



Pax Christi International 70th Anniversary Celebrations, Bethlehem, 13 May 2015

Welcome message by Pax Christi International co-President Marie Dennis

Good evening. On behalf of co-president Bishop Kevin Dowling, and myself, I want to begin with sincere thanks to our special guests for joining us this evening and to all of you -- Pax Christi members and friends -- who have come from the four corners of the earth to this important event in the history of our movement. We are most grateful for the preparations and the warm welcome from so many people and organizations, especially the Arab Educational Institute. Sadly, Bishop Kevin will not be with us for our global assembly. He has been very ill and simply could not make the trip from South Africa. He is terribly disappointed as are we all. The hole left by his absence (and that of our Secretary General) is gaping, but they are with us in spirit we know.

In the coming days we will celebrate these past 70 years of working together for peace; we will learn from and encourage each other; and we will renew our commitment to creating a more just and peaceful world.

As we begin our time together in this holy city, our hearts are tuned to the rhythm of the Palestinian struggle for justice and dignity. We planned our assembly in Bethlehem to be in solidarity with the people of Palestine and with so many others around the world living under the yoke of abusive power. We are deeply honored to be here. We have tasted some of the frustration that Palestinians face day after day as we knocked on every door we could find in the Israeli government to see if there was any way for our Secretary General to enter Palestine. We are very grateful to so many people who helped in that ultimately fruitless effort.

In the past few days I have seen again the beauty and witnessed the power of engaged active nonviolent resistance that flourishes still in this occupied land. Thank you, Palestinian friends, for the witness that you give under extremely difficult circumstances to a world hungry for peace. We will learn from you in these days as we will learn from each other. Thank you again so much for your wisdom and hospitality.

This World Assembly of our Pax Christi movement also presents each of us with an opportunity to understand better who we are as a now very large international network; and to see how each of us and all of us together are working for a just peace -- how we are living our vocation as pilgrims on a path to peace in 2015. In these days as you share your own stories of courage, creativity and hope - often in extremely difficult contexts of destructive violence and injustice - we hope to define more clearly the pathways that we, as a global movement for peace and reconciliation, have been invited to follow.

We have much to celebrate, Pax Christi! It is good for us to be together for these few days - to step back a bit from our daily activities to see the bigger picture. In recent years, as

communications technology has become more sophisticated and affordable, we have begun to see the fabric of our network - of our cooperation for peace - grow stronger. We have worked hard to articulate the shape of our common task -- how we can work together as Pax Christi International in a manner that enhances the efforts of our sections and member organizations. We are beginning to see more clearly that, as the vibrant seeds of peace you have planted sprout and bear fruit, we can nourish them together - to make an even more effective contribution to the global family, the earth community, the New Creation.

This week we will learn more about the seeds already planted by our 115 member organizations around the world. We will look back a bit to retell our story - our stories - about 70 years of working for peace and reconciliation. This has always been a challenging journey - from the first gestures of reconciliation following the Second World War to the most recent efforts to accompany communities threatened by extremist violence in Syria and Iraq. And it has always - in many ways - been an act of faith, literally: Pax Christi's work is grounded in the Gospel and guided by a spirituality of active nonviolence; our 70 years of persistent peacemaking reveal an abiding faith that we can, with the help of God, make a difference.

Pax Christi sections and member organizations are now present on five continents engaging in efforts to foster a culture of active resistance to injustice, support local work for peace and reconciliation in a given context of war or brutality, contribute to the prevention or transformation of specific violent conflicts and address the local, regional and international root causes of these conflicts.

Pax Christi members around the world promote just peace and reconciliation in their own extremely difficult situations and organize concrete expressions of international solidarity with other communities suffering from the impact of repression, systemic injustice or war. Together, we contribute to a global reality in which sustainable peace is possible by challenging unjust systems -- the occupation here in Palestine, widespread militarization on many continents (most recently, Asia) and the avalanche of weapons - driven by the quest for profit - that is burying so many communities. We support popular education and creative, grassroots efforts for life, peace and human dignity and we actively advocate for respect for human rights, international law and the integrity of creation. As a faith based organization, we pay special attention to the tragic and painfully visible reality of religious intolerance and extremist distortion of religious traditions. We also believe that the values and practices of faith can ground and transform our work for peace enabling peace workers to sustain a deep commitment to nonviolence even in the context of horrific violence, give meaning and direction to advocacy and campaigning, helping those involved to avoid partisan or self-serving proposals, and underscore the very long term transformative nature of the work for peace on earth.

In the next few days we will explore together many concrete examples of this work. I have no doubt that the exchange of experience and lessons learned among you will be rich and interesting.

Our work is most effective when it takes full advantage of the reach and depth of these diverse activities. Our goal is to enable Pax Christi member organizations in a strong, well-connected global Pax Christi network to support local work for peace in a given context and to help create an international system that promotes peace, human dignity and ecological integrity.

May these days together deepen our commitment to human dignity and diversity, peace and reconciliation. May they strengthen our capacity for and commitment to active nonviolent resistance to war and to all the forms of violence that tear apart the human family and the earth community. Peacemaking is a complex and difficult process - even more so in the context of an increasingly interconnected world.

Thank you for being here to celebrate this 70th anniversary. May we take together here the next right step on this long journey toward the peace on earth promised in this sacred place so many years ago. Thank you.

Bethlehem, 13 May 2015