

STATIO CONFERENCE
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BENEDICTINES FOR PEACE
By: Sister Mary Bernard Lansang, OSB

The October 16, 2012 issue of the Philippine Daily Inquirer flashed a headline: PEACE IS WITHIN REACH.

“On this day of hope and promise, we must not forget the challenges that remain. The ink on this paper will not save a single life unless it is matched with a true and immovable commitment to peace”

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak summed up the challenge confronting the administration of President Aquino and the leaders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) at the signing ceremony in Malacanang yesterday of a framework agreement for a Bangsamoro.

“If tension arises, it must be met with tolerance. All parties must stand by the principles on which this agreement rests: **Respect for religion, nonviolence, and human rights.** This is not an endpoint but a beginning. There is still much to be done.” (Underlining and bold print are mine.)

While hope for peace has dawned upon the Sulu Region, we cannot and must not forget that our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world are yearning for peace. Issues of the Newsweek feature reports on wars, violence, and brutal crimes that make us shiver with horror and cause us to worry about the future.

The February 13, 2012 issue has on its cover page the tortured face of Christ and the caption : THE WAR ON CHRISTIANS. Christians are being killed in the Islamic world because of their religion. It is a rising genocide that ought to provoke global alarm.

In recent years, the violent oppression of Christian minorities has become the norm in Muslim-majority nations stretching from West Africa and the Middle East to South Asia and Oceania. In some countries, it is the government and their agents that have burned churches and imprisoned parishioners .

The September 17, 2012 issue published a more terrifying news : A Campaign of Decapitation. The Syrian rebels step up stealth assassination, kidnappings and attacks.

The October 15, 2012 issue has on its cover page the caption : “Gaming a War in Iran.” Dan Ephron wrote a disturbing article: “If Israel attacks Iran, will America get pulled into another Mideast war? “

Although, at the moment, we are living in a land free from war, we are aware that waves of violence, aggression and invasion from foreign forces can reach our shores.

BENEDICTINE PEACE

In the 1960's Thomas Merton, faced with the crisis brought about by war, wrote articles and essays on war and our role as Christians in the face of war. He wrote an essay : **The ROOT OF WAR IS FEAR.** I am quoting a part of this essay to help us understand our MISSION for PEACE.

The duty of the Christian in this crisis is to strive with all his power and intelligence, with his faith, hope in Christ, and love for God and man. That task is to work for the total abolition of war. There can be no question that unless war is abolished the world will remain constantly in a state of madness and desperation in which, because of the immense destructive power of modern weapons, the danger of catastrophe will be imminent and probably at every moment and everywhere.

Christians must become active in every possible way, mobilizing all their resources for the fight against war. Peace is to be preached, NONVIOLENCE is to be explained as a practical method. PRAYER AND SACRIFICE must be used as the most effective spiritual weapons in the war against war. (capitalization is mine.)

In his essay, "Breakthrough to Peace : Peace, a Religious Responsibility", Merton condemned the massive and uninhibited use of nuclear power and declared it as contrary to Christian morality. Pope Pius XII declared ABC warfare as sin and outrageous. (ABC means atomic, biological, and chemical warfare.)

On December 17, 1962 Merton wrote to Hildegard Gross Mayer who, together with Dorothy Day and a group of women peace activists, was in Rome lobbying the bishops at the Second Vatican Council with the hope that they will make a strong statement against war. He wrote that it is the task of the Christian to make the thought of PEACE once again seriously possible.

Merton wrote: **The Christian as the Peacemaker.**

We know that Christ came into the world as the Prince of Peace.

We know that Christ Himself is our Peace.

PEACE IN OUR MONASTIC LIFE

Our Mission for Peace as Benedictines is not confined to times and places where there is war. Sister Joan Chittister in her book, "Wisdom Distilled from the Daily : Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today" states that Benedictine peace comes from living the Paschal Mystery well, from our willingness to die to things that prevent us from living the fullness of life, from confronting culture with the memory of the cross.

"Benedictine Peace comes from being one with creation,
from being in harmony with the universe,

from rising above ourselves to the peace of Christ.

Benedictine Peace comes from trying over and over again

to find our place in the universe without violence, without selfishness, without demands."

Mother Church, through her social encyclicals, has invited us to work for the development of peoples and transformation of society to a just and more prosperous one. Among them are :

- ✚ Mater et Magistra, Pope John XXIII, 1961
- ✚ Pacem in Terris, Pope John Xiii, 1963
- ✚ Populorum Progressio, Pope Paul VI, 1967

I am happy to note that the Manila Priory, through her Priory Chapters, has involved herself in the contemporary efforts of the Church **to work for the welfare of peoples** as spelled out in the document of the Asian Bishops' Conference, 1970 and of the Bishops' Synod 1971, particularly the document of **Justice in the World** and others.

In the Last Priory Chapter, January 2012, we set forth towards a “new season of witnessing to our faith” by post-chapter study of the **Lineamenta for the Synod of Bishops in Rome for the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.**

SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT : Monasticism in the Midst of Global Upheaval

In January of this year 2012, Benedictine Sisters under the age of fifty-five from across the continental United States and Puerto Rico gathered at St. Scholastica's Atchinson, Kansas for sharing and strengthening their determination to live out our Benedictine calling to **SEEK GOD** in the midst of global upheaval. Upheaval was present in the many stories shared: sudden deaths, estranged relationships, financial problems, and the ever-present dilemma of having few sisters who are able-bodied, and others.

I am using some thoughts from this Assembly because they deal with situations very much like our own. I invite you to read carefully their sharing. Some of their thoughts, feelings, and sentiments might resonate with yours.

Sister Laura Swan, OSB, President of the Association of Benedictines in America shared the following:

“I am forty-nine years of age, and I will be celebrating my twentieth year of profession. I presently serve my community in leadership positions: assistant to the Prioress and member of the monastic council. I am a councilor for the Federation of St. Benedict. I also minister part time in a local parish working for the youth. And, I care for my father, who is blind and has diabetes, **In the midst of these ministries, I feel stretched, knowing the many levels of peace needed for a balanced life.**

Sometimes, it is hard to reach a level of peace with so many distractions in my heart. In prayer, I long for a sense of harmony that can be long preserved. . . . In my search for God's peace, I have experienced inner violence from anger, resentments, and lack of self-compassion.

Another speaker in the Benedictine Convention is **Sister Anne McCarthy, OSB** who spoke on Monastic Charism of Peacemaking, MOVEMENT FROM FEAR TO LOVE. Chapter 7 of the Rule of St. Benedict seems to be the blueprint for this journey. I will be quoting portions of the key steps to this and I will be adding my own thoughts in parenthesis.

1. Fear of God is the starting point and the touch point that puts all other fears into context. (What is essential to living a life of Benedictine Peace is an all-embracing awareness of God's presence in our life. We get caught up in many concerns and we try to haggle with these various concerns by ourselves. We forget that God is with us and is ever-present to help us.)
2. Guilt, shame and fears that we hide erect banners and walls in our hearts. Opening our hearts to the care and concern of (the superior) or a wise, skilled teacher / mentor heals the shame, removes the guilt and dissolves the fear.
3. With this healing and radical acceptance from others, we have the courage to face ourselves. In this self-honesty, we are both kind and probing. Then, we are less likely to project our self-hatred on to others. **We are more likely to be accepting, gentle, even tender, with others.**
4. Compassion is possible because we recognize the suffering of others. (We are able to accept the weaknesses and suffering of others when we are able to recognize our own limitations and weaknesses.) Then, we are moved to speak kindly of others and to protect them from ridicule or derision.
5. Finally, our entire being is so whole and so loving that our bodies reflect reverence in every situation before every person and even before all creation.

To the above points, I would like to add two points:

- ✚ Peace cannot be dictated. It must grow out of a love that is so strong that it embraces the faults of our own sisters in community. This can be very healing.
- ✚ Let not the evil of murmuring thrive in our communities. Murmuring indicates that we are not at peace with ourselves. Instead of acknowledging our weaknesses, we blame the community and stir up dissatisfaction and confusion. We blame everyone and everything. Those who murmur do not dare to admit that their critical attitude hides dissatisfaction within themselves. Persons who cannot endure themselves and their weaknesses refuse to support the weaknesses of others.

Abbot Primate Notker Wolf, OSB wrote an essay, "How Universal is the Benedictine Presence Today?"

At the last part of his essay, he writes, "**How Universal is the Benedictine Charism Today?**" "This portion can be a challenge to all of us. I will be mentioning those challenges that are pertinent to us in our own culture of civilization here in our country.

- **Individualism.** Individualism has crept into some European communities. Many monks' live likes *singles* in their own communities. In the worst cases, some monks live alongside one another but *not with one another*. Silence is observed not because of a

need to maintain an attitude of constant prayer but because they have nothing to say to anyone else.

Abbot Notker says that things look different in the Philippines and in Africa. He feels that here in our country, community really forms the focus of life. He observed that living together in community takes precedence over personal, individual life.

- **Modern means of communication.** We recognize the need for the modern means of communication : the mobile phones and the Internet. We can hardly live without these means of communication but we are aware that they present new challenges. With these gadgets, monastics are reachable anytime and can go out anytime without leaving the monastery. (underlining is mine.)

Here, personal maturity is needed: a knowledge of our ideals and the will –power to put these ideals into practice.

- Abbot Notker reminds us at the end **to continually ask ourselves whether we are on the right path and whether or not we have allowed ourselves to be captured by the comfort of contemporary life.** (bold print and underlining : mine)

CHRIST, THE PRINCE OF PEACE

Our STATIO for this month of December falls on a Sunday in Advent and prepares us for the celebration of Christmas, the coming of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. It is interesting to note that the liturgy highlights PEACE .

On Christmas, the Mass at Dawn, the Opening Prayer asks God for the Peace that comes from the Prince of Peace.

Open our hearts to receive His life . . . that our lives may be filled with his glory and his PEACE.

And, the Gospel narrative on the Birth of Jesus according to Luke tells us of the multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

Glory to God in the highest and on earth PEACE to those on whom His favor rests

We can arrive at Benedictine Peace in our prayer. Allow me to suggest this:

We can do a **Lectio on Peace** by sitting in the **Presence of Jesus**, allowing Him to speak His **words of Peace** to us:

- When you are beset by worries about a situation in the community or a problem with the staff or the people with whom you work, listen to Jesus the Prince of Peace through the words of the prophet Jeremiah
“**The Lord says: my plans for you are PEACE and not disaster. When you call to me, I will listen to you and I will bring you back to the place from which I exiled you.**” Jeremiah 29: 11, 12, 14

- Like the disciples of Jesus, you might lose your peace because you worry about many things and you fail to simplify your priorities. Listen to Jesus telling you: **Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her.**
Luke 10: 41-42
- Or, you might be choked by so many cares, listen to Jesus telling you: **The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear but they are choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures.** Luke 8:14
- When your heart is filled with anger, bitterness, or even resentment and anger towards someone, allow Jesus to take hold of your heart as he says to you:
“Do not let your hearts be troubled: trust in God; trust also in me. PEACE I leave with you; my PEACE I give to you. Do not be afraid.” John 14: 1, 27
- The peace of God guards our minds and our hearts in Christ: **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again: Rejoice. Do not be anxious about anything; but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** Philippians: 4: 4, 6

May the PEACE and LOVE of CHRIST be always with us !

Guide for Prayer:

Sit quietly before the presence of God. Become aware of the Peace that descends upon you. At the same time, allow thoughts of un-peace to surface. Bring this to the loving compassion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Guide for Sharing.

1. Share with the community how you pray and strive after Benedictine Peace.
2. Agree in community how you can share and build communities of Benedictine Peace with your mission partners and your students and other people with whom you work.

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