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SVD MISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

The engagement for human rights has characterized the efforts towards evangelization for a long time. The author describes the SVD commitment to human rights within the spiritual tradition of the Society and the newer developments of General Chapters and their understanding of mission. He presents some experiences of the human rights work on different levels.

When I was asked to write about the work of the SVD on human rights on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I remembered a speech of a woman.

In 2007, during the Caritas Internationalis General Assembly in the Vatican, I had an opportunity to listen to the speech of Ms. Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan woman, the founder of the Green Belt Movement, the first African woman who received the Nobel Peace Prize for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace. I was very impressed by her good will and enthusiasm working for the environment and rights of women, and still clearly remember her sharing on the Scripture, Acts 3.

After explaining the close relationship of environmental destruction, disempowerment, and governance systems which exploit the poor, she started talking about the encounter of Peter and John with a beggar who was crippled since birth. She shared her impression that the beggar was poor, self-effacing, dejected, humiliated, had very low self-esteem and was unwell. He was too ashamed of his status to look up to the people who gave alms. Peter said, “*Look at us.... I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, rise and walk*” (Acts 3:6). The beggar leaped up, stood, walked around, and went into the temple, walking and jumping and praising God.

Ms. Maathai continued, “He was an empowered man: no longer a beggar, no longer dehumanized. No longer in need of humanitarian aid. Now he could go and take care of himself with dignity, self-

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respect and confidence. There must have been many worshippers who had given him a few coins many times before but never thought of alternatives to alms. But Peter and John decided to empower him, to give him back his sense of pride, dignity and self-respect.... As we work for the poor we need to be inspired by Peter and John. To really help them we need to empower them so that they no longer need us or others. We may have to work a more sustainable way of managing resources, a more equitable way of sharing with them and a governance system that respects human rights and the rule of law; a system that embraces diversity and gives a voice to the minorities and the vulnerable. That means we move from the symptoms to the root causes of poverty. We must remember that Peter and John called on the beggar to rise up and walk. It was not Peter and John who had to do the rising and the walking. It was the beggar. And the beggar made a choice to respond to the call to rise up and walk. He could have preferred to stay put and continue to beg the rich for alms. But he decided to respond to an opportunity which presented itself. He was ready for it and his life was changed for the better.”

We often say we work for people who do not enjoy human rights. But no one can *give* human rights to someone, because every human person *has* human rights from her/his birth. Yet, there are so many people who are systematically dehumanized and do not even realize that they have human rights. As Ms. Maathai said, the dehumanized person has human rights, has the ability to rise up and enjoy jumping and praising God. Our role, as religious missionaries, is to meet them, talk to them, and show them that they are important to God and can stand by themselves. We call such action “empowerment.” In this short article, I would like to touch on the context of human rights for us as SVDs, then introduce some concrete commitments of SVDs for the promotion of human rights.

Context of SVD Commitments for Human Rights

Coverage of Human Rights

Article 2 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights says “*Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be*

independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.”

The Declaration continues, explaining that everyone has rights such as life, having nationality, freedom of movement, etc. We often face realities which are totally in violation of such rights. In the framework of the UN, there are many monitoring mechanisms on human rights performance on issues and in places at the national and international levels. One of such mechanisms is the Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council, and currently there are 44 thematic areas of human rights monitored by experts, so-called Special Rapporteurs. Among the 44 thematic areas there are, for instance, human rights in business, culture, education, environment, freedom of opinion and expression, health, housing, indigenous, leprosy, migrants, poverty, religion, sexual orientation, trafficking in persons, water, women, and so on.¹

This lengthy list tells us how extensive the issues covered by human rights are, and how many different cases, people and areas we need to be aware of. Furthermore, *“These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible.”*²

Gospel: Proclaiming the Kingdom of God

Needless to say, most of the human rights themes we saw above are cases which Jesus himself faced. Pope Francis, during his speech to the members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See for the traditional exchange of New Year greetings on 8 January 2018, mentioned the 70th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He said *“For the Holy See, to speak of human rights means above all to restate the centrality of the human person, willed and created by God in his image and likeness. The Lord Jesus himself, by healing the leper, restoring sight to the blind man, speaking with the publican, saving the life of the woman caught in adultery and demanding that the injured wayfarer be cared for, makes us understand that every human being, independent of his or her physical, spiritual or social condition, is worthy of respect and consideration. From a Christian perspective, there is a significant relation between the gospel message and the recognition of human rights in the spirit of those who drafted the Universal Declaration of*

¹ See http://spinternet.ohchr.org/_Layouts/SpecialProceduresInternet/ViewAllCountryMandates.aspx?Type=TM [Accessed April 25, 2018].

² See <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Pages/WhatAreHumanRights.aspx> [Accessed April 25, 2018].

Human Rights.” Pope Francis tells us that there is a close relationship between the Gospel and human rights. It is God who created the world as good and human persons in his image. It is God who sent his Son to show his love and invite all human persons to salvation. It is Jesus, who showed extraordinary love to the poor and marginalized on behalf of his Father. Such facts give a fundamental and deeper meaning to human rights, and to the work for human rights, which could be understood as the construction of the kingdom of God and evangelization.

The Catholic church is “*a universal community embracing faithful belonging to almost all countries and continents, nations, peoples, races, languages and cultures*” (address of Pope John Paul II to the 34th general assembly of the United Nations, New York, 2 October 1979). The church, therefore, by its nature, is a witness to the unconditionality of human rights.

Founding Generation of the SVD

The SVD was founded by Fr. Arnold Janssen in 1875. It was the time of *Kulturkampf*, and as a German priest, he needed to cross the border to the Netherlands to establish the mission house. Steyl, where he founded the SVD, was an important trade center as it is located along the Maas river and many freight vessels came to Steyl to unload products. Fr. Arnold describes the situation in his magazine *Kleiner Herz-Jesu-Bote* (The Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart), October 1875.

The new mission house was once a much frequented inn. However, those days are now past and the people of Steyl become sad when they think of them. For they have to think back to a time that once was and is no longer, when Steyl was a very busy center of trade; people came from all directions to the Maas harbor to unload bridge stones, coal and cement that had been brought by ship. Since that time the evil trains have come and that busy trading has disappeared. The inn was closed, the house has been sold, and now the German-Dutch mission house has begun its life here instead.³

The industrial revolution affected the people in Steyl. They lost jobs, were impoverished, and such a situation gave a certain impetus to Fr. Arnold to form his understanding of SVD mission.

³ Translation by Fr. Jürgen Ommerborn, SVD (from a lecture at the latest SSpS General Chapter, 2014).

The Sacred Heart of Jesus must also live in our own hearts through true piety and love. It is that love which also loves the neighbor whom it sees (cf. 1 Jn 4:20) and to whom it does good. The needy must be refreshed, the helpless supported, the erring instructed. The way to spiritual good deeds is prepared through corporal good deeds. We must not forget the poor souls in purgatory. All this we should do ourselves and through our example we should move others to do the same.⁴

It is quite important to know that from the foundation of the SVD, the response to social problems was closely connected with spirituality, and was an essential part of SVD mission. Fr. Arnold organized a group of philosophy and theology students to visit poor families in Steyl, made a list of people in need, hosted periodical conferences to share information and plan how to help them. The students then provided food, bed linen, clothing or money, even looked for benefactors to make such activity available.⁵

Fr. Arnold and the missionaries in the founding generation promoted basic human rights through mission in different parts of the world. Apart from directly helping the poor, they provided education for marginalized children, especially migrants, engaged in awareness-raising through mission magazines, and participated in advocacy to politicians. And we should not forget that Fr. Arnold was a natural science teacher, who loved the whole creation. He could see the work of the hands of God in any creature and logic of nature, and he often talked to people how everything was purposely created by God in relation to each other. *“Fr. Arnold hoped that the members of his society would share his love and respect for nature; so the philosophy syllabus for the students in St. Gabriel contained a number of natural science electives like practical chemistry, practical mineralogy, plant and animal microscopy, zoology, astronomy, meteorology... Agriculture was another elective for the future priest missionaries: they had to study the soil, tropical agriculture, plants and animals which the farmer deals with.”*⁶

⁴ Albert Rohner, *Die Gebete Arnold Janssens* (Analecta SVD 56), Rome 1982, 80-82. Translation by Fr. Jürgen Ommerborn, SVD.

⁵ See General Administrations SVD and SSpS, *Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation and Our Founding Generation*, Rome: Curia Generalizia SVD/SSpS 2018, 41-43.

⁶ From the lecture of Fr. Jürgen Ommerborn, SVD, to the SSpS 14th General Chapter in 2014.

SVD Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) Development

As a religious congregation which has such a founder, the SVD has been committed to meet the needs caused by social problems. Particularly after Vatican Council II, the SVD started revising its Constitutions to respond to the call of the Council. *Gaudium et Spes* pointed out the necessity of socio-economic and cultural development. The bishops' synod in 1971 declared in *Justice in the World* that "action on behalf of justice is a constitutive dimension of preaching the gospel." Starting with the 9th General Chapter in 1967, the text of the SVD constitutions on social commitment were gradually shaped, and finally during the 12th General Chapter in 1982, we adopted Constitution 112, which is the foundation of the JPIC mission for all SVDs. "The poor have a privileged place in the gospel. In a world deeply scarred by injustice and inhuman living conditions, our faith calls us to recognize the presence of Christ in the poor and the oppressed. We thus commit ourselves to fostering unity and justice and to overcoming egoism and the abuse of power. We consider it our duty to promote justice according to the gospel in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed." The 12th General Chapter document particularly focused on promotion of justice and peace, presenting the basic understanding and attitude of SVD commitment to justice and peace. No. 2.5 calls on SVDs to "speak out publicly against actual cases of human rights violations and abuse of power or in favor of specific measures that promote justice and defend human rights." Through these documents, commitment to justice and peace was introduced as an important part of the SVD charism both in our religious life and our missionary activities.

SVD Human Rights Engagement and Evangelization

Congregational Directions of the 17th SVD General Chapter

The 17th SVD General Chapter, the latest General Chapter held in 2012, discerned our priorities for evangelization and mission.

Evangelization is the *raison d'être* of our Society. In the 15th General Chapter, we reformulated our understanding of *ad gentes* mission as not having an exclusively geographical orientation but as one that includes missionary situations. Our intercultural mission is a way of giving witness to the unity and diversity of the Kingdom of God... (Chapter Document no. 5).

As a preparation for this General Chapter, all SVD provinces discerned what were the most pressing issues with/for whom SVDs are working in their respective area. As a result of this discernment, the 17th General Chapter prioritized 10 *Ad Extra Congregational Dimensions*, namely: Primary and New Evangelization, Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue, Promotion of the Culture of Life, Family and Youth, Education and Research, Indigenous and Ethnic Communities, Migration, Reconciliation and Peace Building, Social Justice and Poverty Eradication, and Integrity of Creation. We can clearly see that the majority of them are human rights related issues. These are the major “missionary situations” for the SVD, and “evangelization” means holistic commitment in such situations. In the next sections, I would like to introduce a few SVD activities which address these missionary situations.

Romani Empowerment in Hungary

During its 2012 chapter, the SVD Hungary Province decided to take the Romani ministry as their priority. Since then, they have appointed a JPIC coordinator for the ministry, and formed a team and structure as necessary supports.

In the town of Köröm in north-eastern Hungary, where the SVD started the work for Romani, more than 80% of the population is Romani. They have been struggling with a cultural gap, unemployment, poverty, drug and alcohol addiction, theft, prostitution, lack of education and skill training, early pregnancy, discrimination etc. On the other hand, the Romani community has great strength in its rich culture, deep family ties, and they are gifted in art, music, dance, drawing etc. The SVD Hungary Province mainly works in three dimensions which promote holistic human dignity.

Community building: This component provides personality development through training classes for children, youth and families. Also, an awareness program on alcohol and drugs is given. In addition to these, it promotes education and skill training mainly for children and youth. In doing this, the SVD collaborates with the leaders of the Romani group, and ongoing training for the Romani leaders is also being done. All these programs are done in collaboration with SVD and SSpS members, professional doctors, local schools, the diocese, parish structures, the Romani Association, and the local mayor.

Cultural promotion: The SVD supports the children and youth who have artistic talent in Romani culture with special trainings. Also, annual events and camps are organized to commemorate and celebrate Romani culture.

Pastoral care: The spiritual dimension is an important dimension of holistic empowerment. Catechism and faith formation are a regular part of the program, and as a community, a Romani group gathers together and visits Romani families for prayer and sharing.

Empowering the Homeless in Manila, Philippines

The SVD Philippines Central Province started a center called “Arnold Janssen Kalinga Center” in 2015. Kalinga means “to care” but it also follows an acronym that means “Kain–Aral–Ligo–Ng Ayos” (Eat–Study–Bathe–Be Well). It envisions providing dignified care to the homeless through a mission of accompanying street dwellers and wounded people to restore and empower their broken lives. It follows a three-Phase Integral Development process to recuperate their human dignity.

Phase I—Food and Hygiene—to help recreate their self-image: Those who come to the center are welcomed as a valuable individual person in a respectful manner, interviewed and registered, and provided services such as clothes, a bath and meals. Such services are called “dignified service,” which is not just a simple distribution of basic needs, but is meant to follow the steps to recreate one’s self-image as one who has dignity. Following these steps, those beneficiaries recognize themselves as valuable persons who can change their life. It is impressive that among the beneficiaries, a good number start serving as volunteer at the center.

Phase II—Non-Formal Education to help reclaim their self-respect: Many beneficiaries could not finish the basic education, even elementary school. For those who take the courage to study, the center provides the opportunity to finish elementary/secondary level education through the Alternative Learning System which provides a diploma.

Phase III—Livelihood and Employment to help restore their self-worth: The last step is to be self-sufficient by getting a job. The center gives opportunities for vocational training and to accompany those looking for a job.

In addition to these three phases, the shelter also provides services as a night shelter for homeless people, and a mobile service providing food and hygiene to those who cannot come to the center.

Since the state-sponsored “war on drugs” has resulted in the creation of at least 15,000 widows and orphans, the Arnold Janssen Kalinga Center has initiated a program which currently supports at least 200 WOE (Widows-Orphans Empowered) in partnership with major institutions who are also concerned with assisting these vul-

nerable people to regain their lives and seek the justice they rightly deserve.

These two projects are good examples of the recuperation of human dignity given by God, and continuation of the mission of Peter and John, saying “look at us” “rise and walk!” In the next section, I would like to introduce two advocacy efforts to tackle the root causes of human rights violations.

Human Rights Advocacy Work through VIVAT International

On 18 November 2000, the SVD and SSpS held a joint general council meeting and decided to establish an NGO—VIVAT International (VIVAT)—with the intention of close collaboration with the United Nations. By obtaining NGO status from the UN, VIVAT wanted to have access to UN information resources, participate in UN meetings and the process of developing international treaties, and bring our matters of concern before UN agencies. In the letter sent to the SVD and SSpS members on the occasion of the establishment of VIVAT, Fr. Antonio Pernia, SVD, and Sr. Agada Brand, SSpS, the first president and vice-president of VIVAT wrote: “*We believe that the humanitarian goals of the United Nations are very consistent with our own goals and that collaboration with the United Nations can be an important way of working for the kingdom. It can also bring us into contact and allow us to collaborate with a large number of NGOs working for similar goals... We have the resources to bring the voice of the poor and marginalized to the decision making levels of world bodies. To achieve this is the goal of VIVAT International.*”

VIVAT and the UN have “consistent” goals. It could be expressed in many different ways, but the easiest way is “promotion of human rights.” As we have seen, the SVD has worked for the dignity and rights of people from our beginning in many ways. VIVAT work is a continuation of such efforts in a very specific way which opens the possibilities of advocacy (to influence decision makers in the political, social, and economic fields on behalf of the most vulnerable people) both at the local and international levels. VIVAT addresses human rights issues with a particular focus on the rights of children, women, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and the culture of peace. In the past 18 years, VIVAT has tirelessly worked on these issues and has grown as an organization which has 14 member congregations with 25,000 religious members in more than 120 countries around the world. VIVAT has established six National Branches, takes part in a broader network with other NGOs, and closely collab-

orates with UN agencies. Here, I would like to introduce an experience which presents the way VIVAT functions.

In Tumbak, East Manggarai Regency, West Flores, Indonesia, local people suffered from mining activities. In September 2014, the mining companies entered the collective land of the local people, which is their cultural, spiritual, economic and environmental foundation. The people formed a living fence to block the mining vehicles, and Fr. Simon Suban, SVD, the JPIC Coordinator of SVD Indonesia Ruteng Province also joined the local people. It is the right of people to keep and protect their collective land. The local police were deployed to support the mining company, and they intimidated and assaulted the people, including the SVDs.

This news was shared in a wider network in the whole district of Manggarai, and also in the capital city Jakarta. Some bigger peaceful protests took place in collaboration with the diocesan JPIC office, religious congregations and NGOs. VIVAT International Indonesia, a national branch of VIVAT International, which is a legal entity under Indonesian civil law, took a major role in the networking, formed a solidarity group together with NGOs in Jakarta, published statements, and met with relevant government officers.

The networking continued expanding to the international level. With other NGOs, VIVAT New York Central Office brought the issue to the UN Secretary General's Report. VIVAT, together with like-minded NGOs, established the Mining Working Group at the UN and created a data bank. VIVAT with other NGOs gave input to the UN Special Rapporteur who monitors the human rights performance of states. As a result of such actions, at the local level, all mining activities in Tumbak stopped, the mining equipment was removed from the area, and the police chief replaced. At the national level, the Tumbak conflict was taken as a case of national inquiry conducted by the National Human Rights commission. In August 2015, president Jokowi established a task force for mediating resource-related conflict between Indigenous communities and state or private sectors. At the international level, the Mining Working Group continues its advocacy work and is expanding networking in different areas of the world.

As a follow-up, the SVDs in the Ruteng Province continue to monitor the situation in Tumbak, and have started a group of credit unions in collaboration with the diocese to help the livelihood of the people.

This case was very successful because 1) SVDs are close to the people and there had been a good relationship from the beginning. Also the activities were done together with the victims themselves; 2)

SVDs spent a good amount of time for research and documentation; 3) we worked in collaboration with other organizations at the local, regional, national and international levels; 4) we had a good structure at the national (national civil entity) and international (accreditation at the UN) levels; and 5) we utilized UN human rights related mechanisms to which NGOs have access.

One thing the local SVDs learned from this experience is that the fact of such advocacy work empowers the local victims. Through the activity, they learned what their rights are, how to protect them, and how to sustain them. Indeed, they “rose and walked” by themselves in networking with others!

*Tackling the Problems Caused by Multi-national Companies
through the Steyler Bank*

On TV news and internet news sites, every day we see some human rights violations, often conflicts caused by governments or groups of tribes. They are certainly serious and need to be addressed, but on the other hand, in the reality of our daily missionary life in most parts of the world, most of the human rights violations we face are caused by so-called “multi-national companies.” Such violations are, for instance, land grabbing for mining and mega farms or factories, pollution caused by mines, farms and factories, and often, even conflicts which involve armed groups, such as in the area of rare metal mines which are related to multi-national companies. Quite often local police and government do not take the side of the local people, and as a result we struggle to protect the rights of the local people. In such contexts, the “Steyler Bank” invited the SVD and SSpS to do advocacy work directed to multi-national companies.

The Steyler Bank is a bank established and owned by the SVD (in Sankt Augustin, Germany), and so it shares the same mission objectives as the SVD. They are well known for ethical investment, and their promotion of ethical investment can have a certain impact to realize a more just society.

The joint project of the Steyler Bank, SVD and SSpS is called “Ethical Scouting.” The basic idea of the project is as follows:

1. The Steyler Bank invests money in selected companies which are doing their business ethically and sustainably. Steyler Bank excludes companies which do not meet the criteria of respect for human rights and sustainability of the environment. In the selection of companies, the Steyler Bank receives information on the ethical performance of companies from a “rating agency.”

2. However, the Steyler Bank does not rely solely on the information provided by the rating agency. If there is negative information on a company, the Steyler Bank, through the SVD and SSpS JPIC Coordinators, contacts local SVD and SSpS members who reside near where the doubts arose to get more detailed and precise information. Based on this information, they will decide to either immediately divest from the company or to first start a dialogue with the company for the betterment of their ethical performance. In the case of an immediate divestment, the Steyler Bank informs the company about its decision and offers the possibility of re-investment depending on improvements carried out by the company. In general, the companies take complaints raised by the Steyler Bank seriously.

3. From the side of local SVD and SSpS members, they can send information to the Steyler Bank on particular companies which have caused problems. If the Steyler Bank invests in that company, they start a dialogue. If not, the Bank can share the information with the rating agency so that the behavior of the company will be considered and the calculation and their ethical rating can go down. In such a way, the Ethical Scouting project can contribute to create a society where ethical companies get more investment and unethical companies get less.

Conclusion

There are so many secular organizations which work on human rights issues. Often such organizations are quite professional, have many experts, a big budget, good management and international networks. As a JPIC Coordinator, I'm often asked this question. "So why do Catholic church organizations, such as the SVD, need to work on human rights issues if there are so many more professional secular organizations?" After following the points introduced in this short article, I hope it is clear now that our work for human rights is not an additional service apart from our mission, but is our mission itself, which contributes to the construction of the kingdom of God, and helps to recuperate the human dignity given by God.

As the world becomes more complex, human rights violations also are becoming more complex, systematic and commercialistic. But it seems that people get used to such a reality, since we are overwhelmed in the tsunami of information available on the internet. For us religious, it is very important to keep being close to the people, working with people whose human rights are violated. We do it not just as an act of charity, but also for the recuperation of their rights. Religious congregations have good structures and networks both at

the local and international levels to work on human rights issues to help people stand by themselves and to change social systems which violate human rights. As we commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I hope we can revisit the importance of the promotion of human rights and dignity for our mission.

ABSTRACTS

Das Engagement für Menschenrechte kennzeichnet die Evangelisierungsbemühungen seit Langem. Der Autor stellt die Verpflichtung den Menschenrechten gegenüber in den Zusammenhang der spirituellen Tradition der Gesellschaft mit den neueren Entwicklungen der Generalkapitel und ihrem Missionsverständnis. Er beschreibt mehrere Erfahrungen von Menschenrechtsarbeit auf verschiedenen Ebenen.

El compromiso por los derechos humanos ha caracterizado el trabajo de la evangelización por mucho tiempo. El autor describe los empeños en el campo de los derechos humanos desde la tradición espiritual de la Congregación así como los desarrollos recientes en Capítulos Generales y sus perspectivas de misión. Presenta algunas experiencias del trabajo en derechos humanos en diferentes niveles.

L'engagement pour les droits humains caractérise les efforts d'évangélisation depuis longtemps. L'auteur décrit l'engagement SVD pour les droits humains à l'intérieur de la tradition spirituelle de la Société ainsi que les récents développements des Chapitres généraux et leur conception de la mission. Il présente quelques expériences de travail dans ce domaine à différents niveaux.