

RENATE conference: third theological reflection

(This reflection was produced to summarise and interpret the input the RENATE network of women religious from across Europe working to combat human trafficking had received from experts and grassroots organisers in response to the interconnected realities of refugee and other migrant flows into Europe and human trafficking. It makes use of the sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer delivered in 1932/3 and was accompanied by images of the Lampedusa cross and the icons painted by refugees for the church in the Calais 'Jungle'. Please do not distribute without permission.)

What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?

There is a tradition in the port towns and villages of Greece on the feast of the Epiphany that is named the Blessing of the Waters. The priest travels with his community to the waterfront taking with him a small cross, which he throws into the sea. As the cross sinks through the cold January waters they are blessed and made safe for the year ahead. A group of young men, the strongest swimmers, then compete to leap into sea to retrieve the cross. The man who returns to the surface with the cross in his hand is blessed with luck and health for the year.

In 2013 a carpenter from Lampedusa was at Mass in his local parish. He watched a group of newly arrived Eritrean refugees weeping for the loss of their loved ones in a shipwreck. Watching their grief he felt moved to find a practical way to respond, and so he went down to the waterfront and collected wood from the shipwrecked boats. From the rough wood he cast small crosses. The wood, he said, was quite unlike any he had worked with before. It smelt of 'salt, sea and suffering'. He gave the crosses he had crafted as gifts to those who had survived the sea crossing, as a sign of their rescue, their sorrow and their hope.

This beautiful act, which helped draw attention to the situation in Lampedusa, struck me as a powerful and fitting reversal of the Greek tradition of the blessing of waters. The Lampedusa cross is not a cross cast into the sea to bless the waters, but a cross pulled out of the sea, crafted by hand from a vessel nailed and scarred, broken and remade into a symbol of death and resurrection. It was crafted as a thing of rough and terrible beauty, and above all as a way to make visible the invisible – the disappeared and drowned, the structures of sin which compose the systems of war and violence, consumption and profit which drive our current human reality and the hope that overcomes. The carpenter seemed to grasp and express without use of words that the personal is the political, and the political becomes instantly personal for the most vulnerable: the Lampedusa cross was crafted to speak this truth to power.

Over the last three days we have been giving names to this cross: consumption, exploitation, corruption, patriarchy, indifference. As you meditate on this cross, what names do you give to this cross?

The Lampedusa cross also speaks to us of the letter sent to this conference by the survivor: the power of fear, and the desire to give and receive love.

The liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez suggests that the institutional church had yet to understand the depth of the challenge posed by the structures of sin we see in our times. He asks: how do we proclaim a Gospel of love to people who have experienced a profound deficit of love, a constant interpersonal and structural denial of love in their lives? He believes that we yet to really understand the depth of this challenge. This is the challenge of the letter we received from the survivor.

Her letter spoke also of what she called her 'many fears'.

The naming of fear and the overcoming of fear is a theme we have returned to again and again in these days.

In the dark days of late 1932 and early 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached a series of sermons about fear. I want to draw now from a sermon Bonhoeffer preached on Matthew 8:23-27. It is a sermon about the sea and a boat and fear.

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

The Bible, the gospel, Christ and the church, all are one great battle cry against fear in the lives of human beings. Fear is somehow the arch-enemy itself. It crouches inside, hollows out our insides until resistance and strength are spent. Fears gnaws at the ties that bind.

Lets say that there is a ship on the high sea, having a fierce struggle with the waves. The storm wind is blowing harder by the minute. The boat is small, tossed about like a toy; the sky is dark; the sailors' strength is failing. Then one of them is gripped by... whom? What? She cannot tell herself. But someone is there in the boat who wasn't there before. Someone comes close to her and lays cold hands on her arms as she pulls wildly on her oar. Then the unknown one reaches into her heart and mind and brings about the strangest pictures. Her family, her children. What will become of them if she is no more? Suddenly she can no longer see or hear anything, can no longer row, a wave overwhelms her and in a final desperation she shrieks: stranger in this boat, who are you? And the other answers: I am fear. Now the cry goes up from the whole crew. Fear is in the boat; all arms are frozen and all drop their oars; all hope is lost, fear is in the boat. Then it is as if the heavens opened: Christ is in the boat. Christ is in the boat, and no sooner has the call gone out and been heard than Fear shrinks back, and waves subside. The boat rests on the surface. Christ was in the boat

We were along on that journey, weren't we? And the call, Christ is in the boat was our salvation once too. And now strangely all of us are at sea once again, on that voyage where faith and hope are challenged, overwhelmed and in chains.

But the other side of the coin is also true. When Christ is in the boat, a storm always comes up. The world tries with all its evil powers to get hold of him, to destroy him along with his disciples; it hates him and rises up against him. Christians surely know this. So we will make our way through looking to see that Christ is in the boat and can soon stand up and rebuke the sea. But does it seem to be true? Why is he so strangely hidden? Dear sisters and brothers, what do we know about what Christ can do and wants to do for us, this very evening, if we will only call "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" This fear alright, but it is also faith in the midst of fear, because it knew where help comes from, the only place. We say there are no miracles anymore But what do we know really, you and I? What sort of person is this on whom fear has no effect, who overcomes the fear in human life and takes away its power? By asking this question, we are already on our knees before him, praying to him, pointing to him and saying "This is God! Amen!"

What kind of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?

Here – finally - are two images I would like to share with you in response to this question: ***what kind of man is this?*** They are images which I think speak to another of the themes we have heard again and again today: how can we name the darkness of the workings of the mafia and the traffickers and how we can be light in that darkness? Helena, Sr Valencia and Sr Lynda have spoken of this deep need to be and to find light in the darkness. The challenge for us in offering a true grace in place of the false and deadly 'grace' of the traffickers is immense.

Last week the small church in the Calais 'jungle' was finally demolished. I share now two images painted by Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees in the camp. One of the extraordinary things about Calais is that it was both a place of squalor and great darkness, a place that should never have existed, but also a place of creativity. Unlike many detention centres and hotspots the anarchy of Calais meant that refugees could create their own structures of civil society: small shops, little schools and small churches. These images are the work of refugee hands, art and mystery incarnated amidst the mud and the mafia. When I visited I asked the pastor of the church, himself a refugee about the striking images inside. How had they chosen the icons they would create? He told me that a small group had prayed and reflected together on their journeys to Calais. The story of the Archangel Michael in battle with the devil, representing the cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil, felt like a visceral truth to those in Calais. The painting depicts Michael, sword in one hand and scales of justice in the other. This is a battle, he emphasised in which God is victorious, but the full power of that conflict is our reality. The second image he interpreted for me was the image of Christ knocking on the door of the human soul. No handle on the outside, but a door that we must open to him. This is a peaceful image, an image close to Holman-Hunt's famous Christ as the Light of the World painting. As we meditate on this image, perhaps we can think about the things that this door

represent for the women and men we work with and have focused upon this week? Perhaps also about the light that Christ brings into this darkness.

In Germany there is an old Advent tradition of focusing on the Scripture passage that this painting depicts, in which Jesus tells us that he comes, knocking, looking for the resistant, the lost, the abandoned. Christ is depicted as an itinerant migrant, moving from house to house looking for welcome.

In the Advent of our age, who will open a door to be a bearer of this Light that brings us out of darkness? A Light that will both calm the storm and bring new storms in its wake? And who bears this light to us?