

## A Precious Gift

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I was studying my isiNdebele grammar book in the cool shade of an African hut in rural Zimbabwe, when Mrs Ndlovu, my host, called me to come and meet a visitor. Following her I was surprised to see a tall stately Ndebele woman with a shy smile, standing by the kitchen hut. She had a baby on her back and a small child by her side. As I approached she bent slightly and in a fluid, graceful movement took the large tin bucket from her head and offered it to me. In stumbling Ndebele I thanked her, only later realizing the full significance of the gift she had given me.

Hearing that there was an Irish Sister staying with her friends to learn isiNdebele, this young mother walked three miles to the bore hole to fill her bucket with water. Then placing it on her head she walked another two miles to the family dwelling where I was staying. Her thoughtful and loving gift was to ensure that I had sufficient water for washing, whilst I was staying with the Ndlovus.

The memory of this most precious gift is an appropriate one to share as the world is preparing for the UN Climate Change conference in Copenhagen, in December. Evidence of the damage we as the global community have already caused 'Mother Earth' is apparent in irregular rainfall and flooding in some countries; severe drought in others; increased desertification; and the alarmingly rapid melting of huge tracts of ice in the Polar Regions causing sea levels to rise. It makes me think of the situation in Zimbabwe and wonder how far the Ndlovus and their neighbours have to walk today, to fill their containers with water. This is in stark contrast to so many of us, who just have to turn on a tap and think no more about this precious and beautiful gift of our Creator God.

Franciscans International (FI), through our Franciscan sisters and brothers who work at the grassroots around the world, are kept fully informed of the justice issues people are dealing with. The role of FI is to bring to the attention of the United Nations (UN) those issues that cannot be dealt with at either national or regional levels. We do this in the spirit of St. Francis and St. Clare, as we strive to bring about justice, through showing compassion to all, respecting the dignity of every person and working on environmental issues. FI networks closely with other Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to influence decision makers at the UN on behalf of the most vulnerable. This can be on a specific issue like contemporary forms of slavery, which includes trafficking in persons, or debt bondage, to a country-wide situation like the conflicts in Sri Lanka or the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The policy of FI is to deal only with issues that Franciscans ask us to bring to the UN; thereby ensuring that we never put Franciscans at risk in countries where raising issues could prove detrimental to their work with their people. Whenever possible, we bring people from the country involved to represent a group that is working to redress an injustice, so they can share their stories and present the issue themselves. There is the opportunity to do this at the UN Human Rights Council (UHRC) or at different UN commissions or committees.

The work of FI at the UN can be grouped under three main headings:

1. Raising issues using the UN expert committees
2. Urgent Action Alerts
3. Universal Periodic Reviews

**Raising Issues using UN Expert Committees:** Last year FI brought a delegation from West Papua to speak to the UN Committee against Torture (CAT). This committee is made up of 10 independent experts. During the FI presentation, six members of this committee listened to the stories of torture that people are experiencing in West Papua at the hands of the Indonesian Security Forces. Using a power point presentation plus those present retelling their horrific experiences of torture, the CAT members were deeply affected. They now have a much more comprehensive understanding of the situation in West Papua, because they heard it first hand. After our meeting, members of the committee were fully aware of bringing such violations in Papua to the attention of the Indonesian government.

**Urgent Action Alerts:** FI serves Franciscans through this process when a country or region is facing a critical situation and they ask us to do everything possible to help them. Earlier this year we received news of the Gaza situation where ordinary citizens including women and children were caught between the warring parties of Hamas and the Israeli Army. In contact with Franciscans working on the ground in these countries we drafted a letter and sent it to Ban Ki-moon the Secretary General of the UN. FI also sent letters to other countries through their diplomatic missions in Geneva and New York, alerting them to the crisis and the dire consequence for the civilian population. This action combined with the request from many others resulted in the UN holding a special HRC session on the Gaza crisis, where the full magnitude of the suffering was discussed by many countries, which brought pressure to bear on the warring parties.

**The Universal Periodic Review (UPR):**

a relatively new mechanism of the HRC whereby every country in the world (192), is asked to report on the human rights situation in their country. Every four years each country presents a report, which is shadowed by an NGO report. FI assists in the preparation of the shadow report by receiving information from Franciscans working in that country. We then encourage diplomats from other countries to read FI's report so they are fully prepared for the discussion session. The HRC then makes recommendations to the country under review as a means of improving the human rights situation in the country. Franciscans play a key role in monitoring the implementation of

these recommendations and provides important information to FI when the country comes up for review.

The above reflects the main areas of the ministry of FI which is unique in that we represent all Franciscans at the UN. To facilitate our work we run regular trainings out of the three FI offices in Bangkok, Geneva and New York, as well as in-country trainings when requested. FI is fortunate to have a committed, enthusiastic and professional Staff Team. Despite limited resources, particularly during these days following the global financial crisis, FI continues to offer a comprehensive programme in order to serve the Franciscan Family, and collaborate with them in their work for justice, peace and integrity of creation. We also work in close collaboration with our partners Edmund Rice International and the Marist Brothers, and the Good Shepherd Sisters who share our office in Geneva.

I write as we approach Christmas 2009, and I am conscious that God became human as a tiny, vulnerable baby in an occupied country where there was great injustice. Sadly many babies will enter a similar world this Christmas. So let us as Franciscans unite in praying that the world Jesus will be born into, Christmas 2009, is one where people of good faith will continue their work towards justice for all, including Mother Earth.

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight...Everything crooked will be made straight and the rough paths smooth; and every mortal will see the salvation of God" *Isaiah 40:3-5*

NB If you would like to keep abreast of the activities of Franciscans International please look at our website: [www.franciscansinternational.org](http://www.franciscansinternational.org)  
We also send out a monthly one page news update, the 'Franciscan Voice' to individuals or communities. Please contact [press@fiop.org](mailto:press@fiop.org) to include your name. *f*