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Commemoration of Bishop Alberto Ramento

Joris Vercammen, Archbishop of Utrecht

Commemorating Bishop Alberto Ramento, we also recall the witness of all victims of extrajudicial killings in the Philippines and their participation in the struggle for the poor. And with them, we remember all victims of injustice, all poor people who are condemned to live in humiliating circumstances and who are denied their basic human rights. The murder of Bishop Ramento cannot be seen in isolation from all those other victims of injustice and war, of humiliation and slavery. Bishop Ramento was their advocate and he remains their eminent ambassador, even when he is no longer among us in body. Perhaps even more than then, he continues to appeal to us to live in solidarity with all of his fellow-sufferers.

These sufferers remind us of Jesus himself, who became a victim as they are. Jesus is in the middle of this community of victims, he is the centre of it. He was sent by the Father in order to participate in the life of the victims. Because of his obedience to this calling, he became one of the poor himself and was victimized. *Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him a name that is above every name*, St. Paul wrote to the Philippians (2:9). He proclaimed that Jesus brought salvation to the world; a world addicted to the power of 'egos' and to competition among individuals. These egos are the reason for violence and war. The Lord calls on us, not to flee from the brutal reality of the victims of the arrogance of others, because it is only in accepting those victims as our brothers and sisters, as our fellow human beings, that our hearts will be opened for God's dream of a world of justice and peace. Instead of speaking in terms of 'enemies of the state', we first of all will have to learn to speak in terms of 'victims of the state', as Jesus himself became 'a victim of the state'. That means they become a victim of one of those ideological systems which are only built to defend particular interests.

It is impossible to believe in the God of Jesus Christ without opening yourself to this appeal. The God who raised Jesus is the same as the one who sent him to his people as the expression of his solidarity. It is the God who said to Moses: *I have observed the misery of my people (...) I have heard their cry (...) I know their suffering and I have come down to deliver them (...)*. (Exodus 3:7) The resurrected Lord can only be understood and encountered through the life and the work of the victim Jesus of Naz-

areth. The one who came into the world to bear witness to God's concern for us human beings was handed over into the hands of human beings, because his love was seen as subversive. He was put to death because of his commitment to the poor and the voiceless, to the ones who were excluded, the ones who were not seen as valuable members of society, the ones who were 'a mere burden'.

Jesus is the first victim of all victims. He is an extraordinary victim, because he is the victim who never hit back. Facing death, Jesus was able to stand up for his witness and for his people. Precisely this fact made the confrontation with his commitment so strong. But his not hitting back made it possible for the demonic circle of violence to be broken. From then on, it has become possible not to think in terms of victims and enemies anymore, not in terms of divisions, but in terms of solidarity with fellow human beings, who are entrusted to each other in order to care for each other.

Our good Bishop Ramento understood this calling. And with all the limitations a human being has, he lived out his freedom to become a friend of the poor and an advocate of a society that is no longer based on exclusion of some parts of the population, but on the participation of all, because all of us are created in the same image of God. All of us are children of the same Father: no matter how different we all are, no matter how many more opportunities some may have, no matter how many more talents one has received: all of it is merely an invitation to share and to give.

The list of martyrs of our time is long, too long. As Jesus was called 'my beloved' by the Father, on the occasion of his baptism by St. John the Baptist, and on the top of the mountain of the transfiguration, all those victims encounter the same tenderness from the Father; they are called 'God's beloved'. All of them became victims of the violence that is awoken in the heart of their fellow human beings when their egoistic ambitions are frustrated. Our great challenge is to overcome the arrogance by which people are taken hostage. The trust of the martyrs in the love of the Father is ready to do so, their friendship paves the way to a new understanding of what it means to be a human being.

This act of commemoration is an act of community building. Bishop Ramento and all those other victims bring us together, as they continue to appeal to us with their suffering and with their grief, with their poverty and with their exclusion. Today is like a Good Friday, as we feel the shame about what can happen among human beings: how we violate and murder each other because of our fear for each other's otherness. Good Friday is

the day that the bankruptcy of human arrogance and domination becomes obvious, because it is also the day that Jesus is exalted on the cross, on which *he gave up his spirit*, as we read in St. John's Gospel (19:30). *They will look up on the one whom they have pierced*, the evangelist adds, recalling a word of the prophet (19:37).

Remembering the victims of injustice, I would also like to recall the community of the Melanesian Brotherhood. As you may know, among violent conflicts between ethnic groups on the Solomon Islands, the brothers remained one of the few groups to hold the trust of all fractions, as they were working hard for reconciliation. In 2003, seven of them were taken hostage by one of the fractions; later, they were killed. This was one of the moments that moved the situation on the islands towards peace, exactly because of the trust and the love with which the brothers were regarded by the islanders. I would also like to recall the Trappist Community of Tibberine in Algeria. Seven of its brothers were killed in 1996 by Muslim extremists. Brother Jean Pierre – as by a miracle he was saved out of the hands of the extremists – witnessed to their calling: *Our calling is to be among the Muslims: it is as if we were married to the Algerian people, for better and for worse (...) we couldn't leave them behind at the moment that we were threatened. Our neighbours didn't have the opportunity to flee as we had. Could we leave them behind? (...) No, we lived our life of prayer and daily commitment as a struggle of hope, as a fight to overcome the evil that was dominating the country by the better. They are the defenceless, praying people who hope to make the difference between a world destroyed by violence, and a world of justice and peace.*

Today, we reflect on Bishop Ramento, on other martyrs, but also on the calling of the IFI and of all of us. We try to be reliable partners in God's marriage with humankind, for better and for worse. A marriage is something of the heart, and it faces eternity. For better and for worse we are committed to all victims, longing with them for God's world to come, and working with their strength and conviction as fellow workers of our Creator.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone, the first Christians prayed with Psalm 118, as they celebrated Jesus' Easter (Mark 12:10). In Jesus' apparent downfall, he brought the real problem of humankind to light, and he opened our eyes.

The people behind his death may think that they have silenced him and maimed the prophetic voice of the Church, the Statement on the murder of Bishop Ramento, issued by the IFI on 4 October 2006 says. *They are mis-*

taken. His death has become like a candle in burning incense, kindling more fire, enflaming the hearts of the clergy and the faithful of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente to remain faithful to her pro-people and pro-labour heritage. Indeed, we grieved over his death, yet we celebrate his life. They may have taken his life by opening his body with wounds – but these wounds have become the doorway from which the Bishop's valiant spirit has poured out and been shared among many.

As Tertullian, a church father of the 2nd century, puts it: *The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church* (Apol. 50.13). The perseverance and friendship of all those who are called 'God's beloved' is the cornerstone of the new world of justice and peace.

St. Luke uses the words of Psalm 118 in the parable of the man who has planted a vineyard. But Luke adds some wise words of the prophets Isaiah and Daniel as a comment: *Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken in pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls* (Luke 20:17f.). Indeed, we have to admit: the destiny of Jesus and of all the other victims may function as a barrage of vulnerability that unmasks and brings injustice to light. It leaves us speechless and ashamed. This shame may become a strength in our hearts. It will help us not to forget the victims, and may lead us to a stronger solidarity with them, in order to change the logic of violence into solidarity in vulnerability. The Trappist brother who escaped from the kidnapping witnesses: *After we were visited by an armed group of extremists at Christmas 1993, we celebrated Midnight Mass. We were asked to welcome the vulnerable child, whose life was already threatened. The events were an invitation to us to be born. A human life goes from birth to birth. (...) In our own lives there is always a child who has to be given birth: the child of God, who we are ourselves.*

You could say that this is what church is all about: a community where we welcome the child Jesus as the firstborn of creation, and where we welcome all his fellow victims as the ones to whom he has stretched out his arms and hands, in order to lead them to the *new* creation. Church is about resurrection as God's protest against human disorder. Church is about the new creation that has begun with God's solidarity with us. Church is about this community we build here, yesterday and today, around the victims of the extrajudicial killings and around all the others whom are denied the right to live as human beings. We don't have any private interest to defend. Our only longing is to reflect something of God's own equal, free, non-partisan love. Church is the place where Jesus becomes visibly active in the world. It happens in this community, yester-

day and today, just as it happens in our congregations and in the concrete solidarity of Christians with all those people today who are victimized, yet have been called, 'God's beloved', God's children.

Let us go forth, for God is with us, let us go and the peace of God, the courage of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit will be with us as we are welcoming God's Kingdom in our midst. Let us go forth in building communities where all people are welcomed; let us go forth in the struggle against impunity; in building the people's movement for justice and peace; in political action and commitment to advocate for the poor; let us go forth in being church, celebrating the eucharist as the concrete space where the new creation is born. Let us go forth as a global community of faith and prayer in which a counter-culture will be given birth. Let us be reliable sisters and brothers of one another, reliable partners in God's marriage to humankind and in God's mission, as God's 'yes' to the world.

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English Summary

The above address was given at a commemoration service for Bishop Alberto Ramento, held in the IFI National Cathedral in Manila on October 3, 2012, i.e. the 6th anniversary of his martyrdom.