

**TALK BY REV. GERARD WHELAN SJ  
AT THE SCHOOL OF GIUSEPPE TONIOLO  
27 APRIL 2012**

***CONFERENCE THEME:  
THE COMMITMENT AND CONTRIBUTION OF LAY PEOPLE IN  
THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, FOR A MORE  
JUST, PEACEFUL AND HUMANE WORLD***

**THEME OF INTERVENTION:  
“THE COMMITMENT AND CONTRIBUTION OF LAY PEOPLE IN  
THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IN THE TEACHINGS AND  
IN THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CHURCH”**

Excellencies, friends, it is a great pleasure for me to address you today in this conference which celebrates the beatification two days from now of Giuseppe Toniolo. I have to confess that it is only recently that I have learnt of the wonderful life of Professor Toniolo. This having been said, I have been an admirer of the Catholic Action movement for some time. I did my doctoral studies on the social concern of the Canadian Jesuit theologian, Bernard Lonergan, who taught at the Gregorian University up to 1965 and who was deeply influenced by the Catholic Action Movement. I also have some appreciation of the historic contribution made within Italy and, one way or another on Vatican II, of some of the organizations represented here today, including the Italian Catholic Federation of University Students, and the “Italian Catholic Social Weeks.”

As I turn now to the theme given me: “The commitment and contribution of lay people in the international community in the teachings and in the experience of the Church.” I hope you will forgive me if I begin by speaking not so much of the experience of the whole Church on these matters but of my own experience. I would like to offer three images taken from my years spent as a missionary in Africa, mostly in Nairobi, Kenya.

**Three Images**

My first image is of offering a one-day retreat to a group of about thirty members of a small-Christian community in a parish of which I was pastor. Our poor parish on the periphery of Nairobi had a dense population but we had one little corner with some green grass and a hill that ran down to a river. Here we had a simple building for meetings and for days of prayer. I remember witnessing a bible-sharing from the adult men and women at this day of prayer that deeply impressed me. With just a little opportunity to withdraw from their busy and anxious lives, with some time to be silent, and some instruction about how to pray with scripture, many of these parishioners underwent the deepest of prayer experiences. I then had the privilege of hearing their reflections in group session afterwards. I knew that after such retreat days these parishioners would return to their

active lives which included participating in the weekly life of the small Christian community. I knew that this involved following a method of “see,” “judge,” and “act” as they sought to put their prayer into action. In fact, the year before they had organized a campaign that met with considerable success against the selling of illegal alcohol in their area. However, for the time being, it is memory of seeing these people at prayer that stays with me. This for me functions as a symbol of all that is best in lay participation in the Church.

A second image is a very different one. It finds me not far from my parish but in a different environment. In this memory I am attending a meeting at the international conference centre and administrative complex of the United Nations. This is a beautiful city-like location of modern architecture, gardens, and fountains. The reason I was there is that, as well as being pastor of a parish, I was a collaborator of the Apostolic Nunciature to Kenya assigned to help it represent the Holy See to the UN agencies that had headquarters in that city. It was during a break from one of the long conferences I attended there that a tall woman of mature years, I think she was French, came to shake my hand. She said that she had worked for FAO, the World Food Program, for many years and wanted to thank the Catholic Church for the wonderful work she had witnessed it doing in areas of the deepest poverty in many countries of the world. She told me that she was not religious herself but that she was constantly amazed by the work of Catholic priests, religious, and NGO’s in these zones. She added that she felt that this work was rarely recognized at international meetings such as the one we were attending that day.

My third image follows a similar theme. This time I am at a meeting in a less elaborate conference centre, run by sisters in Nairobi. On this occasion I am representing the Jesuit School of Theology at Nairobi, a place where I was also a lecturer in theology. I was attending a meeting organized by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and People on the Move. There was a group of about fifty people attending the meeting including bishops, rectors of seminaries, and a series of eminent persons from the political and diplomatic world. The meeting was part of a “consultation” process whereby this Pontifical Council was trying to promote creative thinking about how the Catholic Church could respond better to the refugee crisis that was affecting many of the countries of Africa. For the most part, discussions confined themselves to questions of internal Church organization but at one point a former Kenyan ambassador to the UN, and a man currently involved in peace negotiations in the region, stood up and made an impassioned plea. He declared how impressed he was by the work that the Catholic Church was doing at grass-roots level with refugees but added how sad he was by how little advocacy work the Church performed for these refugees at national and international level. He spoke of the Catholic Church as a “sleeping giant,” that organized impressive work at local level but which seemed to have problems organizing itself to reflect upon these commitments in a professional way and to communicate the fruits of this reflection as policy proposals to governments and international agencies.

Having offered these three images, I would like to turn to the main topic before us today and break it up into two sets of questions: “The teachings of the Church with regard to lay Catholic involvement in the international community,” and “The experience of the Church on this same issue.” In fact, I do not intend to speak for a great deal of time on these themes but rather to put a series of questions that might prompt us to reflection. I do

this both for reasons of time and because I know that there is a vast pool of knowledge amongst us today and so I think rather to stimulate reflection than to add new information.

### **Church Teaching**

As we think first about Church teaching an obvious place to turn is Vatican II. As we all know, a key aspect of the Council was that it shifted our notion of what the Church is, expanding a notion that stressed its institutional and hierarchical aspects to one that includes more organic and mystical notions such as the Church as People of God and the Church as communion. With more time, we could have chosen each of the four main “constitutions” of Vatican II and reflected first on how each involves, first, a shift in our notion of Church, secondly how each it presents a new role for lay people, and finally relevance of this for involvement with the international community. We recall that the four constitutions are: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the document on liturgy; *Dei Verbum* on revelation and the use of scripture within the Church; and then *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church. Regarding how the this vision of the Church in the world related to a lay Catholic involvement in the international community let me limit myself to one statement from the document on the laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*:

Now, in view of the progress of social institutions and the fast-moving pace of modern society, the global nature of the Church's mission requires that apostolic enterprises of Catholics should more and more develop organized forms in the international sphere. Catholic international organizations will more effectively achieve their purpose if the groups comprising them, as well as their members, are more closely united to these international organizations (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 19).

Of course, we are soon to celebrate the 50-year anniversary of the opening of Vatican II and so we have quite a period to reflect about as we continue to ask the question of what the Church has been teaching about the importance of the Church's mission to the international community and of the role of lay people in this. One approach to this could be studying Chapter 9 of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* which is entitled “The International Community” and has sub-sections, “Biblical Aspects,” “The Fundamental Rules of the International Community,” “The Organization of the International Community,” and “International Cooperation for Development.” However, I would tend to favor another approach which would take a more narrative approach to this question. We could have recalled, for example, the remarkable pontificate of Blessed Pope John Paul II and the energy he applied to the ministry to the international community. We could study the impressive speeches he gave to UNESCO, early in his Pontificate and twice later to the General Assembly . Similarly, we could move on to the seven years we have now enjoyed of the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI and reflect, for example, on how many times in *Caritas in Veritate* he addresses issues appertaining to the international community, not least in Chapter 5 entitled, “Cooperation of the Human Family.”

## Church Experience

I move now to the question of what has been the experience of the Church with respect to lay Catholic involvement in the international community. Such a talk about experience would have been an important way of bringing down to earth the generalized teaching of the Church upon which I have been commenting. Inevitably, such teaching speaks more about an ideal towards which our action leads than the actual reality of what our performance has been. I am somewhat new to the world of understanding this reality, but the privileged opportunity I now have to work with the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO) is helping me to understand this world better. Or at least, I can say that I am clarifying some of the questions I would like to investigate in this area. Above all I have a questions about the history of Catholic NGO's at the international level

On this question of the history of Catholic NGO's, let me share some insights I have gained. I have learnt, for example of the impressive involvement of Catholic Women's Leagues during the First world war and of their emergence as a peace-making organization associated with the League of Nations; next, I have learnt of the important role played by a number of Catholic NGO's from the earliest days of the United Nations Organizations (and how, if I understand correctly, many of these seemed to be French, and how both Paris and Geneva seemed to serve as center for coordinating activities between them). Next, I have learnt of how the Holy See only began to undertake the role of observer nation at the UN general assembly in 1964. Consequently, I understand that an obvious question arose in subsequent years concerning the respective roles of Catholic NGO's, which predated this presence, and the diplomatic missions of the Holy See in representing a Catholic vision to the UN and other international agencies.

## CONCLUSION

So it is that I now draw my talk to a close. I have really just tried to stimulate questions and reflection on the two areas required of me: on Church teaching, and of Church experience in the area of lay Catholic involvement in the international community. Before I finish, perhaps I can return to two of the images I offered at the beginning of this talk and to add a quotation from Church teaching to each. The first image is that of the Kenyan Ambassador I heard describing the Catholic Church speaking of the "sleeping giant" that has magnificent potential to increase its role of advocacy at national and international level. We recall that there will be at least two aspects of this presence to the international community: Catholic NGO's and the Holy See in its official representative capacity. Can we, today, as those associated with Catholic NGO's, feel the call of this mission more personally and pray for an increase of zeal to carry it out? On this matter I quote from *Gaudium et Spes*:

To encourage and stimulate cooperation among men, the Church must be clearly present in the midst of the community of nations both through her official channels and through the full and sincere collaboration of all Christians - a collaboration motivated solely by the desire to be of service to all. This will come

about more effectively if the faithful themselves, conscious of their responsibility as men and as Christians will exert their influence in their own milieu to arouse a ready willingness to cooperate with the international community (*Gaudium et Spes* 89).

Next, I turn to my image of the members of the small Christian communities at prayer in my former parish in Nairobi. I mentioned that these parishioners performed impressive works in the realm of social action in their local community. However, what was clear to me was that this action emanated from an active prayer-life. On this theme we can recall that Pope Benedict XVI has invited us to celebrate the fifty-year anniversary of Vatican II by celebrating a year of faith. Perhaps during this Easter season we can all pray simply, with St. Thomas who we heard on the Second Sunday of Easter pleading to the risen Christ: "Lord I believe, help my unbelief!" I would love to think that our afternoon spent together today could be one of a deepening together of our experience of God's grace who loves us first and who calls us forth to love others. So it is that I conclude with words of the Holy Father in *Porta Fide*, the document that announces the Year of Faith starting next October:

Ever since the start of my ministry as Successor of Peter, I have spoken of the need to rediscover the journey of faith so as to shed ever clearer light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ . . .

We want this Year [of Faith] to arouse in every believer the aspiration to *profess* the faith in fullness and with renewed conviction, with confidence and hope. It will also be a good opportunity to intensify the *celebration* of the faith in the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist . . . At the same time, we make it our prayer that believers' *witness* of life may grow in credibility (*Porta Fide*, 2, 9).

We asked God's blessing this afternoon on the witness of life that we here are trying to support that is the witness of Catholic NGO's involved with the international community.