Vision of Lanza del Vasto and Gandhi Monks Community

Erik Kumedisa

In order to understand the vision of Lanza del Vasto I use the text of a letter written by him, addressed to Gandhi for a meeting at Wardha, in June 1937, while he was on pilgrimage in the Asian soil. It was taken from his work "Le viatique" and published in the "News of the Ark", special issue n°3, January - February 1991, as a tribute to Lanza. I discovered this letter for the first time in September 1991. This was my first acquaintance with the thoughts and works of Lanza del Vasto. Here we make a synoptic comment of this letter for two reasons: firstly, this letter gives an idea about the origins and the conceptual framework of the community of Ark; and secondly how it influenced the creation of the Community of Gandhi Monks, which we founded and deeply involved in.

Narendranagar, June 27, 1937

Beloved Bapuji,

I was meditating to write to you, but I was literally far from expecting you to come to me through a letter. I will always preserve this letter as one of the most precious things, which is a sign of love from a father and your concern for me. However I received the greatest gift which I hoped for: What more a man can ask to God than to have a clear and more than blessed understanding of what he was created for? On these sacred mountains, I pronounced my vows for life and laid out the plan of my future action, with the same zeal as when I was in love and dreamt of happiness. I was not fit for work in a village of India. When a human being, who was born as ambitious and combative, transforms completely to become a servant of peace, he can not be satisfied with a kind of peace which is too peaceful and doing the service without any risk factor. In my home in the West, where peace is in greatest danger, when its lovers are most hated and fought, this is the scenario where I feel personally called for work. I will seek companions and lay the foundations of an Order of wandering brothers, dedicated to preaching of peace across the countries. Their vows will be of poverty, chastity, work, obedience and perpetual refusal for rest; their discipline will be that of an army; their weapon will be the sacrifice. If at the end of next year, I managed to engage even ten or twelve men, by an oath towards me and between them, I will be certain that the seal of the will of God is on the work, and no human power will be able to stop its growth and development. In the name of the good of humanity, they will not take part in the revolution, because no good can come to the men, it can happen only through the improvement of men. The movement will be from the inside to the outside. Likewise it will begin with the villages and later extend to the cities. The reform will be operated not by gathering crowds, nor by public sermons, but it will be shaped by one man to another man, in secret. Because there is no salvation for the masses, but only for the men; it is one by one that all men can be saved. They will neither occupy an official position nor conquer power in the State. They will treat all States, nations or empires, liberal regimes or tyrannies as foreigners and adversaries. As long as these States cling to their
sovereign rights, which have the privilege of murder, (justice and war). The civil authorities are founded nonviolence, chance and fraud. Therefore the members of the Order will strive to free men from the State and the spirit of the crowd, teach them to work for themselves and among themselves, prevent themselves from hazardous and easy comforts and its dangerous protections, from excessive competitions and its abuses. All these factors make a situation of unreal peace under the disguise of war. They will teach peace: that is not taking rest, but it is the sword, as Jesus said. The peace must not be desired out of fear for death and destruction. It must not be loved for the preservation of the pleasures of life, but it must be wanted as a duty of the spirit. Peace does not belong to cowards, but to those who resist violence from outside and from within. Until now those men who have accepted war made heavy sacrifices for the same, similarly they must be ready to take the same risks for the conquest of peace. Our first battle, and victory, will be a refusal of military service in all countries at the same time. It will be a march of those who have been regimented to army, with banners and trumpets, saying no to the military barracks, but ready to end up in prisons. You must not laugh at this ambitious project even if it seems an exaggeration, dear Bapuji. Even if a small part of this dream comes to light, it will be something victorious forever. Moreover, this is my weakness, that if I don’t visualize big things, I will not try for anything at all. Please pray for me, Bapuji, as I do myself, whishing the poet’s dream come true, something alive, something green, like a branch of a great tree that was born out of you. As Christians we knew it, but we did not understand that such attempts are not impossible and crazy. The lesson of your life taught us to believe in what we knew. I will come to Wardha and ask for your blessing, your advice, your word, which I badly need before leaving India, which I love, and where I would have liked to live all my life, if my life belonged to me. Please remember this humblest disciple and most obedient servant of yours.

Shantidas

Through this letter, the basic elements of the nucleus of the Community of Ark were visualized. Lanza placed before Gandhi his plan to create a structure of a monastic life in the West. The idea was not a convent of the monks. It would be a group of families and single boys and girls who would work on things, of men who express themselves by the work of hands, in the process they will free themselves and support themselves without exploiting others. They will work on men by inviting them to share their life and their research on knowledge of self, possessions and self - sacrifice. Ten years after this letter of intent, the Community of Ark was born in 1948.

It was in the spring of 1990, when I was director of research on theology of the Mennonite Anabaptists of Congo that I came into contact with the Community of Ark of Bonnecombe, France. From that moment onwards, I followed it up through correspondence with Jean-Marie Bovy, Head of the coordination of the nonviolent action of the Ark. In the document I received, I read this letter that Lanza sent to Gandhi before their final meeting in Wardha. Through the reading of this letter I discovered another vision of life and of a society without violence.

A few months later, at the invitation of the Quaker Society of Friends in France, under the direction of Georges Elias, I was preparing to go to Bonnecombe for a non - violent training camp. Unfortunately, following the socio - political situation of the country which prevailed at that time, this project was not materialized. In the meantime I planned to create, as I had discovered in the letter of Lanza Del Vasto, a work of monastic life in the Democratic Republic of Congo.
The idea of this project was evolved in the course of time. We started with the creation of the Lanza Del Vasto Missionary Institute, which was transformed into the Gandhi Monks Community in 2014. We salute Gandhi International's action through Louis Campana's committed efforts as a sign of gratitude, which made the work to flourish. In summary, the Gandhi Monks Community was born as a result of contacts with the Bonnecombe Community. The Association is now a movement of ecumenical spirituality whose members are known as "Gandhi Monks".

The term "monk" here does not have a technical connotation of a monk as in the religious orders of Catholics. It is for us a secular association of volunteers, men and women, united among themselves. It does not mean leaving this material world, but basically a commitment to break the barriers of certain lifestyles, habits, and conventions that harm one's life and others. Becoming a Gandhi Monk does not mean to flee from the world and unite with God. It is a commitment to live and propagate the doctrine of non-violence practiced by Gandhi.

For us, non-violence is not a recipe which bears fruit or results. It is basically a behavior that manifests itself in a way of life that is both firm and have a disarming nature for those who use violence and unjust actions to defend themselves. Gandhian non-violence is very firm in its refusal to make a judgment on the actions of other people: it fights against unfair choices, actions and situations, corroborated by facts or institutionalized rules and regulations.

We do not constitute a church or the followers of any sectarian group, tied to religious denominations like Protestant or Catholic, or even a local syncretism. It is a united community movement where we share three common things together: a common vision with a focus on a goal which is not personal, we are driven by an ideal and we are pursuing a joint project to achieve: "a world without violence"; a team spirit that creates relationships of love within our group. This makes our community a place of self-sharing, of wealth as well as of poverty. For us, "being in community" means sharing the same ideal for giving and receiving; a common environment: same geographical space and close proximity in living.

The Gandhi Monks live on the basis of the following principles: firstly, to develop in oneself and in the life of others the necessary aptitudes for the practice of non-violence, it means the daily life has to be harmonized with the spirit of the "Beatitudes": spirit of joy, simplicity and mercy. In order to promote the spiritual values in themselves, Gandhi Monks aspire to strengthen their capacity for religious vision and spiritual radiance through secret prayer, voluntary discipline, and the love of service. Secondly, without being bound by a dogma or a status, the Gandhi monks affirm their tendency to simplify systematically their existence, not by compulsion, but by intimate deliberation, out of respect for themselves and love of the neighbour and by voluntary obedience to their project of society. They free themselves from certain expenses in order to give strength to the power of giving. In addition, they free themselves from certain worldly obligations in order to conquer the temptation of leisure in the service of the brothers. They will be free from the feelings about the comments which the world around them say, in order to conquer the full freedom of conscience and the right to devote themselves joyfully to any just and unpopular cause. Far from abdicating their individuality, the Gandhi Monks are committed to seek the goal of live in peace with oneself and others, systematically and with loyalty and tenacity. They believe in the spiritual and social value of sacrifice; they wish to abstain not only from all that may be morally harmful to them, but also from all that may be harmful for the neighbours; knowing that the height of freedom is to bind oneself in order to liberate others.
The conditions required to follow us on this path are first: a frank and sincere renunciation of material world. This is the first sacrifice, which blocks the way for anyone who tries to live in accordance with nonviolence, which comes deep from his heart. He has to give up the spirit of possession, the coveted positions, the love for comfort and the fear of surrender of all these things. Secondly: the formation of character and personality. Ancient Rome denied all scope for personality development to a slave, because a slave was not his own master: he did not possess himself. This possession of man by himself is based on his reasonable nature, on the fact that every man who knows himself can control himself and become a responsible being. Nonviolence always defends the freedom of human personality against all the tyrannies of instincts and emotions as well as physical violence. Personality in this sense, therefore, is equivalent to "Freedom", which is the first quality of a reasonable nature. It also implies stability, autonomy of mind and unity of character. Thirdly; to follow a plan of work shared between physical (hand-work) and spiritual occupations, so that the body and the spirit are exercised in a balanced and fruitful manner.

The Gandhi Monks advocate religion ecumenism because God is SATYA or Truth. It is a principle that is embodied in all living beings, and especially in human beings, in the form of soul or consciousness of the spirit. As all men are part of the divine essence, they are basically one. They are not just equal but identical, so that love is the only form of acceptable relationship between them. In this case, in a positive way, love means caring and taking care of others and devoting oneself entirely to the task of wiping away every tear from every eye, or the principle of Ahimsa or non-violence. So, the Gandhi Monks try to apply the principle of love or Ahimsa in all walks of life.

Our vision of the world is to promote a truly non-violent, a federally constituted society made of small, self-sufficient or relatively self-sufficient village communities without arms or even police. In such a scenario crime would be treated as a disease. It would be treated not by punishment but by understanding and help that depends mainly on the moral and social pressures of the local community, through the medium of social workers. The majority decision making that does not respect the moral integrity of the minority would be replaced by the rule of consensus. This consensus should be achieved through a rational discussion, a process of deepening and widening the consciousness of the participants. In the case of an impossible consensus, the majority would decide the matter, for administrative and practical reasons. If a citizen is morally disturbed by a majority decision, he would have the right to be exempted from it and even to disobey it. Disobedience of certain rules framed by the majority is a moral right giving respect for oneself and one's integrity. The nonviolent society must also ensure sarvodaya, the growth and welfare of all its citizens. Private property denies the identity or uniqueness of all men's very nature and is therefore immoral. For the Gandhi monks, possessing superfluous wealth is a sin against humanity, while others can not even meet their basic needs. Since private property already exists and men are attached to it, we believe that the rich should take only what they need and keep the rest in the possession of the community or society.

This is not utopia or poetry, this is in the spirit of Lanza Del Vasto's letter to Gandhi at Wardha. In souls nobly born, valour does not depend upon age. Today we have gathered here in Wardha to celebrate the 80th anniversary of Lanza Del Vasto's visit to Gandhi in 1937. An anniversary is celebrated to remember the contribution of the great personality. We have gathered to remember the meeting of two great men whose thoughts continue to influence the world. In his letter, Lanza del Vasto managed to summarize the visionary framework of non-violent society and to encourage habits of collective self-reliance, in the process of laying the foundations for a stable democratic government. These ideas are share by certain sections of
people in the West and they have spread to different parts of the globe, including Africa, with a special reference to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this letter of Lanza Del Vasto to Gandhi is an illuminating one in different ways to understand the dynamics of a certain type of struggle against violence, and the resultant socio-economic and political transformation. Lanza del Vasto, followed his master in letter and spirit, both thought and action. He tried to overcome the political and human limits along with his fellow citizens in the realization of a possible utopia or a dream. Today, in the face of the hegemony of a global economy, we believe that the greatest benefit we can get from this Conference is to verify and enrich our cultural conceptions of nonviolence and to help our fellow citizens to overcome the fear. By doing so we will gain full autonomy of conscience and the right to joyfully devote ourselves for any just cause. Therefore, each of us, as craftsmen will participate in the construction of a collective destiny without violence at the service of humanity. Let God, who has brought us from different parts of the globe to this gathering; guide us in our doing and actions.

Reverend Erik Kumedisa, S.J. is General Regent of Gandhi Monks Such. Congo
Email: moinesganghi@gmail.com