

brotherhood at stake in the United Nations

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BROTHERHOOD AT STAKE IN THE UNITED NATIONS

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→ Maria L. P.

I arrived at the United Nations full of hope. Because of my involvement with social and cultural activities, I had been invited to represent Portugal at the 26th General Assembly of the Organization. I was aware of the fact that it would be difficult to justify to other nations a national policy that was not only misunderstood but was very difficult to understand outside (and inside!) its context. Moreover, I felt myself to be so deeply committed to changing my own country into a more just and dynamic society that I thought I could be a point of dialogue between the nations which fiercely condemn my country and the national authorities which no less fiercely harden their positions. I thought that I could accomplish a doubly difficult task: on the one hand, be in the forefront of the changing process of my country without, however, compromising the status of any representative of the Assembly, that of representing not only a people but also a government; on the other hand, because of my experience in dozens of international meetings and life in the midst of international Grail teams, I hoped to provide the possibility of sincere and direct collaboration with people of other countries and cultures. An ambitious plan? Most certainly. But can one go to such a forum without a plan, a rationale? Can we avoid tasks which can become suggestive of new meanings? Can one stand indefinitely on the banks of life carefully noting the swirls of the current without plunging into its depths? Is there not a time to contest and a time to try out workable projects? Is there not a time to dream, a time to share one's dream of a truer, more humane and more fraternal society, and a time to put one's dream to the test in the very midst of the matter to be changed?

These reflexions were the basis of my decision when I agreed to participate in the General Assembly of the UNO. They did not leave me during my stay in New York. But they had to withstand the continual assault of deception, irritation, impotency, confusion which would rolled over me in waves, seize my most enthusiastic outbursts and slow the pace of the demanding work to which I had committed myself.

Here I touch upon my first deception. I had thought "demanding work" and I found myself in a milieu where hundreds of delegates did nothing: did not study the basic documents put out by the Secretariate, did not react to the possibilities of our world with global ideas but with those of their own more or less restricted "world", did not even realize that the essential

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and specific task of the Assembly was the capacity to work together on sectors or problems which concern the entire world. Certainly, there were exceptions: here and there, a country provided delegates whose experience, expertise or wisdom were striking; here and there, was a delegate with a vision of the problems of humanity and a remarkable capacity to rework the given facts on an interdisciplinary level. There was also the appearance of work, you were there all day, sometimes with night sessions; there was continual movement in the halls; little groups met here and there; people very seriously exchanged prattle ...

Let us take the first point on the agenda of the Commission on which I sat (The Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Commission): "the social situation in the world". Well, we had before us a report covering the entire world, first by geographical zones then by large sections. This report demanded a great deal of study and, in a competent group, would have called for many commentaries. But what happened? In more than 80 interventions, there were barely 10 which attempted to grasp the report as a whole, to deal with a problem of world-wide significance or with a pertinent question of methodology which a study of the report would have raised; the others gave a report on the progress which their country had accomplished, if only to boast about the ideological system which made it possible. Paradoxically, the members of the Secretariate worked hard and with impeccable technique. But of what use are simultaneous translations where even the turn of phrase is correctly given, of what use are neat and competent summaries of each intervention? In the end all this gave such poor results ...

I formulated many hypotheses to explain all this ... Perhaps this was the international diplomatic "tone" and the paperwork and technical apparatus were only a pretext for these people to get together and create an activity of which I didn't know the laws ... Perhaps these people deliberately hid their competence because they all (even those from whom I would expect a less totalitarian spirit!) admitted without ambiguity that they were the mouthpieces of their governments and even went as far as to say that they were defending their livelihood by making as many as possible interventions... Perhaps it was the fact that this was a typically male organization (only one woman in the Secretariate held a high post and the percentage of women in the Assembly was 6 percent) and therefore made up of certain rites and certain ways of being and doing which escaped me and of which I was unable to divine the implications since I am not one of these women who blossom by mimicking men... What more do I know? During the three months of the Assembly I turned these ideas over in my mind; sometimes they seemed derisory; sometimes they seemed evident. What remained was the big question: is it worth it? vaut-il la peine?

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The question gained new force as, little by little, before my eyes, economic and political interests came into play ... I was there, trying anxiously to maintain the motto I had given myself and of which I had informed the authorities of my country: "my loyalty to my country encompasses my loyalty to all humanity". And this was not merely a rethorical expression because this humanity had for me the face of very dear friends of different nationalities from whom I had learned their character, their riches and their struggles and with whom I felt myself existentially united. It is true that I could clarify this from a philosophic and theologic point of view, but the most important thing for me is the fact that I can feel the unity and independence of humanity, through the tissue of the human relationships.

This feeling was rudely put to the test. More than ever, I saw humanity divided before me. At times, during the votings, each time that the green, red or orange lights of the "yes", "no" or "abstention" for each country lighted up, what I had before me was not a sharing of oppinions according to the healthy pluralism of life, it was, on the contrary, the savage taking of positions of the different blocks which divide the world today.

First, there was the striking division between the rich and the poor. On the one hand, the "77 and the unaligned countries" (which came to a total of 96 after the entry of China), and on the other hand ... the others, a small minority. And here is the most critical point of division in the United Nations. Because the "others" are the great powers (capitalist or socialist, it matters little) and the few little countries which live politically (since they are unable to break away) in their orbit. In the hands of these great powers lie the technological power (75% of the world research in the USA, 20% in Europe, 2% in the other countries of the world, this without counting the USSR and China where statistics are unavailable), the capacity in fact to orient the destiny of humanity, the conviction (naive in my eyes, but perhaps realistic) that the rest of the world must necessarily go through the same stages if it wants to get "there", the imposition of a methodology of work and the search for a monolithic socio-economic model without keeping in mind the cultural roots of the peoples which fashion them, make them what they are, regardless of their poverty or their wealth...

It goes without saying that like any other committed Christian, I felt the great power of money and rationalization as a great oppression: clearly, in the misery of so many millions of men; subtly, but strikingly, in the disappearance of the values of intuition, sensitivity and wisdom which form not robots but men... But suddenly, during the Assembly, I saw another power shooting toward the sky, that which comes from the force of numbers. A resolution formulated by the enlarged group of 77 may have been a resolution which was juridically untenable or incoherent or even opposed to the Charter of the United Nations, yet it went

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through the group of great powers and their allies; some stay in their positions without moving, some try to cooperate without surrendering their convictions, and there are some who "sell" themselves to this force of numbers. Why? Because in one instance the prestige of this country in her former colonies depends on it; in other cases the reputation of a country as a "defender of liberty" has to be preserved among another group of nations; in many cases, what is at stake is potential markets or exploitation rights in this or that continent which one mustn't lose on account of a "pious" concern for justice or truth (and how clearly this last stance is seen!) ...

Where then, did I stand in my search for "loyalty to all humanity"? I found myself caught between two currents. These last few years I had found myself "travelling" with the peoples of the poor world. Moreover, I knew of the concrete exploitation of the international economic "mafia". I was in contact with the rush of business enterprises from the "liberating" countries to certain regions such as Portugal where they can easily find a cheap labour force, exploit to the maximum the insecurity of the worker and, with a clear conscience, go for a swim at the nearby beaches... Gradually one of my non-institutional dreams, the "Europe-to-be" found itself boycotted by my revolt in the face of the hypocritical, merchant attitude which, on the one hand, condemns you and, on the other, exploits you. While listening to the Indians and the Brazilians, I knew I was on their side and that I could with difficulty support the gap that separates the rich and the poor, that overwhelms you not only with the oppression of injustice but seems unable to recognize that above and beyond its GNP, each country has a human and cultural wealth. But, during the Assembly of the United Nations, the discovery of the existence of this force of numbers and its use of the technics of the industrialized world (their working agreements, their parliamentary procedures, their more or less cartesian scheme of logic), simply terrified me. My concept (naive, to be sure) of the oppressed in a pure-state crumbled. I had before me the oppressed, no longer the naked individual asking for justice, but an irrational brute force demanding vengeance and spreading hate. At that point, my identification with the oppressed stopped. And another question took shape: how to overcome oppression without becoming the oppressor? This question remains for me the most immediate in the quest for universal brotherhood.

However, it would be too simple to reduce the division between peoples to the two categories of rich and poor. Other divisions became apparent, depending on the points of the agenda: passionate and proud the Arab world stood in its great civilization and, despite internal difficulties, seemed to form a single body; to my great astonishment, the Soviet block was much more a "block" than the marxist theories already integrated

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in the western world would have led you to believe; the new socialistic countries were more dependent on China than one would have thought; the Afro-Asian countries constituted an alliance in certain circumstances, even at the beginning of the terrible conflict which at that moment was starting between two of them; the Latin Americans formed a special group which, already far from its colonial days, was talking boldly of contemporary neo-colonialism; the westerners ... perhaps they were the only ones who didn't appear to be a single group (or did I feel this because I was within and I knew the points of disagreement?)... The list could be remade according to other criteria and explained or justified to the point of exaggeration. What remains is the impression of this continual division which is established today according to certain alliances and which the manipulation of interests will change and remake tomorrow. Where is the outlet where one can find the path to peace? And is not this peace continually put in question at the level of the person?

I would not be truthful if I did not say how the bias of brotherhood affected me personally. During the time, a long period of three weeks, when the 3rd Commission was discussing "racial discrimination in the world" I made a greatly disturbing and difficult discovery. Because of the fact that I was portuguese, I was condemned. Everyone knows that the policy of the Portuguese government has practically no support from other states and that Portugal at this moment is the scapegoat of the Assembly. (the way to avoid handling other hot points which have a greater economic power than Portugal behind them). Even admitting that at a certain point, Portugal was the country charged with the most serious offenses against "human rights", I could not understand how one could ignore and discriminate against the persons who represented their people. But, day after day, the truth of the situation became more evident: I was worse than a paria; I was ostracized; I was put aside by the great majority of the delegates, people whose country had sent them to represent them on the Commission of Human Rights! The few (and happily there were a few) who would talk to me face to face were either exceptional people, completely coherent in their behaviour with the defence of human rights or delegates from countries so powerful that contact with a Portuguese was not going to be "dangerous".

Under these conditions my hope at the moment of arrival was slowly drowning ... I slowly reread and mused over the words of Hammarskyold in Markings, the spiritual itinerary of a political man who had believed in The United Nations and every day, I found there the courage to meet the next day. But my entire stay in N.Y. was lived in this dialectic: "the unity of nations must be possible"; "the UNO is not possible" ...

Now that a few months have gone by and another experiences and events have permitted me to look back at the Assembly from

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a distance what should I say? I am certainly not a fanatical advocate of the UNO as though it were the only forum where peoples meet. I am too conscious of the pluralism of life to crystallize in a single organization (even when it comes to the UN!) all the tottering steps of humanity toward unity. But I give to the UN a certain privileged place in this staggering; I think that in its beginnings the UN had the conditions (and has them still in its Charter) to be a platform of peace, of understanding between nations and of the collective handling of the immense problems of humanity. At the same time, I must draw up the balance of its errors and limits which will only become clearer as the global situation of humanity becomes more complex. And the question returns: is it worth it? vaut-il la peine?

This experience which I consider fundamental in my personal history brings me to the heart of my life as a committed Christian, to its meaning and the values which are the basis of this commitment. A complete secularization (the world left to the ambivalence of its laws) finds in the Mystery of Redemption this answer: "All of creation waits with eager longing for God to reveal his sons" (Rom 8,19). Redemption cannot take place because of any sudden mutation of collective human conditions, nor can secularization, left to itself, bring about a continual "greater being" in man. The committed Christian lives this secularization, feels it in the flesh and suffers its consequences. He can, according to his qualities and his competence, help the bit of the world where he operates evolve toward a more complete equalization of the means to the ends according to the laws of each activity or event. The Christian caught up in the Mystery of Redemption participates in the patient work of history which will someday become subject matter of the Kingdom.

It is because he lives the two dimensions of Christian existence that he can combine the elements of a twofold attitude. He can, from one hand, pursue the "necessary Utopia" (of which Ricoeur speaks), that is, the ultimate global scope of each situation or event in which he is committed, the significant human goal of his activity. He can, at the same time, give himself to this activity with the "ilusioness perseverance" (of which Metz speaks) that is, the desire to succeed despite the knowledge of difficulties and despite the feeling of the slowness of the advances. He has the courage to find new paths when everything seems blocked and without issue and, at times, "the rage" to pierce the opacity of matter ... Between the utopia and the perseverance, a dialectical tension is established which is present to the extent that the Christian wishes to become more Christian and wishes to be part of the world. By living this tension, Redemption will spread across the world through him and something will be born.

... Often during my stay in New York, I vividly felt this mystery in a very concrete manner. I entered the "meditation

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room" of the UNO. It's a little room, very bare and with no direct lighting. In the middle is a large block of polished iron. In the ceiling, a tiny hole permits a ray of light to filter through; and the thickness of the iron becomes transparent; and its heaviness becomes a supple, liquid cloth; and the weight of its two tons becomes a source of confidence and abandon; and its reality of iron becomes the altar of a new act of faith ... Yes, Redemption is at work in the world and the brotherhood of men will emerge from all our stammering efforts.

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