



24th General Chapter

Shalom/UN-NGO Report, Part I

Sisters Kathy Schmittgens and Eileen Reilly

As the *Shalom* network was being birthed 25 years ago, I am reminded of where I was at the same time this decision was made. War had finally reached the town in which I was teaching in Sierra Leone. We had escaped once from the fighting but returned when we heard that everything was under control. We had left hurriedly and had not done a good job of providing for our workers. While we were back in Yengema the priest from the neighboring town came with nine girls who had been abandoned at a boarding school. The soldiers had taken over the school and he was afraid of what would happen to the girls. We had planned to leave again quickly but could not further abandon the girls.

So we were still there when the second attack occurred. This time the main road was blocked so we needed to take a back road around the mountains. We were on our “escape” while the 1992 Chapter was being held in Rome. So you see it is very precious to me to highlight our mission for peace, justice and integrity of creation. I was painfully (and personally) aware of situations of conflict and injustice. I saw the fear in the eyes of the young girls. I realized that we had a duty to provide for our workers and I experienced first-hand what it is like to be forced from your home and become a displaced person.

My story ended well because I was welcomed and cared for at another one of our houses. But I realized the agony of a people who have nowhere to go and no means of support. One woman came to our house in Kabala where I ended up. She had delivered twin girls on a veranda of a stranger’s house as she was running away from the fighting. Her story was not unique to the war in Sierra Leone and it certainly is not unique in the world of 2017. And so *Shalom* was born at that same time in history...we are grateful for all those who have carried the work forward for these years

Roxanne Shares, International *Shalom* Coordinator 2007-2015

Today we would like to especially acknowledge Sister Roxanne Schares who served as the International *Shalom* coordinator for eight years up until this time two years ago. Much of the work of *Shalom* since the last Chapter was done by Sister Roxanne. She helped to facilitate two international meetings. In 2013 the international meeting was held in Baltimore, MD in the United States. The second one was the *Shalom* Seminar held in Rome in 2015.

Roxanne was the force behind the creation of the *Shalom* Seminar in 2015. As a Congregation, we owe her much gratitude and praise! It was a “risk in faith” to envision a

gathering of that scale and with the support of the General Council it became a reality. As a congregation, we owe her and the Council much gratitude and praise....” We wish that Roxanne had been the one present when the Extended General Council met soon after the Seminar so she could hear the reactions and comments on the Seminar. The word that some of the Provincials used to describe the outcome of the Seminar was that the sisters came back “infected” with *Shalom*. Thank you, Roxanne!

Throughout these past five years, branch meetings were held in all five branches of the network

2013

- Africa Branch in Banjul, The Gambia
- European Branch in Budapest, Hungary

2014

- Asia/Oceania held their first Branch meeting in Osaka, Japan
- Latin American and the Caribbean Branch in São Paulo, Brazil

2017

- Just this May the Asia/Oceania branch held their second meeting in Bandipur, Nepal.

The North American branch holds their meeting annually at various sites.

So the work of *Shalom* continues to involve Sisters and colleagues throughout the Congregation.

Shalom/UN-NGO and You Are Sent, C 17

The work we do as *Shalom/UN-NGO* coordinators is situated deeply in *You Are Sent*. In particular, we find inspiration in *YAS, C 17*. I had the opportunity this year to spend three days with the novices. Sister Rosemary asked me to help them in their understanding of this paragraph. Even though I had read it many times, the responsibility of being part of formation made me REALLY look at it. I needed to see it with “fresh eyes.”

You will find copies of *YAS, C 17* on your tables in your languages. We are asking you to take a few minutes reading the paragraph and looking at it yourself with “fresh eyes.” What about the paragraph is familiar? What had you not noticed before? What is challenging? What is appealing?

[Reflection at tables for about five minutes.]

Would anyone be willing to share a reflection or comment with us?

[Responses from Chapter members.]

Here are a few things that I noticed as I prepared to spend time with the novices.

First of all, it is situated in the Poverty section of the Constitution, which at first may seem to be an odd place to locate our main instruction on justice. But YAS situates our efforts for justice clearly in our attitude of total openness to God and therefore to all of God's creation. "Our living of gospel poverty urges us to serve the poor."

Then I remembered what Sister Noreen Slattery, one of our sisters who is now deceased, had told me many years ago. She had been part of the writing committee of *You Are Sent*. She told me that the secret of YAS rested in the ADVERBS. An adverb explains HOW we are to do the things we are called to do and be.

I looked at the paragraph and found five ADVERBS. I am not sure how things translate in the other languages so it may not be exactly the same. The adverbs are "become *painfully* aware" "work *actively* to confront root causes of injustice", "confront injustice *credibly*", "live *simply*" and "value work *rightly*."

Twenty-five years ago when the 1992 Chapter mandated the call for a network for peace, justice and integrity of creation I believe that they were intending that the work we do comes directly out of the words of this paragraph.

We are called to be *painfully* aware of the situations of injustice in our world today. This is reflected for us in the words of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*.

"Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become *painfully aware*, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it." (*Laudato Si'* 19)

Pope Francis urges us, as does YAS, to become *painfully aware* of the many ways creation is being abused and how this is especially impacting the poor in the world. He calls all of us to *work actively* to address the root causes of the crises.

Shalom Seminar 2015, Love Cannot Wait and Laudato Si'

When the *Shalom* contacts from all over the Congregation gathered for the historic *Shalom* Seminar in the summer of 2015, the theme of the Seminar was "Living the Gospel in the 21st Century." The newest encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, had just been published; everything we did was permeated with its energy.

We could not have asked for a better document to focus us for the 21st Century. We were extremely fortunate that Cardinal Turkson spoke to the Seminar participants and listed some of the concerns of the Vatican Commission on Justice and Peace. “These include

- human trafficking and enslavement;
- abuse of women and children in zones of armed conflict;
- food and land insecurity;
- threats to integral human development – so many people lead fractured, disjointed lives;
- the lives of those on the margins – poor, discarded, ignored, and excluded from official recognition and formal economic life;
- the repercussions of globalization and of massive commercial and financial dominance over all aspects of life.”¹

We know some of these from our own lived experience. And to this list must be added the phenomenon of migrations of peoples. Pope Francis, in a beautiful way, breaks open those challenges for us in a document which is meant “for everyone on the planet.”

So our *Shalom* Focus and Commitments became heavily influenced by the grace of that special moment in the history of our Congregation, the Church and the world. When you hold *Love Cannot Wait* up with *Laudato Si’*, the parallels are astounding. *Love Cannot Wait* could have been written right from *Laudato Si’*.

<i>Laudato Si’</i>	<i>Love Cannot Wait</i>
Chapter 5 of <i>Laudato Si’</i> calls for dialogue as a path to reconciliation and healing.	In <i>Love Cannot Wait</i> we are called to embrace dialogue as a way of life that leads to new discoveries about ourselves and others and to conversion, reconciliation, and healing.
<i>Laudato Si’</i> calls all of us to live more simply and sustainably in paragraphs 203-208.	In <i>Love Cannot Wait</i> we are called to live more simply, responsibly and sustainably with one another and with all of creation.
Pope Francis urges us in <i>Laudato Si’</i> to witness to unity by caring for “our common home”. He especially emphasizes that we ARE all connected, we are ALL ONE.	<i>Love Cannot Wait</i> calls us to intensify our efforts to witness to unity in a divided world by holding all in common.
<i>Laudato Si’</i> emphasizes the call for education and for tackling the root causes of injustice	<i>Love Cannot Wait</i> asks us to direct our resources and ministries toward education that transforms and calls all to eliminate the root causes of injustice.

And finally, *Laudato Si'* ends with a reflection on Trinity, Eucharist and Mary.

Love Cannot Wait impels us to deepen the contemplative and prophetic dimensions of our lives by grounding who we are and all we do in the love of the Triune God.

Cardinal Turkson commented specifically and admiringly on the parallels. He said, “With your focus on Justice, Integrity of Creation and Peace, I have no doubt that your Congregation will take these calls for dialogue and education extremely seriously – and with justified pride at finding echoes of your own words and work in the environmental encyclical of Pope Francis.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This encyclical has been a touchstone for all the work of *Shalom* in the past two and one half years.

Love Cannot Wait has also been a guide for the work of *Shalom*. Throughout these past five years we have had a reflection on *Love Cannot Wait* in each of our *Shalom*/UN-NGO newsletters. Sisters and colleagues from all parts of the Congregation fleshed out the call of the Chapter. Each reflection in our newsletter was filled with audacity and hope.

We would like to highlight just a few of those reflections:

- In Honduras women were educated on their rights and realized that it was never too late for them to learn. They got the courage to stand up for themselves in a male dominated society.
- In Japan our students met a woman who continues to fight to keep Fukushima nuclear plant from resuming its operation after the tsunami caused serious damage to the reactor.
- Our sisters working in The Gambia live in a predominantly Muslim culture where women are considered to be inferior. They strive to remind the mothers of the children that they are the first and most important teachers and encourage them in the education of their daughters.
- Eileen reminded us that as School Sisters of Notre Dame we see our call to care for those who are left the farthest behind. Our support of the Sustainable Development Goals is a call to “eliminate the root causes of injustice”.
- In Wilton, sisters remembered Pope Francis’ call to all women and men religious throughout the world to offer housing to refugees. They saw news reports of refugees on the move throughout the Middle East. They knew the commitment in *Love Cannot Wait* and invited a Syrian family into a house on their property. It called them to a deeper dialogue, to deeper understanding of root causes of poverty and to reconciliation and healing.

- We also have the example of our “*Cassetta*”, the little red house on our Generalate property. In January we welcomed a refugee family from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

These are just a few examples. Throughout all five branches of *Shalom* we see sisters working “*actively* to eliminate the root causes of injustice.” They are educating themselves so that they can *confront injustice credibly*, and they are looking for ways to *live more simply*.

Shalom Focus and Commitments

The outcome of the *Shalom* Seminar was the formulation of our *Shalom Focus and Commitments for 2015 – 2018*. The document has three main commitments:

1. First, to deepen our contemplative and prophetic living.

Our aim is to foster a spirituality that reflects our charism. Our spirituality impels us to work for a world of peace, justice and integrity of creation as we see especially in YAS, C 17. We have also been blessed with *Laudato Si'* to focus our pursuit of justice and peace.

We pay special attention to the call for an Integral Ecology in *Laudato Si'*. With *Integral Ecology*, Pope Francis emphasizes that we are completely connected, integrated, with everything and everyone. Any decision or policies must take the environment *and* the people who live in it into consideration for our lives, ministries and institutions. In YAS, C 4 we say that our mission is to “bring about that oneness for which Jesus Christ was sent.” Over and over Francis reminds us that everything is connected. Our mission as School Sisters is really to remind ourselves and others that we are not separate, not separate from creation, not separate from the pain of those who are abused and neglected, not separate from those who are the oppressors, not separate from the powerful, not separate from world realities. God, in Jesus, wants us to work to make the oneness of all visible in our world.

We also acknowledge the absolute necessity of prayer and reflection for all we do. We are especially grateful to the Centers of Prayer for Peace that take one day each month to be the spiritual powerhouse for all of the work of *Shalom*.

We are grateful to the sisters of the Polish Province who each year create a beautiful novena in honor of our *Shalom* patron, Blessed Antonina. It is a strong reminder that how she lived each day prepared her for the difficulties she faced.

2. Our second commitment is to increase the strength of our relationships within the *Shalom* network.

This is one of the biggest graces of the network as well as the biggest challenge. It is only in North America where we have full-time *Shalom* contacts. In the rest of the Congregation our sisters are carrying on full-time ministries as well as educating, facilitating and sharing *Shalom*. We continue to look for ways to share within and across branches of *Shalom*.

As technology improves some of our biggest obstacles remain – *language and time zones!* There is such a richness in seeing what is possible in all the different parts of the world as we strive to live the “oneness for which Jesus Christ was sent.” Our hope is to discover ways to strengthen our connections. In May we began a Facebook page that has the Branch Representatives as editors so that pictures and events can be shared across continents. It is a small start.

3. Our third commitment is to promote education and actions that address the root causes of injustice.

We know that Catholic Social doctrine has two feet. We place one foot firmly in *charity* and care for any who are suffering and we place one foot firmly in *addressing the causes of the injustice*.

To give just one example – **human trafficking**. It is an important thing to try to rescue young people who have been sold into slavery. But it is equally important to work with families in the countries where young people are recruited and trapped in slavery to prevent this from happening.

The effects of climate change, war, intense poverty, and disregard for the girl-child all contribute. If nothing is done to stop the recruitment and enslavement there will always be a new supply of young people. Education is key to interrupting this cycle. Girls especially must be made knowledgeable about the reality that underlies the enticing narratives that are used by traffickers. We must also push for laws that punish the traffickers and the “clients” and see that those laws are enforced. In some countries the punishment for trafficking of animals is greater than for trafficking of persons.

YAS, C 17 calls us to “Confront injustice credibly.” We are called both to educate ourselves in the causes and effects of injustice and to “work actively” to address those issues. And since human trafficking is linked today to the plight of migrants and refugees, we see how important it is find ways to help in that area as well.

Especially pertinent as we look at what is happening to our “common home” is the Global Agenda put forth in the **Sustainable Development Goals** that were ratified at the United Nations in 2015. It is vital in our work for justice, peace and integrity of creation that we see how our values as School Sisters of Notre Dame coincide with the values outlined in these 17 Goals. So as a network we have committed to learning more about them and how each of our countries is planning to set the agenda for the country and to accomplish the tasks. Each July, some of the countries of the world make a report at the United Nations High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on their progress in accomplishing the goals. Sisters in those countries are invited to review the report and comment on whether they see the report as being consistent with their experience.

And finally, the **UN International Days** are a great opportunity for all of our sisters to awaken interest in global concerns and a platform for education on all levels. Three days, World Environment Day, Human Rights Day and the International Day of Peace are

celebrated by the entire network. Other days are also celebrated in some parts of the Congregation such as the Day of the Girl, Education for All, World AIDS Day, Women's History Month, World Day for Refugees, and World Day against Human Trafficking. Each of these brings opportunities both for awareness and education as well as actions to combat injustices.

ⁱ Turkson, "Living the Gospel in the 21st Century: the Church's Response to the Crises of Our Times" talk given at the Shalom Seminar, July 2015

ⁱⁱ Ibid