

SHALOM

Peace at what cost?

Richard Hart, O.F.M. Cap.



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One of the most consoling sections of St. John's Gospel that we can preach occurred when the resurrected Jesus appears to His bewildered apostles and says not once but twice, "Peace be with you."

Jesus does not bawl out His apostles but offers them God's shalom, peace. He does not say to them, "Where were you when I died on the cross?" This was the first day of the week and a time for a new beginning for the apostles.

Jesus offers us the same message despite all the chaos and suffering found in the world today: violence, wars, terrorism, natural disasters, calamities, loss of life, a teetering economy, high gas prices. Jesus' peace can crack the hardest of hearts, and new life can sprout where violence, disasters, and suffering are rampant.

The word "shalom" or peace means more than a greeting like "howdy" or "hi." Shalom can often sound tinny or shallow like Paul's clashing cymbals. Scholars have often argued that shalom indicated a social concept not so much a relationship. But why could it not be both like a greeting or a parting, and a relationship?

Embedded in God

An important aspect of shalom or peace is fullness, perfection, health, wholeness, fulfillment or completion. We are "embedded" (like in the womb) in God and embraced by God. A sense of belonging to a family, a community or place needs to be pointed out to our assembly. Consider all the homeless who have been displaced by war, natural disasters or ethnic hatred. How many cannot wear a T-shirt with a red dot pointing out "You are here?"

Catholic Relief Services is helping to maintain peace in Lebanon by assisting tens of thousands of the 980,000 persons displaced as a result of the war. How about in other countries such as Iraq and the Sudan? We need to help these people reclaim their participation in what Nancy Bloomer calls "the Earth's story" a place that is precious and sacred.

As Thomas Berry, S.J., the famous ecotheologian, stated, "We will neither love nor save what we do not experience as sacred." Recovering the sacred is our job. One of the purposes of religion and our preaching is to bring us into deeper contact with the sacred.

Causes of Division

There are many causes of division among people, some of which even cause exclusion violence — whites versus blacks, rich versus poor, men versus women, the powerful versus the oppressed, Christians versus Muslims, the First World versus the Third World, those who believe in a future life versus those who do not.

Other divisions include abortion, with women versus the unborn, crimes demanding retribution versus the death penalty, euthanasia versus suffering, as well as issues pertaining stem cell

research, poverty and economic justice.

We need to stand strong in our convictions, especially for the poor and the oppressed. We must safeguard the dignity of every individual — a dignity that is a gift from God and not earned. Each of us has a divine DNA.

To reinforce how some are not interested in human dignity, one Lebanese man who lost his home said of the reconstruction, "No one is looking after humans, they are looking after politics." Well, Jesus did. We don't. Our task is to encourage people to join forces with others to work for peace and the good of society. It is true, divided, we fall, but that, united, we stand tall.

Shalom or peace means that we have a wholesome relationship with God and others. We can flourish only to the extent that we relate to others and help them to flourish. Yet we must be very careful not to attempt to do it alone or to act in a superior manner.

The litmus test in working for shalom or peace is how we treat the vulnerable, the voiceless, the outcast, the oppressed. Peace and justice existed when the Israelites extended their help to the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan. We read in Exodus, "You

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shall not oppress an alien; you well know how it feels to be an alien, since you were once aliens yourselves in Egypt" (23:9).

A Franciscan who is well aware of the oppressed is Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes who earned a reputation as a peacemaker. He mediated a bitter labor dispute in Brazil, and has always been a staunch advocate for the poor while maintaining that the Church, "propose not impose, serve and not dominate."

Shalom or peace is a result of justice shown to others. As his holiness of happy memory Pope John Paul II said, "If you want peace, work for justice." Our desire has to consist in not leaving anyone out. All of us are created according to God's image and are to be treated with human dignity. Proverbs tells us, "Anyone who mocks the poor, blasphemes the Maker" (17:5).

Jesus made it clear that we have to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the ill and visit those in prison" (Mt 25:35-36). In the beatitudes, the Magna Carta for Christianity, Jesus tells us, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Mt 5:6,9).

St. Paul understood well how all of us are united in the body of Christ when he wrote, "If (one) part (member) suffers, all the parts (members) suffer with it" (1 Cor 12:26). Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. emphasized this same reality when he wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." He believed that all of us are united in one garment of destiny, and that what affects one affects all. He maintained that in our struggle for peace we need to acknowledge that all of us are children of God and that we must try to live together as brothers and sisters.

Mother Teresa stated that "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

The Good News we preach is that we have the ability to change the "versus," the divisions, and to resist temptations to exclude or polarize. Opening our arms and hearts to others is chal-

lenging, but the embrace is worth the risk. Changing the "versus" is demanding, but as Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, an Indian diplomat and sister to Nehru, wrote, "The more we sweat in peace, the less we bleed in war."

Dream

Another way to counteract "versus" is to encourage our parishioners to dream. Is shalom or peace just a dream or is it possible that "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; One Nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again?" (Is 2:4) Despite the trillions of dollars spent on wars, is it possible for all nations to live in peace? Is it possible for the lion to lie down with the lamb and that we can become one community?

We can understand why many will say this is a pipe dream because of the terrorism, violence, crime, poverty, racism, the lack of affordable health care for all, quality education, and decent housing. Some are discouraged and fold their arms in despair and hopelessness. The drumbeats of hope have been silenced by our inability to counteract the cynicism and despair so prevalent among many.

But, if we refuse to dream of a world living in peace and harmony, we are in trouble and this will lead to economic, social and religious disaster. Noah had to send out the dove twice before it came back with an olive leaf in its beak. After seven days he sent out the dove again and this time it did not return (Gn 8:6-12). The message is clear that we need to keep striving for peace and not to give up.

Jesus' resurrection is a sign of not giving up; he holds everything together. He compared God's reign to a tiny mustard seed. Seeds that lay in Egyptian pyramids for thousands of years grew when they were planted. The right conditions are needed.

Elty Hillesum, a Jewish mystic, had a dream to minister to her people in the Nazi death camps of the Second World War. Her dream was that, despite all the horror present, "We should be willing

to act as a balm for all wounds, and thus be able to say, life is beautiful!" Julian of Norwich insisted that "And all will be well and all will be well and every kind of thing will be well." Her statement certainly reminds us that, even in chaos wars, crime, violence and disasters, all will be well if we believe that all things are possible with God who created the world out of chaos.

Without a gun in our hands we are still fighting another enemy: fear. Some are afraid to fly, to lose their jobs, to get sick, to travel on our streets, to live on a fixed income, to have terrorists attack us. We long for shalom, peace, but need to overcome, to face and to embrace our fears. Jesus is our source of peace. He said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you... Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid" (Jn 14:27).

Through prayer Jesus gives us the assurance that we dismiss our fears. He told his Apostles, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid" (Mt 14:27). Good examples of courage are the Catholic bishops of South Korea who have insisted that "Peace can be achieved only through incessant forgiveness and reconciliation."

Amelia Mary Earhart, first aviatrix to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, wrote, "Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace." On Oct. 9, 2006, a very significant and courageous meeting took place in Ireland between Archbishop Sean Brady and Ian Paisley, the founder of the Free Presbyterian Church and the Democratic Unionist Party. Now the peace process in Northern Ireland has moved forward.

Nonviolence

One way to shalom and peace is non violence. Ghandi used the term *ahimsa* which literally means "no harm," not returning harm to others. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used "soul force." In 1968, he met in Memphis with a group of angry workers involved in a sanitation strike and was able to appease them because he exuded peace.

When faced with natural disasters including tornadoes, earthquakes,

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fires, floods, cancer and many others, we are better suited to deal with them if we have learned to deal in a non-violent way with these pressures of daily life. In our day-to-day living we can learn how not to be aggressive, competitive, winning at all costs, but rather to be kind, compassionate, and caring. The ability to show inner peace in the midst of adverse conditions is very challenging but brings rich rewards.

Buddhists emphasize the need for "right speech" to help them not be violent. Jesus said, "The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile" (Mt 15:18). St. James wrote, "If anyone does not fall short in speech, that individual is a perfect person, able to bridle one's whole body also" (3:2). In speaking we communicate who we really are. Jesus challenges us as we need to challenge our assembly, "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will render an account for every careless word they speak" (Mt 12:36).

Forms of violent language are shouting angrily, profanity, obscene or abusive language, just to mention a few. Non-violent speech means being patient with aggressive speakers, incessant talkers and fearful talkers. Jesus said, "Love your enemies." That doesn't mean we have to like them. Jesus certainly did not like the Scribes and Pharisees, but he still loved them.

Love means not wishing them any harm and, rising above our feelings, trying to resolve our differences. Taming our hostility and calming our feelings of retaliation present a daunting challenge. A non-violent person cannot prevent himself from feeling upset or discontent with an unjust situation. Just and unjust anger are different as well as constructive and destructive criticism.

Our anger is justified when we hear of children being abused, unarmed protesters being clubbed, biases being shown to people of another race or religion. Ghandi's nonviolence started when he traveled on a train and someone complained about his "color." He was asked to move to a second class

compartment, but refused. Ghandi was thrown off the train at the next stop.

As preachers we need to point out that there is a justified anger. Jesus became angry when he witnessed money changers in the temple. He drove them out saying, "Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a market place" (Jn 2:16). He also became angry when the scribes and Pharisees would not answer when He asked them if it was lawful to save a life on the Sabbath. They remained silent, and Jesus got angry because of their hardness of heart (Mk 3:4-5).

Often we shrug our shoulders at some injustice and say, "I can't do anything about it." We salve our consciences by repeating what Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you" (Mt 26:11). A just anger can energize us to act as Ghandi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jesus and many others have done.

We can change situations through a non-violent way. Sometimes it can be done with humor. The story is told of a father who was dying and whose daughter asked him if there was anything she could do for him. He responded with a smile, "I just want a little peace and quiet and all the oxygen I can get."

For the Chinese, sharing a meal together is a sign of harmony or peace. Jesus is often depicted in the Gospels at meals, especially the Last Supper where he said, "This is my body which is given for you...This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you" (Lk 22:19-20). He gave himself for us in a non-violent way during his passion and death. The reign of God, as Jesus predicted, will end at the banquet table.

We have seen how wars start because one country throws a match into a tinder box. On July 12, 2006, Hezbollah fighters kidnapped two Israeli soldiers. In 34 days 1,200 people died on both sides, including many

innocent Lebanese people. Experts point out that Lebanon's development was set back 20 years. The Israelis and

Hezbollah blamed each other, diverting attention from the real issue of trying to find an alternative to violence and suffering. But we need to go deeper than a cease-fire agreement.

Both sides need to continue working toward non-violent means of reconciliation and political progress. Much compassion, open-mindedness, and generosity is needed. Imagine what could happen if both sides agreed that they have been cruel and insensitive to each other and need to repent. The same is true in Iraq and also in Africa.

The United States bishops have made it clear that peacemaking is not a fad. It arises because we are Gospel people. Shalom, peace is a journey not an end in itself. Shalom, peace can triumph if we are convinced that love can overcome hatred and that hope can counteract despair. At the worldwide assembly of Catholic moral theologians held in Padua, Italy, July 8-11, 2006, the moralists insisted that a greater emphasis be placed on peacemaking and peace building rather than on warfare.

Imagine what could happen if that blueprint or shift of emphasis were followed throughout the world. Because he was a peacemaker Francis of Assisi was able to have a tremendous impact on his society, and the peace prayer attributed to him might express well how we can avoid divisions, "versus," how we can dream for peace, and how we can act in a non-violent way.

Lord make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. **P**

FATHER HART, O.F.M. Cap., is the director of preaching for the St. Joseph Province of the Capuchins. He has written articles for *Pastoral Life*, *Human Development*, and *Teacher's Journal*.