Becoming a Peacemaker

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Becoming a peacemaker is not just a moral obligation for every Christian believer but rather a way of life and a transformative praxis that enables peacemakers to imitate God’s own initiatives. This spiritual calling begins in our own hearts and homes, and continues in a lifestyle of practical peacemaking and social involvement as fruits of the Spirit.

A life in peace is a basic human desire. It is also a basic human right, many would argue. For most people of the world today, this desire is far from their reach, and their right is violated. Confronting the evil of violence in daily life, which is present in all societies and life situations, is a constant challenge for individuals and communities, no matter where they live. Whether violence is cultural, economic, interpersonal, military, emotional, or social, it is an evil that challenges human societies, communities, and individuals who yearn to live in peace.

This is particularly challenging to those people of faith whose religious ethic of life is fundamentally an ethic of nonviolence and peacemaking, such as Christians. As I will argue below, our Christian faith, tradition, and church teaching call us to be peacemakers, to make a life of peace, for ourselves and others. What do we really mean by peace? What do we mean by becoming peacemakers in the face of the violence of daily life? Is the Christian calling primarily for living a life of inner, personal peace, or is it mainly for making social peace? Are social peace and personal peace unrelated? Is one possible without the other? Can people maintain inner peace while living in situations of violence? What are we exactly

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called to as Christians? The multiple ways we talk about peace makes the Christian vocation of becoming peacemakers very complex (Himes, 37-39).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to address all the complex questions mentioned above. This article will first briefly present an interpretation of the first stories in the book of Genesis that would help us look at the initial human experience of violence and the development of the religious response and vision of peace in Scripture; second, it will use the example of family life as a principal experience of transformation to become peacemakers; third, it will discuss some aspects of the Christian vocation of peacemaking; and finally, it will point to the centrality of the call to become peacemakers in Catholic teaching. I will argue that the Christian calling to become peacemakers is an integral part of the identity of Christians, and that it is at the heart of the Good News of salvation of the Gospel and our Christian faith. Becoming peacemakers, as used in this essay, is not intended to mean that all Christians should become peace activists in the general political sense and enroll in peace movements, although that is not an un-Christian task. Rather, peacemaking will be considered as a way of life for Christians in daily situations where we are constantly confronted with a choice between responding violently or in a way that makes peace.

The Initial Human Experience of Violence and the Divine Calling

The German bishops have recently written a pastoral letter entitled “A Just Peace.” In light of the new unfolding world events, these bishops present a biblical theology of peace that prepares the way for their reflection on violence, on what a just peace in our world would look like, and on the mission of the church. The letter argues that the human experience of violence is the background for the vision of peace that evolved in the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures. The stories in the book of Genesis describe early human existence as one of murder and social violence. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and disrupted the original harmony that was intended between human beings and the Creator (Gen 1–3).

In chapter four of the book of Genesis, the descendant of the first human couple, Cain, motivated by rivalry, murders his brother Abel. As humans developed socially, expanded and built cities, we learn later in Genesis, the whole of humanity sinned and the earth became corrupt. “When the Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how no desire that his heart conceived was ever anything but evil,” God was grieved and regretted creating humans and the earth (Gen 6:5-6). According to Genesis, God decided to end life on earth by sending a flood. This was God’s way of dealing with the social violence of the first human beings, we are told in the biblical story. Violence among humans has also
affected the earth. Biblical theology makes a connection as early as the book of Genesis between social violence generated by human beings and the future of the earth.

But the Flood is not the end of the story. God also had a plan for a new beginning and for setting humanity on a new course in history. The Scriptures consistently tell us that God does not allow violence to have the last word. Before the Flood, God called Noah, who was an exception, and who “found favor with the Lord” (Gen 6:8). Noah and his family were guided by God to build an ark and were saved with their animals from the Flood. God made a new covenant with Noah that opened the possibility for a new beginning. This new agreement is permanent and universal, and it also opened a new possibility and hope for the earth (Gen 6–9). In the story of Noah, God promised that there would be no more floods to deal with evil (A Just Peace, 9–12).

The realization that the early human experience is primarily an experience of violence seems to be a main teaching in Genesis. This drama of social violence and the possibility for a new beginning seem to be a pattern in the biblical understanding of history. In a situation of great crisis, God calls new people for a new beginning, who bring new hope for peace. This is also a lesson we learn from the story of Abraham a few chapters later in the same book (Gen 12), the story of Moses in Exodus, and from most of the books of the Prophets. This pattern does not end with Genesis, Exodus, and the Prophets; it cuts across the rest of Scripture. It is also a framework within which we can read the story of Jesus.

The Christian Gospels are essentially a testimony of how Jesus responded in new ways to the many types of violence he experienced, e.g., political violence, poverty, exclusion, cultural violence, religious violence, and finally to the concrete physical violence he experienced through his crucifixion. God’s response was to raise Jesus from the dead. Jesus’ teaching, life, death, and resurrection open for us new possibilities for responding to violence and making peace.

In the Gospel of Luke, peace to all people was the first good news from heaven announced by the angels at the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:14). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that the peacemakers are blessed because they are children of God. They are transformed by peacemaking and they share the same nature of God, as God’s children. John Paul II, commenting on the passage from the Gospel of Matthew, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God” (Matt 5:9), asks, “And why else would peacemakers be called...
children of God, if not because God is by nature the God of peace?” (John Paul II, 2004).

Jesus gave a gift of a new peace to his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you” (John 14:27). He also became our peace (Eph 2:14). However, the Christian Scriptures do not offer us a full explanation as to what this peace essentially means and how we ought to live it out, so we continue to explore and develop this teaching to the present day.

I would like to suggest that becoming a peacemaker, as I will develop later in this essay, is not just a moral obligation for a believer in God but rather a way of life and a transformative praxis that makes believers peacemakers, like God.

**Family Life as a Principal Experience of Transformation for Peacemaking**

One of the biggest surprises in my personal journey of transformation and learning to become a peacemaker has been my relationship with my wife and two little children. My experience of parenting over the past four years has made it very clear that it is much easier for me to maintain an attitude of non-violence and a commitment to peacemaking in the political and social arena than to do so at home. After many years of believing and acting for peace on a variety of global issues with strong theological and political convictions, the new call for personal transformation in my relations with my spouse and children is by far a deeper challenge for me. Let me use a familiar example.

Dealing with the tendency to use punishment (emotional or physical) with my children in order to establish or maintain peace at home is an ongoing challenge. When I act on my initial spontaneous impulse in a situation of conflict among my children, my action would normally perpetuate the cycle of violence that is generated as a result of the conflict rather than breaking its cycle and transforming it. Like all children do, my two little children, four and two-and-a-half years old, often fight over toys. There are more than enough toys for each. However, the desire for the toy that the other is playing with at the moment is always a source of conflict and battles. Even though such battles happen on a daily basis, they still often take me by surprise. Despite my many years of spiritual, theological, and some practical training in nonviolence and peacemaking, my initial, spontaneous, almost instinctive angry reaction is immediately to intervene and punish the one who started the fight. When I act in this manner, which I sometimes do, I normally immediately punish the one who initiated the violence and force that one to return the toy to the other. The victim is happy again while the other is angry, and “peace” is apparently reestablished. In my experience, understanding this scenario has been quite significant for understanding the dynamics of spirals of violence at a much larger scale.
My violent reaction in this manner continues the cycle of violence that began with two actors and now it involves a third. Another option for my intervention would be to take a step back, recognize my anger, and try to initiate a mediation to bring the two to talk together, which often takes a lot of creativity, time, and attention. But by doing so, I facilitate a dialogue that could lead to a different way for making peace. There is an ongoing tension between the tendency to act with anger and continue the cycle of violence, on the one hand, and the option of trying to initiate a dialogue that could potentially transform a conflict and make peace. Dealing with this tension is a permanent challenge in my personal transformation.

This is a simple example from the interpersonal relationships in family life, but in my opinion, it is very indicative. It is a typical scenario that helps us understand larger social conflicts. Responding to daily life situations of violence calls for a conscious commitment, creativity, and moral imagination to break and transform the various cycles of violence we encounter, rather than becoming part of their continuation. Relationships with one’s spouse and children open significant new possibilities for transformation to peacemakers, in the deepest biblical, Christian sense beyond the family. “If we can experience the possibility of peace—nonviolent conflict resolution—at the family level,” affirm the authors of Parenting for Peace and Justice, “then our faith in the possibility of peace and our willingness to work for it at the other levels grow” (McGinnis, 25).

This process of transformation in the family is not different from what Richard Gaillardetz calls “working out our salvation” in family relations. In his book on the spirituality of Christian marriage, Gaillardetz makes a strong argument about the connection between marriage, conversion, and salvation. “I am growing in the conviction that my relationship with my wife and children is indeed the spiritual ‘place’ wherein I will work out my salvation. . . . ’Salvation,’ the spiritual transformation that God wishes to effect in me, transpires within the crucible of my relationship with my wife and children” (Gaillardetz, 62). What is said above about conversion and salvation applies also to becoming peacemakers. I, too, am growing in the same conviction.

Opting for making peace in the family is not different from other life situations; the challenges are similar. Tensions that could cause conflicts are part of the daily experience of living. The challenge is constantly to respond by engaging in a process of transformation that becomes an attitude and a way of life for dealing with conflicts, despite the fact that tensions and conflicts will continue to
happen. Transforming the exercise of power in situations of conflict from domination to mutuality and service is key for transforming a conflict. In his work on peace in the Scriptures, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann offers a helpful insight and a tool of transformation used by Jesus. Referring to the scene of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (John 13:14), Brueggemann says that the towel and basin become powerful symbols of peacemaking; “they are the tools of the trade.” The towel and basin are tools for making peace and becoming peacemakers. They are tools for transforming attitudes and relations of power, an important dimension of conflicts without which we cannot make peace (Brueggemann, 143). “Power over” is transformed to become service, empowerment, and “power with” that makes peace (Bamat and Cejka, 269).

**The Vocation of Peacemakers**

As already mentioned in the first part of this article, we do not have a clear, specific explanation in the Scriptures and the Christian traditions as to what it means to become a peacemaker. The argument that peacemaking is an integral part of our Christian life and identity is quite clear, but knowing what that concretely means in each situation is left to the contextual interpretation of believers. The commitment to nonviolence and the commandment to love one’s enemies are certainly two concrete expressions of what it means to be a peacemaker. However, Jesus’ teaching about peacemaking goes far beyond these two expressions.

No matter where we live out the Christian vocation of peacemakers, it is always an invitation to an adventure and taking risks. Not unlike discipleship, it is a long journey of faith that involves ongoing personal transformation. Speaking not from an explicitly theological perspective, John Paul Lederach, a leading voice in the area of peacemaking, dedicates a chapter in his most recent work, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, to discuss the vocation of peace builder. The vocation of becoming a peacemaker, notes the author, is a commitment to a relationship, which entails risk. “Risk is mystery. It requires a journey. Risk means we take a step toward and into the unknown. By its very definition risk accepts vulnerability and lets go of the need to control a priori the process or the outcome of human affairs.”

Based on his long experience in observing peacemaking around the world, the author’s key insight for understanding the vocation of a peacemaker is that it is part of the mystery of faith and life. It is a journey toward a land totally unfamiliar, a “mysterious journey toward the sacred” (Lederach, chapter 14).

This insight resonates with what John Paul II said, commenting on the passage in the Sermon on the Mount about God’s special blessing to peacemakers. “How could this saying, which is a summons to work in the immense field of
peace, find such a powerful echo in the human heart if it did not correspond to an irrepressible yearning and hope dwelling within us?” (John Paul II, 2004).

The vocation of becoming a peacemaker is a commitment to a life of peace that involves practical peacemaking. Kenneth Himes, in a recent article on Catholic social teaching on peace, makes a clear argument that points to an important dimension of the vocation of being a peacemaker. What is needed, Himes contends, are not only personal attitudes, positions, and words, but also clear social commitments demonstrated in concrete actions and lifestyle. Religious or faith convictions and attitudes are not enough.

On the other hand, Lederach, based on his experience with peacemakers in many violent situations in the world, argues that practical skills and training are not enough either. Successful peace building is an art that springs out of one’s soul. Successful peace builders have a deep sense of vocation rooted in the mystery of peacemaking and are connected to the sacred that nurtures their moral imagination. In the same vein, Leonardo Boff affirms that inner peace, rooted in a spiritual relationship, and social peace are connected. “Spiritual masters of all cultures,” notes Boff, “are convinced that peace between persons and peoples is a matter of the soul and heart. Those who wish to be on good terms with others... must be on good terms with themselves. They must pacify their souls, become centered, and bring together the dispersing and scattering tendencies that conspire against peace” (Boff, 22). According to Boff, the religious connection with the sacred is the main source of inner peace (Boff, 24). All the above arguments, I believe, contribute to a better understanding of what we mean by becoming peacemakers.

**The Call to Become Peacemakers in Modern Catholic Teaching**

The teachings of Jesus on peace and the example of his response to violence have been taken very seriously in the Christian traditions across the ages. In modern Catholic social teaching, peace and the call to become peacemakers occupy a central position. Most popes of the last century have issued letters, messages, prayers, and encyclicals on peace. The annual messages of the World Day of Peace, initiated on January 1, 1968, by Paul VI, are a constant reminder of the centrality of the topic of world peace in the church and to Christian life. In his first World Day of Peace message, Paul VI pointed to the centrality of peace in the Gospel: proclaiming peace is announcing Jesus Christ. John Paul II repeated exactly the same words:

We Christians see the commitment to educate others and ourselves to peace as something at the very heart of our religion. For Christians, in fact, to proclaim
peace is to announce Christ who is “our peace” (Eph 2:14); it is to announce his Gospel, which is a “Gospel of peace” (Eph 6:15); it is to call all people to the beatitude of being “peacemakers” (John Paul II, 2004).

In an earlier message, John Paul II asserted that building peace is essential to the mission and vocation of every Christian and to the church, which is called to be a “sacrament and sign of peace.” The evangelizing mission of the church is equated with its work for peace. He notes:

For the Catholic faithful, the commitment to build peace and justice is not secondary but essential. . . . During this Jubilee Year, the Church vividly remembers her Lord and intends to confirm her vocation and mission to be in Christ a “sacrament” or sign and instrument of peace in the world and for the world. For the Church, to carry out her evangelizing mission means to work for peace. (John Paul II, 2000)

This teaching emphasizes the Gospel calling for us Christians to become peacemakers in the world. John Paul II affirms that this calling is an essential element not only of our faith, but also of what it means to be church in the world.

**Conclusion**

Despite our propensity to violence, we Christians believe that peace is a deep desire in the human heart, a gift, and the intention of the Creator. A full understanding of the origin of violence in human relations is still unknown to us. Human and social sciences offer a variety of helpful approaches and analyses, but what motivates violence, its root causes and origin, is still a mystery. It is linked to the broader mystery of evil. What makes one nation or people, oftentimes in the name of their faith, take pride in inflicting violence on other peoples? The same could be said about other types of interpersonal and social relations.

As I outlined earlier in this essay, violence is acknowledged as part of the human condition early on in our biblical understanding of the history of salvation. This recognition is also a central element in the development of many other religions and cultures. The call to live as peacemakers, from a Christian perspective, is a spiritual endeavor with far reaching personal, social, and political implications. Confessing and following Christ as our peace is an ongoing process of personal transformation, as well as a way of life where the cycles of violence encountered are constantly challenged and hopefully transformed by a new faith, ethic, and commitment.

Paul Knitter argues that religions are not finished products. Rather, they are constantly “becoming” together. This argument offers an insightful perspective
on becoming peacemakers. We learn from physics, says Knitter, that all creation is constantly in an interrelated process of “becoming.” “If everything is becoming rather than being, the becoming takes place through interrelating. In that context, we can be only by becoming, and we can become only by relating” (Knitter, 10).

Peace is not primarily the reestablishment of a previous order or the realization of an ideal; rather, it is an ongoing process of transformation and creation at the personal and social levels. Becoming peacemakers, as Christians, means to acquire and develop a sense for recognizing the possibilities for new beginnings that God offers in the midst of each conflict and situation of violence, and to become an active agent in the transformation of these relationships and situations.

References


