

### 9.3

#### The humanitarian operation of the Peace Warriors in Iraq

by Sara Fumagalli\*

*"...I wished to explain that not religion and violence, but that religion and reason, go together. The theme of my talk was, then, the relationship between faith and reason. I wished to call for a dialogue of the Christian faith with the modern world and for dialogue between all cultures and religions. I hope that at various moments of my visit - when, for example, in Munich I underlined how important it is to respect what is sacred for others - what emerged was my deep respect for all the great religions, and in particular for Muslims who 'worship the one God,' and with whom we are committed to promoting peace, liberty, social justice and moral values for the benefit of all humanity. "*

In my car the radio broadcast the words of Pope Benedict XVI from his general audience of Wednesday 20 September, while I hurriedly made my way towards Induno Olona in order to participate as a speaker in the course organized by Transparency International and by M.A.E. entitled "Building Ethics, public trust and the certainty of rights in Iraq".

Throughout the world, despite all the clarifications, there appeared to be no end to the controversy that flared up following the poorly-reported "Regensburg Address", and reports of violent protests were still arriving from Islamic squares. Just three days previously, in Somalia, a missionary nun providing health assistance to the poor in Mogadishu had been murdered by a fanatic.

I prepared myself to meet the Iraqis and, as I had since that distant day in August 2003 when my Peace Warriors and I had started to travel backwards and forwards between Italy and Iraq, despite the disquieting news I was filled with sentiments of faith, hope and friendship. Only this time I was not flying towards the Tallil base in a deafening C130 belonging to the Italian Peace Contingent, nor was I driving along the road between Nassiriya and Baghdad in bullet-proof VM with a 50°C internal temperature compared to that outside of 68°. And, in addition, I was not wearing the usual boots, the light "Umanitaria Padana Onlus" jacket or the heavier, camouflage one... but a simple lecturer's outfit, more suited to the nice, tidy, peaceful landscape in Varese at the end of the summer.

As I was driving I thought about the Iraqis, always queuing up - that's how I remember them - at a police or army checkpoint, or for the elections, in traffic or even to fill their car with petrol seeing as, incredible as it may seem, in Iraq there is perhaps too much oil but not enough petrol.

I thought about the Iraqis, squeezed between the East and the West, besieged by the opposing interests of the current and the emerging great powers, by the historical rivalry with

its neighbours, by the volatile internal divides.

I thought about the population that, despite everything - despite war, dictatorship, embargos, geo-politics and errors by great world strategists, despite international terrorism - is still managing to stand on its feet and move on, wants to work, build and re-build.

The Iraqis are a proud, positive, smiling population who love their country dearly and for this reason keep going and queue up once more, outside a barracks, outside schools, outside mosques, outside churches, outside the polls... even if there, right there, some stranger with no face, nor country, nor religion (but only ideology), has just blown himself up with a car packed with T.N.T., taking away innocent men, women and children along with their hopes. Another bomb in Iraq... who so much as notices now in the world? It's routine!

But seen from Iraq these deaths are not numbers: they are human beings, flesh and blood, body and soul, love, smiles, tears...

The reality is a very different, human thing from the reality as reported in the news!

And in Iraq - we often forget - the dead are overall Iraqis.

I thought about the Iraqis, about my Iraqi friends, permanently in a queue, permanently at risk, and I repeated to myself "...with whom we are committed to promoting peace, liberty, social justice and moral values for the benefit of all humanity."

The room was full of attendees: 38 men and 2 women, all sitting in an orderly fashion at desks and keen to listen to the speakers and take notes.

There present were practically all of the managing class of Dhi Qar, the Shiite province in the south of Iraq which is crossed by the Euphrates and has Nassiriya as its Governorate Capital. I know that region well: my volunteers and I went there five times between August 2003 and July 2004, bringing with us over 20 tons of aid including consumer goods for the school and health systems and hard goods for economic, product and technological development not to mention financial aid for a new professional school for nurses and for some dressmaker's workshops. "We help the population in their own home, we help them to help themselves." That is the motto and mission of our Association.

Some people in the room remembered us and our interventions. They had seen us in person or on local TV, distributing aid or carrying out projects with either the highly-respected men of the Italian Peace Contingent - who are responsible for the reconstruction and stabilization of the Dhi Qar province - or with Barbara Contini, the Coalition Governor since the administrative elections of June 2004. Speaking of elections, how many people in Italy know that, in the Iraqi Province under Italian authority, the elections were held a year earlier than in all the other parts of Iraq? This is not a coincidence.

Back in the lecture room, the customary greeting, "Assalam aleykum" - may peace be with you - and we started immediately with the film about our mission in Iraq. I commented on

the film and there was a simultaneous translation into Arabic.

While the images transported people from Lombardy to Iraq, I noticed how the audience's eyes opened in amazement and nostalgia for their country, seeing the state of it in August 2003: empty streets, cities with no electricity, hospitals with no medicine, orphanages with no beds... However there were smiles and justified self-congratulatory comments when traces of their ancient and glorious history appeared on the screen. The Great Ziggurat of Ur, Nassiriya, for example, is the homeland of Abraham, the father we have in common and founder of the three great monotheist religions.

Let me explain how our work in conflict-ridden countries (including Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan/Darfur, North East Sri Lanka) began. Our work is born out of the commitment and generosity of many people and carried out by unpaid voluntary workers who are driven by both passion and belief. The volunteers and the beneficiaries decide on the projects together, respecting local traditions and customs and working together with other public institutions and individuals in order to minimize costs and maximize efficiency, "because one State cannot be everywhere", and, on the other hand, "associations with high running costs are senseless."

In contrast to my usual talks, I do not need to explain to this audience why Nassiriya was in this condition of poverty in 2003 and the reasons for which there is such a contrast with the images of the capital, Baghdad, which at that time had not fallen into the ruin of chaos and violence that it is today.

This audience knows only too well, putting the war to one side, the discrimination suffered by the Shiite south under the Baath regime. They know about electricity being available for just 4 or 5 hours per day, about rivers being diverted to dry out the land and destroy the ecosystem in order to subject the population to being blackmailed by food and water and they know about damage caused to the poor of heavy U.N embargoes.

But this is all in the past and the last thing Iraq needs are further recriminations - what a lot of words have been wasted! - and what they do need are concrete solutions. And this is what we are always working on, both now and for the future.

On the screen we see one astonishing, emotive image after another: our Army Generals unloading our first boxes of aid from trucks ("this was our first concrete intervention, the first of many", attested the Vice Commander of the Brigade prophetically on Nassiriya TV only 15 days after the official start of "Operation Ancient Babylon"); big soldiers playing with children and holding little Iraqi orphans, a military chaplain collection biscuits in the soldiers' mess to take to children around the White Horse base; a lady, an engineer who is in charge of radiology in the children's hospital, who experiments with our X-ray machines on her own hand.

While the images flash by, the spectators in the room smile and show signs of recognizing

places, persons and events.

And then there is our trip to Baghdad, our delivery of aid to the Italian Red Cross Field Hospital, and then the reports of the first terrorist attack on the Jordanian embassy, which happened on the very same day. "The work of Ansar El Islam", stated Pino Scaccia on the Italian Rai News. Both Jordanian and Iraqi citizens died in the explosion, including a young mother and her child who just happened to be passing by. We were in Baghdad, but we had to call Italy to hear the news of the attack.

After we see our return to Nassiriya and more pictures of the incredible experience of paying an evening visit to nomad family in the desert. "You were the first westerners to visit the Bedouins", they told us when we returned to our camp. "You have opened up relations." We were greeted with celebrations and embraces.

The pictures continue our journey in time and space. Months go past and, from one mission to another, you can see evidence of real, visible progress in the moral, social, economic and political reconstruction of the Iraqi region under the friendly guidance of the Italians who bring together their strength, their willing and, most of all, their hearts.

There is more traffic on the streets, shops are opening, boys and girls are going back to school and there is electricity now for almost all of the day.

Only security measures for us and our soldiers are on the increase.

Our aid is, however, growing, thanks to our good people and to the many companies who have answered our appeal after seeing the images of a "different" Iraq.

Tons of medicine and medical equipment for hospitals and clinics, water pumps, a tractor for the Institute of Agriculture, a large generator to supply a hospital building, sewing machines, materials and thread for widows and orphans, toys, clothes, food and school material for the children...

As one proverb says, "One tree falling makes much more noise than a forest growing", and we love to show people the forest. However, even in our forest they are trees that fall.

The screen now shows the smiling faces of some of our friends - one of our volunteers (Stefano Rolla), some of the soldiers, busy at work, and the Military Police Base where they would lose their lives on that tragic 12 November in 2003.

On the film, images of the intact, living Carabinieri base make way for pictures of the ruin and gaping chasm caused by the explosion from the car bomb driven by strangers with the intention of impeding the peace and progress of the region.

In that attack, apart from the suicide bomber, it was not just 19 Italians who died. 7 Iraqis from Nassiriya lost their lives and many others, including children, were left with varying degrees of injury and scars for life.

As my voice falters with emotion during my commentary, tears flow within the audience...

At that time I would have loved to have there with me those who think that Muslims - and

even more so the poor Iraqis - are all terrorists... and even those who say that the people who blow themselves up in Iraq are not terrorists.

And at that moment I realize that my, Christian, heart and the hearts of my 40 Muslim friends are speaking the same language: the language of love and common sense. A language inscribed into the hearts of every man by Merciful God that has not been suffocated by totalitarian ideology.

And what, if it is not a manifestation of that love, is the true friendship that emerges in the images of our film, in the children's smiles and those of the teachers in the rebuilt orphanage, in the joy seen at the big, opening party for the new school for nurses, in the embraces for the widows whose husbands had been taken away by the regime?

What can we begin to build from, if not from the hearts of willing men and women?

The film finished in that way, with warm kisses and embraces from the Bedouin women, with the applause and live demonstration of respect from our Iraqi friends.

It is possible - I insist once more - to have peace between populations, as it is between people, when they know their own identity, are friends in diversity and each rule in their own houses and are respectful in those of others.

It was an exhilarating experience to speak during a course on ethics, trust and justice in Iraq and for this I gratefully thank my friend Teresa Brassiolo, Trasparency International and the Italian Foreign Minister. But absolutely the best thing about it was learning later that, as a result of my talk and others, some of the course participants decided to found, on their return home, a non-profit association in favour of the orphans in Nassiriya.

From theory to practice, the course had really had results.

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