

Fall 2013

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Recommended Citation

Starken, B. (2013). "Some Perspectives on Spiritan Peacebuilding". *Spiritan Horizons*, 8 (8). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol8/iss8/20>

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SOME PERSPECTIVES ON SPIRITAN PEACEBUILDING



Brian Starken, C.S.Sp.

Brian Starken is a member of the Irish Province and was ordained priest in 1974. He was appointed to Sierra Leone in 1975 and worked in second level education for a number of years. When the civil war broke out in 1991, he worked on various programmes providing humanitarian assistance to both Liberian refugees and internally displaced Sierra Leoneans. In 1995 he was invited on to the Reconciliation and Peace-building Working Group of Caritas Internationalis in Rome and was involved in providing resource materials and training in conflict resolution for Church personnel working in conflict areas around the world. He holds a Masters Degree in Peace Studies from the University of Bradford in the UK. He will return to Sierra Leone later this year.

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Introduction

This year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of John XXIII's Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty. *Pacem in Terris* is addressed to "all people of good will." It was written at the height of the Cold War and stresses the importance of Catholic Social Teaching as the basis for right relationships in communities, between individuals and the State, and for the promotion of greater peaceful relations between States.

Celebrating *Pacem in Terris* provides us with an ideal opportunity to reflect on peace-building as an integral part of our Spiritan mission and as a vital component of our commitment to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC).

Our Spiritan Commitment to Building Peace

Peace-building is an integral aspect of mission in today's world. All Christians are called to follow the path of peace – "Blessed are the peace-makers." When Jesus sends out his disciples on mission he tells them that their first greeting must be, "peace to this house." God's peace gives us a vision of what his reign will be like and what peace-makers must hold as the ideal. The peace of God is a wholesome peace which he wants all of us to experience: a place of safety, justice, and truth; a place of trust, inclusion, and love; a place of happiness, joy, and wellbeing. When we are called to mission we are called to be implementers of God's peace.

As Spiritans we have, over the years, voiced our commitment to working for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC). The general chapters of Itaici (1992), Maynooth (1998), and Torre d'Aguilha (2004) all stressed the importance of JPIC in our Spiritan Mission. Our 20th General Chapter held this year in Bagamoyo calls on each circumscription "commit itself to work with those responsible for the local Church to promote justice, peace and the integrity of creation" (*Bagamoyo*, 1.22). When we work with "the poor and most abandoned," addressing their pastoral needs as well as their human and social needs we are working for justice. When we are working for justice, we are also working for peace. Peace is the fruit of justice. *SRL 14* reminds us that we are called to be "the advocates, the supporters, and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them."

The Spiritan Conference in Durban in April 2007 stressed the importance of our Spiritan Ministry with Refugees, Displaced Peoples and Asylum Seekers (*Spiritana Life*, April 2008, No 17). Refugee ministry brings us into contact with those who are the worst affected by civil conflict. We work with people who have been violently uprooted from their communities and who have literally lost everything – livelihoods, possessions and family members. They are certainly the weak, the defenseless and the oppressed in today's world. During the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, I found myself working with both Liberian refugees and internally displaced Sierra Leoneans and it was this experience that led me into peace-building and reconciliation work. In this article I want to outline my own experience in Catholic Peace-building and outline some of the learning along the way.

Working in a Displaced Camp

When the war broke out in Sierra Leone in April 1991, I was working at the Pastoral Centre in Bo. We were already catering to a large number of Liberian refugees as the Pastoral Centre had become the main distribution centre for relief aid to refugees from the war in neighboring Liberia and who were hosted by local families. The rebel incursion into Sierra Leone caused thousands of displaced people to leave their villages and towns and seek safety in the town of Bo. They were too numerous to be hosted by relatives and friends, so we had to set up a camp outside the town.

I worked on this full time for almost three years. Most of the time was spent responding to one crisis after another as we tried to provide shelter, food, health facilities, water, sanitation, clothing, and security for the people living in the camp. It was an interesting time and the work was hard but very rewarding. In a very short space of time the population of the camp grew to over 80,000 displaced people.

Freetown

I was then asked to move to the National Caritas office which was based in the capital Freetown. For the first time since the beginning of the war, I had some time to reflect on what was happening in this small country and on the nature of the Catholic Church's response to the conflict. I had many questions. By this time the war had become very complex and it was difficult to distinguish between who was a soldier and who was a rebel. The war had started with a defined ideology by the rebels, but now had become a war over control of the natural resources, that is, the diamonds. Ideology had gone out the window. In fact the people had already coined the word, "*sobel*," referring to armed personnel who were soldiers by day and rebels by night.

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There was a pattern of civilians, particularly in mining areas, being driven from their villages by rebels. A few days later, soldiers would enter the village and then declare the area unsafe for civilians to return. Both rebels and soldiers would continue to mine the diamonds. Under these circumstances we had to ask the question as to whether the humanitarian efforts of the Catholic Mission and other agencies in looking after the displaced people were actually feeding into the conflict. Were we taking the responsibility off the shoulders of the military government to take more concrete steps to resolve the conflict?

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Another question that disturbed me at that time was whether we, as Church, should not be doing more to promote a movement towards peace. Taking care of displaced people and people affected by conflict is always important. Providing shelter, food, health services, and clean water is absolutely critical in conflict areas. But given our very rich tradition in social teaching what could we be doing, or more precisely, what should we be doing to bring peace?

I was also very concerned that the vast majority of the casualties of this war were innocent civilians. People were dying directly as a result of the conflict – killed in ambushes and in attacks on villages – and indirectly because of hardship and the lack of any kind of health care due to the fact that hospitals and clinics were shut down, particularly in rural areas. Violence was being used as a means of social control and the valued institutions of a whole population were being targeted. The social and cultural institutions which connect people to their history, identity and lived values were being crushed and marginalised. It was the civilians who were displaced and who lost everything. It was the civilians who were crowding into the displaced camps around the country. This phenomenon was true, not only of Sierra Leone and Liberia, but also of the 50 or so armed conflicts taking place around the world in the late 80s and early 90s.

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Since the 1980s, civilian casualties account for 95% of casualties in internal conflicts. At the time there were an estimated 18 million refugees around the world – mainly in developing countries – a six-fold increase in 20 years. There were 24 million people displaced within their own countries. Between 1986 and 1996, an estimated 2 million children had died in war, with a further 4 million wounded or disabled. I felt strongly that we had to do something in Sierra Leone, but I wasn't sure what we could do.

I had another worrying concern and it was the growing realisation that even if a peace agreement was effected between the warring factions, there would be a tremendous need for post

war reconciliation as people began to return to their homes and villages. That was when the challenging work of real peace-building would begin as people began the difficult process of getting their lives back together again. Many questions would inevitably arise when people returned home. Who destroyed my house? Who stole my property? Who killed my relatives? Whose son or daughter joined the rebels? Who harvested my crops? When, where, and how did members of my family die during the war, and where are they buried?

Every traditional culture experiences conflict and over the years has developed mechanisms to resolve conflicts that arise in families and communities. Would these conflict resolution mechanisms and institutions be strong enough to resolve post war conflicts in resettled communities? Would victims of the conflict have access to justice? Would the perpetrators be held accountable?

From the Caritas Office we got a group of interested people together and began to plan. At the beginning we were not too sure what kind of peace-building program we should engage in. We needed to gather as much information as possible concerning the conflict, how people were affected by the conflict, and what they thought might be the major issues to be addressed in post war reconciliation. We went all over the country – to the major towns, the chiefdoms, the refugee and displaced camps. We invited religious leaders, local politicians, traditional rulers, army and police, representatives of civil society. The aim of this exercise was to develop a needs-based peace-building “Training of Trainers” program for all Catholic Mission personnel in the country. The training programme took months to develop and we were extremely lucky to have been helped in the process by a Conflict Resolution NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) called Conciliation Resources based in London. They heard about the work we were doing and provided help at various intervals until we were ready to implement the program.

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We ran a pilot Training of Trainers program for Catholic Mission personnel – bishops, priests, teachers, catechists etc. This was a six-week intensive training. Those who were trained were expected to go back to their respective dioceses and replicate the training, with our help. This training programme was very successful and we were then approached by other NGOs working in the conflict to do similar training with their office and field staff.

Caritas Internationalis

Meanwhile, Caritas Internationalis was preparing for their 15th General Assembly which was to take place in Rome in May 1995. Caritas is the socio-pastoral arm of the Church and up to this

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point was mainly engaged in humanitarian relief and development work in the 154 member countries around the world. The work of Caritas is very much informed by Catholic Social Teaching. At this time the horrors of Rwanda and Bosnia, in particular, were still fresh in the minds of all participants and so Caritas decided to make work on reconciliation a priority for its 1995-1999 mandate. This was accepted by the General Assembly and an international Working Group on Reconciliation was set up. It was chaired by Bishop Francisco Claver of the Philippines and each Region of Caritas was represented on the Working Group. I was invited on to the Working Group to represent the Africa Region. The Working Group met twice a year over the next 4 years for a few days each time.

Caritas Working Group

I think it is fair to say that the Working Group got off to a very slow start. Working in reconciliation was something new at the time and we had very little guidance and little or no direction. We did, however, have expertise and experience in different areas related to conflict. Our target audience really was the Caritas/Church agencies, particularly those working in conflict areas throughout the world, with the realisation that, as Church workers, they have an important role to play in the search for peace and reconciliation. Like myself in Sierra Leone, these workers would have little in terms of information and resources to help in developing peace-building programs. The Working Group wanted to accomplish several tasks in this regard. We needed to introduce the theme of reconciliation which was by now becoming an umbrella term to cover conflict resolution, peace-building, the healing of memories and the processes that bind people together rather than set them apart. We wanted Caritas to be an agent for peace and reconciliation throughout the world.

We wanted our material to look at the issues of reconciliation through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching. The Church already has a great theology of reconciliation with much emphasis on the vertical, reconciliation between God and humankind. We needed to explore the more horizontal reconciliation in divided communities and divided societies and supply the spiritual resources to do that. We recognised that all reconciliation comes from God and when we engage in the work of reconciliation we are simply engaging in the work that God wants us to do.

We were aware that much research was being done in the field of conflict resolution both in academic institutions and peace institutes. We needed to introduce Caritas members to the recent developments in this whole area hoping to provide background

information on conflict, to help members situate themselves in the search for peace as well as explore their own capacity for peace-building and what they have to offer to the process of reconciliation. We wanted to be practical too and to provide ideas to enable members plan a reconciliation program as part of their daily activities, to look at the kind of reconciliation activities that are appropriate to Church and Caritas agencies with an emphasis on the importance of keeping a cultural perspective on our work.

Keeping a Cultural Perspective

I want to say a word about the importance of culture, and particularly traditional cultures when it comes to the resolution of conflict. Serious research only began in this area in the early 1980s. Culture may seem to be a simple construct but is, in fact, an enormously complex variable. Traditional culture is developed over a long, long period of time and is the result of a set of beliefs and behaviors, both implicit and explicit, which are fundamental to its existence and organization. These learned attributes, through which experience is interpreted, are shared and transmitted by members of a particular society through the process of enculturation.

When we think of culture, we often think of elements like language, dress, food, art and literature, symbols, and other customs and beliefs. We must also understand that values, beliefs, and attitudes are an integral part of culture as well as the social rules and moral obligations which dictate a group's behaviour. Culture is central to who we are and, therefore, central to understanding and interpreting how we do everything, from working to playing, even how we approach conflict and conflict resolution. While we recognize that culture and cultural differences can undoubtedly be causes of conflict, there is a great need to understand the cultural conceptions of conflict and develop culturally appropriate strategies for reconciliation. We understood that the Church, because of its presence – both missionary and local – has a crucial role to play in identifying, promoting and strengthening traditional mechanisms for resolving conflict.

Issues of Justice

The whole area of justice is very complex in conflict situations and demands much more attention than the mention I can make of it here. We have a developed theory of what we know as “a just war.” *Jus ad bellum* (right to war) outlines very clearly the conditions needed to proclaim a “just war.” There is also a developed concept of *jus in bellum* or the just conduct of war. Experience tells us that those conditions are not always adhered to. But modern conflict has brought in a new dimension of *jus post bellum* or a just order after conflict. In internal wars the signing of a peace agreement

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is not the end of the story – it is in fact the beginning of a long process that demands transitional justice and the rebuilding of the institutions, both social and civic, that will guarantee a lasting peace. A peace agreement is the beginning of the long process of reconciliation – and justice is an important component of any reconciliation process. The rebuilding of society after war can only be achieved if that society has its foundation firmly rooted in the rule of law and is committed to a just and equitable order. *Pacem in Terris* gives a very clear outline of Catholic Social Teaching in this whole area of building and maintaining a just and peaceful society.

Rebuilding a Just Society

However, while the principles of a just and ordered society are very clear, those of us on the Working Group who were living and working in conflict countries were very much aware that the reality on the ground can be totally different. Invariably injustice and in equality, real or perceived, are among the root causes of every conflict and these must be addressed in any post war agenda. When a country is coming out of an internal conflict there is often very little to work with – the economy lies in ruins, the institutions of the State are considerably weakened and unable to meet even the most basic needs of the people, the infrastructure is damaged or destroyed, society is in transition, security can still be a major problem, national elections are called for. The rebuilding of a just society is competing with many other needs.

The Search for Reconciliation

John Paul Lederach, who helped us greatly on the Working Group, in his reflections on Psalm 85 outlines the competing voices that need to be heard in the search for reconciliation. The voice of sustainable peace is there, the voice of retributive justice, the voice of truth that needs to know what happened and why it happened, and the voice of mercy that calls for forgiveness and new beginnings. The challenge of any post-war reconciliation program is to ensure that no one of these voices dominates, but also to ensure that each of them is heard and listened to.

This then led us into a whole new area. Reconciliation is something the Church should be expert in – it has a readymade theology of reconciliation, but this theology needed to be applied to conflict resolution and peace-building. In Fr. Robert Schreiter we had probably the greatest theologian in this whole area. Schreiter's theology of reconciliation is very much Scripture-based. The Working Group was required to reread the scriptures using the lens of reconciliation. Schreiter enabled us to tease out the question, how do Christians understand reconciliation? We knew that the answer to this question would make a major contribution to Catholic peace-building.

The Resources of the Church

As the Caritas Internationalis Working Group, we were very much aware that the Catholic Church has enormous resources to put at the service of peace-building. The Church, as an institution, has a worldwide network and is present in almost every country in the world. It has a leader who is not only the head of the Church but also head of a State. The Church has an ecclesiastical network that filters down from Rome to each country where the Church is present through dioceses and parishes – this gives the Church an enormous advantage in peace-building because it has local, national, regional and international networks. It can be present at all levels of conflict settlement. It is present at the top and has access to the elite at government level and to heads of national institutions that can promote peace. It has tremendous access to local, grassroots communities through its parishes and pastoral agents. It has a presence at mid-level or what we might call civil society – local leaders, professional people, and educational institutions. This access to populations at different levels of society is something no other agency possesses.

The Church has a political presence in every region with access to Heads of State and their representatives through a network of Nuncios and the Vatican Secretariat of State. The Church has a respected presence in so many parts of the world. Presence is one thing, but the quality of our presence is what allows us to be trusted agents in the search for peace. Trust is not something the Church has by right – trust is something that has to be earned and we must continually evaluate our presence, particularly in conflict situations.

Because of its structure the Church also has a highly developed international communications network. This network allows it to communicate its spiritual messages, but it also has a voice on social and moral issues. The Church also has financial resources, personnel resources, and institutional resources in pastoral work, health and education, and in many other fields.

It has a rich body of Catholic Social Teaching but perhaps its greatest asset in terms of peace-building is its theological and spiritual resources. There is a deep recognition that all reconciliation comes ultimately from God and that we are, as St. Francis prays, simply instruments of God's peace. St Paul reminds us that Christ, through his death on the cross, reconciled all things, both in heaven and on earth, and he "passed on to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19). For anyone working in peace-building and reconciliation, there is a great need to believe that reconciliation is possible, to have the language of reconciliation, and to be imbued with the culture of reconciliation.

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There is also the spirituality of presence and accompaniment as you stay and continue to walk alongside the people who are caught in protracted warfare, who (as Schreiter 2008:9 explains)

are mired in refugee and displaced camps, who live continually in situations slipping back into overt conflict. How do we reinforce resilience and sustain hope in such settings? How do we enable victims of war to have the confidence to imagine peace, rebuild relationships, to continue to pursue justice and hope in the future? How do we transform situations of conflict into a culture of peace? How do we reconstruct a broken humanity and create spaces where forgiveness might be possible, where memories can be healed and some measure of reconciliation can take place?

I am convinced that in these crucial areas of ministry in conflict a very deep spirituality of reconciliation is crucial.

At the end of our first four years, the Working Group produced a *Handbook*, entitled Working for Reconciliation, which was distributed worldwide to all Caritas agencies. It was eventually translated into some fifty languages – including Russian.

Caritas Peace-building Training Manual

The Working Group was mandated by the 1999 General Assembly of Caritas to continue its work. We realized that the *Handbook* was a useful tool for those who would use it – but it could also end up on a shelf gathering dust in many Caritas offices. We needed to get out there and deliver the message of Catholic peace-building. Our next project was to develop a Training Manual that contained the most up-to-date ideas and tools for social reconciliation, conflict resolution, and peace-building. Catholic Relief Services took a lead here and brought together the best practitioners in the field - such people as John Paul Lederach, Mary B Anderson, Hizkias Assefa - to advise on the necessary components of the Caritas Training Manual. It was an ambitious project providing theory, appropriate exercises, and learning tools in Peace-building skills, Conflict and Context Analysis, Principles and Frameworks for Peace-building, Communication and Conflict Handling Skills, as well as Program Analysis, Design and Evaluation, with a separate section on the Challenges of Reconciliation. This was followed by translating the Manual into the two other languages of Caritas – French and Spanish.

The final leg of our journey as a Working Group, during our third mandate, was the implementation of training programs in every Region of the Caritas Federation. During these training

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programs we came in contact with inspirational people, working with the Church at local level, and deeply committed to building peace in their communities and their countries.

Conclusion

No matter where in the world we work on Spiritan mission, we will encounter conflict and we will be required to resolve conflicts, effect reconciliation, and bring God's peace to the people we live among and work with. Mostly these conflicts are low level conflicts, although a number of our Spiritan confreres work in countries mired in overt internal conflicts. Regardless of the level of conflict we experience, our Spiritan peace-building efforts need to be understood in the context of our own Spiritan JPIC mandate and within the larger context of Catholic peace-building. Because of my own experience with Caritas, I firmly believe in the necessity of collaborating with like-minded organizations in peace-building, sharing personnel, resources and experience. As Spiritan missionaries, we must draw from the wells of our own spirituality of mission and our emerging JPIC spirituality, as well as the Church's own social teaching and resources in reconciliation.

Brian Starken, CSSp.

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