily, without haste but without pause. We are organised communally in church networks, incardinated in CELAM. Jesus is among us. We believe in this, and we trust in him, so we wait, and we do not go backwards.

The first words of Leo XIV were: peace, Jesus Christ, bridges, dialogue. We listen to them and take them seriously. We are silent, because we do not shout or doubt, but we are attentive. We do not doubt. We are still, but mobilised as a community, as the Church of Christ, as the faithful people of God. We go unnoticed, but we are here. We do not wear luxurious clothes or seek the first places,

but we love God above all things, we sanctify the feasts, we respect our parents and our ancestors who were martyrs in the faith. Apart from that, we fall into all temptations, because we are human, but we trust in the liberation from sin that causes us to fall. We are ready to build bridges. Here we are.

We must continue our mission and thus we will know how to do it better, because we must feel and know what the discarded feel and know in order to know what to do. Only then can we talk about them, because knowledge is the product of practice, not of conjecture. Let us not idealise or ideologise the marginalised if we really want to build bridges of sustainable peace. To know is to savour, not to assume. To know is to know how to respect human dignity in everyone, everyone, everyone. We are the sum of our knowledge, and this is the sum of our practices of community commitment. If we listen as they listen, if we smile spontaneously as they smile, if we pray with fullness as they pray, if we live with the misery of the peripheries, I do not know if we will know for sure why social justice is a guarantee of peace and why hope does not disappoint.

Sustainable peace is the result of a loving practice that generates unity. Let us not be 'indietrism', as Francis said. Let us not want to return to the past, nor be reduced to the mere continuity of history. Let us be open to the new with roots in the history of our churches.