

Please, Be Peacemakers!

Marie Dennis' speech at the USA Ignatian Family Teach-in

We have already heard the chilling account of what happened twenty-five years ago this night when forty hand-picked men entered the university grounds in San Salvador where the Jesuits lived and slaughtered six priests, a lay woman who worked with the Jesuits, and her 15 year old daughter.

Those were horrendous days in El Salvador – in all of Central America. You know the story well: Tens/hundreds of thousands of mostly poor people, many of them priests, religious, pastoral workers and catechists had already been killed by right wing death squads and repressive security forces terrified of what seemed to them to be a communist advance on the Americas. The Jesuits were in particular singled out for assassination because they made the university an effective instrument in defense of the people. They were killed because their belief in and love for the poor made them give their lives and ministries, their work and their witness to the tasks of denouncing injustice and announcing hope.

Elba and Celina Ramos were in the way of the powerful as well. In fact, as poor Salvadorans and faithful Christians they were very much in the way. They represented the heart of the matter – poverty, suffering, a daily struggle to survive, hope for justice and peace, and faith in the God of the poor.

Not long after they were killed Jon Sobrino wrote that his brothers also were filled with joy. At the level of life's meaning, they were deeply happy. In living their lives for justice' sake, they found life and happiness even in the midst of terrible violence and danger.

To retell their story is to announce the Good News. Martyrdom comes from life, not from death. Across Latin America in those years hundreds of thousands of poor people and those who walked with them - literally or in spirit - were tortured and disappeared. To retell their stories is to announce the Good News. It was then and it is now.

These times in many ways are very different from the “era of the martyrs in El Salvador” – and yet not so very different. Thanks to the particular way globalization has unfolded, excessive wealth is still concentrated in the hands of a small minority in almost every country around the world while millions and millions of people live in misery – though now in the shadows of modern shopping centers. Life on our beautiful planet is still threatened – though now the planet herself is in crisis. Violence is still widespread – though now extremist, criminal and gang violence seems almost unstoppable. People are still uprooted – though now unaccompanied minors and women with children are pouring across our borders and 9.6 million people – almost half of the population of Syria - have fled that country or are internally displaced.

Just a few weeks ago in Mexico 43 college students were disappeared, probably assassinated, with the likely involvement of local politicians, police and drug cartels. Tomorrow morning Father Melo from Honduras will tell you about the ongoing violence and violations of human rights in his country. And we seem now to have entered an era of unending war, at least in the Middle East and in parts of Africa.

Increasingly, we can see interconnected roots to many of these major global problems. Endemic poverty, war, climate change and other ecological problems are intertwined – deeply interconnected, one to the other, each acting as both cause and consequence of the other. Wherever you begin, as you approach the root causes of a given expression of violence (whether the violence of poverty, the violence of ecological destruction, or the violence of war), you will encounter the other two. War and unrelenting violence are major contributors to poverty and social dislocation, as well as to environmental destruction and climate change. Look at any report on living conditions in Iraq or Syria compared to 30 years ago or at the vulnerability to ebola in Liberia and Sierra Leone after decades of civil war. At the same time, extreme poverty, huge gaps between the rich world and those who are excluded or impoverished help set the stage for violent conflict and war, as does the fact that millions of young people – including those who are well educated – cannot find a decent job and have no sense that they will have a meaningful future. I know it is simplistic to say this, but I don't think it is irrelevant: If you assume you will be killed by a rival gang before you are 20 years old or that you and your family, guilty or not, will be forever in danger of being killed by a drone strike out of the blue, or that you as an immigrant will never be accepted in a new country – why not join ISIS and go out in a blaze of glory?

This interconnectedness of poverty and environmental destruction with war and violent conflict leads me to a bit of an “aside” about peace and nonviolence, which is now the focus of my own work through Pax Christi International.

We all want peace! At Mass and in prayer services we say, “Peace be with you” easily and often. In a few weeks we will immerse ourselves in the Season of Peace. We will welcome the Prince of Peace; sing Christmas carols about peace; hear angels and shepherds talking about peace on earth.

But most often “peace” is perceived as a very soft word and “nonviolence” is seen as weak. Neither is true, but this is a huge problem because both often evoke a big yawn in “serious” efforts to address “real world” crises, including terrorism, poverty and the pending climate catastrophe.

In fact, peace can't be soft or comfortable; it has to be loud and dangerous. The peace we seek has to be just and sustainable; it has to be shalom, the fullness of life and harmony for all. And it has to be dangerous enough to the “status quo,” to the powers that be, that it might get its proponents killed – as it did 25 years ago this night in San Salvador.

Nonviolence also can't be weak or passive; it has to be active, bold, courageous, effective – and almost always, impolite. And we need to invest massive financial resources, brainpower, energy and time developing and using nonviolent tools to uproot injustice, to protect people in grave danger, to stop terrorists, to sow truth, to promote transformation, to reclaim the possibility of just and sustainable peace.

In the 35 years since Archbishop Romero and the U.S. women were killed in El Salvador and the 25 years since the massacre at the UCA, the world has not become a more friendly place for those who are poor. If anything the task now is more difficult – less clear. But never doubt for a moment that connections to the brutality in El Salvador 25 years ago are still present in our world. When millions of people around the world clamor for a more just global economy, they are crying out for an end to the same oppression that killed the UCA martyrs. When refugees from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala risk dying in the desert to find safety or a job in the United States – when moms of “Dreamers” fast for days in front of the White House – when the Fast for Families cries out for comprehensive immigration reform, they are taking a courageous stand against the same violence.

The stories of the martyrs whose lives we celebrate in these days and of many others gave enormous energy to a social movement that was then trying to learn what it meant to live the virtue of solidarity - to accompany communities (then in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras) where people were impoverished by injustice; threatened on a daily basis; or brutally killed for daring to live the Gospel.

We are still called to live the Gospel; to act in solidarity with people who are threatened, whether by violence or poverty or climate change; to work for a just peace. Social analysis – asking hard questions about root causes - can help us know what that means in 2014, 2015 and beyond because the nightmare so many people are living has not just *happened* – like a bad storm or fire or random illness.

At least some roots of the nightmare others live are planted in our own values, lifestyles, laws, trade agreements, domestic and foreign policies. We know which values, laws, practices, and policies we need to change by doing our homework, by studying the issues carefully, right? Thank you for coming to Washington to speak truth to power – to unmask the roots of the migration of minors across our borders; to unmask the roots of poverty and violence that continue to plague Central America; to unmask the roots of climate change and its impact on the poor; to unmask the roots of violence and war.

You also come together at the Ignatian Family Teach-in to retell old important stories and to hear new ones.

Much is in the news these days about the brutality of ISIS, Boko Haram or Al-Shabaab and about unending war in Iraq, Syria, South Sudan. We hear about air strikes and lethal drones; about violence against women in the midst of violent conflict. And we should.

But we don't hear nearly enough about the great work for peace that – as in El Salvador in 1989 - is still ongoing in every place where violence threatens to overwhelm. We don't hear often enough contemporary stories of the heroes and heroines of peace, the stories of courageous people giving their lives now to live and act on their deepest beliefs.

Yet these new stories are vitally important because they can help us know what solidarity, just peace and active nonviolence might look like today – and they give us hope.

My work for Maryknoll and Pax Christi International has given me many opportunities to encounter life in some of the poorest and most marginalized corners of the world. There, even in the context of horrific violence, I have seen incredible goodness and courage, creativity and reasons for hope:

- women in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo forming an effective support network to push back the diabolical gender-based violence they face every day;
- Jesuits in Aleppo and Homs in Syria keeping their doors open all the time to everyone;
- students in Cairo creating games and social media tools to learn new lessons about democracy and civic action;
- young people in Haiti, El Salvador, South Sudan, Colombia, Guatemala walking away from gangs; learning nonviolent ways to settle conflicts; starting “sports for peace” projects;
- de-miners in Afghanistan slowly probing the soil in an old, flourishing grape arbor to locate landmines and unexploded cluster munitions in order to make it safe enough for returning refugees to harvest their grapes;
- shopkeepers and students, women and religious leaders gathering courage to rout oppressive politicians in Asia, the Middle East and Africa or to stop projects that would contribute to the destruction of the planet in Canada and Korea;
- people in the middle of wars in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine - teaching peace and nonviolence; pushing back the violence; forming community projects to run schools, collect garbage, care for homeless and hungry and wounded people

Among the most important gifts you have received from a Jesuit education is the experience of listening to and hearing stories like these – of touching and being touched by people who are hungry or homeless, people who are caught in the middle of violence. You are being taught to see the struggle for life and dignity; the beauty, courage and wisdom found in challenged neighborhoods and impoverished countries. This Jesuit lesson will help you see the rest of the world with the same clarity -- through the experience of people who live in the midst of war or who will never have easy access to running, potable water or decent health care; people who are perpetually disadvantaged or always on the move as refugees. It will help you know where to plant your feet – how to stay connected to the reality of life on the

margins. It will help you seek beauty, courage and compassion where others see only violence and despair. It will help you see the possibilities much more clearly as you make fundamental decisions in this context about the direction of your life from now on.

I am not talking so much here about your career choice, although that is surely important. I am talking more about where your center of gravity is located as you move through life; what your relationships look like; how you define success and security; where you look for meaning; whether you believe just and sustainable global peace is possible; and what your life says to a broken and violated world.

How many of you like to dance? Think about it. When you are dancing with a partner or even with a roomful of people, the center of gravity of the two of you – or of the whole group - is outside of each person – between the two dancers or out in the middle of a room full of dancers. The center of gravity during a dance is always in the center of all the dancers. Everyone participates, everyone gives, everyone receives.

In life , we are called, I believe, to keep our centers of gravity out there in the dance, making sure that everyone has what they need (the ingredients for a full and dignified life -- peace, social and economic justice) and the space (a healthy planet) to dance with gusto!

That means never turning completely in on ourselves; always staying hopeful and engaged in the struggle to create a more just and peaceful world; weaving that commitment (however we can exercise it) into our lifestyles, how we parent our children, how we relate to spouses, friends, and perhaps especially to those we think of as opponents, enemies, competitors, even threats. Such a commitment will affect how we think about and use financial and natural resources; how we exercise civic and political responsibilities; how we manage our businesses; how we do our work, whatever it happens to be; and on and on.

Keeping our centers of gravity “out there” and evaluating the reality around us from that vantage point will help us to discern more accurately how a given decision or action or inaction is likely to affect the lives of people living on the margins here and around the world or the well-being of future generations or the survival of our planet.

This dance of life is a cosmic dance, choreographed to depend on right relationships within the human community, within the whole earth community. The moral compass that you are receiving from your Jesuit education will help you hold onto the virtues, the integrity necessary for this dance -- virtues like justice, honesty, truthfulness, compassion, nonviolence.

Perhaps the greatest challenge as you move on out of school – the greatest challenge will be to claim enough autonomy, enough independent soul space, to determine for

your self how to measure “success,” how to define security; how to find “meaning” in your life.

We are all subjected to a constant barrage of messages that describe success in terms of wealth, power, fame and possessions. Jesuit education, I have no doubt, has encouraged you to move in a different direction – toward the common good, integrity, servant leadership and sustainable living.

We are all subjected to unquestionable assumptions that rest security in higher walls and stronger fences, more sophisticated weapons, bigger prisons and fear of the “other.” Jesuit education, I have no doubt, has encouraged you to define security in a different way – as freedom from want, freedom from fear, solidarity and community.

You have learned well the importance of presence on the margins and of service - of embracing broken and impoverished people in soup kitchens and homeless shelters, in hospitals and on the streets. Some of you have visited or come from El Salvador and other corners of the world, places including in our own country, where violence and poverty abound. The ongoing challenge for all of us is to interpret reality from those locations (the soup kitchens and impoverished neighborhoods, unemployment centers and war zones) and to shape our own lives for the long haul in response.

In conclusion, if you don’t mind, let me share again a few words of advice, which some of you may have already heard.

As you go through school and as you move on in life take every opportunity to cross borders, to move out of your own comfort zone, to spend time on the other side of town, the other side of the tracks, in another country, with another culture – in places where poverty and powerlessness, even violence rule. You will see life there and learn lessons that you will never learn if you stay in safer places.

Allow the core values of your Jesuit education to determine the fundamental direction of your life. Don’t let a commitment to service or a passion for peace and justice that you embrace in school be just a phase in your life – let that commitment guide your life, determine what is of value, what is meaningful to you.

Keep doing the hard work of identifying root causes – of asking why millions are hungry in a world where there is plenty of food; why war is more durable and attractive than peace; why life as most of us are now living it is unsustainable; and on and on.

Be peacemakers – PLEASE be peacemakers. Commit your life to active nonviolence. Live simply; buy less and pay attention to what you buy -- who made it and of what - how far it travelled before it arrived in your local store; vote, let politicians know

what you think – write to them, go visit them; run for office yourself; participate in demonstrations that express your point of view; pray for peace; fast for justice.

In Jesus' words,

Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Visit the sick and the imprisoned. Give drink to the thirsty. Welcome the stranger. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Turn the other cheek. Sell everything you own and give the money to the poor. It is a clear invitation to a happy and meaningful life!

Love, justice, active nonviolence, solidarity, inclusion, compassion, community, generosity, integrity ... Peace.

You are part of a generation that will face great challenges. You are also part of a global community that is filled with energy and life and is already creating a better world. You have the opportunity to bring all of this plus the Gospel in living color into every dimension of your life. That is, quite simply, what I think the Jesuits and the two women who gave their lives for justice 25 years ago tonight were doing. Uprooting injustice. Sowing truth. Witnessing transformation. Thank you!

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