

Ephata! Widen your Gaze



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Introduction

“‘Human Rights and the integral development of society's most abandoned’ is one of the General Assembly’s 4 universal challenges.

It has been presented 1st in the Assembly documents, but we arrive at it last ... so I believe that much of what we have already done in the Assembly will enrich our study and responses to this topic now.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Human Rights – what are they?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an international document drawn up by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, that enshrines the rights and freedoms of all human beings. It was adopted in principal by all nations and has been used as a yardstick ever since.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, drawn up at the Millennium, are the latest attempt of the United Nations to put those Rights into practice.

The title of my presentation today: ‘Ephata! Widen our Gaze’ - aims to help us to broaden, deepen, increase and improve our awareness and responses!

There are 30 articles in the Declaration, which I have grouped into 5 sections:

1. The inalienable Right to recognition of personhood – human dignity shared by all
2. The Right to justice before the Law – just and fair legislation
3. The Right to freedom of choice – of speech, of association, of marriage, of religion
4. The Right to participate – to join groups, to unite against injustice, without gender bias
5. The Right to survival – to food, water, shelter, education, health care, employment

As we widen our gaze we ask ourselves:

- What is happening in our world today?
- What are we seeing with regard to the upholding or the violation of Human Rights?
- As Daughters of Charity, what is our response to what we are seeing?
- How might we promote Human Rights and denounce and work against their violation?
- What is our accountability to the people of the earth?
- How do we help and encourage each other to recognize our response and accountability, when this might mean going beyond our own comfort zones?

Pandemic

The news is packed with statistics and updates on challenges facing our world today, as we continue to navigate the havoc of the global pandemic.

In the midst of worldwide sickness, death, economic failure and huge inequality, we find ourselves forced to ask:

- Who are the most affected?
- Which issues are the most urgent?
- What questions does this raise for us as a Company?
- Can one person, can the Company, really truly make that much of a contribution?
- Where do we start?

The answer is we have already started!

The Daughters of Charity have been defending and supporting Human Rights since before November 29th 1633 – long before they or anyone ever heard of the term ‘Human Rights’. Vincent captured the principle when he wrote on 8th March 1658 that helping convicts was “*doing an act of justice and not of mercy*” (CCD VII, 115), in other words, that charity is not charity if not accompanied by justice.

It’s what we have always done and continue to do. So, we can be encouraged.

We also started in a new way as we prepared for this Assembly.

In your synthesis book you will have read and reflected on the summary of the thoughts, ideas and suggestions that have come forward from Sisters during Domestic and Provincial Assemblies.

In five sections you can see:

EPHATA! for the defence and service of those who are poor
EPHATA! for communities in the peripheries
EPHATA! for making known the cries of the most destitute
EPHATA! for collaboration and networking
EPHATA! for formation that is attuned to the signs of the times

So we can draw on those ideas today and see what more we can do as we reflect and share in order to answer the question – what can we do in response?

Some of the most common violations of Human Rights affect the very survival of people... you will be more than familiar with the consequences of these violations in all your Provinces.

- food insecurity
- poverty and water scarcity
- homelessness
- child health and education
- gender equality
- the environment

I have added ‘the environment’ to the list because our world too is suffering from violation and exploitation that threatens its survival and that of all of us on the planet.

- **Hunger**

There is more than enough food produced in the world to feed everyone on the planet.

In spite of this, about 690 million people worldwide (that’s one in nine people) go to bed hungry each night and suffer from nutritional deficiencies as a result.

Small farmers, herders, and fishermen produce about 70 percent of the global food supply, yet they are especially vulnerable to food insecurity – poverty and hunger are most acute among rural populations.

War and conflict are major causes of hunger: The U.N. estimates that 122 million stunted children live in countries affected by conflict.

Worldwide, an estimated 14 million children under the age of five years suffer from severe acute malnutrition, yet only 25 percent of severely malnourished children have access to lifesaving treatment.

Food insecurity is also the biggest cause of migration.

- **Access to clean water**

By 2025, 2/3 of the world's population – about 5.5 billion people – will live in areas facing moderate to severe water stress.

Climate change, population growth, agricultural demands, and mismanagement of water resources, all contribute to the growing global water crisis.

Due to water scarcity, between 24 and 700 million people will be displaced from arid and semi-arid regions of the world.

The Pandemic has stressed the urgent need for hand hygiene. But - how do we wash our hands if there is no water available?

- **Homelessness**

There are more than 100 million people worldwide who are homeless, that is, they are sleeping on the streets or in shelters.

Moreover, globally, 1.6 billion people live in inadequate housing conditions.

According to U.N. Habitat, 15 million people are forcefully evicted every year, with young people being the age group with the highest risk of becoming homeless.

Causes of homelessness range from poverty in general, to domestic violence, mental health issues, loss of employment and, of course, all the economic and political reasons why so many people leave their homes and countries as migrants, seeking asylum, freedom and safety, employment and a decent life style.

Recognising that none of us is home until all of us is home, the Company, as part of the Vincentian family, was the main instrument in bringing this issue to the U.N. and getting homelessness inserted as a major policy issue and theme at the U.N. Commission on Social Development.

Many of you will have had contact also with the Famvin Homeless Alliance and the 13 Houses Campaign.

- **Children's Rights**

The statistics regarding the violation of the Rights of children make grim reading.

- * About 1 billion children ages 2 to 17, are estimated to experience physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect annually
- * 152 million children are engaged in child labour; 73 million work under hazardous conditions.
- * 41% of girls in least-developed countries are married before age 18.
- * A World Bank study indicates that as many as three in 10 children with disabilities have never been in school.
- * 200 million women and girls have experienced female genital mutilation.

The ability to support their families, access to educational opportunities, affordable food, clean water, sanitation, and health care are some of the urgent concerns of all parents.

- **Gender Equality**

Since 2015, progress towards gender equality has been marginal and now COVID-19 has hit hard.

Many women work a double shift – paid employment and also responsibility for the full care of their families; many jobs traditionally undertaken by women are becoming automated, resulting in high levels of unemployed women; for every 100 men in leadership positions, there are only 37 women.

New York, 8 March 2021 – U.N. Women’s forum stated that – *‘Current projections show that gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years!’*

- **The environment**

We are all aware of the effects of climate change. It has an immediate impact on four major variables:

- a) Health: causing asthma, heart disease, and lung cancer;
- b) Food sources: water supplies are diminished, and growing crops becomes more difficult if not impossible;
- c) Weather: we commonly experience more intense major storms, floods, and heavy snowfall, and longer and more frequent droughts;
- d) Oceans: ice sheets melt, sea levels rise, and water becomes more acidic.

The oceans are the biggest victims of climate change, because they regulate the Earth's temperature

“Evidence of climate change, mass movements of peoples, refugees/trafficking, and violence against women and girls are not separate issues but rather a single crisis of exploitation.” (Cf. Pope Francis)

United Nations

After all these challenging and disturbing facts and figures, you may be asking yourself: “What can I do?” This is a question I ask myself often, as your Representative at the United Nations. How can I make a difference?

The U.N. recognises the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – all 30 articles – and its long-term goal is always to make these theoretical Rights, or Rights-in-principle, into visible and measurable realities, everywhere in the world.

The Company has two representatives on mission at the U.N. – Sr. Margaret O’ Dwyer serves in our New York office which focusses on economic and social issues; and I am in the Geneva office, where we actually deal with Human Rights. So that is one of the ways the Company is making a difference.

At the U.N, Margaret and I are listened to and are given moral respect, because Daughters of Charity are seen as people who “walk the talk” – we do what we say we do.

What Sr. Margaret and I can do at the U.N. is dependent on you Sisters, you who serve poor people face-to-face, keeping us informed about issues that concern you, which we can then bring into the U.N. system.

The 17 SDGs

One way the U.N. is currently striving to achieve this huge goal of making Human Rights a worldwide reality, is by setting 17 smaller goals or targets to be achieved by 2030. These goals are concrete expressions of Human Rights, in line with the most important issues of our time.

They are known as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (U.N. SDGs). Here they are:

1. No Poverty
2. Zero hunger
3. Good Health and Well-Being
4. Quality Education –
5. Gender Equality.
6. Clean Water and Sanitation
7. Affordable and Clean Energy
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth
9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
10. Reduced Inequalities
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities
12. Responsible Consumption and Production
13. Climate Action
14. Life Below Water
15. Life on Land
16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
17. Partnership for the Goals

You will have heard echos of Human Rights in that list, which reflects the United Nations’ determination to promote these Rights and to denounce their neglect or violation.

So – back to the question - How can I make a difference? And more importantly during this Assembly – how can we make a difference?

What can/ could we do, as a Company, as a Province, as well as in local communities, to continue to make a difference and perhaps make a new difference?

Vincent and Louise

You might begin by asking yourselves: ‘How would Vincent and Louise respond – what might they be urging us to do in our times? How might they enable us now?’

Prayer

Lord you have given me a tongue to speak,
but I do not have all the words.
You have given me a heart to love,
but I do not have enough strength.

Be the Word that proclaims your praise.
Be the strength that dwells in my heart
and open me to love my brothers and sisters...

MARY, only Mother of the Company,
we entrust you to the work of our Assemblies.

Amen.