

# The Call to Justice: The Legacy of *Gaudium et spes* Forty Years Later

## The Call to Justice in the Political Order

*Rubens Ricupero*  
Former Secretary-General of UNCTAD

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"When shall we have the courage to outgrow the charity mentality and see that at the bottom of all relations between rich and poor there is a problem of justice?"

Dom Helder Camara, quoted in the Internet homepage of the Sisters of Notre Dame whose Constitutions also contain the following statement: "We commit ourselves to that action for justice which makes real and credible the message of the Gospel".

Here and now: the call to justice is as timely today as 40 years ago. It is not only a local problem, more important in some places than others, but a global, indivisible, pressing necessity everywhere. Demonstrating the truth of this assertion is the best way to prove that *Gaudium et spes* is alive and well.

For me, writing in Brazil as the month of February 2005 draws to a close, "here" means Anapu, a miserable settlement of landless peasants in the state of Pará, in the hot, damp Amazonian rainforest. "Now" is Saturday, 12 February, the day Sister Dorothy Stang, an American nun from the Congregation of Notre Dame of Namur, is walking on the dirty track to a meeting with the local community.

For more than 25 years, she had been working with and for the poor farmers of the Amazon, many of them displaced people driven by misery from other regions. They had come to that part of the country lured by the military government of the 1970s with promises of "a land without men for men without land". What they found instead was the greed of illegal loggers, the exploitation of land-grabbers and quasi-slave labour, the brutality of the *jagunços*, the hired guns at the service of the landowners, malaria, fevers, diseases, no doctors, no schools, no law, no order, the utter abandonment of a muddy, almost impassable road that the military pompously called "Transamazonica" and the locals re-baptized Transamargura, or "Across the bitterness". Sister Dorothy was the soul of that lost community. Born in Ohio, she was part of the Middle America that made the US great. The high school yearbook photo of her pretty, smiling face and blonde hair looks no different from that of millions of other American girls destined to a life of comfort and well-being. She had, however, heard the call of Jesus Christ, the call to justice of Vatican II and of *Gaudium et Spes* – after all, she was young, as some of us were, when Pope John XXIII opened the Council. Nothing better expresses the essence of Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli than these two short words: *gaudium et spes*, joy and hope.

That Saturday, 12 February, a little more than a month ago, Sister Dorothy, who had received many death threats, met two hired guns at the end of her personal road. She did not run away, she did not plead for mercy. Fearless, she rebuked the two gunmen for having sown grass to

destroy the vegetable gardens of the landless peasants. They complained that she was meddling in their business, that her work was a threat to their interests. Her work, her poor work, was to organize the families, to teach them simple techniques of sustainable development in coexistence with the forest, to replace the destructive methods of “slash and burn”.

How could she possibly threaten them? Her weapon – her only weapon, she said, opening the handbag and taking out a book – was this. And in a firm, clear voice, she read to them three verses from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter V: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth; Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God; Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied [...]”.

At these words, one of the assassins cried out, “It won’t work that way, Sister”, and killed her with six bullets. Sister Dorothy was not the only victim that 12th of February. Before the day ended, two others, a leader of the landless peasants and a farmer, had also been gunned down in the area. The Brazilian Commission for Agrarian Pastoral (Pastoral da Terra) recorded 1,349 deaths as a result of land conflicts between 1985 and 2003. Only 64 of the killers and 15 of the people who had ordered the murders were ever found guilty and sentenced. Of the 1,003 crimes committed in that period, only 75, or 7.5%, less than one in ten, were tried in court. A few of the victims were priests, nuns, lay leaders. In other Latin American countries, bishops and even a Cardinal have been murdered. Most of those who died were simple, poor women and men who had been fighting for land, fair wages and a better life; who shared only their hunger and thirst for justice.

But they never found justice. Those who survived are as poor, landless, forgotten and exploited as ever. Economic and social conditions are as unfair and unjust as they were before. The victims’ families did not see their persecutors brought to trial, and justice has not been done in that narrow sense of the word either. Put another way, justice continues to be missing from the face of the Earth, in Brazil and elsewhere. How many of those who died or who keep fighting had read *Gaudium et spes*, or had at least heard of it? Some, and Sister Dorothy was certainly among them, had their entire lives transformed by Vatican II, by this and other Council documents and the fresh spirit they breathed into the Church and the world. All, even the most illiterate, were touched and changed by the spirit of joy and by the hope this movement brought to their hard, short, brutish lives.

Hope, Walter Benjamin wrote in the memorable phrase that Marcuse placed at the end of his *One-Dimensional Man*, was only given us on account of those who were left without hope. An unbreakable link is thus created between those who have no objective reason to hope and those who are struggling to bring them some reason to hope again. But hope is also inseparable from joy, as we implore in prayer: “Lord, give me again the joy of being saved” – that is, the joy that comes from the hope of redemption. As Lacordaire exclaimed in his first sermon in Strasbourg: “Frères, je vous apporte la joie” – “Brothers, I bring you joy, the joy of salvation”!

If I had to sum up what is for me the essence of *Gaudium et spes*, I would say that it is the exhortation to provide hope to the hopeless. Shortly before the dawn of the new century and millennium, I thought about how the French wrote *cahiers de doléances*, or “books of complaints”, as they were electing their deputies to the National Assembly that would mark the first opening act of the French Revolution. Instead of *cahiers de doléances*, I reflected, we should write *cahiers d’espérances*, or “books of hopes”. What I intended was that we

should list not vague, fanciful, utopian wishes but tangible, feasible, solid reasons that justify hope in the future.

In this sense, *Gaudium et spes* is an extraordinary *cahier d'espérances*, a great Book of Hopes. Not dreams, not mystic visions, but expectations well grounded in reality; concrete hopes. Here I emphasize the word “concrete”. Just as Jesus teaches us in the Gospel – to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, bury the dead, free the prisoners, comfort the distressed and dress the wounds – the Council document does not demand the impossible of us, but only everyday actions within our reach. This was and is the reason for its continuous vitality and fecundity, and the reason why it has been the source of so many concrete successful achievements: the world network of Justice and Peace Commissions, their rich harvest of accomplishments on behalf of human rights under the most trying and dangerous conditions, the institutions created and the activities undertaken to protect indigenous peoples, the landless, the unemployed, the homeless, the street children, the weak and vulnerable.

Nothing less should be expected of those who take their inspiration from He who said, “I am the path, the truth and the life”. That is, truth is not something abstract, a philosophy or even a theology, but a Word that became flesh, a God who became man, Jesus Christ. This is the reason why I chose to start not with a theoretical or academic reflection about the Council’s intentions but with the personal testimony of a martyr who decided to embody *Gaudium et spes* and, above it, the Gospel, as it was understood by the best among us: as a project for a radical life, a life that goes to the roots of things.

What does it mean to go to the roots of things in the political order? It is to understand, first of all, that the highest goal in the political sphere – power – will find its ultimate legitimacy not only in its origin – the consent of the majority – but in its subordination to an ever higher value. That supreme value is the service of others, as Christ makes clear in several passages from the Gospel devoted to what could be called his political thinking. By the way, this is one of the rare examples where he does not resort mainly to parables or symbols but develops his ideas directly and explicitly.

It may seem paradoxical that, after making a clear distinction between what belongs to God and what is Caesar’s, he goes on to lay out the criteria to which even Caesar’s power should be subjected. In effect, he reminds his friends that, in the world as it is, the “rulers of nations” seek power as a means to control, to oppress, to dominate. Here the key word is “domination”, whose etymological root comes from *dominus*, lord, or, even more fundamentally, from *domus*, house – that is, the “rulers of nations” see power as an extension of their control over their own households, where people become objects of their personal ownership; they become things, merchandise.

In contrast, Jesus’ friends should use their power for the service of others, becoming themselves the servants or slaves of those who had hitherto been their objects and who now become the subjects. Christ goes to extremes to underline the central importance of this teaching, to the point that he stages a dramatic live demonstration, washing the Apostles’ feet and drawing a didactic, explicit conclusion: they ought to do the same to one another.

It is surprising how frequently Jesus returns to the subject of the link between power and service, authority and sacrifice. When John and James demand the places of honour in his kingdom, he promptly reminds them of the high price of glory. Cephas’ confirmation as the head of the Apostles is three times expressed not as a formal transfer of power but as a

command of service: “Shepherd my flock”. It is not without reason that the Head of the Church has since been called “the servant of God’s servants”. Likewise, the symbol of power in the Christian Church has been from the start not the lion or the eagle, but the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his flock and knows each of them by name.

With some exaggeration it could be claimed that, together, those passages form a “theory of government” of sorts that could not be more remote from the prevailing notion in ancient empires of the glory and even the personal divinization of the ruler as the ultimate goal of power. No wonder that an ardent admirer of the greatness of Rome like Machiavelli would feel nothing but contempt for a religion that preached humility and service. Calling to mind the fate of that great Rome, it is impossible to agree not with Machiavelli but with Leopardi:

Or dov'è il suono	Where is now the sound
Di que' popoli antichi ? or dov'è il grido	Of those ancient peoples? now where is the battle cry
De' nostri avi famosi, e il grande impero	Of our famous ancestors, and the great empire
Di quella Roma, e l'armi, e il fragorio	Of that Rome, and the arms, and the thunder
Che n'andò per la terra e l'oceano ?	That spread over the whole earth and the ocean?
Tutto è pace e silenzio, e tutto posa	All is quiet and peace, and deeply sleeps
Il mondo, e più di lor non si ragiona	The world, and about them no one cares to argue any more
(Giacomo Leopardi, La Sera del Dì di Festa)	(transl. RR)

The Gospel is not as preoccupied with the source or origins of power as a basis for its legitimacy as were the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment doctrines of the American and French Revolutions. After all, Jesus does not question Caesar’s or Pilate’s power. What really matters is the use that is made of power: was it put to good use – that is, was it placed at the service of others? The New Testament texts leave little doubt or ambiguity about who should be the beneficiaries of the good use of authority. Preferably, not exclusively, they should be the weak and vulnerable listed in the description of the Last Judgement, the missing lamb, the sheep with a broken leg, the prostitutes and public sinners, the prodigal son, the beggars, the lepers, the scum of the Earth. In the splendid formula chosen by the Latin American Church, there should be “a preferential option for the poor”.

I very much doubt that today's Church in Latin America or Brazil would have been associated with that formula were it not for the legacy of Vatican II and of *Gaudium et spes*. The role of the pastoral constitution of the Council was essential because it provided a road map for a multitude of efforts that lacked coordination and a sense of direction; it released an explosion of energy just waiting to be tapped, it gave legitimacy and apostolic authority to actions that had often been misinterpreted or inspired mistrust under the distorted atmosphere of the Cold War. It should not be forgotten that in Latin America, the two decades after *Gaudium et spes* coincided with the dark period of military dictatorships, Central American guerrillas, tortures, disappearances, murders and massive violations of human rights. The Council’s orientation had to pass through trial by fire, and it is no exaggeration to say it passed it with flying colours, but not without paying a heavy price in terms of blood, pain, ruined lives and martyrdom.

For many of us in Brazil in those sombre days, the living embodiments of the spirit of Vatican II and *Gaudium et Spes* were Dom Helder Pessoa Camara, the Archbishop of Recife, a true evangelical man, the main figure behind the creation of the Commission on Justice and Peace of the Conference of Brazilian Bishops, a cherished friend to whom here I pay a fond tribute of affectionate memory, and Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns, Cardinal-Archbishop of São Paulo, a fearless defender of the oppressed, the tortured and the persecuted in opportune or less opportune times. Both stood out as the moral conscience of the nation because of their extraordinary personal qualities and their leading position in the Brazilian post-Vatican II Church. Let me say how proud I was yesterday, hearing Cardinal Cláudio Hummes, the current Archbishop of São Paulo, to be a member of his dioceses and to see how he was able to create for all of us an opportunity to feel again the spirit of joy and hope that we had felt during Vatican II. He did it by allowing the text of *Gaudium et spes* to speak for itself, reading what the document said about the need to understand today's world, to respect the admirable freedom of human conscience, to recognize the potential for good in modernity and science. Countless others, however besides Dom Helder and Dom Paulo – bishops, priests, members of religious orders and of lay organizations – had the courage to take great risks “to defend their rights and those of their fellow citizens against the abuse of authority”, which *Gaudium et spes* explicitly recognizes as being perfectly legitimate in Chapter IV, paragraph 450.

Now the tyranny is over, but the challenge of making the call to justice a reality in the political order has lost none of its acutely problematic nature. Paragraph 449 of the constitution states that the exercise of political authority “has always to be conducted within the limits of moral order and to promote the common good, dynamically considered”. Although the words are different, this is the reiteration or update of what the Gospel teaches about the subordination of power to the selfless service of others. What is problematic in that approach is that Jesus turns power upside down; he inverts the “natural” order of the world as it is, a crude reality where power subordinates everything to its own idolatry. This is aptly and tellingly narrated in the story of the Temptation, when “the Prince of this world” offers Christ all the kingdoms of the Earth as the price of idolatry, a reminder of the demonic nature of power for power's sake.

The inversion in the logical order of things is always a shocking experience. We remember Peter's astonishment as Jesus, Lord and Master, offers to wash his feet. It is the same amazement or incomprehension that greets the Gospel's narratives about an outcast, a Samaritan, who is better than a Jewish priest; a prodigal son who is given a much more lavish feast than his hard-working brother; a labourer who works only one hour and is paid as much as those who toil for 12 hours in the heat of the day.

We have to keep those stories in mind to understand that justice, in the sense of the Gospel and of *Gaudium et spes*, is not a synonym for worldly justice. If our justice does not go beyond the justice of the scribes and the Pharisees, we are not ready for the Kingdom.

In paragraph 467, the pastoral constitution says exactly this, with almost the same words: we must push on “beyond the limits of what justice can offer”. The document has moved here to Chapter V, Peace and the Community of Peoples. Peace is not merely the absence of war; nor is it the result of the balance of forces or of violent oppression. Its first definition, according to Isaiah, is “work of justice”. But this is not all. It will be impossible to build peace on Earth unless men share spontaneously among themselves the riches of the heart and the intellect, unless they respect the dignity of others, unless they exercise diligent fraternity. In other

words, peace is also the fruit of love and is never attained once and for all; it has rather to be continuously constructed.

The patient, tireless, endless construction of peace is precisely the central goal of the United Nations, where I spent the past nine years as Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Almost a decade, those years mark not only the turn of the century and the millennium in a chronological sense, but a true turning point in the qualitative transformation of history. The mid-1990s coincided with the high tide of globalization in the economic sphere, the overcoming of the acute ideological split of the Cold War and, in the political arena, a return to convergence and cooperation. The interplay of those trends made it possible to resolve systematically many of the chronic problems that had loomed as imminent threats over the Council Fathers as they were debating and writing Chapter V of *Gaudium et spes*: the implacable ideological conflict prevailing not only during the Cold War, but ever since the October Revolution of 1917; the division of Berlin, Germany, Europe and Vietnam into two hostile camps; the precarious nuclear Balance of Terror and the danger of humanity committing suicide through atomic escalation and miscalculation.

Both of the two major symbols of that era of problem-solving in the 1990s that followed the cold war were linked to the notion of the demolition of walls between human beings: the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989, soon to be followed by the reunification of Berlin and Germany and, for the first time since the Roman Empire, by the unification of Western, Central and Eastern Europe into a single political entity, side by side with the crumbling of the political and legal barriers of apartheid. Division, a word that has some symbolical association with *diabolus*, was being replaced by union, convergence. As Father Teilhard de Chardin would put it: “tout ce qui s’élève, converge”, or “everything that rises comes together”.

Unfortunately, those exhilarating promises were not to be realized. Just as the “real” 20<sup>th</sup> century was ushered in by the guns of August 1914, so has the new century begun in earnest with the dreadful image of the two planes crashing in flames into the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001. The terrorist attacks clearly opened a new era that brought back divergence and dissension – whether of the virulent kind that is reflected in the mortal antagonism of Al Qaeda against the United States, or of the much milder variety that divides the US from its European allies over the best way of fighting terrorism. We are again witnessing something we naively thought would never return: the reconstruction of walls to separate people, from physical fences such as the one between Israelis and Palestinians to legal and political barriers against refugees, illegal immigrants, desperate “boat people”. Walls and barriers may prove necessary for purposes of protection, but every such erection, even around embassies and public buildings, is a confession of failure to neutralize violence through persuasion and dialogue.

This short summing-up suffices to show how far we have travelled since the time of Vatican II. The Council was a phenomenon of profound historicity that gave expression, meaning and guidance to the aspirations and hopes of millions and millions of women and men of every persuasion and origin, regardless of their attitude towards Christianity. In that sense, it was perhaps the first genuine ecumenical council in history, as it embraced all people of good will and made a strong impact even on communists and atheists. Persons otherwise hostile to any religious concept saw in it a reflection of their own personal quest for the meaning of life and history.

Historicity means that Vatican II cannot be viewed in isolation from the particular political atmosphere of its time, characterized by a strange dialectical tension between fear and hope which, in my opinion, no longer exists today. We still have fear, though of a different kind, but we sadly lost hope. On the one hand, fear was then primarily represented by the Balance of Terror, by what Emmanuel Mounier called in the title of one of his books *La Grande Peur du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle* (“the great Fear of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”), the fear of nuclear annihilation. Rightly or wrongly, this sentiment has to a large extent disappeared as a consequence of the end of the Cold War and of the Soviet Union, being replaced by other fears: from terrorism and from the sometimes unwise way of fighting it. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the II Vatican Council was inaugurated at practically the same time as the Cuban missile crisis, the moment when the world came closer than ever before to a nuclear war, and that it was briefly preceded by the construction of the Berlin Wall. The whole decade would march forward amidst continuous turmoil and conflict: the American intervention in the Dominican Republic, the military coups in Brazil, Algeria, Indonesia and Greece, the Cultural Revolution in China and the escalation of the Vietnam War, culminating in the Têt offensive.

On the other hand, where fear abounded, hope was superabundant, overflowing in excess and often ending in disappointment and tragedy. Those were the days of rock 'n roll, of the hippie movement, mega festivals, the sexual revolution, drug culture, youth rebellion and May 1968. It was also the time of the passion and death of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy and Ernesto "Che" Guevara. The 1960s were the decade of development, when UNCTAD was created and Paul VI said that “development was the new name of peace”. Very little of that enthusiasm, certainly utopian and even misconceived in some cases, survives today, and I am afraid that disillusionment has unfortunately not spared the expectations created by the Council.

If some of the central problems of the 1960s and afterwards are no longer with us – the Cold War, ideological confrontation, the nuclear Balance of Terror, apartheid, the Vietnam War, the armed conflicts arising from the independence process in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique, Algeria, the Central American guerrillas, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Cambodia, etc.; as you see, the list is impressive – new challenges have not taken long to emerge. Society is by nature problematic, and as soon as it overcomes some obstacles, it turns its attention to others that have long lain dormant or that stem from the very solution of earlier difficulties. This is particularly the case of the enormous number of problems resulting from economic progress or discoveries in the field of science and technology: climate change caused by atmospheric warming, the destruction of forests and biodiversity, industrial and chemical pollution of water and air, the depletion of oceans, Chernobyl and the threat of nuclear reactors, acid rain, food scares arising from mad cow disease and other diseases, the unknown consequences of the genetic manipulation of plants, animals, human beings, new plagues of disastrous proportions, such as AIDS, bird flu and so forth.

Other problems are also the result of the inexhaustible human capacity for reinventing evil, this time in the political and economic spheres, ceaselessly corrupted by greed, selfish domination, cruelty, intolerance, hatred and the thousands of types of violations of God's love and the Ten Commandments. To this category belong the massacres and violence in the conflicts that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the endless civil wars in the Congo, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, genocide in Cambodia, Rwanda and Sudan, the spread of terrorism, the increase in unemployment, economic precariousness and

impoverishment, brought about by a kind of globalization totally indifferent to human and moral values.

It would be unreasonable to look for an explicit description of those recent developments in a document written 40 years ago although I personally believe that the Council's constitution could have been more prophetic in relation to the most important issue in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the promotion of equality among women and men. However, it is no exaggeration to claim that the basic principles of *Gaudium et spes* are as effective against today's evils as they proved to be in the world of yesterday. The destructive potential of the Cold War and of the arms race did not succeed in exterminating life on Earth because that potential was neutralized, as recommended by the Council, not through war and military means but by standing firm, through dialogue, patience, and political and diplomatic efforts. Such an approach created the conditions and breathing space needed for time to perform its healing task and for the internal process that led to the demise of the communist dictatorships.

It is true that the leadership of the first among the Powers, the USA, showed more wisdom in dealing with the difficulties at the start of the Cold War, in the aftermath of the Second World War and in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s than it has more recently. The generation of Franklin Roosevelt was the same that created the New Deal and the Marshall Plan; the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were responsible for the Vietnam War but equally for the Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps and the Great Society. Nixon, Kissinger, Reagan and Bush Senior were tough realists but tried to avoid war whenever possible. Nowadays, on the contrary, there has been a banalization of war and a militarization of diplomacy, both pushed forward by a dangerous feeling of omnipotence and invulnerability in the US, a feeling commonly attributed in large part to its crushing superiority in conventional weapons and technology.

The arrogance and hubris derived from the temptation of omnipotence, a form of idolatry, have led to a total disregard of what *Gaudium et spes* advocated in paragraph 485, the preparation of an age when it would be possible to outlaw war in absolute terms. As the paragraph states, "this naturally requires the institution of some universal public authority, recognized by all, endowed with an efficient power to safeguard security, the observance of justice and the guarantee of rights".

This universal public authority is, of course, the Organization of the United Nations, not as it is today but as it should ideally become in the future. The concept of a universal authority has been a "work in progress" at least since the creation of the League of Nations after the First World War. It is a progressive evolution towards an institution that should strive for the highest possible degree of universality of membership, for a participatory and democratic decision-making process and for an effective power to guarantee peace, security, justice and human rights. The first goal, very imperfect in the League of Nations, has been practically achieved with the completion of decolonization. The last two, however, have proved difficult to reconcile, as the great powers have never agreed to delegate effective means of power to a truly democratic mechanism, one which is not controlled by them or exclusively at their service.

It is highly unlikely that this will happen in our lifetime, particularly now, after a war launched and conducted in *prima facie* violation of the UN Charter and against the express will of the majority of Security Council members. Nor is it likely that the current process of UN reform, undertaken under such inauspicious conditions of extreme concentration of power

in few hands and a qualitative change in the nature and destruction potential of international terrorism will produce a more balanced multilateral system. As a matter of fact, the US and its closest ally, the UK, want the reform effort to be focused on what they call “the new challenges and threats” – which in practical terms do not go much beyond fighting international terrorism and stopping nuclear proliferation on the part of so-called rogue States. Both are certainly grave dangers that have to be taken very seriously but there are other challenges that are not by any means less new or less global as, for instance, the threat of global warming. Nevertheless, as is well known, this was not included among those priority challenges – not because of a dearth of scientific evidence but because of the political agenda of the Bush Administration.

This brings us to the crux of the matter: the question of the indivisibility of solidarity. Like peace, solidarity cannot be selective, selfish or one-way. It has to be indivisible or, to put it better, it should wish for others what it wishes for itself. How, for instance, could the United States expect solidarity in its fight against terrorism from such island nations as the Seychelles, Maldives or Vanuatu, or from low-lying countries like Bangladesh, literally threatened with annihilation by the rise in sea level, which has in turn been partially provoked by the excessive energy consumption of American society and its refusal to join international efforts to bring some relief to that threat? Could the Bush Administration ever persuade Malawi, Zambia or Botswana, in danger of physical extinction from the biological onslaught of AIDS, that Saddam Hussein’s attempt to develop nuclear capability posed a greater danger to them than the viral “weapon of mass destruction” of which they are already a target? Is it credible to ask for the solidarity against terrorism of poor African nations as Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, and, at the same time, deny them the justice they demand in the scandalous matter of cotton subsidies that are depriving hard-working African farmers from the minimum conditions of survival?

The subject of non-proliferation offers another example of the selective and biased nature of current efforts against the “new threats”. Since 1967, when the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was signed, the treaty had always been accompanied by a complementary objective, however remote and possibly rhetorical: that of the total proscription of nuclear weapons by all, without exception, like the ban on poison gases after the First World War. At the present time, however, the US sees no contradiction in denouncing other countries’ interest in nuclear matters while Washington announces its intention to develop a new, superfluous and even more lethal generation of nuclear weapons. And as if this were not enough, up until the end of Bush’s first term – hopefully the attitude will change in the new State Department – US government officials were constantly qualifying and reinterpreting the assurances of non-nuclear aggression previously given to States that had unilaterally renounced nuclear arms. To avoid any misinterpretation about where I stand on this matter, despite this extremely unfair and imbalanced behaviour on the part of the current US Administration, I wish to put on record my unwavering support of my own country’s formal renunciation of nuclear arms, but I have to admit that this is easier to do for a Brazilian, who is not under US pressure and who is far away from the hot spots of the planet, than it would be for an Iranian, for instance.

*Gaudium et spes* did not actually use the expression “indivisible solidarity”, but it meant just that in its insistence that here on Earth, it is not possible to reach peace unless we ensure people’s well-being, unless we eradicate the causes of war and above all the injustice that stems from excessive economic inequalities and from the delay in remedying them. If we had had enough time, we could have proceeded line by line, and in almost every line we would have found confirmation that the notion of indivisible solidarity permeates the whole

document as a kind of unifying link. As we cannot afford so detailed an examination, suffice it to say that the conditions and prerequisites the Council deemed indispensable for peace with justice are just as pressing and unfulfilled today as they were 40 years ago.

It was precisely to advance the work of justice and peace that a 74-year-old Christian woman – significantly, an American who more than any of her powerful compatriots embodied the very best of the generosity and courage of the great American people, an American Christian woman who gave with her life the ultimate testimony of solidarity and love. She had nothing of the politician in her; she was on neither the left nor the right of the ideological spectrum. In her fight against poverty, against the destruction of the Amazon forest, against injustice and the mystery of inequity, she was a martyr, as the etymology explains; a witness of Jesus Christ.

The story of Sister Dorothy's martyrdom is powerful, mysterious, rich in layers of meaning. The fact that she was a woman, an American, her serenity, her calm courage, her spirituality that had nothing to do with political or theological ideologies. The troubling detail that we were only able to learn what she had read aloud in the Gospel thanks to the unexpected evidence given by the killers themselves, as the only witness kept at a safe distance and could not hear what she was saying. What did the murderers make out of Matthew's words? One of them, maybe to exculpate himself, states that, as he listened to her, he had given his companion a sign not to pull the trigger. Was it true? Today, as we approach the week of the Passion, 2005, another disturbing analogy of that episode with the One who is the force of the martyrs is that the assassins were promised the equivalent of US\$ 20,000 for their bloody task.

Sister Dorothy's death in the early morning hours of 12 February, not two thousand years ago, during the persecutions under Nero or Diocletian, but barely a month ago, was worthy of the Acts of the Martyrs, of the Golden Legend. Actually, it was much more wonderful in its evangelical simplicity than the colourful, fanciful stories of improbable and unnecessary prodigies and miracles. It was indeed the miracle of the Gospel that she followed to the letter in the passage where Jesus says that when the hour of persecution and trial falls upon us, we should not premeditate what to answer our persecutors, as the Spirit will provide us with the answer. On that morning, the Spirit moved Sister Dorothy Stang, a saint for our time, to read the sublime Word of God: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth; Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God; Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."