

Anti-Tziganism and a Theology of the liberation of the Roma

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Introduction.

Dear Friends,

I am absolutely delighted to be invited to this meeting. It is my second time and I have been asked to speak to you about anti-Tziganism and the consequences for us.

To begin with I shall reflect on the work of solidarity in an area where the Roma live and where my wife and I are active on behalf of the Institute of Social Work, Our starting point is therefore a definite place, where we work and where we meet real persons. This starting point is in the theological concept of “Joy and hope, sadness and the fears of people of today, particularly the poor and oppressed”.

My starting point therefore is in a “colony” of Roma in a Rumanian village. Here there are houses without running water, electricity, often a roof, men without ID cards, no birth certificates, non-existent, children without schooling, consequently without hope of work, of a future. This quarter is to be found on the outskirts of the village, separated by a wall invisible to the neighbours mainly Rumanians and Germans. The villagers who have been there over 20 years have never ventured into this quarter because inhabited by Gypsies. I call this anti-Tziganism.

When we examine the situation of the Gypsies, we soon realize that from the dawn of history the Gypsies have always been treated differently or totally excluded from the systems in society. From my own experiences I would like to stress some points regarding the treatment of the Gypsies. I shall discuss religious anti-Tziganism and finally reach a theology of the liberation of the Roma and which could be elements of discussion for group work afterwards.

ANTI – TZIGANISM

In my book “*Anti-Tziganism and Social Work*” I have tried to classify the different mechanisms of expulsion and discrimination at different periods of history and in different geographical regions. I noted four important points.

Exclusion in its most extreme form is EXTERMINATION, death, practiced under the Nazi regime. It is still functioning in the pogroms. Then there is EXPULSION, that is banishment from a country, school, building site, a house. REPRESSION is the commonest form of anti-Tziganism. Finally INTEGRATION, rarely successful, into society while maintaining Roma identity.

EXTERMINATION

You are all aware of the problems so it is unnecessary to evoke them here.

In 1408 in Fribourg, Gypsies were outlawed. In 1417 Gypsies arrived in Northern Germany, bearing letters from the King-Emperor Sigismund saying that they were invited by the Leaders and the Princes of the Church since the letters asked that they be received correctly and treated humanely.

In 1505 the presence of Gypsies in Great Britain is mentioned for the first time. 50 years later a law was passed stating that Roma immigrants could be condemned to death. In 1596 in York, 106 men and women were condemned to death because they were Roma. Finally only nine of them were executed.

Under the Ceausescu dictator Rumanian Roma were tolerated especially those employed in industry and agriculture. A few days after the fall of Ceausescu suppression broke out.

- In January 1990, the inhabitants of Turu Lung burnt down the home of a Roma and a child perished in the fire.
- In February 1990, at Lungu six houses on a Hungarian Gypsy site were burnt down and four Roma killed.
- In April 1990, at Seica Mare, two Roma houses were burnt down and one Roma murdered.

These are not the only examples. In Kosovo after peaceful co-existence violence broke out and thousands of Roma fled. I am wondering what our next speaker will have to say on this question. It cannot be said that relations between the Roma and the Gadge were exactly smooth! They are the result of political, historical, and economical situations of the majority population.

I am also struck by the fact that the memory of the extermination of the Roma is almost non-existent. 60 years on and there is still no monument to the memory of the holocaust in Berlin. The permanent exposition in the Tzigane quarter at Auschwitz was opened only in 2001. Only recently has any research been done on the forced deportation of Rumanian Roma which cost the lives of more than 11 000, something scarcely known in Rumania or in the rest of Europe.

The consequences of such events still linger in the collective memory of the victims, and even today can hardly be remedied. Those responsible continue to adopt positions of violence, racism, and discrimination making fresh relations difficult based on human values and the rights of man. We Christians who every Sunday celebrate the Eucharist should be aware of the need for a liberating memory of suffering and death.

EXPULSION.

Expulsion is also another form of exclusion, not necessarily associated with death, but has the same results in the majority population or those wielding power since the Roma are no longer to be seen and are no longer a problem. The results are drastic. This form of anti-Tziganism has always been practiced and is still in use today.

In 1498, years after their arrival in Germany, the Tziganes were banished from all the "Lander". In 1505 first mention of Roma in Grand Britain, and already in 1530 by law they were driven out towards America and Australia. In 1600 the Roma were deported from Portugal to Angola and they were deported from Spain to Brazil under the pretext that they practised Black Magic and were heretics! Polish Roma were deported to Siberia. At the beginning of the 19th century Basque Roma were obliged to emigrate to Louisiana. Similar constraints were applied in other European countries, principally Holland.

What about today? Such expulsions still go on but under a more elegant name: "Repatriation" and are carried out after agreement between countries, e.g. Rumania and Germany in 1992. In Austria begging by Roma from Slovenia is forbidden by law so they can be expelled. Today Roma from Italy are expelled towards Rumania where the Foreign Minister wonders "if they should not be sent to Egypt and put in camps in the desert".

Today in Austria and in other countries, children of 5, 6, 7 years of age and who are already at school, speaking German better than their mother tongue, are sent back to Kosovo. I would like to hear the cry of the Church of Christ following its Master beside the excluded families not taking refuge behind a courageous priest or the helpers of Caritas. If it was only a question of saving the souls of the Kosovars, mainly Muslims, it would be so wonderful to develop an Ecumenical pastoral project. But it is a question above all of saving the souls of the majority population who must strip their heart of stone of their selfishness if they are not to insult the name of the Christian West.. When the physical elimination of the Roma failed then anti-Tzigane repression succeeded in excluding them from the different social systems. Men's creativity has been almost boundless in getting rid of them.

1. First came POVERTY excluding the Roma from the social system "money". Poverty isn't a fatality, it can be created. In 2002 in Rumania 85% of the Roma live with less than \$4 a day; 88% live below the national poverty line. You can all find similar situations in your own countries. Many of the Roma live on "hand outs", officially 16% in Rumania, and this aid is so linked to conditions that many of those who would be eligible cannot receive it. The candidates for allowances are the most numerous in the department, because our social workers have been able to get the necessary ID papers, birth certificates and have filled out the forms
2. Lots of Roma in Europe need social welfare simply because the WORK market is closed for them. Don't forget that for long years work for them work was forced labour as was still the case in Austria and Germany under the Nazi regime, and in Communist Rumania until 1970. In Rumania there was a long tradition – 400 years – of slave labour up till 1855/1856. Under Communism, in Eastern Europe, the Roma were often integrated into the State system. They had the lowest positions and were the first to be fired when there was unemployment due to privatisations. As well as that they were excluded from building sites. Results: child labour became indispensable for the existence of the family and women's work didn't count. And when they did work they had the worst paid posts and unemployment among women was always higher than for men. The Roma were regarded a stop-gaps as well as being a handy supply of cheap labour. Provocative policies against begging in the public places against "tribes of dark skinned beggars from Eastern Europe" only hides the inability of Governments to struggle against poverty and unemployment, and stirs up nationalist feelings which please the voters.
3. Another sign of repression of the Roma is their exclusion from SOCIAL HOUSING. Their housing situation is the result of their assimilation and forced settling in marginal quarters far from the towns and villages. On the other hand, where Rumania was concerned, after the abolition of slavery the Roma were obliged to settle near to their former masters. They were thus excluded from society; they could only come to the outskirts of the town and when they died they were buried in separate cemeteries. The Landler cemetery in Transylvania was enclosed so as to be beyond the reach of the Roma. In our own village there is a cemetery ghetto for the Roma, near the Jewish cemetery (abandoned today) and a third for the Gadge at the other end of the village. The enclosure is sometimes a concrete wall as at Usti nad Labem in the Chezk Republic. It's the image of what goes on in people's heads!
4. The state of HEALTH among the Roma is terrible and leads to frightful experiments by people working in that environment. It is said that their life expectancy is 10 years shorter and child mortality is higher. An enquiry in 1999 showed that child mortality amongst the Roma of Rumania was 80 infants per 1 000; where as amongst the Rumanians it is 28. Women have twice the problems during pregnancy and the

number of under weight babies is double. Because of the state of housing there is greater risk of contagious illnesses – hepatitis or TB. You could all add to this list.

5. Another form of anti-Tziganism has been brought to my attention and one which I had not thought about – DISCRIMINATION BY NON DISCRIMINATION. Apparently a declaration by the Health authorities in Rumania in which figures concerning the Roma were omitted so as not to distinguish between the Roma and the non-Roma so as not to discriminate. You probably all know the cartoon: an elephant, a monkey, a bird and a fish, so as not to discriminate, must all perform the same action ; climb a tree!!!! As long as there is inequality between men, an identical action, hiding discrimination under pretext of non-discrimination is unjust and cynical.
6. Same can be said about EDUCATION. Never forget this during discussion about the poor formation of the Roma. In my book you will find many7 examples. However I will leave the final word to a Rom whom I interviewed :

When my daughter was 3, I enrolled her in the Kindergarten; my other child was attending the Kindergarten also. I was afraid to leave her because of the differences made between the children, the Roma being considered inferior. They are said to be dirty, not washed, that they have lice, that they are wild. This is why the majority of Roma don't put their children in the Kindergarten; the general mentality can't stand them."

That's what I mean by anti-Tziganism repression and their exclusion from the Social systems of our society.

7. Anti-Tziganism is evident in the LANGUAGE and CULTURE. Under the Empress Maria-Theresa Roma caught speaking their own language were punished by a beating. Things are different today. In the public administration there is no service Fewer and fewer Roma can speak their own tongue , although at present efforts are being made to revive their language.
8. The POLITICAL SYSTEM acts against the Roma. Under Communism, association were forbidden; after the fall of Communism, lots of Associations were formed by Roma but lacked coordination, which is not surprising since the Roma lack the tradition and political experience.
9. Then there is PUBLIC OPINION ; on can't forget the shocking remark made by the Rumanian President speaking about a journalist as a "stinking Tziganism". There are also "tests of popularity" according to which the Tziganes are ranked after Jews, right at the bottom of the list.

Discrimination can lead to discrimination in other spheres. In 2008 a document published by the Hungarian authorities showed that the measures taken to improve the education of Roma children didn't succeed. Schools participating in the experiment and receiving subsidies didn't always apply the rules with the result that the parents of the majority withdrew their children and in the end the Roma children were on their own in classrooms which had been ethnically cleansed.

In our Rumanian village we intended to begin integrating the Roma children in the school but we soon found out that many of them had no birth certificates and so didn't officially exist! It was necessary that the children had a roof over their heads to be able to study and do their homework in ideal conditions. Since we couldn't realise this for the whole village and since access to the work market is difficult and urgent we found an alternative: Find a place where at lunch time the children could have a hot meal and in the afternoon have help with their homework and be able to relax.

What role can Religion and the Churches play in the integration of the Roma? I am now going to embark on a new chapter to study this question.

ANTI TZIGANISM AND RELIGION.

From the moment of their arrival in Europe, religion played a key role in the life of the Roma. The first arrivals were considered to be pilgrims or penitents coming from Lower Egypt. This soon became a myth of a curse. They were said to have refused hospitality to the Holy Family in Egypt, and to have made the nails for Jesus' crucifixion! In 1714 the Archbishop of Mainz ordered the expulsion of all "Tziganes and other thieves, because of their way of life. That was the end of the saintly pilgrims. There to follow a certain number of prejudices according to which the Roma had no religion and had no difficulty in joining the faith of their neighbours.

EMPIRICAL FOUNDATION.

For the past few years, as part of a research program in a village in Rumania, I am studying the situation and importance of philosophical and religious positions of the Roma on their social situation. In the chat I had with a Catholic priest of the diocese he told me that he found seven different religions amongst the members of a same family. I myself found, during an interview, that certain children had been baptised in the Catholic Church, others in the Orthodox church.

These examples seem to confirm the popular anti-Tziganism prejudice of superficiality where religion is concerned. In actual fact the reality is more complicated and the conclusions to be drawn are more complex.

As part of my research, I was going to interview a family; a table was quickly set up with two shaky packing cases for my mike; there would have been no room in the hut in which there were already three beds – no wardrobe, no table! Chairs were borrowed from their neighbours. But there was a picture of Christ, joined hands. All very lovely.

When I asked them what they did when things went badly, and what did religion mean to them, they said that they pray, and more than once, every day. In many of the houses there is a statue of the Virgin Mary. Religion and religious images are present and play an important role in their daily lives. But when it's a question of the Church representative, it's different. The Catholic priest, who was complaining about seven confessions in a family, later on told me about the Baptism of Roma children.

"I once baptised five children of a Roma family. The Parish priest was hospitalised and the Roma came suddenly. I thought, how can that be done without preparation. I called the P.P. at the hospital and he told me: Do the baptisms, if you don't they'll kill you. They'll be mad they have prepared everything. So I baptised the lot of them. \it was interesting."

In our village, an orthodox mother told me how her children had been baptised according to the Catholic rite. A German priest had been passing through with his bus load of humanitarian aid. He stopped in front of the half derelict house of a Roma family; the young mother was there with her baby in her arms. He asked if the baby had been baptised. Since the answer was no, he baptised the baby as well as the youngest, even though the

mother was orthodox. This priest never returned and for the last three years the Catholic priest never set foot in the village! Is such a Baptism of any serious value? For the Gypsies no, but for the priest? When I questioned the P.P. about the number of Catholic Gypsies in his parish He answered:

“Now and again one of them will come and tell me that he is a Catholic. But that doesn’t happen very often!”

My interviews taught me that more than half the Roma in the village were Catholic. When I asked him if he ever did any Catholic baptisms, this is what he told me:

“I am not in direct contact with the Tziganes. I have been in contact with them now and again, for the Sacraments, for example, but right now, very little. These last few years the Tziganes are not often baptised “catholic”

So you see, the method of exclusion of the Gypsies by society, is reproduced by the Church. The colony of Roma in our village is out of bounds for the cure also. It remains to be seen whether this is the result of history or if it is particular to minority groups. Not only the Parish Priest but the Roma themselves say that the number of Baptisms is diminishing because the Souabes, who are Catholic, have left the region and the majority community has become Orthodox. Belonging to a particular confession, changing one confession for another is like trying to overcome total social exclusion, to be accepted at least in the social system “religion”. But that’s not seen thus by the representents of the great religions; On the contrary they regard a weak church link as a weak religious sentiment. Neither supporting nor encouraging such efforts is in reality a sign of religious anti-Tziganism and makes people say: “They have no religion”!

RELIGIOUS EXCLUSION AS A SOLUTION ?

Certain Evangelical movements have followed another route. The Pentecostal movement “Life & Light” from France undertook a missionary work with the Roma allowing them to extend their action throughout the whole of Europe and to have many adherents. At the annual meeting of the Gypsy Lore Society in Manchester (UK) last September heard Marti Marfa y Castan from Barcelona present the evolution of this Evangelical movement amongst the Gypsies. According to him, this Pentecostal movement known as “The Evangelical Church of Philadelphia” has created a new identity assimilating the position of the Gypsies in a world hostile to the destiny of the Jews, thanks to which they become a chosen people whose mission in life is to realise God’s plan. The auto-identification as Gypsies takes on a religious dimension. This redefinition created by the Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria has several consequences, amongst others : converts would change their way of life, they would have a new identity as believers in the face of non-believers from whom they must be separated so as not to be contaminated. Formerly opposition was between Roma and Christians, today it was between believers and unbelievers. Movements weakening traditional family structures are even mentioned by a chaplain of the Gypsies in Germany. When such is the case Christianity is no longer the salt of the earth and the light of the world, it is a will o’the wisp in religious circles of exclusion.

INCLUSION BY A THEOLOGY OF THE LIBERATION OF THE ROMA.

I would now like to explain what I mean by “theology of the liberation of the Roma” by recalling the passage in the Gospel of the curing of the 10 lepers
I shall quote from the text of St Mark chapter 1, 40 – 45.

“A leper come to Him and pleaded on his knees: “If you want to” he said, “you can cure me.” Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. “Of course I want to,” he said. “Be cured!” And the leprosy left him at once and he was cured. Jesus immediately sent him away and sternly ordered him “Mind you say nothing to anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your healing prescribed by Moses as evidence of your recovery.” The man went away, but then started talking about it freely and telling the story everywhere, so that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but had to stay outside in places where nobody lived. Even so, people from all around would come to him.

Peter Gstewtner inspired by Michel Foucauld writes about the social relations with the Lepers. “The model whereby society reacted in the presence of leprosy was excluding lepers from the community: Hiding them an isolated spot far from the population, where lepers were amongst themselves and where they cultivated a sub-culture of wretchedness, infirmity, poverty and handicap, a sub-culture which nobody bothered about. The lepers were outside the pale, and outside society the symbol: a wall; what went on behind that wall interested no one. The lepers’ villages were sign of misery which nobody visited unless on a special mission.

The contrast between this description and what happens in our Roma section is striking and needs no explanation.

Jesus, therefore bypasses the exclusion, touches the lepers and becomes their liberator although such an attitude is against the prescriptions of the law of Moses (Lev 13,14) according to which a priest must first of all check that the leper has been cured, if he like the others before being able to deal with him. By side stepping this law Jesus is in tune with the logic of the laws of society; he himself is excluded; he must remain outside the village until such times as his own logic becomes a source of attraction “people from all sides would come to him”.

If therefore the exclusion of the Roma forms part of the central elements of their life, these elements must be found at the heart of the Pastoral care of the Roma. Therefore in my opinion it is wrong, at least in Europe, present the idea of “displaced persons” as the foundation of the Pastoral care of the Roma, as a recent document “Orientations for a Pastoral of Gypsies” from the Pontifical Council for the “ Pastoral of Migrants and Displaced Persons” The 5th World Congress for the Pastoral of Gypsies held in Budapest in 2003, stated that the service of this Council should include all nomads, i.e. all individuals families and groups leading a nomadic life, for ethnic reasons e.g. the Gypsies or for economic reasons e.g. circus staff. It also includes those who have no fixed abode, and who cannot profit by parish ministry like the nomads in Ireland, Belgium or Germany, who live in caravans or the nomads of Bangladesh who live in boats on the water. At the first international meeting of the

Pontifical Commission in 1975, representatives of African nomads were present; they were not Gypsies but shepherds, e.g. the Touaregs of the Sahara, the Masai from Tanzania and Kenya, or the Pygmies from Central Africa. A Pastoral care which gathers nomads, fishermen, civil aviation personnel, Touaregs, Masai and Pygmies along with the Roma is ignorant of the reality of the life of the Roma, 90% settled in Europe, nor of their spiritual needs.

Following in the path of Jesus and like his curing of the lepers, the struggle against exclusion of the Gypsies must be the spur of all pastoral accompaniments the definition of the leper by society explains better the mentality of those who exclude than the excluded. If Jesus touches the Lepers, it's not only to cure them, but it's also to free us from our hardness of heart but to give us a heart in which not only our neighbour but God himself finds a home.

The struggle against all forms of suffering, inflicted on the Roma by exclusion, is not only an added extra of the "nice" religious teaching or the distribution of the sacraments. No. It must be the central point of a Pastoral care which takes seriously the Incarnation of God in the poverty of the stable in Bethlehem. Social work, liberating mankind, is not only an expression of charity but a practical application of our Faith. Such a Pastoral helps the Roma to feel that God has seen their sufferings and heard their cry. (Ex 3, 7-8) and that he loves them with a preferential love. Such an approach transmits an energy and spiritual strength without which all other help is superficial and useless. Such an image of God must be felt by mankind. This conviction convinces me that personal involvement in projects destined for the Roma is more important than distributing material or financial resources.

This demand for a Pastoral care dedicated to overcoming poverty and to the abolition of exclusion is in the interest of the Roma. But it is also for the benefit of the majority population for it opens up new possibilities of a living understanding of the Faith. In reality it's not just freeing the Roma from their misery and exclusion. It concerns us too. Such an approach to those who, in our industrialised societies are at the other end of the social hierarchy, who are far removed from all political and economical interests, makes us look beyond ourselves, and helps us to overcome our endemic selfishness, to broaden our horizons and to better follow Christ who has preceded us in breaking down frontiers. "***What you did to these the least of my brethren, you did it to me***" (Mat 25, 40) I suppose that in our capitalist society that worships money and power, we must succeed in changing "The Theology of Liberation" into a "Theology for the Liberation of the Roma" which will reveal human dignity to those who are shifted to the margins of society and save our own dignity. A Tzigane Pastoral care which is new, spiritual and aimed at inclusion could possibly help us. As we devote ourselves in this spirit to the Roma, by being aware of anti-Tziganism and analysing its structures, by taking position against all forms of exclusion, by literally touching the lepers, then we will be following in the footsteps of THE builder of Peace, and we shall become makers of Peace, Love, a Love stronger than death.