

Sunday Morning Keynote at the 2016 Pax Christi National Assembly.

Fr. Rocco Puopolo, SX

The title that is in your program for this morning reflection is “How Pax Christi USA membership can grow on local and regional levels so as to continue building this national movement.

I am going to indulge your kindness to tweak it.

Some years ago I was asked to give a talk at the national meeting of the Africa Faith and Justice Network on my engagement in advocacy for peace on the Continent spelling out What I practically did in 1997 and 1999 while in Washington when I spent 10 days each time getting the story out to all who would listen of the situation in Sierra Leone..... The title was : “Respectfully Insistent for the love of God and Africa....” The operative words were RESPECTFULLY INSISTENT. That is a kind way of saying “in your face.”

May I entitle our time together as: **Being respectfully insistent for the love of God and Peace, non-violence and racial justice.**

I have a hunch it is that same respectful insistence for Love of God and Peace, nonviolence and racial justice that brought each of us here for this gathering. I have heard it as we mingled and responded to our presenters, witness experiences and workshops....So, what can prepare us for our return and challenge us to grow Pax Christi on a local and regional level? How that may get fleshed out in each region or local community depends on your, your girls, your concerns, passion for Justice, etc.

I need to tell you how I got this gig! I was just trying to find out some information!! I visited Sr. Pat and Sr. Anne Louise back in February while attending a training with the National Catholic Volunteer Network. I stopped in at the office to get some direction on needed resources that could assist our “growth” as Pax Christi in Massachusetts. The focus of my interest was material that we could offer to campus ministers of Catholic High school or colleges to better grow Pax Christi there. At the moment Pax Christi is on two high school campuses and one college, a bit disconnected, but we are present. At a state assembly two years ago we committed to invite every Catholic High School and Catholic college in our state to have a Pax Christi group. That is the plan. As visits go, I told Srs. Pat and Anne Louise stories of how there is a Pax Christi group behind the bars at Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Shirley, a medium to Max prison facility (check out the current NCR. There is whole page article on this which I haven’t seen yet!) or the new group at St. John’s Seminary, started by one of our state board members who is beginning his studies to priesthood for the Diocese of Worcester, He invited a member of his new found community to our November Assembly that welcomed Sr. Helen Prejean, and they found three others, and there you have it..... a new chapter at the Seminary, no less. Actually the current Rector had been a Pax Christi member as a young priest, so he encouraged the initiative. So, that is what brings me here. I am a witness to what one state is attempting to do and in sharing it, a tease to

us all into finding creative ways to “grow” Pax Christi where we are. I have looked through the national website with the many initiatives that other regions are doing. I do not claim that one is better than the other. But as we leave this gathering and return to our homes, I am asked to challenge us all to be more respectfully insistent for the love of God and Peacemaking and Peacemakers , intentional public witnesses of what we see as core to the message of Jesus. We all work to point the way towards the beloved Community, new relationships, and transformed ties that bind us, freed from fear.

I would like to offer a template for all of us that can frame our next steps. And it can be simply put as story, community and spirituality.

I say this because I believe our being here and the advocacy we do is grounded in our personal story, our experience. It is the story that shapes each of us but it is more than “my story,” it is really “our” Story. And the “our” goes beyond Pax Christi!!! It encompasses our Church and our Society and our world as a whole. Otherwise I am afraid we become marginalized as a group... (or worse... made into heroes or sheros for peace..... You may hear complimentary things like (examples I am sure you have heard): “Aren’t Bishop Tom’ Gumbleton’s columns nice in the NCR? Isn’t that your group?” “ Isn’t it nice that you could stand all day on Good Friday in front of the Massachusetts State House witnessing against the death penalty... ? but come on, truth be told, nothing will change in the bigger picture.” It is as if we are the ones given permission to act on everyone’s behalf to make peace and justice real. We have to find a way to make our story intentional and credible and not only own it, but tease others into the story as well. How do we get “our” Church, “our” Society “our world” to take peace and nonviolent options to resolve conflicts serious. ?

Story

So let me share some of my story. My story looks like this. I was in high school in the mid 1960’s and college during the late 60’s and early 70’s... these were powerful times... (but, I was in a seminary community that was rather “sheltered,” to be kind).. yet I was trained in social analysis and engaged with the poor that taught me the power of our faith and ministry. It readied me for the future. But the most powerful experience as I look back on the years of study and ministry were the later years of my time in Sierra. I served there for 12 years over a spectrum of 26 years... The last four years were there in the 1990’s during the violent and unforgiving civil conflict that threw this peaceful country into the throws of displacement, cruel war and madness that touched us all. Many of you know of this conflict through the movie Blood Diamonds. But the reality of the war was worst. I was even a victim of that madness, shot in the leg due to a ricochet bullet by a very frightened 11 year old child soldier who was killed the next day because he shot a priest. Madness... pain and brokenness. But also grace.....

Moving Towards Community

Membership in the Africa Faith and Justice Network, which I was a member since 1984, helped me articulate my story and make it become part of “our’ story. All those of us who care for Africa and what is happening to the continent, its people, its land and resources come together with one voice. By belonging to a larger group it deepens the credibility of my story and enhanced “our” story. We know!!! Those in the trenches KNOW. Weren’t we in the trenches of Central Baltimore yesterday

afternoon? We are all in some kind of committed trench presence. We need to affirm your story and expand it.

Vulnerability

There is the element of personal and communal work that can help us heal the scares we have due to violence, marginalization and fear. And that work leads us to discover how fragile and vulnerable we all are. My community is engaged in interreligious dialogue, and one thing I have discovered about Christianity is we have a unique and empowering way of dealing with failure. Our icon is Christ Crucified! But that coming together in community transforms our fragile and vulnerable hearts and hopes into something more... It becomes our strength. We cannot do it alone. We need a beloved community to all be transformed. This past Good Friday as I stood with other witnesses at the Massachusetts State Capital Building, witnessing the power of the cross, we were joined by a young Veteran for Peace member who seriously contemplated suicide as he struggle with his memory of directing drones and killing others thousands of miles away at his command. This transformative grace moved him not only to continue living, but strengthened him to witness an alternative power. Christ Crucified.

Grace.

And then there is the mystery of grace.... The grace that gives us a different perspective on relationships. It moves us through our fragility, our fears to a place of blessing. One of the most moving stories I hear after the passing of Dan Berrigan was his response to a question of how he planned to reach out to those who found his preaching and witness an issue, a threat. The question actually was, "how do you deal with your enemies". Dan's response: " Enemies? I have no enemies!..." That speaks of great grace and presence of mind and heart. Transformative grace.

And then there is one of my favorite stories of Pope John Paul II, during his first visit to the USA in 1979. I was in Africa at the time, but friends couldn't wait to tell me. He celebrated Mass at Grant Park in Chicago. I know Chicago. I studied there for three years and served for 6 years recently. On that day while he was in the city, there was no one murdered that day. No one. In Chicago. The power of his presence and the grace he witnessed transformed everyone, even those who did not know he was in town. There was no violent death that day. But the real good news, I deeply believe, is that we all possess that grace! Do we engage it? Do we trust and affirm our story? Do we engage that grace?

By way of example I would like to share an experience that we had in Massachusetts where we were able to use our stories, and experience to unleash the grace that is taking us into the future.

We faced a serious challenge two years ago as we prepared for our State Assembly, which we hold each Fall. The topic was to be "The Militarization of Youth." Our planned speaker became ill and was not able to make it. Sam was from Colorado. With only two weeks to show time, it seemed that we would have to cancel. Our State coordinator and another board member who served as chair were visibly uncomfortable about this scenario. We were all at the Archdiocesan Justice Convocation. When they shared the news with me, my response was that among our state group there must be members who

could speak to this topic. We did look around to our own community and we put together a program where one peace teacher from Connecticut did the morning input and exposed how our military gets young men and women to join and what that does to them, as well as proposing alternatives for these youth...She really brought it home. I provided input on the international challenge of the militarization of youth... especially child soldiers and how it stunts any hope of peace in many countries... and comes here in our country to roost in many cases. While I was in DC for 5 years (2006 to 2011) I learned that the majority of young men of color in Prince George's County Jail or Montgomery county jail were former Child Soldiers from Sierra Leone! Hard core wasted energy and youthfulness.

But the real gift of that day was that after the presentations, we set up the process in order to leave room for brainstorming with the assembly. What were particular challenges that could be met to address this militarization of our youth in our State? We formed working groups for the remaining time that fleshed out four areas of concern and action:

1. How can we practically provide education for Peace in Parishes we were in contact with by After Mass Opportunities?
2. How can we practically offer an alternative to ROTC and JROTC in Colleges and High Schools...working towards the formation of Pax Christi groups in every Catholic High School and on many college campuses?
3. How can we encourage peace studies, conflict transformation studies, restorative justice, etc. in high schools and colleges?
4. What opportunities do we have to provide books and other resources on peace, reconciliation, restorative justice, racial justice and the like to our public libraries? We would ask the librarians to offer some of these materials as "Staff recommendations". We also would commit to making sure that these materials would be kept in circulation at the library by occasionally checking out these materials so that they are not removed. These resources don't just feed our advocacy, but can feed the community as a whole

These challenges and tasks are still ongoing. It is a work in progress. In 2015 we had 14 local Pax Christi groups in the State according to our newsletter. At our last Assembly this fall when we hosted Sr. Helen Prejean, I as moderator challenged the assembly of 100+ people to grow that number by 5. To date we have three new groups up and running since January with a good possibility of two more to be formed this September. We have to be respectfully insistent... Affirm and share the story... our story.... And let grace do the rest.

Best Practices.

When I moved from DC to Massachusetts five years ago, I needed to find a community that was serious about nurturing peace and justice and right relationships with all. I found a wonderful small community in the nearby town of Natick, women and men who formed a community of peace that witnessed in a number of ways this intentional gift of peace: Some of their actions were witnessing the need for peace

in the face of war that threatens our environment at the annual town Earth Day celebrations on the Natick common; another member who is an owner of a small manufacturing plant hires men and women coming out of prison who cannot easily find an employer willing to hire because of their past incarceration; others who were witnesses to peace who had personally traveled to El Salvador during the years of civil unrest and use that past experience to be in solidarity with present day places of war, particularly regarding Palestine. I am in awe of their commitment and energy....in spite of their ages! And we too are aging!

And now that I am engaged with the State Board and present at our Assemblies and Retreats, I have met initiatives that again engage our community in witnessing peace and nonviolent options to conflicts.

One of our Board members is a public school teacher in High school who, through his English classes, uses by way of his examples and writing assignments themes of peace education, peer mediation and non-violent responses to conflict.... Amazing creative intentionality.

At our last assembly, complimenting Sr. Helen Prejean's story, we invited five members of the state community to share creative ways that they have witnessed their opposition to the death penalty, especially just having had the trail of the marathon Bomber in Boston. We met Mrs. Isaura Mendes, a Cape Verdian immigrant who lives with her family in Dorchester. Two of her three sons were killed on the very street her family lives on. She has forgiven both perpetrators, visiting the one each week at Old Colony Prison. She shared with us that not forgiving these men would be just too heavy a burden to carry. She works through her Parish and the city to address gun violence in a very intentional way through an education outreach that she has set up in the memory of her two sons. And then, just two months ago, her son Steve was seriously wounded, again on the same street. We have offered her all our support to make her story our story and through that effort write a different script on how to address the violence perpetrated to her family and neighborhood. We stand together in close and personal ways.

WE have a Pax Christi group in Central Massachusetts in the medium security prison at Shirley. It was initiated by three Pax Christi members who responded to the invitation by the incarcerated me who had read about Pax Christi in a Catholic Newspaper. They wanted to be part of this nonviolent way of operating. There is an article in the current NCR. There is a good chance that due to the movement of prisoners from one prison to another, some Pax Christi members from Shirley who are now at the Norfolk facility will start a chapter there.

Networking

We support each other and network with others to create a bigger impact in the community. The Natick group links with Peace Action as well as the Common Street Church community. At our assemblies we have representatives of Peace Action, Veterans for Peace, Just Faith, Agape Community/Catholic worker. Our story expands as we link with others. My hope and prayer that the day will come when we can have an assembly not with just representatives of these fine groups, but a collaborative single event where the critical mass of people committed to peace, non-violence and racial justice could make a statement just by way of presence and numbers. I know. I know. That is

where each of our organizations make our money, but we need to find a way to make this happen. I believe that is what is needed to move the political will of the masses

And then there is Sr. Linda Besson present, who lives in Somerville but ministers in Lynn. There was a recent incident at the city hall in Somerville where a Black Lives Matter Banner has been up for some time. The local police union had asked it be taken down. To the credit of the mayor, it remains up, but ongoing dialogue and conversations have been initiated to address what that banner represents to the community in Somerville.

Linda and the Pax Christi group there have been active with the Essex county Community Organization... engaged in racial justice dialogues where the community is in conversations with the police, offering what they call **implicit Bias Training**, hosted by the Lynn Police Department. Linda can tell us more. She is here.

And my last example of a creative initiative is where Pax Christi partnered with my community to host at our shrine an interreligious panel addressing violence in our society. It came from an experience I had in Sierra Leone during the war. At a university students seminar that I directed at the pastoral center I ran, a series of essays were published that gathered the wisdom of the experience. One essay spoke to religious leadership and the challenge was that if religious leaders failed to offer moral direction to people in the face of such madness and terror, we would be irrelevant. That essay challenged us to then host a monthly all day meeting with all the 5 Imams of Kenema town, all the Christian Clergy, Catholic and beyond, and we would take a very practical and timely issue of the war and study it and at the end of the day prepare a one page summary that would be the core of a homily that each of us would offer the following weekend, whether it were in a Mosque or any and every Christian place of workshop.

When I related that to my local Pax Christi group, the response was, why now here? So together we now have an annual interreligious panel that looks at a particular issue from the various perspectives of a small number of faith traditions. That first year we invited a Sikh community leader, a Moslem scholar and a Pax Christi member who presented each traditions perspective on non-violence through the particular faith tradition..... It was a true dialogue of life, offering a moral compass that went beyond any one tradition, sharing our common core to human dignity and respect in spite of differences. The very next day we witnessed the Boston Marathon bombing. For more than one week, this terrorizing experience gripped the Metro Boston area in chaos. Many of those who attended that event thanked me because, by coming, they now knew that Islam was not the perpetrator of this horror, although implicitly that is what the media was telling everyone all week long. That is how it was couched.

Spirituality

Let me conclude with some commends on our spirituality. This is what I find as the glue that both holds us as Pax Christi together and shapes what makes us unique. Our process of see, study and act, the many materials, articles and books that speak of the spirituality, giftedness of the many writers who have contributed to this corpus is great. For me it is the challenge of finding the grace in the mystery of

it all, articulating it in such a way so that it can be a gift to the others in order that they may be invited into "our" story.

So, I would like to end my sharing with you with two poems that expose the spirituality and the grace that holds us together. And each poem comes with a story.

The first is my story, again. After that frightful experience of violence in 1998, the loss and displacement, I found myself in 1999 in New Jersey, not aware of having been effected by Post Traumatic Stress, but knowing that something was wrong. So I went on retreat. Don't we hope that retreating will fix it, praying it away. And it does in its own strange way. It was a very difficult retreat. In the Ramapo Mountains with the Carmelites, 40 people being directed individually, and my director was much younger than I and a bit taken aback by my reflections and stories as I wrestled with as I prayed the Scriptures I was given each day, really wrestled. By way of example, when praying the Good Samaritan passage, I could only identify with the guy in the gutter. And on the second to the last meeting we were all invited to write a "magnificat," a prayer of praise and gratitude for the graces received. When Mike told me this assignment, I rolled my eyes and cannot share in public what I said inside my heart.... But, I did comply and the next morning, I climbed the nearby mountain where I daily sought refuge in prayer all week, took all my notes and on a clean legal pad, I jotted down words that came to mind as I reviewed the struggle I had all week, surfacing feelings of abandonment, hurt, woundedness, loss, deathmemory.....and faith. And as I rearranged those words, they came together in this poem that has become a gift to many who struggle with recovery, loss, violence and pain.

*Ishallah - God is Great
Islam - Surrender
Barakah - Give thanks
Credo - I believe.*

*The light of greatness
shines forth
as darkness.*

Aren't they the same?

*The silence and depth of the wound...
makes space for the fullness of God.*

And so...

*I stand beneath a tree
long dead
and displaced
whose dry wood has become the gibbet of another's death.*

*And as he dies, his blood moistens the wood
which lost its sap*

in other times and other places.

*I don't stand alone,
for there are many who witness the deaths that strike us dumb.*

*But
God is bigger than us, my friend,
and here we see God's power.
And we are many.*

*Ishallah,
Islam,
Barakah,
Credimus,*

we believe.....

And then there is a poem that comes again from the depths of human suffering and disconnectedness.

It is the story of John Newton, a onetime slave trader in the 18th Century who was transformed by the power of God's grace. I have heard two different stories... one being that while in prayer one evening as a devout Christian, the scriptures hit him that the cargo below deck were not things to be bought and sold, but brothers and sisters..... that transformative prayer found expression in a poem he later wrote. Another story goes that in 1748 while his ship was crippled in a violent storm in the North Atlantic, he experienced a moment of deliverance, again, articulated in a poem which later became a song which is still popular today.....Which ever story is true, the power of the poem remains a gift for us.

(All Sing)

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now I'm found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'twas Grace that taught,
my heart to fear.
And grace, my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear,

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come.
'tis grace that brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead us home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be,
as long as life endures.

When we've been there ten thousand years,
bright shining as the sun.
We've no less days to sing God's praise,
than when we first begun.

So, what was going on as we sang this song... what thoughts came to you mind?

What we just did was affirm John Newton's story and transformation and make it our story and transformation. Every time I sing this song, my prayer moves to others who either have experienced this transformative grace or are in need of it.

How many would enjoy a copy of my humble poem? Of course you would, because, again it transcended my story and experience and has become a gift of grace for others. I will have Racheal put it on the website. I can't tell you how many in recovery have pointed to a line that they say speaks to their experience and struggle.

Story. Community. Spirituality

Each weaves into the other to make us who we are as part of the Beloved Community. As we often said in Sierra Leone as we attempted to reach out to other young people who could be enticed to enter the violence of that war, we committed each other to "each one, reach one." We can do the same here.

Thank you.

August 14, 2016

Baltimore