



TOGETHER, LET'S CULTIVATE PEACE THROUGH DIALOGUE

A faith-based reflection

"You can plant a seed, that's very easy," said the saffron-robed monk, "but who will nurture the tree?" He was talking about the possibility of sustainable peace in post-war Sri Lanka, but the question can be asked of us all. How can we, in our lives and our communities, nurture the tree of peace? What can we do to support others in their efforts to nurture sustainable peace? The rich resource of our faith leads us towards dialogue as a basis for long-term peace. As our Holy Father has said: "In dialogue everybody wins, and no-one loses ... Dialogue is gentleness, it is the capacity to listen, it is putting yourself in the other person's shoes, and building bridges."

Christ, the Holy Gardener, would tend the tree of peace gently, with patience and love. But Christ was also a man of action, of radical justice. The Gospel stories of loving one's enemy (Matthew 5:44), not counting the sins of others (Matthew 6:15) and turning the other cheek when harmed (Matthew 5:39) challenge the logic of violence. It is that logic that creates a barrier to dialogue for all who work for peace.

The fundamental teachings of Jesus call us to reject this violence. He offers wisdom on how to peacefully confront violence so we can enter

into authentic dialogue and begin the difficult path towards reconciliation.

Have there been times in our own lives where we have noticed the temptation to respond to violence with more violence, yet resisted that temptation? If we take a moment to reflect on those times, perhaps we will also recall how this eased the conflict. It may have been a moment when we chose to turn the other cheek in response to what we saw as a family member's aggression.

But authentic dialogue does not mean dropping the issue forever. Did we choose another moment to raise our concern about a hurtful action? Did we talk, risking vulnerability, about the impact the harmful words or action had on us? Did we invite the other to talk with us, searching for resolution? This is dialogue. With commitment on both sides it can become a process in which we generate options together to resolve our misunderstandings and problems. It takes courage. It isn't compromise, but rather it is a collaboration into which we must enter humbly and with a spirit of finding creative solutions.

As Pope Francis says, to build lasting peace in the world we must "arm our children with the

weapons of dialogue...teach them to fight the good fight of encounter and negotiation," if we wish to leave them "a culture capable of devising strategies of life, not death, and of inclusion, not exclusion."

Dialogue, which is so important in establishing just relationships in our own lives, is also important at both the national and international level. We live in a world where economic and social systems too often perpetuate injustice.

We see structural injustice in the case of people being forcibly displaced from long-held traditional lands because they do not have formal land titles, as is happening in Brazil. We see it in Indonesia, where public water rights are leased to bottled water companies at the expense of water access for smallholder farmers and the poor. We see it in the murder of more than 100 Hondurans, including Berta Cáceres, for defending both human rights and environmental rights. These are situations of economic and social injustice maintained by violence. A water source surrounded by barbed wire and guarded; paramilitaries hired by landowners to remove impoverished people from contested land; the murder with impunity of committed human and environmental rights advocates. This is the violence that Development and Peace partners in the Global South deal with through peaceful means; these are the kinds of injustices they seek to change at great personal risk.

Our partners have much to teach us about peacemaking. It is not just turning the other cheek, but making sure the voices of those affected by injustice and violence are heard, supported and invited into dialogue with those who have oppressed them. In this way, and with the help of our own and our partners' solidarity, the humble begin to challenge and change systems of oppression.

Theology can also teach us to challenge oppressive systems, say some thinkers. To know God is to do justice, and to walk in compassion (Prov 2: 6-8), to be animated by such love that we feel the needs of others as our own (Pacem in Terris, 35). It is justice between humans that brings about the peace of Christ on the Cross (Philippians 4:7, Colossians 1:20). The peace of Christ is not merely the absence of war, it is the presence of justice, and it is justice that sustains a fullness of life for all. As we stand in solidarity with those who suffer from injustice in the Global South, we advocate for the true peace of the cross, rather than the false peace – the silencing – that comes from wielding the sword.

The faith we associate with Christ challenges

injustice and power. Christ's peace transforms injustice without resorting to more violence. Faith propels us into working for sustainable peace and reconciliation. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18), which calls for active listening, allowing for spaces of authentic dialogue, confessing and sharing. In this way we are called to journey together and commit to the reconciliation we have received through Christ (Romans 5:11).

There are clear risks involved with adopting the radical teachings of Jesus as a means towards peace and reconciliation. We make ourselves vulnerable in talking with an aggressor in a spirit of humility and openness. It requires courage. Why should we risk our safety and security in seeking peace through authentic dialogue? Is the seed of peace worth this risk?

Yet when we use violence to confront violence instead of using dialogue, we pursue the downward spiral of death and destruction. Violence that confronts violence, whether through physical acts or speech, cannot build sustainable peace.

The list of global conflicts is seemingly endless. In each, violence grows from long-term and structural injustices. The teachings of Christ invite us into authentic dialogue in ways both radical and challenging, ways in which we can ensure not only the absence of war, but the presence of justice and peace.

This Lent, let us have the courage to walk with our sisters and brothers who have rejected violence. In solidarity with them, let us choose the path of dialogue and reconciliation. Let us nurture the tree of peace in our own lives and in those of our children and our communities. Let us also support the tree of peace in the lives of those struggling for justice around the world. This is the authentic peace that Christ calls us to build.



Peacemaking calls for courage, much more so than warfare. It calls for the courage to say yes to encounter and no to conflict: yes to dialogue and no to violence; yes to negotiations and no to hostilities; yes to respect for agreements and no to acts of provocation; yes to sincerity and no to duplicity. All of this takes courage, it takes strength and tenacity

— Pope Francis, *Invocation for peace*, June 8, 2014