

Panel Intervention by Josianne Gauthier, CIDSE, on the 80th Anniversary of Pax Christi International – March 13, 2025

I am so grateful for this invitation from Pax Christi International, to mark their 80 years of work, and to be with these wonderful speakers and all of the people joining us today. I am happy to share a few reflections and hopefully contribute to a rich exchange and reflection.

The timing of this reflection and gathering is providential. The world needs this conversation right now – in the midst of all the violence and noise, and ugly threats, and manipulated information, lies, and orchestrated chaos, we have the opportunity to slow down, breathe, and reconnect with our faith, with our humanity, and with our truth.

Today, I am speaking from my perspective – from the experience of my life and the journey I have shared with CIDSE these past years. As we know, CIDSE is not an organization with a direct mission to work for peace. And I think we have often distinguished our work in development, in human rights, in ecological and social justice, from work on peace. But I believe that we now need to challenge that idea.

The relationship, the **interdependency** between these ideas, notions, but also actions and endeavours are real, and our intentions and our lens will need to be adjusted, especially in a context where **peace** is so threatened, not just as a state of being or political reality – but even as a **principle**.

We are being invited to – and have a certain responsibility to reframe how we see our work. Peace and Integral Ecology, Peace and Human Rights, Peace and human Dignity, Peace and biodiversity, and cultural heritage and intercultural and intergenerational solidarity.

If we come back to the simplicity and beauty of the Canticle of St-Francis of Assisi, and of the Encyclical letter of Pope Francis, “Laudato Si” – in this, its 10th anniversary, they both refer us to the reciprocity between Peace and our relationships with Nature. And in these readings, we can see a workplan for integrating peace as an objective within our other justice work, including ecology.

We, who are involved in the human rights, the ecology, the social justice work must learn to intertwine our analysis and our efforts with those working for greater peace. We can't let ourselves be intimidated by the enormity of the task. Peace is not ever achieved fully, it is **an ongoing struggle**, an ongoing prayer, an ongoing commitment.

I believe that how we act in this world, should be guided by our will to contribute, to build, to protect, and cherish Peace, justice, and love.

What are the main challenges we are facing as Faith Organisations? Fear is the constant challenge

Social/Political climate – the madness

We are living in a time of great anxiety, unpredictability, loss of all references, and of truths we thought we could count on. Every day, something new is thrown at us with the purpose and effect of destabilising us. As a result, faith leaders and organisations are being distracted and pulled in so many directions that they are left wondering what to react to and what to act on. What we are

facing is a total dismantling of a global world order. This in turn breeds distrust, self-protection and isolation even among organisations such as ours. With the escalation of systemic violence and armament, and a spiral of hate, of othering, we're losing focus. We are forgetting what really matters and where we are meant to invest our energy. We are forgetting the most vulnerable, including the planet.

Economic climate: the unraveling

The economic environment is also fueling more fear and lack of trust. This is encouraging new forms of hoarding, holding back, and self-protection, and is preventing us from sharing. This has translated into funding cuts to organisations, and an increased sense of scarcity. But again, fearing the ideas we find challenging, we prefer to blind ourselves and comfort ourselves in our own ideas and turn away from our collective responsibility towards each other and towards the earth. We are not even taking responsibility for the way we live and how it is creating the very violence we now fear.

The fear of war has also fed the economic climate, with a new and growing mistrust of allies, we are seeing an arming up of our countries, and a shifting of resources to an economy of war. The lack of funding to social justice, advocacy, peace, environmental, and human rights organisations is also feeding our lack of trust, but also limiting and reducing our capacity, and we're losing opportunities to learn and hear from communities. And because we have stopped listening to these communities and other voices, the most vulnerable, the most excluded, and most marginalized always pay the highest price for our fear and loss of vision. This then leads to an even greater concentration of power and resources into the hands of a few, which also spells more violence and potential for violence, in some form or other.

Social climate: the isolation – breakdown of solidarity and increase in egotistical and selfish choices

The social climate is one of fear. And fear is compounded by the lack of courage of those who can influence change. Everybody is afraid to lose what they have: their comfort, their power, their influence, or their funding. Fear makes us small and meek, and isolated. It reinforces the feeling of powerlessness and defeatism and anxiety.

And in this context, we lose the ability to engage in dialogue. The isolation, loss of sense of community and shared struggles is mirrored and enhanced by a shrinking space for civil society. Where is the space for healthy, respectful, critical dialogue and thinking? We can only become stronger and smarter by sharing and confronting our ideas with others – but we are afraid to do so – because of the violence we think that will ensue. And so, we are seeing a vicious circle of closing in and self-protection and “independence” and self-reliance instead of acknowledging how interdependent we all are between humans, and with Creation. We're being separated and put into ideological boxes and pushed to the extremes.

What are the strengths, capacities or added value of faith-based organisations and religions in response to these challenges?

We know who we are

Our faith gives us rooting as individuals and mission as organisations. We know we are loved and were created for love. And we know we are not alone.

We promote and we **model** solidarity, listening, community, sharing and pooling together of resources and knowledge. We can practice collaboration instead of competition.

We know how to practice **hope** which is so deeply needed.

We often speak about the faith actors and their role in creating, communicating, sharing hope. But we must remember that this is no easy task. It's a choice and a daily practice and something we need to do with the help of others.

We know what we're doing - We have practices and skills

As Catholics, we have Social teachings to help us put words on the complexity around us, but we also have spiritual and intellectual practices and methodologies to guide our action. We know that by our faith, we are called to action.

We know how to accompany grief and fear, and we have tools to overcome them together.

We have gifts, we have privilege, we have talents, and we are cared for. We have the responsibility to pass this knowledge on and share these gifts with others. This is our witness. **We can practice Love – active – activist – hopeful – creative – courageous – radical love** and chip away at the fear and sense of isolation, and replace it with a sense of community, of support, of possibility, and hope.

And we have **expertise and experience** in thinking outside the model – outside the economic, political, intellectual model that is causing so much harm. We can be inspired by other ways of thinking because we know we are a global and diverse human family. We do not need to be trapped in the thinking that is the growth paradigm, or that resources are scarce. We have knowledge and lived experience of solidarity and sharing. We have the voices and wisdom of possibility from our sisters and brothers around the world that we can hold up.

As global organisations and relations, we are close to the marginalized. We can access and can **share power and space** with the multitude of communities and people who are not being heard and who are being drowned out by the noise of fear and systemic violence and injustice.

We are conscious of our limits and know how to make this a strength

We are one human family. We are a community and we all need each other.

We practice **gratitude**, and we can **celebrate** each other and the good we see in everyday miracles and achievements.

We can propose and take part in concrete actions that go beyond our own individual capacities and even our own lifetime and there is great relief in that. Knowing we don't have to fix everything, we still have a responsibility to act and give back in whatever way we can.

We are conscious both of our **smallness** and of our incredible **collective power**. Though we must not pretend to know everything, we must – especially in the Global North – practice more humility, **listening**, and be open and prepared to **unlearning** and learning again – and find the courage to challenge the lies we are being told about the world we live in. We know that we can reconcile these **broken relationships** with each other and the Earth.

In short, we know the **work does not end with us**, nor that we can or should do it alone. We will only be stronger in our work and more powerful in building and sustaining just peace, by listening to and learning from each other. **Dialogue** involves leaving space for others' ideas to be considered. It's certainly not easy, but something we can practice and challenge each other with and for which we can hold each other accountable.