

The Third Week of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in the current tragic situation of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Emmanuel W. Lenge SJ

When I first made the Spiritual Exercises in the novitiate, a new kind of prayer based on intimate encounter with Jesus Christ and with myself became available to me. This prayer training revealed to me many faces of God: serious, tender, sad, frail, merciful. Surely I was discovering something new and I could envisage a new path, a priceless treasure towards which I am still travelling. The enthusiasm of the first days of my 30-day retreat – with its powerful and fruitful meditations such as the Principle and Foundation or the Two Standards, with all the fervour and the emotional thrust this entails – faded away abruptly during the Third Week, which I experienced as a demanding and scarcely joyful moment.

I felt completely lost. After having answered to Christ's Call as Eternal King, I could not recognize this person who was to be imprisoned and condemned, who would not defend himself from the charges brought against him, nor answer back those who insulted and despised him, who would die the death of a criminal, nailed practically naked to a cross. Luckily for me, this week was not very long, and the joy of the Risen Lord that invites the retreatant to love and to contemplate God in all creation restored to me the joy and enthusiasm of the first days.

Many other Ignatian retreats followed all through my Jesuit formation and gradually a new light was shed on my manner of understanding the Third Week, on the significance that the meditation and contemplation of the Passion of God have for me today. In this article I simply seek to share a personal interpretation of the meaning of the Passion and suffering of Jesus Christ – crucified and put to death on a cross – an interpretation inspired by the tragedy that thousands of Congolese people are going through, especially in the eastern part of the country.

In the East of the DRC, a war has been raging for more than 12 years. The majority of the Congolese people do not see the sense of this war. Millions of Congolese have been killed in this war and thousands of others have found refuge in neighbouring countries or have ended up homeless, wandering within the Congo, exposed to illness and persecution from militias. The tragedy is not wholly confined to the east of the country. Even though the west (the rest of the DRC) has no direct experience of the war, it bears the consequences of the conflict while suffering the effects of the Congolese paradox: our country with huge mineral wealth has ended up among the poorest countries in the world, with a population steeped in misery. This very quick and sketchy

snapshot of the situation in the DRC seeks to set the framework for the reflection contained in this article. It is a sort of *composition of place* that enables the reader to situate the subject matter in its context.

The *Principle and Foundation* of the Spiritual Exercises describes God's project for humankind and thus for the Congolese people as well. The human person was created to love, serve and revere God, and thus welcome God's salvation. In such a project, one may see little more than the self-centred plan of a narcissistic God, bent on receiving praise and honour, a God who chooses to create humankind to flatter himself. This is how I saw it some years ago, but I soon realised that the only place where we can love, serve and revere God is in our neighbour. Actually, God is first and foremost present in the persons physically close to us, those we can see with our own eyes and those whom we often consider hard to love and respect. Surely, it is easier to fall in love with an idea about God than to recognize God in the concreteness of a well-known face.

The physical and human suffering of Christ: this is the theme of the Third Week of the Spiritual Exercises. Jesus experiences abandonment, betrayal and absolute loneliness. The Third Week poses the question of evil and suffering. Must God suffer? Does it have to be physical suffering? Why does evil exist? What sense is there in all this?

In the Third preamble of the second contemplation, the retreatant may find the grace that she is invited to ask for during this Week:

[At this point, I] ask for what I want. It belongs to the Passion to ask for grief with Christ in grief, anguish with Christ in anguish, tears and interior pain at such great pain which Christ suffered for me. [SpEx 203]

For a long while, I found it difficult to "feel and relish interiorly" the grace of this exercise and even to ask for it with conviction. Surely, it is not about exalting pain, evil and injustice. God does not ask us to take delight in suffering. He created us to praise Him, revere Him and love Him, for He is love. But our world is far from being an ideal universe,¹ and when we become aware of this, its very reality helps us to see Christ's suffering in the actual pain of our brothers and sisters throughout the world. The passion of Christ became visible to me in the millions of dead bodies left on the roadsides of war-torn North Kivu,² or on the faces of the thousands of lonely children crying for their

¹This is certainly nothing new. The Incarnation, as Ignatius portrays it (SpEx 102-109), is a project born from an 'observation'. The Holy Trinity looks in dismay upon the perversion of the project of peace and love that it had planned for humankind. The world has become a battlefield strewn with the victims of hatred, terror and crime. Humankind has to be saved! Thus, the origin of God's plan of salvation is to be found in God's compassion in front of a world turned adrift. Salvation is obtained through the expiatory sacrifice of Christ. Because of love, Christ accepts the call to come and save all men and women through love. Fear of rejection, death on the cross, offences and vituperation: none of this has the power to dissuade Jesus from coming to help humanity.

²The North Kivu is a region in the east of the DRC.

slaughtered parents, or among the thousands of defiled women who can no longer hide their shame, or among the thousands of child-soldiers, robbed of their innocence. Once again, it is not a question of exalting suffering and evil. Nothing can justify all the tribulations endured by so many innocent and defenceless people. No cause and no reason in the world can excuse the death of six million human persons.³

The Third Week teaches us that in the face of such a tragedy, rather than lament or sink further in despair, we may see that all this suffering is not totally useless or absurd, but acquires 'meaning' at another level. We are invited to believe that such wounds partake in the history of salvation and in the ever-present Passion of the Innocent Lamb. I am convinced that in all this, Christ is leading us towards a better future. When confronted with such evil, we feel helpless and we become aware of our finitude: this allows us to come in closer contact with the Great Reality that exists beyond all finite being.

We thus discover, along with many others throughout the history of humankind, that it is possible to go through distress holding on firmly to the one and only Good, and return once again to the unique Absolute. He is the one who can give us faith and hope. While contemplating the passion of Christ and seeing the Origin of innocence led to torture, we can find a new sense in the sufferings of the thousands of displaced people today.

The passion of Christ, as contemplated in the Exercises, is no longer for us a dubious phase of human history, but the faith dimension whose power allows us to carry our own crosses and thus follow the Lord with hopefulness. This is where we understand better the Lord's advice:

Those who want to be more devoted and marked by the service of their King Eternal and universal Lord, will offer not only their persons to the labour, but, acting against their own sensuality and against their carnal and worldly love, will make offerings of even greater value and greater importance. [SpEx 97]

The suffering of innocent people thus becomes part of the suffering of Christ when we accept it in faith, when we consent to be set apart for Him. There are those who die with their hearts full of hate, unable to repay wrong with wrong. Their suffering gets worse as their self-love encloses them in a sense of humiliation and a thirst for revenge. They end up engulfed in the whirlwind of evil, tied down by their violent desire to inflict on others the very same pain they themselves have endured.

There are also those who, like Job, abandon themselves to God's will, even though they do not fully understand what is happening to them:

*⁶ For hardship does not spring from the soil,
nor does trouble sprout from the ground.*

³This is the estimated figure of the total number of victims of the war.

- ⁷ *Yet man is born to trouble
as surely as sparks fly upward.*
- ⁸ *"But if it were I, I would appeal to God;
I would lay my cause before him.*
- ⁹ *He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed,
miracles that cannot be counted.*
- ¹⁰ *He bestows rain on the earth;
he sends water upon the countryside.*
- ¹¹ *The lowly he sets on high,
and those who mourn are lifted to safety.*
- ¹² *He thwarts the plans of the crafty,
so that their hands achieve no success.*
- ¹³ *He catches the wise in their craftiness,
and the schemes of the wily are swept away.*
- ¹⁴ *Darkness comes upon them in the daytime;
at noon they grope as in the night.*
- ¹⁵ *He saves the needy from the sword in their mouth;
he saves them from the clutches of the powerful.*
- ¹⁶ *So the poor have hope,
and injustice shuts its mouth.*
- ¹⁷ *"Blessed is the man whom God corrects;
so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. [Job 5, 6-17]*

Ultimately, there can be no passion of Christ without the joy of the Resurrection. The glorious Christ always triumphs over evil and death. Life will always overcome death. It is this faith in the Resurrection that enables us to carry our crosses, day after day.

Thus, the Third Week is not a merely a pious and disincarnate meditation, but a true contemplation of the suffering Christ, one that empowers us to see Him still present in our sisters and brothers today. One is obliged not to remain indifferent. It is not an unemotional, dry and lofty exercise but a genuine moment of humanization, since our world continues to bleed from the wounds of human sin. Christ therefore reveals himself all through this Week in those who die of hunger or as victims of human violence, in those who pass away due to sickness such as AIDS and malaria. Christ unveils himself in the sullen faces of abused women and in the expressionless countenances of the young child-soldiers dragged away from their homes and families. Christ reveals himself too in the young girls who end up prostituting themselves so as to get something to eat.

In my opinion, this is the face of Christ in the DRC and in many other places in the world today. This is the face of Christ that presents itself to me when I contemplate each crucifix – whether hung in our churches or worn by

priests and religious – the commitment of so many men and women of little means.

We have said before that the passion of Christ is not the final act of the past and present tragedy, or of the history of salvation. We bear with this passion because we know that beyond it lies the glorious Resurrection of the Lord, the victory and joy of the Fourth Week, the joy of the empty tomb and the wounds that have healed. The joy of the stone rolled away, the stone of our helplessness...

The Resurrection of Christ does away with our despair once and for all. Death will never have the final say. To see Christ's passion in the Congolese tragedy allows us to withstand the temptation of letting hatred fill our hearts. We undertake to seek peace using the means that the glorious Christ gives us by seeking and finding the strength to answer hatred with love and forgiveness. The contemplation of Christ in those who suffer sends us forth, upon completing the Exercises, to carry our fallen brothers and sisters, to sustain the children struggling to stand up, to cry out so that those who cause suffering will no longer have the means of doing evil.

Ite inflammate omnia: this is what Ignatius is reputed to have said to Francis Xavier while sending him forth to the ends of the earth: go and set everything ablaze with the fire of love and the passion of Christ! Ignatius knew that Francis, dough that had been so hard to knead, was now aflame with that same fire that the practice of the Spiritual Exercises enkindles and tends.

The contemplation of the passion of Christ rallies us and obliges us to commit ourselves. Commitment is the dynamic and the end of the Spiritual Exercises; at least that is what I believe I have understood. The Exercises, while purifying our intentions and ordering our lives, commit us to choose Jerusalem (the good) over Babylon (SpEx 136), following the footsteps of Christ, the Eternal King. This choice is not, and cannot be, a passive choice; rather it is an active choice to renounce and stand up to Babylon and to evil in all its forms. Babylon is not an aesthetic or abstract image of evil; it is the concrete form of all the injustice that we must not fuel through our prudent passiveness.⁴ It is present in the millions of crosses stuck into so many bleeding hearts. Babylon is

⁴In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Jesuits are actively and concretely committed to taking care of the victims of the war especially through the work of the JRS and the « Parlons SIDA » (Let us talk about AIDS) projects. Many other Jesuits and religious have become involved at different levels, seeking to provide aid to the thousands of victims of the conflict. In my opinion, this aid effort deals with the symptoms of the problem but has little impact on the causes of the disaster, and should things remain so, the effects will remain and even multiply. To deal with the true causes and the real actors we have to go to the roots of the Congolese tragedy (multinationals involved in the exploitation of mineral resources, incompetent and inefficient public administration, institutionalized corruption, proven support of local rebels by foreign armies...). Only at this deeper level can one engage in a more effective action whereby all those responsible – who through their decisions, or failure to make decisions, are accomplices in this human carnage at the national and international level – are enjoined to act.

built whenever we refuse to listen to the cries of the massacred children, every time we close our eyes so as not to see the misery next to us, every time we block our nostrils so as not to smell the odour of the unburied corpses, every time we turn our backs to the outstretched arms that call for help.

I think that the practice and the living experience of the Exercises alone have motivated many people. Among these are Jesuits who live their life in this world as something much more precious than a mere stop leading to the afterlife, and others who have refused to contribute – not even by their silence – to the structures of sin that weigh down on so many persons still crying out for help and justice.

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