

A Sunny Side of The CGLTE Caravan

My participation in the CGLTE (Convergence Globale des Luttes pour la Terre et l'Eau) Caravan has continued to enrich me with transformative and profound inner experiences. While providing me with a unique opportunity to be on the frontline of social action, it has equally questioned my ideas and strategies of working for the poor. Indeed, the idea of working for the poor already puts one in an assumed superior position relative to the other. Truly, those we label the poor are economically and socially less privileged but it has not in any way reduced their humanity relative to ours.

In fact, the idea of working for the poor prevents us from encountering the people in front of us with the richness of their dignity. We rather relate to them from the images of them that we hold in minds as poor people. It remains to ask whether we can really work with or for the poor without being with them to experience their world. The effort to stand with the poor immediately becomes a mirror that helps us to see our own vulnerabilities. It requires the grace of God to allow oneself to be continually confronted by such vulnerabilities which constitutes the portal to transformative change both for the individual and their institutions. As it is now, there are signs of transformative change taking place on both side of the Church actors and the CGLTE actors but these new experiences need to be held and nurtured in a calabash ware.

Recalling that my participation in the 2nd edition (2018) could be said to mark the formal participation of a Church actor in the Caravan puts me in a vantage position to place a finger on signs of transformative changes taking place. As expected, my joining the caravan felt like a sheep among goats. "What is this Priest doing among us?" was a question on the faces of the participants. "Is he truly a Catholic Priest or is he pretending to be one?"; "Why is he different from others?"; "What is it that has changed in him and so on?" A part of me was rebellious but a deeper part of me was calm, and eager to reach out to the folks in the Caravan. This deeper part of me stood his ground, queuing up to grab my own share of whatever is served as meal, putting up with no water to take bath sometimes, queuing up to use the toilet and so on with the people. That encounter demystified me as a priest and turned me into a human being like any of them. The result was the introduction prayer in the program of activities of the Caravan dominated by Muslims. It became a source of worry for me to assume the responsibility of a chaplain for the Caravan but after a dialogue with the leadership on the possible negative implications, that item on the agenda was alternated between me and a Muslim.

Whether we want to accept it or not, we have formed images of each other and it is only honest encounters that can transform these prejudices based on socio-economic, color and religious differences into love and human solidarity. The current edition of the caravan to say the least is a rejuvenating experience for me. Some of those who were not in the 2018 edition of the Caravan have approached me to enquire if I were Père Chika. There was no need interrogating their mission since these are certainly questions of curiosity.

Another significant sign of progressive transformative change taking place emerged in our scheduled visit to the President of Guinea. It required that each country delegation would be represented by a man and a woman. Three women approached me each asking me to take her

as my companion since I was the only one from Nigeria. They were Muslim women with hijab head to toe. However, what remains indelible in my mind is what happened thereafter. The chosen woman became the “femme of Père Chika in the Caravan” to the fun of everybody. Talking with her while we were waiting for the President of Guinea in the Presidential palace revealed her to be a woman of substance struggling to make a difference in the world. Indeed, Islamic terrorism has given a negative image of Muslims and blocked us from seeing their humanness. Terrorists are simply people who have lost touch with their humanity and not because they are Muslims.

Though I am not in the coordination team of CGLTE, I have been called aside during this edition of the Caravan each time an issue comes to seek for my opinion and some of my suggestions have been put forward as the decision of the coordination team. This may be the kind of role that the Church could be playing for the civil Society if the Church opens up to working with them but the Church will need to demonstrate her readiness to be a mother.

There seems to be a similar pathway on the part of institutional Church in West Africa (RECOWA). In the 2018 edition of the Caravan, only one national Caritas was involved in the country level preparation and activities. The Director of Caritas of this country has never ceased to recount the life changing experience and perspective that it brought to Caritas. There is even an impressive and progressive participation of the Church in the current Caravan. Out of the five countries traversed, three national Caritas participated in the country level activities at varying degrees. The exceptional participation of a local Parish community in one of the countries who gave out their school premises to accommodate the participants, helped in welcoming them and the physical participation of the Bishop of a diocese in another country stand tall. There is more openness on the side of CGLTE too to work with Church.

The myth of the Church as being an unapproachable and rich institution is fast fading. They have seen through their collaborative work with these national Caritas that the Church is not a repository of funds waiting to be spent. It is out of her poverty that she makes her social interventions and both are on the same route for social justice.

These are some of the signs of the new spirit growing in the RECOWA Church which RECOWA will never let go unattended. RECOWA may consider taking steps to hold a debriefing meeting with these Church ambassadors, to learn from them and define the next steps in her strategies with national conferences. In particular, their experiences will form an important aspect of the bulk of messages of the online Justice pilgrimage that could be brought to the plenary of the RECOWA bishops for further reflections and action. The Church that listens changes and remains vibrant but the Church that does not listen remains sterile and dies. It is evident that there will be genuine institutional change only when the Church listens to the unencumbered experiences of her children. That may be why Pope Francis has made the next synod participatory and RECOWA will do well to borrow a leaf from the Pontiff.

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