

## **Ritual, Liturgy, Spirituality of Peacebuilding**

Response by Marie Dennis to Robert Schreiter's talk

Last week I participated in 60th anniversary events of Pax Christi Germany. Visible throughout the weekend was the huge and heavy Aachen peace cross which was made by former German soldiers in 1947 and carried by them from church to church and village to village in Europe's post conflict context as an expression of repentance for crimes committed in Germany's name. The cross carried the weight of a healing and reconciliation process then underway.

Last week the Aachen cross was carried by French and German members of Pax Christi as it has been hundreds and hundreds of times since the end of the Second World War in a solemn pilgrimage to a German soldiers' cemetery and then to an Allied soldiers' cemetery to retell the story of violence and conflict that Europe experienced in the first half of the 20th century – but this time it was to remind the pilgrims and those who saw them of the desperate need to remember the devastation of war and to recognize the need for healing and reconciliation in our world today.

Rituals – public rituals like this way of the cross – can be important anchors, as Bob Schrieter said, in the process of healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding. Ritual also is often a reminder of the *need* to stop violences, to begin the work of building peace – a way of witnessing in a violent world:

- In 1988 in Israel, shortly after the 20th anniversary of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and the beginning of the intifada, Israeli Jewish women began to stand in weekly vigils in public places, usually at busy intersections. Starting in Jerusalem, the number of vigils in Israel eventually grew to almost forty. In the north of Israel, where the concentration of Arab communities was greatest, Palestinian women who were Israeli citizens also were active in what came to be called Women in Black (WIB).

At WIB vigils, the focus was precise, “End the Occupation,” to draw in a wide group of women. The vigils were predictable: same site, regular intervals – on the same day and at the same time each week. The women wore black. There was no chanting. They were seen by, and provoked reactions from, many passers-by, some of whom heckled and abused them. But their policy was to maintain silence and dignity. In other countries, including Canada, the US, Australia, and many European countries, Women in Black vigils soon were organized in support of those in Israel. They continue to this day.

- Other public rituals organized by women have been enacted in countless war- or violence-torn countries around the world: the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the Co-madres in El Salvador, the women of the Southern Sudan, the Grupo Apoyo Mutuo in Guatemala, and so many others bereaved by violence and repression whose presence week after week in the public square demanded truth from authorities perpetuating violence or an end to war
- In a much larger, but not so different ritual every year on or near the anniversary of the assassinations of the Jesuits and women at the UCA in San Salvador, tens of thousands of people gather at the gates of Fort Benning, Georgia, home to what used to be called the US Army School of the Americas. For several hours names are read of those who have been killed in violence perpetrated by graduates of the school – thousands upon thousands of names, each followed by Presente! During this long litany, a solemn procession walks past the gates, leaving entwined in the chain link fence white crosses on which are written the names of the dead. The intention of this ritual is to call for closing that training center and others like it as a step in the process of building peace in the hemisphere.

Rituals are extremely important vehicles for pointing to the desperate need for peacebuilding

**Liturgy** - I want to underscore briefly the last few words of Bob Schreiter’s reflection on our sacramental tradition, especially on Eucharist and Reconciliation (go forth) by

recalling the so-often quoted words of the synod of bishops from 1971 that participation in the transformation of the world is constitutive to the preaching of the gospel. It seems to me that we should find clear ways in our churches to make that visible – just as we have the altar as the focus of bread of life shared and the pulpit or lectern as the focus of the word of life broken open so should we have in our churches a visible, physical focus for the commissioning of the community to transform the world – to be peacebuilders.

**Spirituality** – Finally, Bob Schreiter mentioned Pax Christi International in conjunction with the spirituality of nonviolence and he is certainly right – the spirituality of nonviolence is at the heart of our mission and our identity. We believe that the spirituality of peacebuilding *is* a spirituality of nonviolence – and work hard to understand what that means.

Not long ago I heard the story of an Iraqi child whose name is Shams. When a bomb exploded next to her family's car in Sadr City, her mother and her brother were burned to death. She was saved, but she lost both of her eyes and her face is terribly, terribly scarred. I know I don't have to describe to you our violent world – you live there; you try to make peace there. We could all tell too many stories about broken children we know or have known. Some of them – too many of them - live in my neighborhood a stone's throw from the White House ...

Pax Christi International is committed to countering the kind of violences that Shams and other children – and their parents and sisters and brothers and friends – face. Our spirituality of nonviolence is informed by the reality of the violence in which we live and by experiences of accompaniment and solidarity that enable us to see and to feel the *real*—in a violent and violated world.

Our spirituality is rooted in an absolute belief in the dignity of every human person. Children are easy, though the world seems to have no problem showering them with ugly violence. Much harder is to apply this belief to someone we think of as enemy – perhaps Osama bin Laden.

Jesus called us to right relationships – to relationships built on respect and social justice. Everyone was to have a life of dignity and sufficiency. The beloved community was to include every person. *Punto*. Pax Christi spirituality is nourished in the beloved, inclusive community and that beloved community, it is increasingly clear, has to include the rest of creation with which our relationships also have to be nonviolent and just.

So, our spirituality is based on a deep belief in each person's dignity and immeasurable worth. It embraces the real. It is lived out in and lives for the beloved, inclusive community. It is informed by a new cosmovision and respect for the integrity of creation. It is also impelled by the cross of Christ.

On the cross, Jesus adopted a powerful stance of nonresistance that we believe overcame sin and evil. His nonresistance on the cross was not passive, but a perfect example of nonresistance actively resisting deep injustice and social evil – as he had been doing throughout his public ministry. Jesus' nonresistance to torture and to crucifixion did not fit into the belligerent ways of kingdom building many expected, but was a sacrifice powerful enough to challenge injustice and evil for all eternity and to inspire a spirituality of active nonviolence that calls us to love our enemies as a form of active resistance to hate and violence.

Often in these times, we hear “Peace I leave with you” ... but the deep roots of violence are nurtured all around us. “My peace I give to you” ...while massive treasure and talent are invested in weapons and war-making. “Do not let your hearts be troubled ... do not be afraid” ... as many of those in power orchestrate fear and isolation.

In spite of this, Pax Christi's spirituality is profoundly hopeful. As Christians, our worldview is defined by hope. War, violence and the New Creation cannot co-exist. A real world without violence. We human beings are subjects of a future in which life can be protected, not victims of a future over which we have no control. The work of our

movement – and of so many others – in situations of incredible violence gives testimony to that belief.

Finally, our spirituality of nonviolence calls us to live now *as if* peace had broken out. The *already* peace – how we do our living day by day, how we nurture right relationships close to home joins the *not yet* peace, Pax Christi, on the very distant horizon -- a radical global conversion from violence that we are fully engaged in making real.