

Angelo Romano: Lessons from the Sant'Egidio peacebuilding activities

1) *Dulce bellum inexpertis*. Erasmus of Rotterdam was right. War is beautiful for those who do not know it. In the community of Sant'Egidio we say that war is the mother of all poverty: I have been able to experience this since I deal with conflicts, that is, since 1992. War is the most serious problem for development.

2) **War has changed, peace too.** After 1991, after the collapse of the USSR, we have gone through 27 years in which the world changed, but also war and peace changed, as we knew it before. In the pre-1991 world peace was the fruit of a balance between the major powers, between the two blocks. Even the war, in the pre-1991 world, arose from the initiative of the two superpowers, or their associates.

In these 27 years we have seen conflicts arise from local realities, or from countries that aspired to become regional powers at the expense of others. The bloodiest conflicts were civil wars, one of which produced a genocide, in Rwanda. War seems to have become an activity within the reach of many. Mercenaries have not only returned, they have become a decisive reality in many situations. The war has also become a business for individuals. Everyone can make war. But everyone can also work for peace. In 1992, the general peace agreement for Mozambique was signed, after two and a half years of negotiations at Sant'Egidio. A peace process that for Sant'Egidio has become a vocation, a call to engage in a sector that has been hitherto scarcely touched.

3) **Every war affects us.** This is not just a moral imperative. Conflicts cannot be ignored, and their consequences will very quickly touch us. In the pre-1991 world, some conflict were considered important, while others were almost totally ignored. Who was following the creation of the Moro Liberation Front in the Philippines in 1974? Many other conflicts were obscure and forgotten. But today thinking of ignoring what happens in the Middle East or in Latin America is unthinkable. The world became very small, and the result is sometimes the fear of a world that is too big and complicated. In Sant'Egidio we apparently follow insignificant conflicts: Casamance, in South Senegal, produced maybe 25.000 casualties in almost 45 years. But consequences are now touching Italy; many refugees are from Gambia, southern Senegal and Guine Bissau, countries affected by the consequences of the conflict.

4) **War is made by men and can be stopped by those same men.** Every man can change. I had many meetings with men involved in conflicts. I have spoken with many of them: no one wanted for their children the same future. Perhaps they dream of a different country: but not a country at war. They dream of justice, but not an endless conflict. Only a small minority of mentally sick people love war.

5) **Peace must have its dividends.** There is a debate about the costs of war: very little is said about who gains out of a war. Well, there are also the costs of peace, but also the dividends of peace. Peace is always convenient if there is sufficient international support. The key factor is the disarmament processes, DDRR. They have costs, but ridiculous if compared to the costs that the international community has to pay as

outcomes of a conflict. Difficulty managing ex-combatants. Central African Republic. Need to take charge of providing another opportunity for ex-combatants. There will be beneficial consequences for the entire population. A country coming out from a conflict is like a convalescent: must be treated not to get sick again. The Marshall plan is the perfect success story of the implementation of this principle in our recent history.

6) **To put an end to a conflict means to free people from a trap from which it is almost impossible to escape by themselves.** Many believe that during a civil conflict hatred spreads so much that it makes peace impossible or at least utopian, and it opens the way to chains of revenge and violence. It is not true. I have seen many countries coming out of a civil war, and the overwhelming majority of the population absolutely wanted to end the conflict, to turn the page. The logic consequence of this is democracy. Many times, votes have been for the confirmation of peace agreements. In Mozambique, but also in South Africa. Democracy is a way to confirm peace decisions taken by leaders worthy of the name. Peace gives the opportunity for the disarmed majority to be listened to by the armed minority.

7) **Words can create a conflict, but other words can turn it off.** We have entered a historical phase of tensions, of breaking the diplomatic and political paradigms, of questioning multilateral structures and previously signed agreements. A close look is necessary.

Sadly in fact, the idea that after all the treaties are a “scrap of paper” is more and more diffused, and I add, only words are written on them. We must remember that this was said before the violation of the neutrality of Belgium in 1914, starting the catastrophe of the First World War, which Pope Benedict XV described as a “useless massacre”. I do not share this dangerous thinking. Our destiny is linked to those words and to those pieces of paper: if words are not given the right importance, they risk losing their value and being replaced by other means. Words, dialogue, set in a text, an agreement, are the way that humanity has invented to recompose the conflicts. Experience in Mozambique, Burundi, Guatemala, Togo, Guinea, Niger. *Pacta sunt servanda*. May the time when it was thought that the use of force was the best way to resolve disagreements among nations or, even worse, within nations themselves never return. May the irresponsible use of words typical of nationalistic rhetoric, that produced in the XX century the tragedy of two world conflicts also never come back. We need a peaceful and peace building use of words.