

ZACCHAEUS REPENTANCE FROM HIS WRONG DEEDS AND THE NEED FOR RESTORATIVE ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Collecting taxes is a fundamental way for countries to generate public revenue to finance investment in human capital, infrastructure and the provision of services to citizens and businesses. To achieve this, they need men and women in charge of tax collection. This practice is not new. In the time of Jesus, a figure emerges: that of Zacchaeus, whose story is told in Luke 19:1-10. This man appears in the guise of an ordinary person, denigrated by some, and undoubtedly admired by others, for his wealth and notoriety; a man who, in the end, finds in Jesus a unique, exceptional consideration, which, in the end, brings about his conversion. Only true love converts and transforms.

What is Zacchaeus accused of?

As a tax collector and publican, he benefited from contracts to supply the Roman army, manage the collection of port taxes and supervise public construction projects. He also acted as tax collector on behalf of the Roman Empire. He had to advance the sums to be collected and recover his funds from the taxes he levied. Organized into "colleges", the tax collectors constituted a powerful order. As the imperial administration grew, both their role in this area and their importance in general declined rapidly.

So it's not tax-collecting activities that devalue Zacchaeus, but his greed, dishonesty and, above all, his collaboration with the Roman enemy.

This situation deprived the people, who no longer benefited from the money collected. This money ended up in the pockets of the Romans, who took it elsewhere for their development, to the detriment of the Jews from whom it came.

A similar situation exists in the Congo, which has possessed enormous wealth for a long time, but the impact of this wealth touches the whole world, but the people do not benefit from it.

As a tax collector, Zacchaeus was hated by some; but as a leader and a rich man (v.2), he was undoubtedly adulated and envied by others, as is the case in all human societies. Zacchaeus thus assumed a somewhat complex social position. But this rich man and ruler didn't hesitate to climb a sycamore tree to see Jesus pass by. His desire to see Jesus was stronger than anything else.

Zacchaeus acknowledges his wrongdoing before Jesus, and promises to right it: "*Behold, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor, and if I have wronged anyone, I will repay him four times over*" (v.8). In fact, by expressing himself in this way, he is not merely evoking a possibility of guilt, but is affirming that he has wronged others; he is confessing his sin. This testifies to his humility and poverty, since he now shows sensitivity towards the poor. Zacchaeus observes what Jesus asked of the rich man in the previous chapter (18:22). He sought out Jesus, met him and welcomed him into his home, resulting in his conversion.

Zacchaeus' conversion greatly opened the doors to his true mission, which was to work for himself and for the people. He understood the concept of eco-justice, which takes into account the rights of organisms and the natural environment in addition to those of human beings. In Zacchaeus' case, it's the latter (human rights) that is emphasized, based on access, equity, diversity and participation for all.

By redistributing his possessions, Zacchaeus appeals to crooked rulers to give everyone equal access to social goods, which is one of the most fundamental principles of social justice. This means that society's resources must be equally accessible to all. In Africa, for example, there is a need for managers who exploit and loot natural resources in the Congo to ensure that people have equal access to education, healthcare and employment opportunities. Managers of multinational companies must respect this principle by ensuring that everyone has access to these resources in a way or another. This will also be a form of their conversion to the image of Zacchaeus.

In his actions, Zacchaeus understood that he could not be happy on his own. This redistribution of his goods is the way to equity, which is the principle that people should have the same opportunities to succeed, despite past injustices or systemic discrimination. It can also mean that resources are distributed in such a way as to meet the specific needs of the disadvantaged communities or people from whose resources are exploited.

Zacchaeus opens the doors of his home to people without discrimination. We read in this a form of openness to corporate social responsibility. The leaders of the companies that exploit the Congo's resources must be sensitive to the injustices they cause and correct them through restorative justice.

Eco-justice emphasizes the principle of participation, which gives everyone in a community the right to have a say in important decisions. In many societies, public policy is defined by a small group of powerful individuals, without consulting the communities they represent. This can have the unintended effect of excluding a large part of the community. Public decision-makers can remedy this shortcoming by consulting the advocates of minority communities and taking their needs into account.

The story of Zacchaeus is no different from the situation in the DRC, where we must shout out loud for restorative ecological justice. The Congo has known the throes of ecological injustice since the reign of the Belgian Sovereign, King Leopold II. History tells us that in order to exploit the Congo's riches, especially its rubber trees, the country experienced the holocaust of over 10 million Congolese killed for not producing the quantity of good expected by Leopold II, in terms of the exploitation of the rubber trees.

During colonization, Belgium did the same, stripping the Congo of its resources for the benefit of the metropolis. As if that weren't enough, these days it's the multinationals who are behind the plundering of the Congo's resources, to the detriment of the Congolese people who continue to languish in indescribable misery, and in economic wars that enrich the exploiters of Congolese resources. To date, more than 8 million Congolese have died under the silence

and passivity of the international community. On the other hand, the industrialized countries of the world are polluting nature for their own economic interests, and this is leading to the effects of climate change. Once again, it's the Congo that's footing the bill for protecting its forests to combat climate change, at the cost of sacrificing its people.

Just as in the story of Zacchaeus, who recognized that he had exploited the people, he then repented and decided to repair the harm he had caused his contemporaries by exploiting them, we demand that restorative ecological justice be done for the Congo by the multinationals who continue to steal the Congo's wealth, destroy the ecosystem and enrich themselves at the cost of the blood of many Congolese. We call on the international community to break its silence, condemn injustice and advocate restorative ecological justice for the Congo.