

## **The Prophetic Ministry of the Deacon V: *The Deacon as Peacemaker***



(Swords to Plowshares, U.N.)

*If you want peace, work for justice.* These words by Pope Paul VI are often quoted by Catholics involved with working for a more just and peaceful world based on Catholic Social Teaching. Much emphasis over the years has been placed on the deacon's role in helping to build a more just world. However, little attention has been paid to his role as being a peacemaker. The *National Directory on the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States* does refer to the possibility of finding men who *have aptitudes for working in the fields of peacemaking, development, socio-cultural promotion, justice, health care....(#107)* It also mentions that abilities to manage conflict, collaborate and organize are qualities to look for when interviewing men for acceptance into deacon formation.

We are told in Matthew 5:9, *blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.* Peacemaking, in a world that often glorifies violence in movies and in the broader culture, can become relegated to a sentimental and pious hope and nothing more for many. But we are told that peacemaking is an essential element of the life of faith of all the baptized. The difficulty with this is that most people are not trained in peacemaking between individuals, groups or nations. As history reveals, nations are not always good at it either. The biblical vision for peace is captured so well in Isaiah 2:4,

*He shall judge between the nations,  
and impose terms on many peoples.  
They shall beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
One nation shall not raise the sword against  
another,  
Nor shall they train for war again.*

It was this very biblical vision of universal shalom that one finds on a statue across from the United Nations building in New York City. It is a statue of a man hammering a sword into a plowshare with the words of the Prophet Micah that repeat the words of Isaiah 2:4. In some respects one might say that the United Nations symbolizes a hope of what could be for humanity—keeping the vision of the prophet Isaiah alive in our contemporary situation. For people of faith, especially for deacons, peacemaking can be manifested in number of ways, such as helping to reconcile those separated from their families, building a more just community, mediating disputes between warring parties and other such activities are some ways for deacons to be peacemakers.

*The service of charity is also supposed to include traditional ministries of social justice, such as promoting the peaceful resolution of international disagreements, feeding the poor, and working for humane housing for all. Often overlooked in this catalog of social ministries, but equally if not more important, are the ministries that seek to protect the unborn, young children, and the elderly, whose vulnerability is endangered by the indifference of modern culture. 1*

Deacons as clergy in the Catholic Church can be in a position to help promote active peacemaking. For many deacons will take place in the local parish and community. Here the deacon has this charism of calling forth from the laity those persons with commitment and skills forward for the work of peace. Yet, the deacon, schooled in peacemaking techniques, can help to form the laity in Catholic Social Teaching and methods of organizing for peace and justice. For other deacons, who may be in situations of national and international policymaking, offering their assistance to help resolve conflict can be a vital prophetic witness of Christ's work for peace through the Church.

There are precedents for this type of clerical ministry. During the 1980's a civil war raged in Nicaragua. After a number of years both sides agreed to meet at the peace table to resolve the conflict. At the beginning of each session a Catholic priest began with prayer and remained in the meeting the whole time. This gave the meeting an aura of the sacred reminding the parties that their efforts were being witnessed in God's presence. Many who participated in the meetings mentioned that this gave them added impetus to reach agreement. 2

The institutional Church is in a position to exercise influence around the world in the cause for peace. Political Scientist Barry Rubin points out that the Catholic Church has a number of characteristics that it brings to areas of conflict in our world. 3

- **Catholic Church's leaders and property are relatively inviolate.** While this does not mean that some governments have not or will not take on the Church, those governments must reckon with the enormous political and social consequences for doing so.

- **Its international links as a movement and its connection with the Vatican in Rome make it easier to mobilize international support and make it difficult for a government to dominate it.**
- **The Church's discipline is a powerful force that makes it a de facto political party.**
- **It has a distinct worldview and moral framework.**
- **The Church has become a powerful advocate for human rights.**
- **Religion has unique leverage for reconciling conflict and to re-humanizing relationships.**

While one may agree or disagree with some of what Dr. Rubin points out it is clear that he believes that the Catholic Church has political and moral influence. In a book entitled, *Getting to Peace: Transforming Conflict at Home, at Word and in the World*, by William Ury, there are listed a number of ways a person, and a deacon, may be a peacemaker.<sup>4</sup>

- *The Provider*: is one who promotes sharing those things with other people that allow them to experience freedom from want and deprivation. The provider also agitates for the providing of skills for people for self-empowerment to break the cycle of dependency.
- *Teacher*- can help others to learn new values, perspectives and skills that lead to a better way of living. Jesus Christ is the ultimate teacher for the deacon of a life of total service unto death.
- *The Bridge-Builder*-can help to bring opposing sides to communicate and cooperate by helping to build relationships *across the aisle*. The deacon can help to create clear communication between the parties to help resolve the issues.
- *Mediator*- can serve in the role of peacemaker as a mediator that helps two or more conflicting parties to meet and to discuss their concerns with one another. In this role as mediator the deacon is not making a judgment about who is right or wrong but is interested in helping conflicting parties to get to the core of their problems with each other.
- *Arbiter*- can be a role for a deacon when conflicting parties cannot seem to reach agreement but are tired of conflict. Here a deacon can help to craft a just agreement to give all sides enough to accept the arbitration.
- *Equalizer*- can be a role for the deacon when the sides are of unequal strength. The deacon can raise up Catholic Social teaching and its demand for justice in a way that all parties to the conflict are held to the same standard.
- *Healer*- in the imitation of Christ's own healing ministry the deacon can help to reconcile parties by providing a *safe* location and event for parties to meet casually that will help to break down the barriers of suspicion. Deacons can be builders of bridges rather than barriers.



The slain Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzak Rabin, once commented that making peace was the most sacred of human tasks. Our Lord tells us that peacemakers are God’s children. Formation of deacon candidates and the ongoing formation of deacons may want to look into structuring their program to address this important aspect of diaconal/prophetic ministry. This would and should include instruction on “grassroots organizing” for social change based on Catholic Social teaching; our topic for the next article in this series.

### **Notes**

**1** James Keating, ed. *The Deacon Reader* (New York: Mahwah, N.J.) Paulist Press, 2006, p.106.

**2** Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds. *Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (New York, Oxford) Oxford University Press, 1995.

**3** *ibid.*

**4** William Ury, *Getting to Peace: Transforming Conflict at Home, At Work, and in the World* (New York) Viking Press, 1999.