Chadian Sister Engages Kansas City Youth about Peace and Justice

Londadjim, Nelkem

Published by Langaa RPCIG


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I met Sister Jeannette Londadjim in August 2017, when she became the first Activist-in-Residence for the Buchanan Initiative for Peace and Nonviolence (BIPN) at Avila University in Kansas City, Missouri, in the United States of America. As a faculty consultant for the BIPN and a historian of Catholic sisters, I was delighted to welcome a Sister of St. Joseph and a grassroots activist for peace and nonviolence to our campus.

Our goal was to provide opportunities for respite and reflection for our activist and an opportunity for her to spend ten weeks at the University to interact with faculty, staff, students, and the Kansas City peace and justice community. Sister Jeannette exceeded our hopes for dialogue, cultural exchange, and learning, so important to a university community.

Encouraged by her interpreter and now friend Kathryn Toure, she began a journal to document, reflect on and eventually share her time as Activist-in-Residence. Her writings developed into this book, a microcosm of her time and reflections at Avila. She takes the reader on a journey of faith, hope, interculturality, and ways in which peace and nonviolence can be actualized in local and global venues. Sister Jeannette’s essays are a testament to our shared humanity, hopes, and fears in these times of change. She uses words that underscore our human connections: trust, journey, risk, fear, responsibility, and mission.

She challenges herself to share her story with American and international students studying in the USA. With humility and honesty, she tells about her childhood experience of displacement, when she and her family flee their home country of Chad to take refuge first in Cameroon and then in Central
African Republic. She affirms that these “travels and displacements shaped me.” She describes her life as “wonderful” and “painful” at insists that “Who I am today, I owe to others.”

When Sister Jeannette came to Avila, she was working with immigrants, asylum seekers and youth groups in Algeria, relating all too well to their precarious life circumstances. She facilitated activities and encounters that empowered immigrant women and young people to analyze and understand the causes of their problems, commit to peace and justice, and find ways to resolve the problems without resorting to violence.

Bringing those skills to the Avila classroom, Sister Jeannette answered questions and promoted student dialogue on a variety of issues. Surprised about the depth of ongoing racial tensions in the United States, she ponders stories and feelings of alienation and racism shared by African American students, in a country that still has to live up to the reality of peace and justice for all. Students, sensing her presence, interest, and concern, opened up to share everyday experiences, fears, despondencies, and hopes. Sister Jeannette deeply listened, validated their experiences and emotions, and also challenged them to continue the “ancestors’ fight for freedom” and to manifest American diversity to the world.

When asked by Avila students about her definition of peace and how she became a peacemaker, she explained that, for her, “Peace is the fruit of love, truth, justice, and respect of human rights and the common good.” She advocates for an “awakening of consciences – not only the conscience of each person but also the collective conscience of our society.” Sister Jeannette goes on to stress the need for global sustainability. We must be at peace with and respect Mother Earth who sustains humanity. She challenged herself and
others to go beyond changing personal habits to understand human interdependence at a global level and become a citizen of the world.

Reflecting on the spiritual and service heritage of her congregation, the Sisters of St. Joseph, she shares her pride in the “boldness and courage” of the sisters who founded Avila University. Sister Jeannette sees her congregation’s work as a way to share the experience of liberation and freedom and make us “more human.” Referring to the Constitution of the sisters of St. Joseph, she explains how the sisters “want to share with kinfolk and the whole of humanity this life, this happiness, this freedom, so that everybody recognizes and experiences human dignity, divinity and fellowship.”

In a secular world desperately searching for meaning and purpose in the twenty-first century, the Sisters of St. Joseph exemplify a legacy of hard work, sacrifice, compassion, and purposeful and peaceful intentions, profound in their relevance and simplicity. This seems to be a model for survival on the planet. Sister Jeannette represents the very best of this tradition – a living legacy, a gift to all of us.

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