

**Laurie Johnston**

**Response to David O'Brien, Panel on "Models of Church Engagement with Peacebuilding"  
Conference on the Future of Catholic Peacebuilding, University Notre Dame, 4/15/08**

I greatly appreciate this discussion of the way contemporary experiences of peacebuilding are challenging existing theologies of the role of the church in the world. And I am fully in agreement that the challenge of further developing Catholic peacebuilding is, indeed, part and parcel of the challenge of fully living out *Gaudium et Spes*' vision of real solidarity with the world.

As Dr. O'Brien has indicated, one of the most interesting ways that the realities of peacebuilding challenge existing theologies of the church's relationship to the world is this: peacebuilding requires us to move beyond the existing dichotomies of realism vs. idealism, citizenship vs. discipleship, the spiritual and moral purity of the church's witness vs. the need for the church to take a public role that is responsible and politically effective.

I must be brief here, but I will offer one example: in the experience of the Community of Sant'Egidio, it has become clear the one of the most important and powerful "techniques" of peacebuilding is simply holding out the hope for peace as a possibility, and a realistic possibility. Perhaps the most important step in the Mozambique peace process was simply convincing the parties that peace was possible – and this is certainly something that has been important in other contexts as well. Yes, idealism is sometimes effective – as Niebuhr and Weber acknowledge. So, effective peacebuilding depends upon cultivating hope, but it must be grounded hope. The conference organizers have asked us to consider if there is something distinctive about Catholic peacebuilding, and while I am hesitant about claims of distinctiveness, there is no question that our faith in a God of hope is a central aspect of Catholic peacebuilding. But what does it mean to have "grounded hope?" *Gaudium et Spes* says that the church brings "*commitment, direction, and vigor* to establish and consolidate the community of humans according to the law of God"<sup>1</sup> – commitment, direction and vigor – perhaps that is one way to define "grounded hope."

For Sant'Egidio, one of the most important influences which has shaped its own brand of "grounded hope" was a friendship with the great French Dominican theologian Yves Congar. In fact, I think Congar is an important resource for developing an ecclesiology which can ground the practice of peacemaking. Congar described peacemaking as a key element of the Church's solidarity with the world. Christians are responsible for peace in this world – even "peace of a sort," because, as he wrote, "this is the world that, transformed and renewed, will pass into the Kingdom; ...final salvation will be achieved by a wonderful refloating of our earthly vessel rather than by a transfer of the survivors to another ship wholly built by God."<sup>2</sup> Congar understood peacemaking in a very practical way, as an aspect of Christian vocation that has political consequences.<sup>3</sup> Peace requires work on building just government structures nationally and

---

<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* para. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, Orig. published as *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1954. Donald Attwater, trans. Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1965, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, "The Four pillars of peace." in Schambeck, Herbert, and Agostino Casaroli, eds., *Pro Fide et Iustitia*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1984, pp. 369-380.

internationally, he says, but it also requires people “who seek to weave with others a network of personal relationships in the process of friendly give-and-take.”<sup>4</sup>

Congar also did not see much conflict, in this work for peace, between the need for the church to be politically effective and the need for it to maintain the purity of its spiritual and moral witness. Rather, he wrote, “It is...in being people of God, in being truly and fully itself, that the Church makes its contribution to the world in quest of unity and integrity.”<sup>5</sup> And if the Church must be fully itself to be effective at peacemaking, it is, in turn the experience of peacemaking which evokes the fullness of what it means to be the church, since, according to Congar, “In every sphere, the Church’s potentialities are brought out by being actualized and she is brought to understanding by events.”<sup>6</sup> The church is a living organism that requires external stimuli if it is to develop. For example, the Church is learning much from the field of secular conflict resolution about its own vocation to peacebuilding. Or, to give another example, it is, in part, the reality of peacebuilding carried out by Sant’Egidio and many other lay groups that is challenging the Church to acknowledge more fully the theology of the laity that emerged at Vatican II and the full capacity of laypeople to carry out the mission of the church, including peacebuilding.

Dialogue is, of course, a key aspect of the church’s strategy of peacebuilding, and yet, as Dr. O’Brien points out, this raises questions about the integrity and identity of the Church. For Congar this was less of a dilemma, because of his emphasis on the very nature of the Church as also dialogical, and the Church depends upon its dialogue with the world to grow in its own particular vocation as church.<sup>7</sup> This is, I would argue, a dynamic which is clear in the stories of peacebuilding we are encountering. And when Congar speaks of dialogue, it is a deep and ongoing type of dialogue – he often uses the phrase “etre-avec” – to be with the world, to accompany people, “to enter into the depth of the question, to realize all the seriousness of the drama of history.”<sup>8</sup>

Andrea Riccardi, the founder of Sant’Egidio, has described how this focus on entering into the drama of history is the key to real solidarity with the world, and therefore the key to effective peacebuilding: “*Gaudium et Spes* offers an historical perspective, or rather, *the* historical perspective; in the vision of this document the Church declares that she lives within the problems of history, that she is not far-removed but is a companion: history is not only tradition but is also contemporariness.”<sup>9</sup> A sensitivity to history is, in Riccardi’s mind, actually a sensitivity to contemporary reality as well: “[Congar told us that history] creates a profound sensitivity to reality:

---

<sup>4</sup> “The Church: Seed of unity and hope for the human race,” in *Chicago Studies*, Vol. 5 No. 1 (Spring 1966), pp. 25-40 at 34-5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Congar, *Esquisses du mystère de l’Église*, cited in Macdonald, Charles. *Church and World in the plan of God: Aspects of history and eschatology in the thought of Père Yves Congar O.P.* Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1982, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> “Le Dialogue, loi du travail œcuménique, structure de l’intelligence humaine.” in *Dialogue ou Violence?* Texts from the conference organized by *Recontres Internationales de Genève*, 1963. Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, pp. 37-54.

<sup>8</sup> *Sacerdoce et Laïcité: devant leurs tâches d’évangélisation et de civilisation*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1962, p. 251.

<sup>9</sup> Riccardi, Andrea. “The Call to Justice: The Legacy of *Gaudium et Spes* Forty Years Later.” Presented at the conference *The Call to Justice: The Legacy of Gaudium et Spes 40 Years Later*, 17 March 2005, Vatican City, available at <http://www.stthomas.edu/CathStudies/cst/conferences/gaudium/papers/RiccardiGS.pdf> (accessed 11/29/06), p. 8

‘Without history you find yourself like illiterates who can’t read the present.’ That’s how I gradually discovered the importance of history for understanding the world.”<sup>10</sup> It is impossible to read the signs of the times without understanding how those times have arisen in history. And conversely, an understanding of history creates a sense of urgency about helping to shape that history in an intelligent way in the present. Riccardi has said that “The great teaching of Congar... was that utopias are belied by history, but that one must always dream, and dream *in* reality.”<sup>11</sup> There has been some mention at this conference of the danger of becoming “too political,” and I think Congar and Riccardi would say that it is in part this historical perspective that can guard against that danger.

Last year in Bogota, Msgr. Hector Fabio Henao Gaviria quoted a statement of the Colombian conference of bishops in which they wrote, “To discover the theological meaning of historical human events means we recognize that God has directed our history in the past and is also acting in current events, as painful as they may be, and is creating a future that we can view optimistically, because the God in whom we believe is a God of hope.”<sup>12</sup> Msgr. Henao Gaviria has also spoken of the need for “grounded hope for what can be an arduous journey,” but also believes that the “consistent lesson learned” by the Colombian bishops “is to look at history through hopeful eyes.” This is the task for Catholic peacebuilders and for the church as a whole: to look honestly and yet hopefully at history – and this, I think, is what Dr. O’Brien has helped us to begin to do.

---

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Andrea Riccardi, November 24, 2006, Convent of Sant’Egidio, Rome.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *Testimonies of Hope*. LXXIX Ordinary Plenary Assembly of the Episcopate, July 4-8, 2005.