

PEACEBUILDING 2013: PACEM IN TERRIS AT 50

“The Call of Religious Communities to Peace Building and their Role in it”

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Janice McLaughlin, MM

I was a novice in the Maryknoll Sisters when Pacem in Terris was released. We read and studied it as part of our training, as well as the documents of the Second Vatican Council. I’m a product of both and am proud of this heritage.

I’ve worked most of my adult life on the African continent. Throughout the continent, proverbs are a vital teaching tool. Every community has a wealth of proverbs that teach the values of peace, harmony and getting along with one another. A favorite proverb of mine comes from the Tonga people who live along the Zambezi River in Zimbabwe and Zambia. It says: A frog may live in the same pool as the crocodile, even though it is not a child of the crocodile.” (*Chulwa kukala mumenda tachambi kuti mwana wasitale.*)

In my brief presentation today, I will give several examples of how frogs and crocodiles share a common pool. I’ll leave it to your imagination to decide whether indeed they overcome their differences and live in harmony!

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND PEACE BUILDING

Let me begin with an overview of the call of religious communities to be peace builders and then I’ll give a few examples. I think this call flows from three aspects of our vocation: 1. Life in community; 2. The form of servant leadership that we practice; and 3. Our apostolic work.

Our life in community demands that we learn to share the pool in which we live. It’s like a boot camp for peace building. We come from many different backgrounds, social classes and cultures. There is a book about Maryknoll Sisters called No Two Alike. This more or less sums up the diversity found in most religious communities. Truly there are many frogs and crocodiles among us! That’s why most communities provide training for their members in conflict resolution, diversity, listening and communication and other forms of self-knowledge and human relations skills and practices. Starting with self is common sense as well as good practice.

Secondly, our form of servant leadership offers a model for creating relationships of equality, which is a prerequisite for building peace. Sister Sandra Schneiders, IHM, spoke of this when she accepted the LCWR Leadership Award last August. Describing the Gospel leadership of Christ, which is the model for the Christian community, she said: “It is a community in which there is no slave or master, no national or ethnic superiorities, no gender domination, no inequality that is theologically or spiritually significant expect holiness, and in which even distinctions of role and function are not titles to power but differences which must serve the unity of the whole. It is a community in which all vie for the lowest place, wash one another’s feet, lift rather than impose burdens, and dwell among their sisters and brothers as those who serve.”¹

She concluded that “this kind of servant leadership in this kind of Gospel community is as baffling to those in power today as was Jesus’ mode of leadership to the Temple hierarchy and the Roman Empire of his time.” Perhaps this form of participatory governance, or teams of equals, is one of the reasons that women religious have been in the spotlight (or under the microscope) in recent years.

A PROPHETIC LIFE FORM

Finally, our apostolic ministries require us to learn skills for peace building and trauma healing. Ours is a prophetic life form that is modeled on the life of Jesus and his disciples. We are called to be on the margins of society, with the most vulnerable, the marginalized, the outcasts. We can be found in soup kitchens, refugee camps, prisons, shelters for the homeless and for abused women and their children, with torture victims, and with those who have been trafficked and sold into prostitution. As Sr. Sandra Schneiders wrote in an article about our prophetic calling: we can be found in many “other situations in which there (are) were no easy answers and the stakes for real people (are) were as high as they were for the woman taken in adultery to whom Jesus proclaimed the Reign of God as compassion redefining justice.”²

¹ Schneiders, Sandra, “Acceptance Address”, LCWR Leadership Award, August 10, 2012, p. 4,

² Schneiders, Sandra, “Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form”, National Catholic Reporter, January 7, 2010.

Sr. Pat Farrell, OSF, past President of LCWR, pointed out in her address to the LCWR Assembly last August, what this prophetic life form looks like and what it demands of us. “We cannot live prophetically without proximity to those who are vulnerable and marginalized,” she said. “First of all, that is where we belong. Our mission is to give ourselves away in love, particularly to those in greatest need.”³

In our mission to those on the margins, we learn to see the world through different lenses and are transformed. Seeing what they see opens our eyes to the reality of structural injustice and oppression. This calls us to another aspect of prophetic ministry and of peace building – the obligation to unmask and denounce the injustice and to work for structural change.

When I was visiting our Sisters in Guatemala, I saw an injured Quetzal bird, the national bird of the country. This bird had had its wings clipped so that it could not fly and was dependent on the man who found it to feed it and keep it alive. This bird is a symbol to me of how Catholic Sisters work. We respond to the needs of those who have been crippled by injustice, poverty and oppression. We support them to gain confidence, knowledge and skills so they can become self-reliant and can fly. We know, however, that the present world order is so unjust that it will continue to cripple, maim, deform and domesticate the majority of the earth’s citizens and will destroy the earth as well. Therefore, we must challenge the root causes of injustice. Who can forget the “Nuns on the Bus”!

LCWR RESPONSE TO DOCTRINAL ASSESSMENT

Let me now turn to the recent experience in peace building of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), a body that represents 320 religious congregations in the United States, comprising approximately 57,000 Catholic Sisters. LCWR made headlines worldwide last year because it was being investigated by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In a nutshell, the doctrinal assessment was mostly negative, pointing out perceived errors or shortcomings in the work of LCWR.

³ Farrell, Pat, “Navigating the Shifts”, Presidential Address, 2012 LCWR Assembly, p. 6.

The LCWR raised concerns about both the content of the assessment and the process by which it was prepared that lacked transparency. LCWR then engaged in a contemplative process with its members to determine how best to respond. At its annual assembly in August 2012, more than 900 participants (I was among them) unanimously agreed that the leaders of LCWR should begin a conversation with Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, the apostolic delegate appointed by CDF to oversee LCWR. Explaining the reasons for this decision, LCWR issued a press release, stating: “(Our) Their expectation is that open and honest dialogue may lead not only to increasing understanding between the church leadership and women religious, but also to creating more possibilities for the laity and, particularly for women, to have a voice in the church.”⁴

I believe that this decision was a watershed moment for the women religious who are members of LCWR and helped to demonstrate our commitment to peace. Even when provoked and unjustly accused, we remained steadfast in our determination to sit at the table as equal partners and to engage in dialogue to create understanding. We could easily have decided otherwise and walked away.

While we cannot be sure of the outcomes of this dialogue, there is hope that greater understanding of each other can develop. Truly, this is a powerful witness to peace building among religious women in the United States today! The story is not over. Let’s see what Pope Francis has to say!

PEACEBUILDING IN TANZANIA

Every religious community has its own specific nature and purpose that is spelled out in its Constitution. The purpose of the Maryknoll Sisters, the community to which I belong, is spelled out in the very beginning of our Constitution which states that we proclaim and witness to “God’s Reign of peace, justice and love...throughout the world.”⁵

In 1947, after the Second World War when many of our members had been under house arrest, deported or held in detention centers, our founder, Mary Josephine Rogers, spoke of our mission

⁴ LCWR press release, August 10, 2012.

⁵ Maryknoll Sisters’ Constitution, #4, p. 3.

as being dedicated “to the spread of the Gospel of Peace and the alleviation of suffering.”⁶ I could give many examples of how we lived out this mission but I will choose only two: a Maryknoll Sister in Tanzania who works with Christians and Muslims in Zanzibar and on the mainland to create understanding among them and my own experience in Zimbabwe.

After 9/11 when tensions between Christians and Muslims grew, not just here in the United States but worldwide, Maryknoll Sister Jean Pruitt initiated a project for bringing Christians and Muslims together on Zanzibar, an island off the coast of mainland Tanzania. The majority of people living there are Muslim. Although there had been tension between Christians and Muslims in the past, these tensions grew and began erupting into violence in recent years. Sr. Jean is an artist and decided to communicate the message of peace through art. She worked in partnership with a Muslim co-worker, Mustafa Ali, Secretary General of the African Council of Religious Leaders under Religions for Peace and a member of the board of Pax Christi International.

This is what she wrote to me when I asked her why she embarked on this ministry of peace education: “Why did I feel called to work for Peace? Very simply – children. Working with children, trying to make a ‘World Fit for Children’ – a UNICEF theme – can only be done through interfaith dialog as the thread weaving Peace. Peace is the hand which holds diversity. As an artist there is nothing more attractive than all the colors of peoples and their ethnic clothes which are always a rainbow of color.... Diversity is the adventure to love. And it is such an incredible adventure filled with myriads of ways to pray, to eat, to dress, to speak, to create. What a great spiral,”⁷ she concluded.

I wish that I could show you the art work that the people who attended the workshop produced. Truly it gives witness to the power of peace building through art!

⁶ Maryknoll Sisters’ Constitution, p. 2.

⁷ Email message from Sr. Jean Pruitt in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Feb. 21, 2013.

PEACE BUILDING IN ZIMBABWE

Let me end with my own experience. Perhaps it is a public confession. Some of you know I supported armed struggle for then Rhodesia to gain Independence from white settler colonialism. Having seen the ongoing violence in Zimbabwe since Independence in 1980 until today, I have concluded that violence is not the answer to injustice and oppression. Indeed, as others before me have learned and said more powerfully than I can, as I'm still finding my voice as a peace builder, violence begets a cycle or spiral of violence that is difficult to break.

I made a U-turn and initiated a program of Peace Building at Silveira House in Zimbabwe in 1999. We give short courses throughout the country to youth, traditional leaders, war veterans - even to members of the police and army. I will never forget the former freedom fighter who stood up at the conclusion of a peace building workshop in a rural community in Zimbabwe and made a commitment to all who were present that he would ask his wife to bury his gun where he could never find it. "I learned that I can solve problems with words," he said. "I no longer need to use violence."

I will end with a quote from Nelson Mandela, an icon of peace for the world who spent 27 years in prison and came out willing to live in harmony with those who had arrested and imprisoned him and had oppressed the African people. Mandela invited his prison guards to his inauguration. As he stated in his autobiography, Long Road to Freedom, "I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there was mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person. . . . People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of our guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. (A person's) Man's goodness is a flame than can be hidden but never extinguished."⁸

I think that Pope John XXIII had a similar outlook on life as Nelson Mandela. In Pacem in Terris, he encourages us to reach out to those with whom we differ and to build bridges of understanding. The phrase that stood out for me in Pacem In Terris is one that is repeated many

⁸ Mandela, Nelson, Long Road to Freedom.

times - “the universal common good.” If the family of nations would work together to achieve this, then truly we could share the pool that is our planet Earth and live in harmony.