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Justice and Peace Work in Algeria

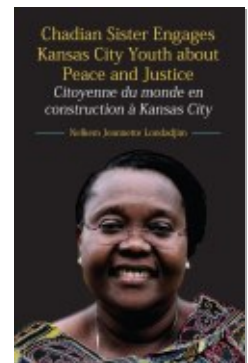
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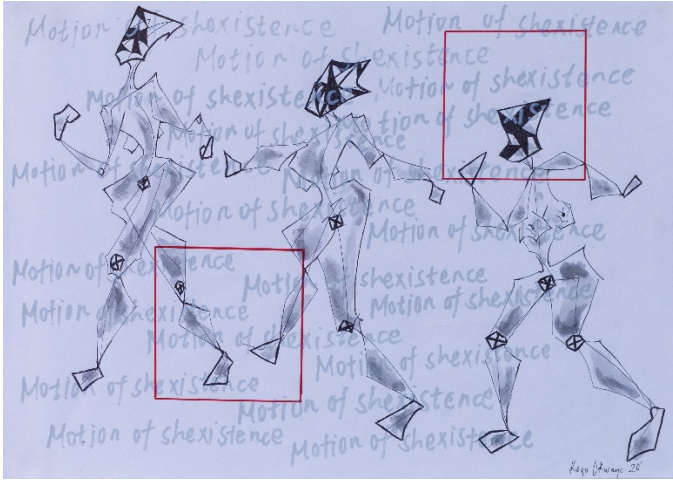


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Justice and Peace Work in Algeria

The students asked me to tell them about action for justice and peace in Algeria...



The words “justice” and “peace” are so often used and can have different meanings for different people, depending on the situation. In my country, for example, the government was comprised of Muslims from the northern part of the country. They spoke of peace and justice from a perspective of security. Southerners spoke of peace and justice from a perspective of recognition of their citizenship. As Chadians from the south of the country, we had become, or rather were considered, almost as foreigners and as servants for the needs of our northern brothers and sisters. Money and power were concentrated in their hands, and we were to be at their service.

War, I have finally realized, is not first and foremost a problem to be solved but a tragedy of people not being understood.

I have been deeply touched by conversations with groups of students here at Avila University. I have also been reflecting on the words so often shared at Mass: “Peace be with you.”

We must fight for justice and peace. But how can we if we do not understand cultures and people and their ways of living and doing in society? Art can be a medium and a gateway in this regard.

I experienced two different approaches to culture and the building of peace and justice with women in Algeria: one in the context of my work at the Jesuits’ spiritual centre and one at the women’s support centre founded by the Salesian Sisters.

For me, justice and peace are a dimension of every situation. Every action is an opportunity to build or fight for peace and justice.

At the spiritual centre, we propose three activities open to anyone, but it so happens that women are the main participants. We propose pottery, flower art, and painting. The idea is to nourish the spiritual dimension of humanity – so people dare to express themselves. It is a space of real dialogue and freedom, I’d say. Generally, the women who spend a morning invested in the artistic activities discover a deep need to continue the reflections begun.

Thanks to these women, I dared organize a weekend about racism and another about pluralistic living, i.e. with people of different religions, sexual orientations, etc. Before, I had not dared address these issues, even if ignoring them is a threat to social peace. The creative activities we shared, however, liberated words and revealed the need to speak about these topics more widely and not just among women.

I had another experience at the sewing workshop run by the Salesian sisters. I went there to gather information for advocacy activities for an association for women’s rights.

I initiated conversations with the women, who gave me the impression that there were no problems. Their talking was full of positivity. They are respected in their households and at liberty to pursue their ambitions. I had the impression that my questions felt like a judgement and that my presence was somehow injurious, because my questions introduced myself into the private matter of their family life.

It was by chance, in proposing an activity for young people, that I felt something come alive and some “true speaking.”

In Algeria, there is little entertainment for youngsters, and no real spaces or meeting places for them. The government constructed youth centres, but you don't find much going on in them. The only entertainment is soccer, and the games generate so much violence. On soccer days, people stay securely at home or rush home before the end of the game. The violence became so worrisome that the government started sponsoring special consciousness-raising announcements on the radio.

In light of this situation, I thought I could, with others, propose something for young people. My idea was to train some young people in nonviolence so they could in turn become ambassadors of peace and nonviolence with other young people in their neighborhoods.

I sought advice from the mothers. Was the idea appropriate? Did they know children who might be interested? It was at this point that they began to speak of their problems of conjugal violence and of discrimination and of not knowing where or how to speak about it.

The sister responsible for the centre and I felt helpless listening to these women, most of whom had obtained one or more university diplomas. They were nonetheless conditioned and restricted by their religious and societal cultures. Is it really

necessary to feel strong and as a bearer of solutions? I discovered that you have to be weak, without any real possibility of action, to allow the solution to emerge. One can aggravate a situation of non-peace if one does not know how to decode a culture. Listening to the women talk about their difficult situations was the mission of peace accomplished.

To listen and support discussion among the women was for me the only commitment for peace in that context. This commitment meant considering each woman as a sister... and potentially as sisters to each other.

The women are very different from one another, each with her particular situation. Although they are all Muslims, they have different ways of practicing their religion and relating to others.

In short, not judging others' ways of doing things is important. I tried to meet others in a spirit of respect. We welcomed each other as different, and, little by little, wove bonds of trust and shared experiences of suffering. Such was my mission of justice and peace in Algeria.

There is no peace without justice. And there is no justice without conversation. To make words flow was my only action for peace, justice, and nonviolence!