

The Christian Vocation of Peacemaking
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February 2004

Woven into the fabric of the Jesus' story from beginning to end is an identification of his mission with peace on earth – deep peace, peace rooted in justice, shalom, and a call to the task of peacemaking for those who would be disciples.

We say the words often and easily: “Peace be with you.” We call him Prince of Peace. We listen to the promise, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” We struggle to follow his mandates: “Love your enemy;” “Leave your gifts at the altar and go be reconciled with a brother or sister who has something against you.” And we are deeply puzzled by his warning, “I come not to bring peace, but the sword.”

To seek peace, deep peace rooted in justice, shalom – not a mere absence of war, but the fullness of life for all – that is the Christian vocation. As followers of the One who is Peace, the Already, who on the cross overcame the violences of our world, we are called to help move our broken and violated world toward the full flowering of New Creation. We are invited to claim the hope that is the hallmark of the Christian life.

The prophets among us, the ones whose lives are given to proclaiming peace, seem to understand at a soul-deep level that every human life is unique, precious, of utmost value in the eyes of God, and that we are part of a community of life that is a beautiful and gratuitous gift from the Creator.

It was very easy for me when I was in Afghanistan a few months ago to cherish the life of a little girl I met there named Amena – she was just the same age as my oldest granddaughter. U.S. bombs had inadvertently hit Amena's house near Kanduz, killing her mother, all her brothers and sisters, her aunts and uncles and her cousins, including a two-day-old baby – 16 people in all. No one believes that such a tragedy was intended, but it was a good example of what modern wars do and my encounter with Amena offered powerful motive to pursue peace.

But the Christian vocation would demand even more – that we honor the fact that every terrorist is also a beloved – and that each one is as precious in the eyes of God as are my grandchildren. That is hard to say – Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein are as precious in the eyes of God as are my Cati Adele and Bobby.

John Brewer, whose research on grassroots responses to violence in Northern Ireland was included in a recently published Orbis book, *Artisans of Peace* (Bamat and Cjeka, 2003), wrote *In our context of thirty plus years of troubles - violence, fear, and division are known. Peace is the mystery! People are frightened of peace. It is simultaneously exciting and fearful. This is mystery. Peace asks a lot of you. Peace asks you to share memory. It asks you to share space, territory, specific concrete places. It asks you to share a future. And all this you are asked to do with and in the presence of your enemy. Peace is Mystery. It is walking into the unknown.*

Peace is Mystery. It is the Promise, the “already and the not yet.” The pursuit of peace is an act of hope. It requires careful theological reflection on the values of our faith tradition in specific situations of violent conflict and war. It requires presence, accompaniment and the nurturing of relationships across boundaries. It requires the creation and use of a moral framework and ethical tools for peacemaking appropriate to these times. It requires vigorous spiritual exercises, and creative liturgical expression.

First, theological reflection - for people of the Word, this suggests a familiar practice – that of praying with the Sacred Texts in one hand and the newspaper in the other. It implies careful social analysis and identification of root causes of the violence.

Secondly, the contours of the peacemaking task are made much more visible by the habit of accompaniment, the virtue of solidarity toward the righting of relationships. Those who join Witness for Peace, Voices in the Wilderness, the Nonviolent Peaceforce and similar groups, and go to places like Colombia, Iraq and Sri Lanka do so not in an empty political gesture, nor only to serve as human shields, but to build bridges of understanding and solidarity, essential tools for peacebuilding in an integrated world.

Father Bob McCahill and other Maryknollers have lived very simply in predominantly Muslim and Hindu Bangladesh since 1975. When asked why he is there, he says, “I am here to serve seriously sick persons who are poor. Your religion and mine teach that those who serve the poor serve Allah. I respect your Islamic faith. It is good. My Christian faith is also good. You fulfill your faith, and I will fulfill mine. We shall meet again in paradise.” Bob McCahill is planting deep and lasting roots of peace.

People of faith can also contribute in these times to the work for peace by helping to develop a moral framework for peacemaking that is shaped by the experience of communities devastated by war, who know too well the consequences of war and the urgent need for cultures of peace. And we can tap the spiritual energies in our own traditions, appropriating religious ritual and symbol into the work for peace. Before the most recent war began in Iraq, thousands of people around the world joined together in prayer and fasting, a practice that was both personally transformative and politically powerful. When we retell the story of Jesus’ last supper and remember the meaning of Eucharist, the One Loaf that already accomplished reconciliation in our broken world, we reclaim a hopefulness that defines the Christian vocation.