

The Encounter of Humanity: A Paradigm for a World of Peace

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An Experience of Regeneration Grounded in African Cultural Heritage

3rd March 2002 is still vivid in my memory: I was at Kariobangi mission, in the slums on the eastern outskirts of Nairobi, where I lived and was engaged in social ministry. That evening we witnessed the infamous Kariobangi massacre, a brutal episode that made the front pages of the national newspapers for a week.

It all began with the killing of a member of a neighbourhood vigilante group called the “*Taliban*”, made up predominantly of people of *Luo* ethnicity, on the night between 28th February and 1st March; in response, the man’s companions killed three young men suspected of having murdered their comrade, who happened to belong to the *Mungiki* sect, whose members are ethnically *Kikuyu*. The *Mungiki* reaction was devastating: on 3rd March, in a wave of appalling violence, they killed 25 people on the streets and wounded and mutilated several dozen others.

The outcome of an explosive situation fuelled by political patronage and by economic and socio-cultural impoverishment, that massacre nevertheless became the occasion to begin an interreligious journey of healing and reconciliation in the neighbourhood, through an encounter of humanity.

Indeed, in the wake of the massacre the local community suddenly found itself shattered, plunged into fear, grief and mutual distrust. The survivors experienced an unbearable sense of loss, deprived not only of their dearest loved ones but also of security, of a future and of hope.

To respond to this crisis, an interreligious committee was set up which, among other initiatives, invited the Community Peace Museums of Kenya to contribute to the healing and reconciliation of the community. These museums are community-based initiatives that document and communicate the living traditions of peace, the wisdom and the ancestral knowledge of various human groups in the country. What followed was not merely a series of initiatives but a genuine journey of transformation, in which the encounter of differences and of cultural symbols, and the sharing of experiences and life stories, opened up new paths of reconciliation and regeneration. It was a long and laborious journey, of which I would like to mention only four fundamental stages.

First of all, the immediate response was one of closeness to the survivors and to the families directly affected by the tragedy. Thanks to the widespread presence on the ground of the justice and peace ministry of the mission’s Small Christian Communities, we were able to trace and visit these people. Small groups of religious leaders visited them in their shacks, listened to their stories and prayed together. It was truly heartbreaking, harrowing, to hear their testimony

in detail about what had happened and what they still felt. Yet in this encounter of wounded and anguished humanity, in sharing the Word chosen by the survivors themselves for our common prayer, we also experienced the presence of the Lord, the paschal mystery. And from one meeting to the next the stories changed, a sign of the slow process of the healing of memory. One year into the journey, one of the survivors confided to me that what had given him the strength to hope was seeing the different religious leaders come together to pray. In a reality such as that of the slums, where everything divides, religion included, that was a prophetic sign.

Thus, little by little, we proposed to the survivors that they meet to continue the journey together. They welcomed the proposal with enthusiasm. I still remember the group's first meeting: in the same hall were the survivors and the relatives of the people killed by the *Mungiki*, as well as the parents of the three young *Mungiki* killed by the *Taliban*. The meeting began with the remembrance of those who were no longer there, with the sharing of the survivors' state of mind, and so they found themselves united in their wounded and suffering humanity, rather than divided by the dynamics of violence and retaliation, by seeing each other through the categories of humiliation, anger and revenge.

The second crucial moment came on 1st June 2002, when elders from the Peace Museums met the group in Kariobangi, bringing peace trees and peace staves. They told stories of suffering and redemption, drawing on the memory of the colonial period and of the struggle for independence. They shared traditions and symbols that, in the past, had enabled torn communities to find unity and harmony again. Seated in a circle, the survivors listened in silence, then began to recount their own wounds: the night of the slaughter, the fear, the shattered lives. A climate of trust and openness emerged, a safe space in which to express sorrow and hope.

The peace trees became a living symbol of this process. Mama Agneta, who had lost her husband and her eldest son in the massacre, planted one on her husband's grave: from that gesture she drew new strength, turning her mourning into a mission for peace. Her story showed how cultural symbols, united with human solidarity and with people's faith, can rekindle inner life and give meaning, a vocation, even after the harshest tragedies.

The third key moment was the visit, on 20th June 2002, to the *Agikikuyu* Peace Museum in Nyeri, considered a place symbolically close to the *Mungiki*, who in their ideology refer — with unscrupulous manipulation — to traditional practices. It was an act of great courage: on the same bus travelled together the families of the victims of the massacre and those of the three young *Mungiki* killed at the outset of the affair. The welcome was extraordinary: traditional songs, dances and old songs of the *Mau Mau* struggle for liberation from colonial oppression, surprisingly dedicated not to war but to peace and life. The women began to dance spontaneously, and the other participants with them: the music and movement released repressed emotions, dissolving fear and anger.

The elders used proverbs, stories and traditional rites to touch people's hearts, conveying wisdom, identity and cultural pride. They also spoke of the planting of peace trees on the mass

graves at Othaya — a reminder of colonial violence — which symbolized the healing of the earth and of memory. From that meeting came the idea of a peace tree garden in Kariobangi, a living memorial and an educational space for future generations.

A gesture of extraordinary solidarity followed shortly afterwards: *Mzee* Thuku, a former Mau Mau leader, announced the creation of a relief fund by the *Kikuyu* elders for the victims of Kariobangi. The *Kikuyu* women offered produce from their lands to their guests, turning ancient divisions into bonds of fraternity. Simple gestures, yet capable of restoring dignity, security and hope to those who felt alone and vulnerable.

The fourth transformative passage took place on 14th September 2002 with the inauguration of the peace tree garden in Kariobangi. Different ethnic communities brought their own sacred trees, symbols of justice, good governance and reconciliation. The *Luo* and *Kikuyu* elders planted one together, marking unity beyond differences.

In time, the garden became much more than a memorial: it turned into a place of encounter and dialogue, where people gathered to talk, resolve conflicts and cultivate peaceful relationships. The parish priest noted how this space fostered daily reconciliation, becoming a concrete sign of a community that, through symbols, songs, stories and gestures of solidarity, had learned to transform sorrow into peace and wounds into hope.

On that occasion there was also a sharing and consultation with the Commission for the review of the Constitution of Kenya: starting from the experience of fall and rebirth, the local community contributed significantly to the constitutional process, which would lead to the approval of the new Constitution in 2010.

The story of Kariobangi shows that when people meet authentically, drawing on their own cultural and spiritual heritage and shared humanity, even the darkest tragedies can generate new possibilities of life, unity and future, in a dynamic that moves from the healing process of the survivors, to community reconciliation, and on to the rebuilding of coexistence at the national level.

The Architecture of Encounter: A Grammar of Shared Humanity

Starting from this experience, and thanks to a ministerial experience spanning over some 20 years, first in Kenya and then in Italy, I realized that there are certain dynamics that underlie an authentic and creative encounter of humanity. I wanted to understand the dynamics that make such processes of communion possible and how they can be effectively accompanied.

In short, there are some invisible structures, as it were, that facilitate encounter, the experience of fraternity and the building of a shared journey. In particular, five interdependent dynamics have emerged that contribute significantly to these processes: evoking humanity, facilitating participation, transcending differences, deep listening and taking care.

1. *Evoking humanity*: there are simple activities that tend to bring out people's humanity, a

sense of gratuitousness, of generous self-giving. For example, with the communities and groups we accompany, we pay particular attention to introductory dynamics, in a climate of mutual welcome and recognition. This creates a climate of welcome, a sense of security, and helps release the generosity and creativity of the participants. This dynamic is further enriched through moments of personal sharing, self-narration and the sharing of transformative experiences. An exchange takes place that is never taken for granted; on the contrary, it is different and unique every time. The openings and self-disclosures of the participants invite and echo one another, generate empathy, and one finds oneself, as if by enchantment, on “holy ground”, before the mystery of a shared humanity.

2. *Promoting participation*: the use of participatory methodologies fosters the involvement of participants, releases their creative energy and builds more meaningful relationships. A process of participatory learning is set in motion, in which everyone contributes to discovering the world, to building meaning and to transforming reality. This can be facilitated in various ways: a significant example is Danilo Dolci’s reciprocal maieutics — a process of collective exploration that takes as its starting point the experience and intuition of individuals — which makes use of generative questions and a respectful, suitably moderated dialogue; another approach is based on symbolic dynamics, artistic expression and wisdom narratives, as the Community Peace Museums in Kenya do. A further possibility is the application of Paulo Freire’s psycho-social method, starting from problem posing materials that present life situations which the group decodes, analyses and relates to its own living environment and experience. All of that facilitates involvement and the discovery of new possibilities, and invites people to make choices to influence change. With groups and faith communities, participatory theological reflection activities — that is, the group’s reflection on the community’s lived experience, in the light of faith and the Gospel, in order to respond to a given situation — have proved genuinely transformative and an important opportunity to contribute to processes of inculturation of the Gospel.
3. *Transcending differences*: every dialogue open to diversity and to different perspectives generates disorientation, discomfort and conflict. This is inevitable; indeed, if it does not happen, it means there has not yet been real engagement with diversity. Differences are not to be cancelled or levelled out, but welcomed and respected, in the awareness that the difficult reconciliation — without erasing differences — can only take place at a higher level, where we can nonetheless recognize the humanity that unites us, a sense of mutual belonging and of a common destiny. It is possible to build together a shared horizon in which each person can recognize themselves while remaining different, by using an appropriate methodology that circumvents ideological oppositions and the defence mechanisms they activate.
4. *Listening deeply*: mutual listening is a fundamental aspect of a journey that makes dialogue its backbone. Those who accompany these encounters must grasp what stirs in the hearts of the participants, appreciate it and bring it to light. This requires active listening skills, perceiving the participants’ expressed and unexpressed needs, and honouring the life that emerges from lived experience. There is a need to make room for discernment, for awareness of God’s presence and action in history, and of the invitations that the Spirit

silently makes to the group to lead it towards an experience of regeneration and communion. Thanks to this, emotional self-awareness grows and insights, inspirations and shared aspirations emerge from the depths.

5. *Taking care*: generally these encounters are an occasion for an experience of regeneration for the participants, opening up new possible worlds and to communion. However, this is only a starting point. Then it is necessary to build processes and paths, which must be accompanied, animated, encouraged, sustained and promoted. Caring for people, for creation, for the institutions and situations we encounter daily reconnects us with the mystery of life, restores beauty and fullness to lived experience, and introduces us to the joy of the Gospel. It is like a seed of life that then needs care in order to grow and bear concrete fruit in society.

These processes illustrate that there is a grammar of the encounter of humanity, a reality that, besides having value in itself, can contribute decisively to addressing the great human and social challenges of our time.

The culture of encounter is one of the fundamental themes of Pope Francis's pontificate, taken up repeatedly and in various contexts, not least in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. The culture of encounter arises from recognizing the other as a brother or sister, never as an enemy or an obstacle. It is rooted in the conviction that every person has an inviolable dignity, and in a respectful openness that seeks points of contact without renouncing one's own identity.

Moreover, the culture of encounter is opposed to what Francis calls the throwaway culture, which marginalizes the poor, migrants, the elderly, the sick. Instead of excluding, the logic of encounter integrates and values. For Pope Francis, the culture of encounter is a foundation of the path towards responding to the great crises of our time, closely linked to the project of universal fraternity. It is not only a personal attitude but also a social and political one, which seeks the common good and peace. The culture of encounter puts dialogue, listening and the valuing of differences at the centre. Conflicts are not to be avoided but overcome through creative encounter, which takes place in the most diverse contexts: political (States), social (sciences, culture), ecumenical and interreligious, with a view to the common good. Every person, people and culture are bearers of a treasure; even those on the margins or who have made mistakes can enrich the community. However, good will is not enough: patience, daily gestures and hard work are needed: the culture of encounter is built day by day.

It should be emphasized that the encounter of humanity is an enculturated reality. In the African world, for example, the culture of encounter is expressed with its own characteristics, typical of the cultures of *utu* (humanity in Kiswahili) or *ubuntu* (in Xhosa). These are cultures in which the worldview is founded on a sense of community belonging — “I am because we are” — and on the assumption that everything, visible and invisible reality, is interconnected. The person exists in relationship; their humanity is expressed in relation to others and, at the same time, their individuality is expressed authentically¹. *Utu* can also be described as the

¹J. K. MBINZE, *Reconciliation as a Way to Peace through Ubuntu Worldview according to Michael Battle*, Licentiate thesis in the Social Doctrine of the Church, Pontifical Lateran University, Rome, 2020, p. 13.

capacity to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interest of building and maintaining communities in justice and in mutual care². In other words, *utu* can be seen as a process of humanization that requires each person to uphold social justice, have empathy for the integrity of others and think from a community perspective for the common good³.

Facing the Great Crises of Our Time

Today the world is facing a *polycrisis*, that is, the simultaneous presence of several crises that influence one another. As the encyclical *Laudato Si'*⁴ observed, for example,

It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.

Thus, on the one hand there is the climate crisis, with devastating impacts; on the other, we find ourselves in a situation that Pope Francis described as a Third World War fought piecemeal. There no longer seems to be any red line capable of containing conflicts, and the arms race has reached unprecedented levels, generating new debts and diverting resources from social services and from actions of mitigation, adaptation and reparation with regard to climate change. The multilateral and diplomatic approach to resolving global problems and conflicts is in decline, and the world has entered a phase in which the logic of appealing to the law of force — rather than to the force of law⁵ — of annihilation and of impunity prevails. Human and peoples' rights are neglected or trampled upon, and inequalities continue to grow because of unjust economic structures, pushing ever more people below the poverty line and the Planet beyond its regenerative capacity.

Then, *Laudato Si'* continues, “strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”⁶ Such an approach can be realized only with the involvement of everyone, which has the culture of encounter as its premise. It means launching inclusive processes in which different cultures, spiritualities and forms of knowledge give rise to a shared search for solutions, building a common horizon in which everyone can recognize themselves without having to conform: a creative process that opens to the unprecedented, to new possible worlds, to a communion that respects diversity.

²K. A. BAKER, *Wayfinding Peace: Museums in Conflict Zones*, PhD Thesis, Vancouver, University of British Columbia, 2021, p. 70.

³K. A. BAKER, *Wayfinding Peace: Museums in Conflict Zones*, cit., p. 72.

⁴FRANCIS, *Laudato Si'*, 2015, 139.

⁵FRANCIS, *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, 174.

⁶FRANCIS, *Laudato Si'*, 2015, 139.

The Contribution of Indigenous Peoples

The theme of care for our common home is intimately linked to those of peace and of the economy, or the so-called model of development. It is, to date, a privileged starting point for addressing the polycrisis in its complexity. The ancestral knowledge, ecological practices and worldview of indigenous peoples constitute a fundamental voice, alongside that of the scientific community and the faith traditions, for facing the challenge of integral ecology.

It should be noted that indigenous or original peoples are not simply a minority, but deserve to be the principal dialogue partners, especially when projects affecting their lands are being planned. For them, land is not a commodity but a sacred gift that holds the divine and ancestral inheritance. To preserve their identity and their values, they must live in a living relationship with it. When they remain on their lands, they themselves are the best guardians⁷.

Laudato Si' stresses the importance of integrating local cultures into decision-making processes on the environment, valuing their traditions and knowledge: cultural ecology urges the safeguarding of historical, artistic and spiritual identity, recognizing that authentic development must emerge from local culture and not be imposed from outside. It is a warning against global homogenization, which leads to the loss not only of biodiversity but also of ancestral cultures and ways of life. Indigenous peoples embody deeply rooted values, such as community and responsibility towards the land and future generations. They are described as a source of environmental wisdom that the contemporary world must heed, and they offer an alternative model of progress that is more human and attentive to the common good. Their cosmic and spiritual vision, founded on a sacred relationship with nature, enriches the whole of humanity. Indigenous cultures are not to be isolated, but to be engaged in respectful dialogue.

As *Querida Amazonia* emphasizes, the aim is not to propose a completely closed indigenism that would isolate indigenous cultures from dialogue with other cultural spheres⁸: identity and dialogue are not enemies, but diversity to be transformed into a bridge. The apostolic exhortation insists on the importance of safeguarding roots, valuing one's own symbols, myths and narratives, entrusting young people with the task of preserving them, in order to overcome cultural colonization.

From the Culture of Encounter to a New Multilateralism

The cultures of encounter are a heritage of humanity that can help us overcome the current *impasse* in the crises of our time, from the climate and environmental crisis to armed conflicts. We see that, every year, the United Nations climate conferences (COP) fail even remotely to approach the urgent measures the planet needs. And yet this is still the space that offers the best opportunity to arrive at authentic solutions to the climate crisis. We must not be discouraged by the magnitude and complexity of the struggle against the crisis we are living

⁷FRANCIS, *Laudato Si'*, 2015, 146.

⁸FRANCIS, *Querida Amazonia*, 2020, 37.

through, with results below expectations. It is true that in recent years the multilateral approach has reached paralysis, but despite all its limitations and flaws, multilateralism remains the way forward (LD 34).

Certainly, as *Laudate Deum*⁹ stresses, we are wasting the best opportunities to bring about the necessary changes, as happened in the financial crisis of 2007–2008 and was repeated in the Covid-19 crisis. The selfish and conflicting interests of States easily block a process that is based on consensus. Above all, the elephant in the room is the fact that until the current development model goes on — a model based on an extractive economy that aims to maximize profits at the expense of social and environmental realities — there are no solutions to the climate crisis. The current challenge, then, is, as *Laudate Deum* argues, to reconfigure and recreate this space of global governance¹⁰.

Pope Francis, in fact, pleaded for a new model of multilateralism that recognizes that

many groups and organizations within civil society help to compensate for the shortcomings of the international community, its lack of coordination in complex situations, and its lack of attention to fundamental human rights¹¹.

Civil society organizations and indigenous peoples can already take part as observers at the COPs. The point now is to find mechanisms that would allow such actors to have an authoritative and respected voice, carrying weight in the decisions of the international community.

It must also be stressed that, since everything is interconnected, as the encyclical *Laudato Si'* repeatedly affirms, when indigenous peoples, civil society and faith-inspired organizations address the climate crisis at the COPs, they also connect to this crisis the socioeconomic one and the conflicts that are devastating societies and ecosystems. That is, they have the capacity to face reality in its complexity, without simplifications and as an alternative to the false solutions of the technocratic paradigm.

Conclusion

The itinerary outlined in this presentation allows us to grasp how the cultures of encounter constitute not only a relational device but an anthropological and social paradigm. The Church's social magisterium offers a hermeneutic of it, with a view to paths for building what Paul VI called the "civilization of love"¹², an expression taken up by John Paul II¹³ that indicates the historical and spiritual goal of a process in which fraternity is not a mere ethical value but the theological and social foundation of human coexistence.

⁹FRANCIS, *Laudate Deum*, 2023, 36.

¹⁰FRANCIS, *Laudate Deum*, 2023, 37.

¹¹*Ibidem*, quoting *Fratelli Tutti* 175.

¹²PAUL VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967, 86.

¹³JOHN PAUL II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, 33; JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 2001, 43.

The encounter of humanity, being rooted in mutual recognition and in the valuing of differences, offers the presuppositions for this construction. This makes operative that “social friendship” which Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*¹⁴ identifies as an indispensable condition for a more just and inclusive world order. The logic of encounter, in fact, overcomes the drifts of the throwaway culture¹⁵ and opens up the possibility of a reconciled society, capable of integrating wounded memories and transforming them into resources for the future.

Wherever processes of participation, deep listening and mutual care are activated, there emerges what Pope Francis called the social poets “acting as sowers of change, promoters of a process involving millions of actions, great and small, creatively intertwined like words in a poem”¹⁶, that is, the capacity to generate creative solutions and paths of peace from below, as in the case of popular movements. In this sense, the traditions of *utu* or *ubuntu*, evoked in the African experiences, are not mere cultural references but genuine epistemological contributions to an integral vision of the person and of society, in harmony with the perspective of integral ecology found in *Laudato Si’*.

Furthermore, the perspective of the civilization of love makes it possible to reformulate in positive terms the link between globalization and cultural pluralism. It is not a matter of deleting differences but of transcending them in a higher level of belonging, according to a logic reminiscent of Benedict XVI’s vision in *Caritas in Veritate*¹⁷, when he affirms that charity is a principle not only at the interpersonal level but also at the macro-social and institutional one.

In light of the current polycrisis — environmental, economic and geopolitical — the encounter of humanity thus appears as a significant way to translate the civilization of love into practice. It calls for inclusive, multilateral and dialogical processes, in which local communities, indigenous peoples and the different spiritual traditions contribute with their own knowledge to building a planetary common good, “to build bridges through dialogue and encounter, joining together as one people, always at peace”¹⁸.

The civilization of love — while regarded as an eschatological horizon — is also a historical and ecclesial task: a work of patient daily weaving, in which the Church is called to become a sacrament of unity of the human race¹⁹ and a promoter of universal fraternity. The culture of encounter, by embracing this horizon, thus promotes not only spaces of social mediation but true workshops of a new humanity, in which the transforming power of the Gospel becomes visible in the historical order. The civilization of love may be an eschatological horizon, but it is also a task to be lived here and now.

The architecture of encounter can be understood as a concrete collaboration with the *Missio*

¹⁴FRANCIS, *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, 94-95.

¹⁵FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, 53.

¹⁶FRANCIS, *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, 169.

¹⁷BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, 55.

¹⁸LEO XIV, *Address to the Members of the Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice Foundation*, 2025.

¹⁹SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Lumen Gentium*, 1964, 1.

Dei. Mission begins not with the Church's initiative, but with God's own movement towards humanity. The five dynamics of encounter—evoking humanity, facilitating participation, transcending differences, deep listening and taking care—describe ways of cooperating with that divine action, creating spaces where God's reconciling presence can become visible. And yes, as it happened in Kariobangi, it is open to the experience of regeneration in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

The experience of Kariobangi reminds us that mission is not primarily about bringing God where God is absent, but about discerning and nurturing the seeds of communion that the Spirit has already sown in people's lives, cultures and histories. In this sense, the Church fulfils its missionary vocation not only by proclaiming the Gospel, but by becoming a companion in God's work of healing, reconciliation and the renewal of creation, so that the encounter of humanity becomes a sign of God's Kingdom already breaking into our world.