

Reflections on Human Unity

By Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.

Address to Focolare Movement

On Receiving Luminosa Award 2005

Hyde Park, New York, May 7, 2005

I learned about the unity of humanity through signal moments in my life. One day in Bangladesh, where I was doing a study of development models, I spent some time in a village where the huts were made of a mixture of clay and mud, with grass for a roof. There was no electricity. The nearest water was several hundred meters away. The cooking seemed to be done over small outdoor fires. Long strips of cow dung, used for fuel, were drying. Most of the children were naked and one of them particularly caught my eye, a boy of about eight with the right side of his face blackened. His mother, who said her name was Kumu, told us it was a birth injury.

Because I was accompanied by a social worker, the woman invited us into her hut. We sat on plain wood chairs as her eight children gathered around her. Her husband works the land as a sharecropper. There was enough food at the moment, although the children's faces and bellies clearly revealed nutritional deficiencies. The date palm juice, which flows from trees like maple syrup, was very good for them, Kumu said, pointing to the fire outside where a pot of juice was being heated. We talked about her life for a few moments, then left and circled through the village compound for a little while, talking to some of the elders sitting in the sun. As the social worker and I started back down the trail to our car, Kumu came running

after us, carrying a pitcher. She wanted us to have a glass of the warm date palm juice. It was evident that through the date juice, which was all she had to offer, the woman was extending her friendship to these strange, white Westerners who had dropped into her life for a moment. I knew instantly it was a moment I would treasure.

Another time I was in Venezuela, studying the conditions of life in Latin America. I met a Communist labour leader who had left the Catholic Church because, as he said, he found his Communist colleagues more determined to cure the social ills around them. I spent some time with him and got to know him and then wrote his life story. I could see how much he wanted to improve the human condition around him.

Later, I spent time in Africa and, in Nigeria, met an Ibo Christian teacher. He talked about his hope for his children, that they would be able to escape the poverty that surrounded them.

When I began to study the great philosopher Jacques Maritain I could see his description of integral humanity in the faces of the Bangladeshi woman, the Venezuelan labour leader, the Nigerian teacher. Maritain, in describing the human person, said that the person is not just an individual, in the sense that a fly or an elephant is an individual, but an individual with intelligence and will who does not exist only in a physical manner, but who is

animated through the existence of soul. No matter how poor or crushed the individual may be, the person is whole, a microcosm integrally connected to the whole of humanity.

My journeys around the world in those early years of my life enabled me to make a great discovery: most of the world's peoples have a different colour, a different race, a different culture and a different religion than myself. Yet we are all human, bonded by a common yearning for life in its fullest. When the Second Vatican Council occurred, I could feel vibrantly the opening words of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: "The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [people] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts."

When I started going to the United Nations, where I have worked in different capacities for three decades, I was fascinated to look at all the faces in the General Assembly on a crowded day. There I saw the world in one room: people of different colours, different races, different cultures and different religions but united in their search for the elusive instruments of peace. My work at the U.N. has never been an abstraction; I have always approached challenges by recalling the faces of the people I met on my

journeys and who have influenced me. Thus, I was able to make real the words of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993:

All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. The international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing and with the same emphasis.

I find these words to be a reflection of what Pope John XXIII wrote in his great encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*. People have “the right to live,” the Pope affirmed. They have “the right to bodily integrity ... to food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest and social services.”

The words of our teachers ring true. Yet it seems so difficult to get the political systems to reflect integral humanism in policies and legislation. An attitudinal change is necessary and here we must look to new forms of communication to revitalize public opinion to demand the implementation of strategies and laws that promote a global social justice.

When we fully understand the meaning of the photo of the Earth sent back by astronauts – in which we see this beautiful, fragile sphere as a whole – an attitudinal change occurs. Though we continue to live on the streets of our own community, the image of the entire planet lifts up our thinking. Who are the people on the other side of the globe? What are they doing? What is their daily life like?

This awakening to the concerns of others leads us into the sources of vast amounts of information now available about food, water, health, jobs, and other human problems faced by those in different societies. This information, available from a widening network of U.N. sources, leads us further into the zones of intolerance, discrimination, conflicts, and wars.

Questions follow. Why is there so much starvation when there is so much food in the world? Why do we tolerate the existence of nuclear weapons, which threaten to destroy the processes of life? Why are we polluting the atmosphere and waters when we have the technology to avoid this? Why do we have the U.N. and then refuse to empower it to stop wars and end starvation?

The first sign of real knowledge is to examine the quality of the questions it evokes. In previous centuries, we were not able to frame questions large enough to address fully the nature of the human condition. While there have always been visionaries, many of whom made the scientific and technological breakthroughs that led to the ability of the astronauts to take the photo of the Earth, the public as a whole did not share in visionary thinking.

The ordinary person has always been caught up in the mundane tasks of daily existence. What concerns our family and our business this week,

not the state of the global community 25 years from now, has monopolized our attention. But now the flow of information, electronically conveyed, opens up new vistas for everyone. Many still live within the confines of their own “world,” but many more now extend their thinking about the world to places far beyond their neighbourhood. The questions posed by this larger view held by growing numbers of the public are a sign of the change in attitudes that is actually occurring. It is this new attitude that is the first requisite of a culture of peace.

Proponents of militarism as the route to peace appear to operate today from the commanding heights of public opinion. But against this insidious thinking that war equals peace is rising a new army – not of soldiers but of highly informed, dedicated, and courageous citizens of all countries who do see the perils ahead. There is a blossoming of both understanding and action in the new phenomenon of an alert civil society calling governments to account for paying only lip service to their human rights commitments. Buttressed by the dynamic means of electronic communication, they are bringing new energy to the global quest for peace.

I want to go on sharing in this global quest. I am only one person, but inspired by my friends, the woman in Bangladesh, the labour leader in

Venezuela, the teacher in Nigeria, I rejoice in the human unity already attained.