

... WARS AND RUMOURS OF WAR...

AND PEACE-MAKING

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At times, life seems like a tug-of-war between cruelties and atrocities over against goodness, grace and beauty, whether in nature or in human lives. I think the more we are touched by each, and by the conflict between them, the more deeply we live. After all, compassion (“suffering-with”) is a deep and rich way of being, but it wouldn’t be at all if there were no suffering. Reconciliation can be an enriching and moving experience, but it wouldn’t be if there were not first some kind of alienation. And I think our commitment to peace-making will be shallow if we haven’t first wept over the suffering, waste, futility and personal tragedies of war.

The tug-of-war is not an everlasting, unresolvable conflict. It reached a climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus, when evil was not merely defeated; it was itself transformed by being seconded to the purpose of revealing the resurrection and future life. Evil has no future.

St Paul spoke of creation “groaning in travail” as the prelude to sharing re-birth. Perhaps he could have said “straining towards ecstasy”, for isn’t that what we catch glimpses of in bird-song and Beethoven, in self-sacrificing love, in forgiveness and new beginnings? The ecstasy doesn’t merely follow on from the agony; it emerges from within the depths of the agony, and gradually transforms it.

It is the meaning of “gradualness” that I want to explore, because it calls for different ways of contributing to peace. Failure to recognize the implications of gradualness results in debates unhelpfully polarized between “war” and “non-violence”, or results in mere repetition of the less sophisticated, more dialectic, wisdom of an earlier era: “...there is a time for killing, a time for healing; ... a time for war, a time for peace...”(Eccles. 3:2)

Pope Francis speaks of “time” and the importance of process; Lonergan and others speak of shifting horizons, conversion and transformation when describing what happens to ourselves as we grow in knowledge; Pope John Paul II and moral theologians have spoken of “gradualness” in the journey of personal development and moral growth. And if Jesus could speak of evils that “must happen,” this could only be because He did not expect the fullness of peace until the end of the ages: “You will hear of wars and rumours of war; do not be alarmed, this is something that must happen, but the end will not be yet”. (Mt 24:6ff) What is the meaning of peace-making in that context? It has many forms, and they all point to the end-time when peace will be God’s gift. The long wait serves to increase our longing and our capacity for it. It is also the only time available to us in which to become instruments of peace, which is at the core of every calling.

I confess to feeling weighed down by the terrible conflicts and cruelties depicted in documentaries on the History channel and Al Jazeera. But I suspect the long-term cumulative effect of quicker communication and wider awareness of what is happening will be good. By uncovering skullduggery in any of its guises, good investigative journalism deserves recognition for its contribution to truth, justice and peace-making, (just as shonky journalism contributes to injustice and conflict.)

When we look to the causes of the world’s conflicts, colonialism shows up as a prime culprit, both in its older form of “empire”, and in the still current ways that big-business, munitions dealers and financiers exploit and plunder, sometimes even with help from their home countries’ special forces. Moreover, the experience of being governed by outsiders, or by puppet dictators, did not help colonized people to

gradually learn the skills and responsibilities of freedom. So, when liberated, many self-destructed from tribal rivalries or political corruption. Properly directed development aid to exploited or repressed peoples is not charity; it is owed as reparation, and as contributions to reconciliation and peace. And those who owe it are all who have benefited by the spoils of colonization.

It is well known, of course, that religions have played a part in many violent conflicts. This is what happens when religion is turned into ideology, with its impulse to impose and dominate. Faith, by contrast, respects the dignity and freedom of persons, human and civil rights, and the primacy of conscience. Christians, Muslims and Jews are among those who have taken a long time to fully realize this. They did not always see that it was incompatible with the nature of faith and the dignity of persons to impose the truth they wanted to share.

Some still don't. Some Christians, especially of a fundamentalist disposition, still display an intolerance that falls short of full respect for human dignity and rightful freedom. (Fundamentalists have yet to learn that what sacred texts actually teach is not necessarily the same as what they merely presuppose.) Echoes of ideologized religion also surfaced at the Second Vatican Council, but now live on only in groups that didn't accept the Council's teaching on ecumenism, inter-faith relations, and religious liberty.

Islam's experience is ambiguous: The Ottoman Empire was Islamist, yet even though sharia was the law of the land, the Ottoman system did not impose Islamic culture on the Empire's Jewish, Christian or other minority communities. (Later clashes were reprisals against nationalist and separatist movements during the break-up of the empire.) There, and in other parts of the world, Jews, Christians and Muslims have lived harmoniously together, even under Islamic rule. But freedom of religion and of conscience vanishes wherever Islam has tried, or still tries, to impose its culture. There are human and civil rights that have emerged in humankind's consciousness where the Enlightenment has been experienced and its values critically assimilated. Much of the Islamic world has not had that experience, - or is in shock at how the Western world has abused freedom.

People responsible for political judgments may wonder whether a State can claim to be acting in self-defense when it has blatantly provoked the frustration and reprisals of the people it oppresses. Whatever about any political judgment, there is also a religious dimension to the modern State of Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people: at the core of Hebrew faith was the discovery of God's great and unmerited mercy, and the resulting need to show mercy (in ways that never occurred to ancient Israel's pagan neighbours). Today, whatever about the trappings of faith, it is the core of Hebrew faith that the State of Israel has lost.

Secularism itself is repressive in an inverse way when, acting out of its denial of faith, it moves in the direction of denying religious freedom and freedom of conscience. The impulse to impose and dominate is common to all ideologies, religious and secular.

The Judeo-Christian tradition predicts a time when nations "will hammer their swords into ploughshares, their spears into sickles, and not lift sword against other nations nor train for war any more" (Isaiah 2:4). There are those who would turn such a prophecy into a moral principle for immediate and universal application. They telescope the end-time into the present. But real time is needed for moral growth and human development. In this meantime, peace-makers include those who promote disarmament, "truth and reconciliation", restorative justice, *medecins sans frontiers*, etc. There is a down-to-earth realism in accepting that forgiveness presupposes acknowledgement of the

offences that need to be forgiven. “Only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing” (Archbishop Desmond Tutu).

There is realism also in the Catholic Church’s treasury of Catholic Social Teaching - as well as in the commitment of people, of all faiths and none, who work to change the social and economic conditions that spawn injustices, resentments and wars. By the same token, these people are also “prophets”, because the deeds of justice, peace and reconciliation are experienced as reminders of what our hearts are made for, and intimations that what we hope for can really happen.

We cannot exclude from the title of “peace-makers” those who risk their own lives to defend others against lethal attack. Citizens have a right to be defended, and governments a corresponding duty to defend them, by force if necessary, as well as a right to call on other governments for help, if needed. This is not different *in principle* from what we expect of our police forces, which sometimes have to use force, and call for back-up.

To leave others exposed and defenseless when we are in a position to help cannot be justified by invoking “non-violence.” Members of peace movements rightly remind us of Jesus’ sermon on the mount and his teaching on turning the other cheek. His teaching is to be taken seriously, but not superficially: it is not intended to encourage new acts of violence. Nor does it excuse us from restraining perpetrators of violence if we can. We are not being anti-war by allowing others to wage war. Pope Paul VI, even as he warned against revolutionary uprising, admitted that this cannot be absolutely excluded if there is no other way of liberating people from long-standing tyranny and on-going, deep injustice.

Nor does “non-violence” in the sense adopted by Ghandi, Te Whiti and Tohu, Martin Luther-King and others fulfill our obligations in all situations. This is a noble philosophy and mechanism for promoting social and political change, but even where it makes use of passive resistance and civil disobedience, it simply does not apply, for example, when terrorists are attacking buses and trains in London, cafes and restaurants in Paris and Sydney, school children in Nigeria, holiday-makers in Libya, party-goers in a gay night-club in Orlando, religious and ethnic minorities on a hill-top surrounded by ISIS, etc.

The rights and duties relating to self-defense and defense of others are the basis for what has been unhelpfully nick-named the “just war theory”. It seems strangely necessary to say that this “theory” is not intended to argue the case for war: it is intended to limit the circumstances in which force may be used even for legitimate defense! And it is not just a “theory”; when the Church identifies circumstances in which it would be morally wrong to use force, its teaching is to be taken seriously. It is sloppy thinking to say “modern wars have made the just war theory obsolete”. On the contrary, it is that “theory” – or “the strict conditions for legitimate defense by military force” as the Catechism of the Catholic Church more correctly calls it – that outlaws modern warfare in many circumstances!

Comparison was made above with policing. I would argue that the concept of war needs to be *replaced* by the concept of policing, which seems to offer a more civilized way of thinking about enforcement. I think this is also implied in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council when it said that a nation’s right to use force in self-defense exists only so long as there is “no competent and sufficiently powerful authority at international level” to defend them; (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 79). They too are peace-makers who work for a world order in which we can move beyond war to policing; beyond what is possible now to what might become possible yet. The temptation is to feel overwhelmed by the size of the task. But every small step in the right direction gradually shifts horizons,

and in this way opens up new possibilities. It starts with where we put ourselves. Pope Paul VI was right to say: “there can be no new world unless there are first of all new persons.”

Archbishop Tutu was also right to link it with forgiveness:

When I talk of forgiveness I mean the belief that you can come out the other side a better person; a better person than the one being consumed by anger and hatred. Remaining in that state locks you in a state of victimhood making you almost dependent on the perpetrator. If you can find it in yourself to forgive then you are no longer chained to the perpetrator. You can move on, and you can even help the perpetrator to become a better person too.

Whatever makes for better persons makes for peace.

Does respect for gradualness risk being used as an excuse for doing too little, and acquiescing in how things are, instead of how they should be? The trouble is: asking too much too soon can produce the same result. This is the tension being played out in differences between Pope Francis and his critics. His critics insist on repeating and emphasizing the full ideal; they fear that not to do so is to compromise doctrine and moral standards. They have little to say to those who don't reach the full ideal, other than that they are guilty. Pope Francis starts instead from human experience, which is the experience of weakness, struggle, failure and limited success; it's about a journey in which every step in the right direction is good, and getting there gradually is better than feeling overwhelmed and not getting there at all.

Peace-making is like that: doing what you can, where you can, when you can, and believing that it all counts.