

RENATE: First reflection. Day 1 summary.

What kind of Church do you dream of?

Pope Francis' answer to this question is that he dreams of the Church as a field hospital, binding the wounds of the world; not another NGO or 'ambulance' service but a community tending to the deepest of our societies' spiritual wounds, whilst aiding with immediate and practical care the material needs of our peoples. Indeed he does not think of a separation between the two. This is a Church that realises that dignity is – and can only be – relational. It is founded in mutual recognition, attention and the exchange of gifts. Echoing St Paul, Francis desires that we learn to keep faith with the difficult process of naming each other as brothers and sisters. No longer slave or free, but brothers and sisters.

In our conversations so far we have heard a variety of hints and suggestions – through the sharing of resonant images and phrases and the rendering of powerful gestures – about the Church we dream of. We began by breaking and transforming walls – literally, we entered our conference space by taking bricks from the wall: a physical act of spiritual resistance.

Listening to our discussions over the past day I want to draw out briefly five sentences that express the ways in which we have imagined seeking to be the Church, the body of Christ, in our work.

I want to frame this reflection on my four sentences by introducing the work of the British theologian Sam Wells. Sam has argued that the work of Christian communities should be shaped by an ethic of 'being with' rather than 'working for' others. Being with others requires us to ask Jesus' question: what do you want? Sam structures his reflections around three different phases of Jesus' life and ministry: the thirty years spent learning how to be with others in Nazareth (in fact, the vast majority of his life), the three years he spent in Galilee building a movement, healing, challenging and confronting, and the one week he spent in Jerusalem leading up to his death and resurrection. During the course of today we have reflected on these different phases of Jesus' life and ministry and I will now try to express some of these through four brief statements drawn from my own reflections on today's speakers.

1. Jesus' way is a way of encounter which places God and neighbour – suffering and resilient neighbour – at the core of our attention and action.

Pope Francis in his address to us today, Sr Gabriella, Sr Eugenia and Sr Regina have all spoken of the need to prioritise encounter, reception and accompaniment in our work. Building relationships of trust and collaboration must be at the core of the work of women religious at a grassroots level to disrupt the traffickers and accompany the women and men who they prey upon. We live in the context of a global crisis in trust at every level of our cultures and traffickers trade precisely in faking and breaking trust. They turn the pretence of trust into a profitable industry of death and despair. Without the reality of trust

built through encounter and reception our work will struggle to be properly gospel centred. We have also heard today that these relations of encounter, trust-building and collaboration (as opposed to forms of isolation and competition) need to extend to law enforcement agencies, embassies and other NGO's.

Pope Francis talked about Jesus' way as a way of accompaniment, and he drew parallels with the Good Samaritan passage. We have heard other references to this passage too today: the Samaritan meets immediate need, but he collaborates with others to bring healing and restoration.

2. Jesus' way is a way of truth – telling and justice seeking, which is necessarily a way of prayerful persistence.

There is a passage that has kept returning to me today as Sr Gabriella, Eugenia and Regina spoke: it is the story of the persistent widow and the unjust judge in Luke 18:1-8.

On the one hand the persistent widow is simply dogged in demanding justice, and her persistence is rewarded by even (and the point is, even) the unjust judge. But the focus of the passage is on the justice of God and the faith of the people in that justice. There are echoes of the line in Jeremiah 29.7 'But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare'. Just one just man (or woman) is needed for the redemption of the city. This spirit of seeking the peace and the justice (the welfare) of the city has been central to all that we have talked about today. We have heard from Pope Francis about the need to put pressure on governments, those responsible for law and order and to fight for economic justice. We have heard this morning about the importance for trafficked women and men of recovering their legal identities, legal identity is part of the search for dignity and welfare.

The passage is about a persistence in hope and faith; a rejection of all that is unjust in the name of the hope that is in us. Sr Gabriella spoke beautifully and powerfully of the parallels between the story of the money lenders being cast out of the Temple by Jesus and the ways that those combatting trafficking seek to honour the temple of the human body: to cast out with the same anger and vigour those who turn the body into a market. Anger, urgency, determination and persistence in hope have their place in the Galilee ministry of Jesus and in our own mission.

3. Jesus' way is a way of communion and collaboration.

We have heard again and again today that we need to work together for the common good, to cast out the temptations to be individualistic or competitive in our responses to trafficking. Bridges not walls in all areas of our work.

The traffickers communicate with great efficiency and effectiveness, they market (quite literally) false relationships when states and civil society are slow or resistant to act. Our power of and for relationships of human communion needs to overcome this. This is a grace to which we must open ourselves – despite ourselves - more and more. This is not simply a practical, external task of organisation, this is – as Sr Imelda hinted in her address to Pope Francis - a spiritual task or struggle in places of desolation.

4. Jesus' way is of cross and resurrection is a way of conversion and repentance

St Augustine tells the story of the Good Samaritan differently from the way we are often presented with interpretation of this passage. He suggests that Jesus is the Samaritan and we are wounded humanity lying beaten by the side of the road. We as individuals and 'we' the Church have not always got our response to slavery (old or modern) right. We have failed and we will fail in this work. We stand in need of conversion in / at the hands of the stranger. This work calls us into a journey of individual and communal conversion. Only as part of this journey will we be able to challenge the forces of the market. This is surely part of the depth of meaning to be found in Sr Eugenia's affirmation that it is in bringing together our poverties that riches are to be found. In engaging our poverties and seeking their transformation we might learn to serve.

As John Howard Yoder wrote, there is no general way to be like Jesus, there is only 'the concrete social meaning of the cross' and, liberation theologians would add, the resurrection.

What kind of Church do we dream of?

Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus of Galilee and Jesus of Jerusalem.

Only in learning better how to live together do we learn to die together that we might rise together.

Talitha kum.