31.
Consecrated Life and the Service of Peace

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul writes of having been given “the ministry of reconciliation” and being “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:19, 20). Down through the centuries, in ways sometimes hidden and sometimes public, the Church has carried on this ministry. The sacramental practice of reconciliation is familiar to us, but the ministry of reconciliation entails much more than what takes place in the confessional. A gospel verse that points us beyond the chapel and confessional room and into the wider world is the beatitude, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:9). Jesus also says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27). Jesus is above all a peacemaker, “making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:20), and he expects the rest of us to be and to do the same. The cross reminds us that peacemaking may exact a high price.

Before we consider how consecrated life is so well poised to promote peacemaking, it is worth recalling the extent to which working on behalf of peace has been a notable characteristic of the Petrine ministry for well over a century. The World Day for Peace was first observed under Paul VI on January 1, 1968. The headers for the annual papal messages are worth recalling: “The promotion of Human Rights, the way to Peace” (1969); “To be reconciled with each other, to educate themselves for Peace” (1970); “Every man is my brother” (1971); “If you want Peace, work for Justice” (1972); “Peace is possible!” (1973); “Peace depends on you too” (1974); “Reconciliation—the way to Peace” (1975); “The real weapons of peace” (1976); “If you want peace, defend life” (1977); and
“No to violence, yes to peace” (1978). Paul VI was following up on John XXIII’s great encyclical *Pacem in terris* (Peace on Earth) with its vigorous defense of human rights and its fierce condemnation of the arms race that was going on between the Soviet Union and the United States. Before John XXIII there was Pius XII, and before Pius XII there were Pius XI and Benedict XV—pontificates that unfolded against the horrifying backdrops of World War II and World War I. When Paul VI wrote *Populorum progressio* (On the Development of Peoples), the Vietnam War was being fought, while during John Paul II’s pontificate the U.S. and its allies were waging the War in Iraq. Both in terms of writing and diplomatic efforts, recent popes exercised the ministry of reconciliation and peacemaking before a world that had known war for almost a century.

When explaining why he chose the name Francis, Monseñor Bergoglio said, “Francis was a man of peace, a man of poverty, a man who loved and protected creation.” Pope Francis stands very much in the current of his recent predecessors. Watching him at the vigil for peace in Syria in September and reading his remarks on the anniversary of *Pacem in terris* in October remind us that peacemaking and reconciliation are still very much at the heart of the Petrine ministry.

The call to serve peace by being men and women of peace comes to all of us through baptism. The call is echoed at the end of each Eucharist in the words “Go in peace.” But when I try to think of the connection between the service of peace and consecrated life my mind moves in two directions. One direction is toward the prophets among us and the other is toward the contemplatives. On the contemplative side the major moment that comes to mind is that of the Trappist monks slain...
in Algeria. Their story is told in John Kiser’s book *The Monks of Tibhirine* (2002) and movingly recounted in the film *Of Gods and Men* (2010). Thomas Merton also comes to mind. Writing from the silence of his monastery in Kentucky, Merton contributed significantly to the peace movement of the 1960s and 70s. Much like Blessed Charles de Foucauld, the monks of Tibhirine became a prayerful presence in a Muslim world, a presence that fostered understanding, compassion and reconciliation. And here we could also include other figures who devoted their lives to the patient and often uncelebrated work of interfaith understanding. I think, for example, of the Benedictines Dom Henri Le Saux and Bede Griffiths who set up ashrams in the largely Hindu subcontinent of India. The promotion of interfaith understanding and cooperation is consummately the service of peace. Those who make such efforts the center of their lives are brilliant signs of the presence of the Spirit in our world.

On the prophetic side I am drawn to think of figures such as Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, and the four American churchwomen slain in El Salvador, although Day, Romero and Jean Donovan (one of the churchwomen) were not vowed religious. Nevertheless, there are countless examples of the prophetic character of peacemaking in Central and South America alone, many of them martyrs who put flesh on Paul VI’s words “If you want peace, work for justice.”

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