

A Mennonite and Catholic Contribution to the World Council of Churches’ *Decade to Overcome Violence*

INTRODUCTION

An international dialogue between Catholics and Mennonites took place between 1998 and 2003, beginning with the theme “Toward a Healing of Memories”, and concluding with a report entitled *Called Together to be Peacemakers* (CTBP). In the hope that, on the basis of that dialogue, Catholics and Mennonites may together offer suggestions for the World Council of Churches’ *Decade to Overcome Violence* (DOV), and especially in reference to the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC) in 2011 with which it culminates, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Mennonite World Conference sponsored a brief conference 23–25 October 2007 in consultation with the DOV office. It took place at the Centro Pro Unione in Rome. As a result we now submit some theological reflections which Mennonites and Catholics, committed to overcoming violence, may affirm together as a witness to peace in the ecumenical context. We hope these reflections can be useful to others as preparation continues for the IEPC.

We begin by identifying biblical and theological foundations of peace. These appear under the sub-headings of *Creation*, *Christology*, and *Ecclesiology*. Then follows a section on peace and discipleship. We conclude with some challenges and recommendations which might be considered as the focus of workshops at the IEPC.

I. BIBLICAL–THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PEACE

A. Creation: Peace as gift and promise

From the beginning of creation, the God of *shalom* “who from one man has created the whole human race and made them live all over the face of the earth” (*Acts* 17:26), has destined all humanity for one and the same goal, namely, communion with God. This harmonious relationship reminds us that since human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, we are called to a life of unity with one another through reciprocal self-giving (*cf. Gen* 1:26; *Jn* 17:21f.). Although sin has marred our harmonious relationship with God and with one another, redemption through Christ has restored to creation the possibility of peace marred by sin (*Gen* 9:1-17; *Col* 1:19f.; *Rev* 21:5). As God’s new creation, Christians are called to life in peace with one another, with all humankind, and with all creation (*Acts* 10:36; *2 Cor* 13:11; *Rom* 12:18).

The depth of the *shalom* offered by Jesus is seen in his farewell address to his disciples (*Jn* 14:27-31). It is customary, in Jewish leave-taking, to offer peace as a parting

gift. Jesus goes deeper by offering the gift of peace by way of a participation in his very self. The peace of Christ flows from his very being, which is united to the Father in love. The world cannot give this peace because it does not know this intimate “being-in-peace” with the author of all peace. The peace that Jesus gives is the peace infused by the spirit of the Beatitudes. This peace makes nonviolence possible, since its true claimants speak and act in accordance with the logic of the selfless love of Jesus Christ.

The biblical vision of peace as *shalom* includes the protection of the integrity of creation (*Gen* 1:26-31; 2:5-15; 9:7-17; *Ps* 104). The Church calls people to live as stewards of the earth, and not as exploiters. The gift of peace flows from the very being of a gracious God and touches all of creation. As God is generous and faithful to his promise of peace, we in turn need to receive this gift and employ it responsibly in our relationship with God, who has entrusted each other and the whole of creation to our care.

B. Christology: Jesus Christ, the foundation of our peace

The peace witness of both Mennonites and Catholics is rooted in Jesus Christ. He “is our peace, who has made us both one... making peace that he might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross” (*Eph* 2:14-16). We understand peace through the teachings, the life, and the death of Jesus Christ. He taught us to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, to pray for our persecutors (*Matt* 5:39ff.), and not to use deadly weapons (*Matt* 26:52). In his mission of reconciliation, Jesus remained faithful even unto death, thereby manifesting the peace-making dimension of divine love and confirming the depth of God as a lover of humanity. Jesus’ fidelity was confirmed in the resurrection.

Peace and the cross

God revealed his love for humanity in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross as a consequence of his message of the Kingdom of God. The cross is the sign of God’s love of enemies (*Rom* 5:10f.). For both Catholics and Mennonites the ultimate personal and ecclesial challenge is to spell out the consequences of the cross for our teaching on peace and war, and for our response in the face of injustice and violence.

In looking upon the cross of Christ we come to realize what the atonement means for us. As the apostle Peter wrote: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (*1 Pet* 2:24). That is, through the cross Jesus makes our peace with God who offers us the *shalom* of a new creation while we are still sinners (*Rom* 5:8). At the same time the cross beckons us to follow in the steps of Jesus who “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited” (*Phil* 2:6). Rather, “when he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly” (2:23). Thus, “in Christ, there is a new creation” (*2 Cor* 5:17) in which we now take up our cross and follow his way of peace and righteousness.

Peace and suffering

We acknowledge suffering as a possible consequence of our witness to the Gospel of peace. We do not live in a utopian world. Following Christ will require costly discipleship. Mennonites and Catholics live with the expectation that discipleship entails suffering. Jesus challenges us: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny

themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (*Mk* 8:34). The faith that love is stronger than death sustains Christians in their suffering. Yet, we are called to suffer and to alleviate suffering rather than to compound it. Catholics affirm with Pope John Paul II:

“It is by uniting his own sufferings for the sake of truth and freedom to the sufferings of Christ on the Cross that man is able to accomplish the miracle of peace and is in a position to discern the often narrow path between the cowardice which gives in to evil and the violence which, under the illusion of fighting evil, only makes it worse” (*Centesimus annus*, 25; cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 42 and 78).

Reflecting the same conviction, a recent Mennonite confession of faith states:

“Led by the Spirit, and beginning in the church, we witness to all people that violence is not the will of God... We give our ultimate loyalty to the God of grace and peace, who guides the church daily in overcoming evil with good, who empowers us to do justice, and who sustains us in the glorious hope of the peaceable reign of God” (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale/Waterloo: Herald Press, 1995, Art. 22).

Both Mennonites and Catholics take their inspiration from Gospel texts such as Mark 10:35-45 and Luke 22:24-27, where Jesus invites his followers to offer up their lives as servants. We note with joy our common appreciation for martyrs, “the great cloud of witnesses” (*Heb* 12:1), who have given their lives in witness to truth. Together, we hold that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (*I Cor* 1:25). This commitment has implications for how we understand the church and what it means to be the church in the world.

C. Ecclesiology

The ecclesiological marks of the peace church derive from her message of reconciliation, her commitment to nonviolence, her freedom, her mission, her oneness, and her hope of salvation.

Peace and reconciliation

Together Catholics and Mennonites affirm that the true vocation of the church is to be the community of the reconciled and of reconcilers. We accept this calling “from God, who reconciled us through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (*2 Cor* 5:18). Our similar identities as “peace churches” (Mennonite) and as a “peacemaking church” (Catholic) derive from our commitment to be followers and imitators of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace and Lord of the Church. By their baptismal commitment to Christ, all Christians are called to the way of peace and reconciliation.

Peace and nonviolence

In the midst of a world that has not known how to accept or employ the peace that Jesus brings, it is the holy calling of the church to witness, by its very being, to the way of peace and nonviolence. The Church is called to be a peace church. This calling is based on the conviction we hold in common as Catholics and Mennonites, that the Church, founded by Christ, is to be a living sign and an effective instrument of peace, overcoming every form of enmity and reconciling all peoples in the peace of Christ (*Eph* 4:1-3). We

hold the conviction in common that reconciliation, nonviolence, and active peacemaking belong to the heart of the Gospel (*Mt* 5:9; *Rom* 12:14-21; *Eph* 6:15). Mennonites and Catholics affirm that the power of Christ overcomes divisions between peoples (*Eph* 2:13-22; *Gal* 3:28). On this basis, the Church bears the responsibility, in the name of Christ, to work at overcoming ethnic and religious violence, and to contribute to the building of a peace culture among races and nations.

Together Mennonites and Catholics agree that the path of violence is no solution to the problem of enmity between persons, groups or nations. Christian peacemaking embraces active nonviolence in the transformation of conflict in both domestic and international disputes. Furthermore, we regard it as a tragedy and a grave sin when Christians hate and kill one another. The availability of resources for the practice of nonviolence to individual groups and governments reduces the temptation to turn to arms, even as a last resort.

Peace and freedom

Together, Catholics and Mennonites share the conviction that the Church should be independent of society's human organizations. That is, the Church should enjoy religious freedom and self-government under the Lordship of Christ, the Prince of Peace. The freedom of the Church from state control enables her to witness without encumbrance to the wider society. In virtue of their dignity as children of God, moreover, all men and women possess the right to freedom of religion and conscience. No one should be forced to act contrary to conscience, particularly on questions of military engagement.

Peace and mission

Mission is essential to the nature of the Church. Empowered and equipped by the Holy Spirit, the Church brings the Good News of salvation to all nations by proclaiming the Gospel of *shalom* in word and in deed to the ends of the earth (*cf. Is* 2:1-4; *Mt* 28:16-20; *Eph* 4:11f.). The Church's mission is carried out in the world through every follower of Jesus Christ, both ministers and lay people.

A significant dimension of the mission of the Church is realized in the very constitution of the Church as inter-ethnic communities of faith. The Church is one people of faith, called into being from peoples of many tongues and nations (*Gal* 3:28; *Eph* 4:4-6; *Phil* 2:11). Mission requires that Christians seek to become "one" for the sake of their witness to Jesus Christ and to the Father (*Jn* 17:20-21), and that they make "every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (*Eph* 4:3). It belongs to the mission of the Church to proclaim the peace of Jesus Christ to the world, and to extend the work of Christ, the *shalom* of God, to women and men of good will everywhere.

Peace and oneness

One of the essential marks of the Church is her unity. This unity is a reflection of the very unity of the Triune God. Therefore, together with other disciples of Christ, Catholics and Mennonites take seriously the Scripture texts that call Christians to be one in Christ. Our witness to the revelation of God in Christ is weakened when we live in disunity (*Jn* 17:20-23). How can we ask the world to live in peace when we ourselves fail to heed the call to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (*Eph* 4:3)? Together we ask: What does it mean for the churches to confess "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one

God and Father of all” (*Eph 4:5-6*)? The Catholic-Mennonite dialogue report is entitled *Called Together to be Peacemakers*. This title stands as a hope-filled sign of “the unity of the Spirit.”

Peace and salvation

Catholics and Mennonites agree that the Church is a chosen sign of God’s presence and promise of salvation for all creation. Catholics speak of this by affirming that the Church is “the universal sacrament of salvation at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God’s love for humanity” (*Gaudium et spes*, 45). Mennonites express the promissory character of the Church by proclaiming that “in God’s people the world’s renewal has begun” (Douglas Gwyn *et al.*, *A Declaration on Peace* (Scottsdale/Waterloo: Herald Press, 1991), and that “the church is the new community of disciples sent into the world to proclaim the reign of God and to provide a foretaste of the church’s glorious hope” (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Scottsdale/Waterloo: Herald Press, 1995, Art. 9). While the Church is still underway toward the peaceable kingdom of God, here and now the Church manifests signs of its eschatological character and thus provides a foretaste of the glory yet to come. This glory is none other than the very *shalom* of God who, as the lover of humanity, invites us “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God” (cf. *Micah 6:8*).

II. PEACE AND DISCIPLESHIP

In light of the reflections just made concerning the biblical and theological foundations of peace, it is our mutual conviction that to be a disciple of Christ is to be a witness to peace. Christian discipleship is based on a spirituality which roots the disciple in the life of Christ who “is our peace” (cf. *Eph 2:14–16*), and leads to action for peace.

A. Spirituality

For Christians, spirituality consists in following the teachings and the life of Jesus, making his manner of life our own. “Christian peace witness belongs integrally to our walk as followers of Christ and to the life of the Church as ‘the household of God’ and ‘a dwelling place of God in the Spirit’ (*Eph 2.19*)” (*CTBP*, 181). As imitators of Christ, we are called to love of enemies and the practice of forgiveness (cf. *CTBP*, 180). Peace must be built up by the practice of peace. For that reason, the church must be a school of virtue where “the peaceable virtues” are valued, taught, practiced and revived. These include: “Forgiveness, love of enemies, respect for the life and dignity of others, restraint, gentleness, mercy and the spirit of self-sacrifice” (*CTBP*, 184). We would like to call attention in particular to four virtues that contribute to peacemaking: nonviolence, forgiveness, repentance and prayerfulness.

Nonviolence

Empowered by their union with Christ, and imitating Christ as his followers, Christians are called to practice nonviolence in their efforts “to overcome evil with good” (*Rom 12:21*; cf. *Centesimus annus [CA]*). Catholics have increasingly emphasized nonviolence as central to the gospel and to their witness in the world; and Mennonites have likewise expanded their understanding of principled non-resistance to include the

exercise of active nonviolence. Since Christian peacemaking is carried forward under the sign of the cross, suffering is inevitable as the price that must be paid in a sinful world for loving one's enemies in a sinful world (cf. *CTBP*, 182; *CA*, 25)

For both Mennonites and Catholics, peacemaking through nonviolence, while an individual vocation, is also a communal activity. Each of our communities understands its "responsibility to discern the signs of the times and to respond to developments and events with appropriate peace initiatives based on the life and teaching of Jesus" (*CTBP*, 181). In the Mennonite Church this discernment is exercised at both the congregational level and by larger church bodies, though sometimes too in specialized agencies like the Mennonite Central Committee. In the Catholic Church, it takes places at multiple levels and in a variety of settings: in parishes, in lay and religious communities, in diocesan and national justice and peace commissions, in synods of bishops and on the part of the hierarchy (cf. *CTBP*, 181). Inspired by the gospel, this communal discernment guides disciples in being church in a world of conflict. Through such reading of the signs of the times and the activities that result from it, the church can be salt and light to the world (*Matt* 5:11-16).

Forgiveness

In addition to nonviolence, discipleship entails forgiveness as a primary expression of the Christian life. Jesus taught us to forgive one another, and in his death gave the ultimate example of forgiveness (*Lk* 23:34) Accordingly, the church has a special role in the promotion of reconciliation. The church, especially the local church, is the place where both our communities learn forgiveness: Catholics in the sacrament of reconciliation; Mennonites, in the way the church teaches and exemplifies forgiveness and reconciliation in everyday life and practices mutual correction in the context of the Lord's Supper. We are conscious of our own duty to ask and grant forgiveness, individually and corporately. We acknowledge that in the past our churches too often failed in this regard.

We applaud the spread of public acts of forgiveness in our day and the growth of programs of reconciliation in civil and international conflicts. As Pope John Paul II wrote, there is "no peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness" (*World Day of Peace*, 2002). These initiatives represent an advance in public life at which Christians can only rejoice. At the same time, Christians ought to be a leaven for peace in the world by practicing forgiveness in their own lives and by promoting public forgiveness as a necessary element of peaceful reconciliation. By enacting forgiveness, the churches build up the culture of peace for the world.

Truthfulness

Just as peace requires justice, genuine reconciliation requires truthfulness. We learned in our own dialogue, as others have learned in their efforts at reconciliation, that the painful history of division cannot be overcome and healing cannot be effected without a purification of memories and a spirit of repentance (*CTBP*, 190-198) First, healing of memories involves readiness "to move beyond the isolation of the past and to consider concrete steps toward new relations" (*CTBP*, 191). Secondly, the purification of memory consists of allowing our consciences to be purged of all forms of resentment and violence inherited from our past and inviting the renewal of our way of acting (cf. *CTBP*, 192). Finally, the penitential spirit is manifest in the determination to resolve future differences

through dialogue (cf. *CTBP*, 198). If they are to be convincing models of reconciliation in Christ to the world, Christians must repeatedly undergo this process of healing, purification and repentance.

Prayer

Finally, prayer is essential to Christian peacemaking. Down through the centuries, Christian peacemakers have drawn the inspiration and strength for their witness from their prayer, contemplation of the life of Christ and attentive openness to God's Spirit. There by God's grace they experience "the peace that exceeds all understanding" (*Phil 4:7*). So also prayerfulness is a mark of the peacemaker in our own day. Furthermore, the ecumenical witness of the churches in prayer, where divisions are overcome and we experience communion with God, is a blessing both for Christians and for the world (cf. *CTBP*, 185).

B. Action

The practice of prayer, in private life as well as in the public worship of the church, yields immeasurable fruit in peacemaking as individuals and communities participate in the church's witness for peace. Together Catholics and Mennonites share the common conviction "that reconciliation, nonviolence and active peacemaking belong to the heart of the gospel (*Matt 5:9; Rom 12:14-21; Eph 6:15*)" (*CTBP*, 179). Promoting nonviolence in the resolution of domestic and international conflicts, advancing programs of conflict resolution and conflict transformation and fostering reconciliation between adversaries, sometimes in conjunction with their secular counterparts, sometimes without, Christians find ways to realize "the gospel of peace" in today's world. Nurturing the love of enemies and the spirit of forgiveness, they also contribute to building a lasting culture of peace in our times.

We understand, however, that in the absence of justice and human rights, peace is a mirage, a mere absence of conflict. For that reason, we believe "that justice, understood as right relationships, is the inseparable companion of peace" (*CTBP*, 177) Accordingly, "the gospel's vision of peace includes active nonviolence for defense of human life and human rights, for the promotion of economic justice for the poor, and in the interest of fostering solidarity among peoples" (*CTBP*, 178). Active nonviolence plays a decisive role in transforming the unjust social conditions into a more just order reflecting the values of the kingdom of God. (cf. *CTBP*, 178-179, 184). For this reason, the education, training and deployment of Christians in the practice of active nonviolence is an essential contribution of the church and church-sponsored organizations in our time. It is the responsibility of the church to building a peaceable world in keeping with the biblical ideals of shalom and the Kingdom of God (cf. *CTBP*, 177, 184).

III. PARTICULAR CHALLENGES/ RECOMMENDATIONS/ SUGGESTIONS FOR POSSIBLE WORKSHOPS DURING THE IEPC

Besides offering the theological reflections just made, we would also suggest some particular challenges which might be subjects of specific sessions or workshops during the IEPC. They are based on the fact that the ecumenical movement, in seeking to

reconcile separated Christians, is by its very nature a movement of reconciliation and peace.

(1) The ecumenical movement, for over a century, has contributed to the reconciliation of Christian communities which have been divided for centuries. Since the reconciliation of Christians is itself a contribution to peace, we recommend that the convocation provide opportunities for the participants to learn of some of the most important achievements of the ecumenical movement which have led to the breaking down of barriers of disunity, and the creation of new relationships between Christian communities which had previously been divided from one another.

(2) In the background of the centuries-long divisions among Christians there are bitter memories resulting from the conflict among Christians which led to those divisions at various times in the history of Christianity. Various ecumenical dialogue reports have addressed the question of the purification and reconciliation or healing of memories. We recommend that study be undertaken to ascertain the different approaches to the healing of memories which have been developed in the dialogues, or by specific churches, with the goal of fostering common witness by Christians to this important factor which is necessary for peace.

(3) We affirm Jesus' teaching and example on non-violence as normative for Christians. At the same time, we recognize that Christians have adopted different perspectives and positions in the course of history, and today, in dealing with serious conflict in society. These include theories of just war, forms of active non-violence, and pacifism.

We recommend that the Convocation in 2011 work toward the goal of achieving an *ecumenical consensus* on ways Christians might advocate, together, to replace violence as a means to resolve serious conflict in society. We suggest, as a step in that direction, that the various positions which are alternatives to violence, and are currently advanced, be studied and critically evaluated together. These include, for example, (a) the right, for all men and women, of conscientious objection to participation in war; (b) the right of *selective* conscientious objection, which is the right and duty to refuse to serve in wars considered unjust, or execute orders considered unjust; (c) the position taken up recently by the WCC, described as *The Responsibility to Protect*; (d) the idea of "Just Policing" (Cf. Gerald W. Schlabach, *Just Policing, Not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence*, Liturgical Press 2007).

(4) In recent decades, Christians have participated with members of other world religions in giving witness to peace, e.g., the meetings in Assisi (1986, 1993, 2002) at the invitation of Pope John Paul II, or the efforts of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, and others. With the understanding that cooperation among the religions of the world is vital in the search for peace today, we recommend that the convocation in 2011 organize opportunities for study of these initiatives with the hope of learning from these initiatives and building on them.

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