Justice, Peace and Reconciliation

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A Journey that Shaped Our Lives

Gary Warner

Along with my wife Joy, I became a Lay Spiritan after what seemed in retrospect like a long journey of life-based formation for Spiritan mission. The initial thrust of the Spiritan Congregation as a “mission to the Blacks” is reflected in its contemporary mission of service primarily to the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised.

Though the experiences of my life, especially in my early years as well as through my reading, I have come to realize strongly that our lived experiences are an important pathway to encounter God and the sources of inspiration God provides for our guidance.

In the spirit which tells me that what I say in my words is so much less important than what I mean with my life, I have come to see my own calling as living in the secular world, translating my Christian spirituality into the everyday world of family, work and civic interactions, being a witness, working for the building of God’s Kingdom of Love, Justice and Peace by the vision I bring and the choices I make in my family, professional and social life. This is the essence of the commitment we make as Lay Spiritans.

Trinidad, France, Canada

Many years ago, as a young student in a Spiritans’ School, St. Mary’s College, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, I got my first experience of faith-filled social outreach visiting the sick in the General Hospital, as a member of the school’s Legion of Mary presidium.

While still in school I joined a small reflection group which was studying the social teachings of the Church.

As a university student in France, two chaplains there contributed significantly to my ongoing formation to a life of faith in action. Both were charismatic and inspiring leaders who deepened the social consciousness of many Christian students that they are called to be active agents in God’s vineyard, working to “undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free” (Is 58:6).

On taking an appointment to McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, I became involved in a very vibrant Catholic community on campus. This was in the mid-sixties, an exciting and productive era in the evolution of the church’s social doctrine. The Theology of liberation, being developed in Latin America where the church had traditionally been associated with the rich and powerful, was calling Catholics to be active participants in helping to change the economic and political systems that maintain social injustice. From this theology emerged the belief that although God loves us all, excluding nobody, God has a special predilection for those excluded from the banquet of life, a preferential love of the poor. The Canadian Catholic Bishops took up this understanding of poverty as an injustice in their social teachings.

International development and civil rights

This same vision and understanding has inspired my journey in the subsequent forty years. I have derived great inspiration in pursuing volunteer work in the area of anti-racism and civil rights from Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Bishop Tutu. Campaigning against the systemic racism which, although often unintended and unconscious, is embedded in our culture has taken many forms for me over the years.

International development work and advocacy for global justice have also been avenues for me to translate my faith into action. Serving overseas with CUSO in a variety of development programs, I was able to introduce a segment on spirituality and development into my presentations. Pope John Paul II insisted that development is not merely an economic issue, it must involve the social, cultural and spiritual needs of the people being served.

From my consideration of this message and my experience in the field, I realized that peace was the first prerequisite for full human development. On my return to McMaster I worked hard in the building of a peace culture in the university and the Hamilton community. Though the Centre for Peace Studies at McMaster, the Civic Centre, the Development and Peace group in my parish and the Spiritans, I have been able to spread the social teaching of the Church as well as to have hands-on participation in events which promote peace.

Lay Spiritan community

As a Lay Spiritan, I have a community of brothers and sisters around me who share my vision of the better world; the world transformed according to God’s wishes for it, as revealed by his Son, Jesus. The Spiritan charism of special concern for the marginalized and excluded, the recognition that God’s Spirit resides in every human heart, and the willingness to be guided by the Spirit which blows where it will, is the motivating force inspiring Lay Spiritans. We commit ourselves to an active prayer life and to follow the promptings of the Spirit, to work to give options to those who are most poor, vulnerable and excluded.

To this cause, Joy and I have made a lifelong commitment. We thank God daily for leading us on a journey to where we are today. As Spiritans we echo the prayer of Francis Libermann “O Divine Spirit, I wish to be like a feather before you, so that you breath may carry me wherever it pleases and may I never offer it any resistance.”

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