

"The challenges of women in a synodal Church for reconciliation, justice and peace"

Sr. Anne- Béatrice Faye
Member of the Commission of Theologians for the 2023 Synod

Introduction

Dear María Lía, General President of WUCWO, our sister, good morning.

I thank you and your collaborators for having associated me with this General Assembly, an important moment in the life of the World Union of Catholic Women life, on the synodal journey together with the universal Church and the particular Churches. It is a gathering that allows you to share your experiences as women, but also the concerns of both the world and the Church, especially in these wounded times.

Today, there is what we see, there is what we are... This is how we can identify certain feminine figures who are at the same time sisters, wives, guardians of tradition, mothers who console, advise and reassure, but also professors, theologians, politicians, philosophers, sociologists or anthropologists etc....¹ . talking about women makes each one of you visible in your own specific way.

For my part, I have chosen the figure of "the woman of Tekoa" to approach the theme of peace, justice and reconciliation. This wise woman from the village of Tekoa, that we can find in the second book of Samuel, chapter 14, verses 1-22, acted as an intermediary between General Joab and King David on behalf of Absalom.² Her name is not specified in this passage or in other parts of the Bible. She is simply called "a woman of Tekoa" or "a woman of Thecoa".

This modest contribution will be divided into three (03) points. With the first point, we will try to learn from this woman. She will help us to better understand the important role that women can play in rebuilding human and humanising relationships today. Pope Francis insists on this role when he says, and I quote:

¹Anne-Laure Bucher, "Engendrer, nourrir, dévorer: les fonctions symboliques de la féminité", in *Religiologiques*, 1998, vol. 17, pp. 175-191.

² 2S 14, 1-22. During a reception, Absalom, son of King David, kills Amnon, another son of David, in revenge for the rape of Tamar, his sister. Absalom fled and David did not want to see him again.

[...] "The world needs the contribution of women in all areas of social, economic, political and cultural life. [...] They have a unique capacity to show compassion, solidarity and care for the most vulnerable in our society".³ Better still, "they have an important role to play in promoting reconciliation. [...] For they often have the capacity to bring together and heal communities divided by violence and hatred".⁴ (I).

With the second point, "the breath and the pace of the Synod show what we are, and the dynamism of communion that animates our decisions".⁵ So what new face can women give to peace, justice and reconciliation in this "walking together and this synodal conversion? (II)

Starting from the answer to this question, and in a spirit of dialogue and openness, I would like to share with you the experience of another woman from the village of Zooré in Burkina Faso. Unlike the woman from Tekoa, this one has a name. Her name is Julienne Kaboré, an internally displaced person and a victim of the collateral effects of terrorism in that country. Her testimony reveals the woman as "the capacity for the other" to build justice, to build peace, to reconcile her children. This is the subject of our third point (III).

1. When Tekoa's woman visits our wounded world?

Here is a brief summary of the story. King David, faced with a fratricidal struggle between his sons, banishes his eldest son Absalom. His army commander Joab saw the royal family under threat. He may have won victories against armies, but he feels powerless to win a father's heart back to his son. The reason: Absalom, son of King David, kills Amnon, another son of David, in revenge for the rape of Tamar, his sister. Absalom runs away and David doesn't want to see him anymore.

It is then that Joab turns to the wisdom of "Tekoa's woman", for her "capacity for the other". She meets the king and tackles the problem by means of a fiction in which she herself represents the king.

"Help, your majesty! I am a widow; my husband is dead. Your servant had two sons, who quarreled in the field. There being no one to part them, one of them struck his brother and killed him. Then the whole clan confronted your servant and demanded: 'Give up the one who killed his brother. We must

³ Pope Francis, Address to the participants of the International Conference on Women in the Church, 2018

⁴ Pope Francis, Message for the World Day of Peace, 2020.

⁵ Pope Francis, Introductory address at the opening of the work of the 70th General Assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference, 22 May 2017, in www.chiesacattolica.it.

put him to death for the life of his brother whom he has slain; we must extinguish the heir also.' Thus they will quench my remaining hope and leave my husband neither name nor posterity upon the earth." ⁶

Through the figure of this woman from Tekoa, we have first of all the symbol of so many women in our different socio-cultural and religious contexts, who mourn in all its forms because of war, structural and cultural violence, terrorism, etc... They are raising the same cry as this woman.

What she teaches us today is that every woman is made responsible by the fragile. Indeed, "when the fragile is not something but someone," says Paul Ricoeur, "the latter appears to us as entrusted to our care, placed in our charge. The fragile person who is someone relies on us; he awaits our help and our care; he trusts that we will provide it. This bond of trust is fundamental. As a result, in a sense of responsibility, we feel that we have been made responsible for by..."⁷.

Of course, Ricoeur speaks from the perspective of political management. Is it not in living together that the fragile calls more for action? However, women often experience fragility in many different ways. This is what drives them to be responsible of doing something for..., to help, to grow, to enable fulfilment and development. Women therefore have a special capacity to understand certain situations and to contribute to the search for original solutions, including in the life of the Church.

As for Joab, an army general, he reminds us that we cannot build a lasting peace by forgetting women. They must be present where the important decisions are taken. They have a unique ability to forge links and build support networks. Their ability to create positive relationships can help to strengthen communities and encourage reconciliation. In other words, they often have different perspectives from men on social, economic and political issues. Their contribution can help broaden perspectives and encourage more inclusive decision-making. This is why their empowerment is a key element in building a just, peaceful and reconciled world, as it enables them to express themselves and participate actively in decision-making. Women are often under-represented in decision-making spheres. Their inclusion in decision-making processes can help to ensure that the adopted decisions take account of women's needs and perspectives.

And Pope Francis reaffirmed once again:

⁶ 2S 14, 4-7

⁷ Paul RICŒUR, *Histoire et civilisation*. Introduction and edition of nine texts by Ricoeur published in the *Revue du Christianisme Social, Autres Temps*, no. 77-78 (Spring 2003).

"We must promote the active participation of women in all areas of public life, in order to build a more just and equitable society for all. [...] Women have an irreplaceable role to play in building peace, as they bring unique perspectives and valuable human qualities." ⁸

They have a special ability to see things with different look, to reflect on important issues with different wisdom. They must therefore be given the opportunity to give their opinion on important issues that concern the Church and society. Their inclusion in the structures of governance both in the Church and in society is not only a question of justice, it is also a question of common sense. Hence the need to rethink peace, justice and reconciliation from the perspective of women. This is the subject of our second point.

2. Rethinking peace, justice and reconciliation based on the "capacity of the other"

As we know, justice is necessary to build lasting peace, because impunity and injustice can lead to resentment and tensions that threaten the stability of society. Consequently we cannot build lasting peace by forgetting women. Since for woman, mediation and the peaceful resolution of conflicts can help to prevent them and promote reconciliation by enabling the parties in conflict to engage in constructive dialogue.

This is what Tekoa's wife does:

"Please let your servant say still another word to my lord the king. We must indeed die; we are then like water that is poured out on the ground and cannot be gathered up. Yet, though God does not bring back life, he does take thought how not to banish anyone from him. And now, if I have presumed to speak of this matter to your majesty, it is because the people have given me cause to fear. And so your servant thought: 'Let me speak to the king. Perhaps he will grant the petition of his maidservant.' " ⁹

In our various countries, when violence breaks out, women spontaneously mobilise to seek a peaceful solution despite the risks. Whenever social harmony and human life are threatened, women are the

⁸ Pope Francis, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, 2020. (Direct translation of the text provided by the speaker)

⁹ 2S 14,12-15

last line of defence against the murderous madness of men. It's the same everywhere. This shows that peace is not a natural state of affairs, but a political and cultural value to be built and consolidated on a daily basis. In a society that has been weakened and traumatised by war and division, small actions can help us to understand each other's pain. Between women, there is a natural understanding. They have a great capacity to mobilise other women for just causes. Their ability to create strong networks can help promote peace and reconciliation in their communities.

Education for peace and human rights is an important means of promoting understanding, tolerance and reconciliation between individuals and groups. The pacification of hearts (Peace), the adjustment of relationships with others and goods (Justice) and the restoration of broken ties (Reconciliation) require attitudes and behaviour that reflect and promote conviviality and sharing. Women's action in the Church and in society can be considered through the centrality of the heart, to bring about Justice, Peace and Reconciliation. Women have a unique capacity to be agents of change in humanitarian crisis situations. Their active participation can help meet immediate humanitarian needs and promote long-term reconciliation. Women often have specific experience of discrimination and social exclusion. Their active participation can also help to fight against these forms of marginalisation and to promote social inclusion.

3. Zooré's woman, echoing Tekoa's woman, the woman's heart

The approach taken by the woman from Tekoa prompted me to go and meet other women and learn from their rich experience. The experience described here takes place in the context of internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso, commonly known as IDP. Their living conditions are very precarious because of the terrorist violence raging in the country. Thousands of people have been forced to flee their destroyed villages. Many find themselves separated from their loved ones, not to mention the loss of human life. All these displaced people, whatever their religion is, share the same extremely difficult living conditions, notably the lack of shelter, food, drinking water and access to medical care. They are also at risk of abduction. It was against this backdrop that we interviewed Kaboré Julienne. Everyone still remembers the tragic terrorist attacks that took place in Burkina Faso in January 2020 and April 2021. Villages burned, livestock scattered, grain stores set on fire. There was nothing left. All this has increased poverty and food insecurity.

The photos express her emotions at every moment of the interview.



"My name is Kaboré Julienne. I'm married and have 8 children, one of whom has died. We lived in Kaya, more precisely in the village of Tawalbougou. My daily occupation was farming. This enabled me to provide for my family. So far, so good. I became a widow when my husband died. This turned my life and that of my children upside down. They stopped going to school because they couldn't afford it. "It was something vety hard to live with," says Julienne, "especially as we were beginning to go hungry and thirsty. The loss of so many lives plunged the Christian community into fear, anxiety and stress. We Christians were singled out and stigmatised. "I experienced violence on a daily basis. That's when I tried to flee to save the lives of my children and those of my loved ones. We walked for several days before finding a host family. They were already living in precarious conditions. Their compassion for us really touched me.

One of Julienne's convictions is that Christians, like all human beings, have the duty to oppose violence and work for peace. "I remember how we used to get together in the evenings to pray the rosary and ask Mother Mary to support us through this ordeal and help us find somewhere to stay.



For displaced Christians, the situation is even more difficult, as we are often targeted because of our faith. Churches and places of worship are often destroyed in some places, making it difficult to practise our religion. Yet despite this, many of us continue to pray and remain hopeful. "In difficult times, I have above all found comfort, encouragement and hope in the Word of God. " *Fear not, I am with you; be not dismayed; I am your God. I will strengthen you, and help you, and uphold you with my right hand of justice*". (Is 41:10). Prayer is also a way for me to communicate with God and ask for his protection and peace. As a Christian, it's important to turn to God to find peace and

strength to face the many difficulties. "*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, saves those whose spirit is crushed*". (Ps 34:18)

I also found support, material and spiritual assistance from my faith community, which helped me to stay strong and keep my faith during difficult times. We were often reminded of the values of love, forgiveness and non-violence taught by Jesus. To try, even in difficult situations, to live these values in our daily lives. Seek to be an example of peace and reconciliation in our community, showing God's love to others around us. It is also important to work to promote understanding, good living together, and understanding between different religious and ethnic communities, in order to build lasting peace.

Prayer and meditation on the teachings of Jesus Christ have helped me a lot to strengthen my faith and trust in God, even in the most difficult times. There was one day in which I had no food for the children. This experience was a test of faith for me, but also an opportunity to serve God by helping others and bearing witness to His love. That's what I try to show the children in my catechism classes.

In the face of violence, it is important not to lose sight of our Christian values and to seek to act in accordance with them. This may mean practising forgiveness and reconciliation rather than revenge, or seeking to resolve conflicts by peaceful means rather than force. For Julienne, in the face of violence, we are called to be witnesses of peace. For her, faith in God is a refuge in extremely difficult situations.

Our world needs heart so that everyone can live in it without becoming dehumanised. We need an era of heart and compassion. Women can help to save our society from some of the deep-rooted evils that threaten it: violence, the will to power, contempt for life, wars... She is the hope of a more humane world, because she has the ability to connect to everyday life the immense struggle of death and life with the small and great battles of her life as a woman. If the Church listens to the experience of women in a spirit of partnership and equality, its words of hope and comfort will take on their full meaning.

"When peace is threatened and justice scorned, when poverty is on the increase, women stand up to defend human dignity, the family and the values of religion. May the Holy Spirit continually raise up within the Church holy and courageous women who make their precious spiritual contribution to the growth of our communities!"¹⁰

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Africae Munus*, no. 58.

Conclusion

Let's go back to Tekoa's woman. The problem is how to rebuild relationships when brothers have brought death into the family circle. What is interesting here is how the attitude of Tekoa's woman helps King David to look objectively at the situation that mirrors his own. Her main argument in favour of the murderous son is that life goes on, through the legacy of the "father's name". The empathy she aroused opened the king's heart to mercy and reconciliation with his son. The figure of this woman, sent by Joab, the army leader, shows that the warlords do not know the true paths to peace, reconciliation and justice. They know, however, that women are the best mediators for reconciling hearts.

A wise and wounded woman can inspire and indicate a significant response for our world and the Church today. She can help us to rebuild more humanising relationships in favour of life, because, by virtue of her role as mother, she holds moral authority. From this position in the family, she occupies the centre of human relations in society. This fact invites us to change our traditional points of reference in the conflict management process, and to better understand the effectiveness of women's different roles (wife, mother, sister, political leader, etc.) so that they can contribute to the work of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. The destiny of the world is also and above all in the hands of women themselves, who are called upon to give it new impetus.

My dream: Looking to the future, Creation of a Global Women's Solidarity Network in a world of "great opportunities".

All true peace, justice and reconciliation come from God. For "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" (Gal. 3:28).

May women, together with the whole Church, commit to forming networks in order to develop a global vision of conflict prevention, management and resolution that takes gender considerations into account.

Foundation of this network

Women have a special role to play in building peace. They are often the first to pass on the values of peace and sustainable development to their children and communities. Educating women is the

foundation on which a culture of peace is built. They have an essential contribution to make in promoting peace, justice and reconciliation. They therefore have a key role to play in transforming the social and economic structures that perpetuate injustice and poverty in Africa. They must be protagonists of history, social and political actors in their own right.

Objective:

Enable to tune into the potential and experience of women who want to make a significant contribution to reflection and to the development, prevention, management and resolution of conflicts. If the Church in Africa listens to African women, in a spirit of partnership and equality, its words of hope and comfort will take on their full meaning.

- To take forward the follow-up of the results of the synodal process in Africa by identifying priority topics;
- To study ways in which the different branches of the Church can work more closely together;
- To draw up and adopt an action plan to be used by the appropriate departments of the Church in Africa for the greater involvement of women in its life and mission.
- To create a welcoming environment where women can feel safe and comfortable to share their experiences and concerns.
- Organise regular networking events to enable women to meet other women who share their interests and goals.
- Encouraging women to take control of their lives and give themselves the means to achieve their goals.
- Promoting diversity and inclusion within the network to enable all women to feel included and valued.
- Raising awareness and advocacy: Raising awareness and advocacy for women's issues and encouraging women to do likewise to improve living conditions for all women.

Method:

That each of them undertakes to find twelve (12) women in her country, capable of raising it in order to make this Network a reality.

To conclude, I invite you to let this Hymn to Peace¹¹ resonate within each of you.

¹¹ Bestine Kazadi Ditabala,

*United and together, in a shared commitment,
Peace
Now and forever,
Let us rekindle our long-walled hearts
In the darkness of fear,
And with our courage as women
To Faith forever determined,
Let's walk hand in hand along this path of light,
To light our children with our torches of love,
On the road to reconciliation, justice, peace and work
Proof of our sacrifice, the sacrifice of forgiveness
From our anonymous tears, to pass on love
As the only truth,
As a legacy to our sons and daughters,
All linked by this maternal bond
In a world of solidarity, freedom and equality
In peace and for ever¹² .*

¹² Bestine Kazadi Ditabala, Hymn to Peace.

Appendix 1

“When Joab, son of Zeruah, observed how the king felt toward Absalom, he sent to Tekoa and brought from there a gifted woman, to whom he said: “Pretend to be in mourning. Put on mourning apparel and do not anoint yourself with oil, that you may appear to be a woman who has been long in mourning for a departed one. Then go to the king and speak to him in this manner.” And Joab instructed her what to say. *So the woman of Tekoa went to the king and fell prostrate to the ground in homage, saying, “Help, your majesty!” The king said to her, “What do you want?” She replied: “Alas, I am a widow; my husband is dead. Your servant had two sons, who quarreled in the field. There being no one to part them, one of them struck his brother and killed him. Then the whole clan confronted your servant and demanded: ‘Give up the one who killed his brother. We must put him to death for the life of his brother whom he has slain; we must extinguish the heir also.’ Thus they will quench my remaining hope and leave my husband neither name nor posterity upon the earth.”* The king then said to the woman: “Go home. I will issue a command on your behalf.” The woman of Tekoa answered him, “Let me and my family be to blame, my lord king; you and your throne are innocent.” Then the king said, “If anyone says a word to you, have him brought to me, and he shall not touch you again.” But she went on to say, “Please, your majesty, keep in mind the LORD your God, that the avenger of blood may not go too far in destruction and that my son may not be done away with.” He replied, “As the LORD lives, not a hair of your son shall fall to the ground.” The woman continued, “Please let your servant say still another word to my lord the king.” He replied, “Speak.” So the woman said: “Why, then, do you think of this same kind of thing against the people of God? In pronouncing as he has, the king shows himself guilty, for not bringing back his own banished son. We must indeed die; we are then like water that is poured out on the ground and cannot be gathered up. Yet, though God does not bring back life, he does take thought how not to banish anyone from him. And now, if I have presumed to speak of this matter to your majesty, it is because the people have given me cause to fear. And so your servant thought: ‘Let me speak to the king. Perhaps he will grant the petition of his maidservant. For the king must surely consent to free his servant from the grasp of one who would seek to destroy me and my son as well from God’s inheritance.’” And the woman concluded: “Let the word of my lord the king provide a resting place; indeed, my lord the king is like an angel of God, evaluating good and bad. The LORD your God be with you.” The king answered the woman, “Now do not conceal from me anything I may ask you!” The woman said, “Let my lord the king speak.” So the king asked, “Is Joab involved with you in all this?” And the woman answered: “As you live, my lord the king, it is just as your majesty has said, and not otherwise. It was your servant Joab who instructed me and told your servant all these things she was to say. Your servant Joab did this to come at the issue in a roundabout way. But my lord is as wise as an angel of God, so that he knows all things on earth.” Then the king said to Joab: “I hereby

grant this request. Go, therefore, and bring back young Absalom. "Falling prostrate to the ground in homage and blessing the king, Joab said, "This day I know that I am in good favor with you, my lord the king, since the king has granted the request of his servant."