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# One Day at a Time

by Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB

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The Russian mystic Saint Seraphim writes, "If you have inner peace, thousands of people around you will be saved." St. Seraphim makes it sound so simple. Yet all of us know that to become a person who radiates such intense beams of redemptive peace is not a simple task. It takes, in fact, a lifetime of concentration to become a true peacemaker, a peacemaker like the one described in this story.

It is said that, when the Chinese invaded Tibet, many of the soldiers were very cruel toward the conquered people. They were especially harsh and mean-hearted toward the monks. When the Chinese invaders arrived at a certain village, the village leader approached them and said, "All of the monks, hearing your approach, fled to the mountains. All of the monks, that is, but one." The commander raged out of control. He marched to the monastery, kicked in the gate, and sure enough, in the middle of the courtyard stood the one remaining monk. The commander approached the monk and screamed, "Do you know who I am? I am he who can run you through with a sword without batting an eyelash." The monk gently, but steadily, gazed at the commander and replied, "And do you know who I am? I am he who can let you run me through with a sword without batting an eyelash."

The monk is my model of a peacemaker. Behold the nonviolent one: disarmed, centered, vulnerable, detached, unafraid of death. The question the monk poses for us is this: How do we become people of peace? How do we become a church of nonviolence? What experiences in life, what methods of prayer ever prepare us to stand disarmed? Jesus, I think, shows us a way to become people of peace.

In the Sermon on the Mount he offered the Beatitudes as steps toward a disarmed heart. The Beatitudes, in other words, might be seen as a series of stages that Christians must pass through if their spirituality is to mature and deepen to the point of total disarmament.

## **1) BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT**

The first Beatitude, the beginning of the spiritual journey is "*Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit.*" To be poor in spirit means that you can say in truth – I am worm and nothing. To be poor in spirit means that you can say in truth -- I am good. Or, as the rabbis in the Hasidic movement teach: We should all have two pockets. In one is the message, "I am dust and ashes." In the other is, "For me the universe was made."

The spiritual journey begins with this Beatitude, or it never begins at all. The spiritual journey begins with awakening to what it means to be human. To become aware of creature-hood is to grasp this tale: I walked up to an old monk and asked him, "What is the audacity of humility?" The old man had never met me before, but do you know what his answer was? "The audacity of humility," he said, "is to be the first to say, 'I love you.'"

God is audaciously humble. God is the first to say, "I love you."

Awakening to gratuitous love is ground zero in the spiritual life. Oh, wonder of wonders! God first loved me. God made a unilateral initiative. I did not merit this gift: to be made by love and in love. In a sense, the miracle of being loved of God, a child of God, is an insight from which the mystics never fully recover. "Just to be is blessing, just to live is holy," exclaims Rabbi Heschel. The Zen say it this way: The pupil asked the master, "What is the deepest meaning of Buddhism, Master?" And the master made a deep bow to the pupil. To be poor in spirit, then, is to know my dignity as a child of God and to recognize the same God in my brothers and sisters.

## **2) BLESSED ARE THEY WHO MOURN**

This growing awareness of the sacredness of all life plunges the follower of Christ into the second Beatitude, "*Blessed Are They Who Mourn.*"

It is one thing to wax poetic about the sacredness of life, another to plant your feet on earth. It is no exaggeration to imagine the world as a gaping wound. The church pictures it in more poetic terms: a vale of tears. I'm grateful that my early years in the convent included chanting the Salve Regina at the passing of each day. It didn't come as such a shock, then, when what I prayed turned out to be true – "To thee we send up our sighs as, mourning and weeping, we pass through this vale of sorrow."

Some sorrow is beyond our control, but the more we analyze the stories behind the newspaper headlines, the harder it is to hide from harsh reality – our apathy, our lifestyles, our budget priorities mean mourning and weeping for tens of millions around the globe.

Some friends return from a Third World experience with this story: Marta our hostess, was a hollow woman. Thirty years old, seven children, alone, uneducated, despairing, she made blouses to pay for last weeks food. Lorenzo, her man, visited her, drunk, when it suited him. Water is in the faucets two hours a day. The people stand in line for hours waiting for it. The children have parasites. One of us asked her, "Marta, what has been the happiest event in your life?" And she had no answer. Finally, after a long, long time, she said, "Maybe when it ends."

Indeed, we send up our sighs. Truly, for one who recognizes infinity behind every human face, the silent tears of Marta must slowly turn a heart of stone into a heart of flesh. Take Marta and multiply her by a hundred million. Then meditate on the words of Cuban writer, Jose Marti: "When others are weeping blood, what right have I to weep tears?" Blessed, blessed are they who mourn.

To mourn the disfigured face of God is not enough. We must also learn to walk through this bitter valley and make it a valley of springs. Somehow we must immerse ourselves in the turmoil and tears, enter deeply into the pain, and yet walk lightly through it, leaving a wellspring behind.

The poor in spirit - those who recognize the sacredness of life - and they who mourn - those who realize the violence under which so many live - face a dilemma: How do we restore dignity, how do we bring forth that day "when every tear shall be wiped away and death shall be no more, neither shall there be crying nor pain anymore"?

### **3) BLESSED ARE THE GENTLE**

Some, of course, advocate violence to right the wrongs. But the beatitudes suggest an alternative, another way to engage in the struggle. And that alternative is the third beatitude, Blessed Are the Gentle.

Another translation for this beatitude is "Blessed are those who do not use force." The next step in the spiritual journey, then, is the invitation to nonviolence.

The spiritual power of nonviolence is what Gandhi called "soul force," while the Christian speaks of a "power of love" that can overcome the world. To accept the invitation to nonviolence, to say YES to nonviolence is to begin living out of a disarmed heart. The beatitudes that follow "Blessed are those who do not use force" suggest or explain what is involved in this nonviolent way of life.

### **4) BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR JUSTICE**

The fourth beatitude, the one immediately after the invitation to nonviolence is Blessed Are They Who Hunger and Thirst for Justice.

This beatitude reminds us that nonviolent love is always other-centered and public. Nonviolence takes place in the streets, as well as the cell of one's heart. To begin the journey of nonviolence is to find oneself hungering and thirsting after justice and being drawn to actively resist any system or government that diminishes life.

It is where the Catholic bishops of the Philippines found themselves after the fraudulent Marcos elections. In a statement ringing with extraordinary clarity and courage, they called an entire nation to resistance, endorsing a protest campaign that included prayer and fasting, boycotts, vigils, strikes, walk-outs, demonstrations and civil disobedience. Who will ever forget "people power" and hundreds of thousands on their knees, facing guns and tanks, armed only with rosary beads, Mary statues, and flowers?

If ever you need to explain the fourth beatitude, bring the Phillipino people to mind. To hunger and thirst for justice is to take concrete action. It is active refusal to submit to injustice and an active showing of love.

### **5) BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL**

But it is one thing to resist the structures of violence, quite another to serve the victims of institutional violence. That is why the next beatitude, Blessed Are the Merciful, moves the spiritual journey to another level.

Nonviolent love includes unconditional love, a willingness to serve others without counting the cost. It involves a total pouring of self, a day by day dying to our own agendas, time-tables, dreams, plans and priorities.

About 17 years ago I was part of a group that opened a center for nonviolence. At first we thought nonviolence meant sponsoring seminars and workshops on the topic, and organizing nonviolent actions against the war system.

But it wasn't until we started a soup kitchen and began welcoming the homeless into our lives that we began to understand the implications of the nonviolent cross. I would be less than honest if I didn't tell you that direct service to the poor is the none element of nonviolence that I struggle with constantly. That said, I must insist that the most important thing I've learned over the past ten years is this: some direct contact with the

poor is indispensable for those who call themselves peacemakers.

First, if it is imperative, I think, to have some kind of presence next to the least of God's children if we are going to speak to others about peace and justice with any credibility - to say nothing of being able to look in the mirror. More important than giving us public credibility and a sense of personal integrity is what the poor will teach us about ourselves and, consequently, about God.

*...At the soup kitchen an eight-year-old girl asks, "Can we borrow your cat? I found a rat in my bed." Next week she reports: "Your cat ran away when he saw three rats. I got out a stick and killed one; the other two ran away. There was blood everywhere."*

*...It is a hot and humid day in August, the temperature in the soup kitchen is close to 100 degrees. The place is jammed, is sticky and smells. The volunteers just want to serve the food and get everybody out. It is not a day for casual conversation. Clyde, a soup kitchen regular, is one of the obnoxious kind. He talks and talks and talks and even on good days, it wears on your nerves. Today, of all days, he corners one of the volunteers. She sits down and listens to him. He talks nonsense at her for 15 minutes. By some grace, she gives him her full attention. When he leaves, he presses a dollar bill into her hand. She tries to refuse it but he insists. "Please take it," he says. "I want to thank you for not rejecting me." The volunteer begins to cry and can't stop crying.*

It is here, in rubbing shoulders with the poor, the marginal, the lonely, that our nonviolence is tested as gold in fire. The words of Jean Vanier warn of a danger all too prevalent among peace and justice professionals. He writes: "Is not one of our problems today that we have separated ourselves from the poor and the wounded and the suffering? We have too much time to discuss and theorize and have lost the yearning for God which comes when we are faced with the sufferings of people."

## **6) BLESSED ARE THE PURE OF HEART**

The next beatitude, Blessed Are the Pure of Heart, is a surprise. Here we thought action: signing petitions, marching in the streets, writing letters to government officials, and even committing civil disobedience would make us peacemakers. Here we thought serving soup to the hungry and preparing beds for the homeless would bring in the reign of God. Instead, we discover that all the killing and destruction, all the pain and screams, only reflect our inner violence, our own lack of inner peace.

What a startling insight: conversion of heart must accompany conversion of the world. The problem is purity of heart. Now we must wrestle with the demons within. The words of Thomas Merton haunt us: "instead of loving what you think is peace, love other men and women, and love God above all else. Instead of hating all the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and disorders in your own soul which are the causes of war."

We are called to conversion on all levels: our attitudes and spirit, our habits of mind and speech, our lifestyles. We are called to transform all the violent conditions of our hearts: egoism, fear, passivity, rancor, revenge, love of comfort. Until all of these un-truths are purged from our hearts, the world will stay darkened by war and weapons.

It is through daily conversion, through fasting and solitude that we grow in truth, in radical honesty with ourselves and others, meeting face to face all the lies and fears, hatred and harm that spring from self-righteousness and pride.

Gradually, we grow in understanding of the person we truly are in God's sight. The film that covers the eye of our heart completely dissolves and we can see each man and woman as they are in the eyes of God. The beauty of that reality is blinding. Everywhere we look, we behold the face of God. Mechtild of Magdeburg gives us a glimpse into the pure of heart when she writes, "The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw all things in God and God in all things."

## **7) BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS**

From this contemplative vision flows the next beatitude, Blessed Are the Peacemakers. They are called children of God, those who recognize the unity of the human family. One who is pure of heart, one who sees the face of God in every human family. One who is pure of heart, one who sees the face of God in every human being cannot injure, cannot kill, cannot comprehend the term "enemy." One who sees the whole world in a single ray of light cannot speak of nation states or superior races or inferior sexes. The peacemaker has a single vocation: to keep the vision of oneness, of wholeness, of unity, of God's unconditional love for all, alive in the marketplace.

Wherever there is injustice, discrimination, division, discord, violence, you should find peacemakers, God's children. Where the battle rages between the forces of light and darkness, you should find

peacemakers, God's children. And God's children enter the public arena, the conflict, trying to make God's love visible.

This means that we forgive seven times seventy, we love our enemies as ourselves, we accept suffering without retaliation, we meet hatred with love. "Rivers of blood may have to flow, before we gain our freedom," Gandhi told his followers, "but it must be our blood."

### **8) BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED**

This final thought brings us back to the foot of the cross and to the final beatitude, the final stage of the spiritual journey: Blessed Are Those Persecuted for Justice' Sake.

Suffering love first attracted me to nonviolence. In the early 60s - before Vatican II and renewal - when we were only permitted to watch the evening news on television, I can remember staring transfixed as I watched blacks sit at segregated lunch counters, refusing to move until they were served, while angry whites poured ketchup on their heads, smeared mustard throughout their hair and eyes, and pelted them with racial slurs.

I heard the word "nonviolence" and wondered how people could absorb such hatred and violence without striking back. Then I read an account in the *Catholic Worker* newspaper where a black was quoted as saying: "I will let them kick me and kick me until they have kicked all the hatred out of themselves and into my own body where I will transform it into love."

That unidentified black man let me see the cross of Jesus anew. No longer was it possible to see the death of Jesus as a mere historical event, a dogma of faith to adhere to but never connect to real life. No, the disarmed figure on the cross was an invitation to me to break the cycle of violence, to be an instrument of continuing violence, to be an instrument of continuing redemption through suffering love.

Many have accepted the invitation: Oscar Romero, Ita Ford, Jean Donovan accepted. Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day accepted. Then there's me...and there's you. The Seed of the Resurrection has been planted, but has not yet blossomed in us...has it? We don't have faith enough, yet, to follow a Jesus who said that nonviolence and suffering love are "the way, the truth and the life."

### **VOW OF NONVIOLENCE**

It is for people like you and me that Pax Christi USA has, for the last three years, been inviting Christians to consider taking a vow of nonviolence.

Across the country, people are promising that, for a period of one year, they will practice the nonviolence of Jesus. It is important to remind ourselves that the taking of a vow is not a public proclamation that we are nonviolent. Rather, the public pledge signals a decision, a conscious commitment to allow nonviolence to permeate all phases of our lives.

There are many reasons for taking a vow of nonviolence, but I would like to offer three for your consideration. One, a vow helps us to focus our hearts. Each day, we can renew our desire to follow the way of nonviolence. Second, vows are channels of grace that help us to remember who we are - men and women made in the image of God. Third, the vow of nonviolence is a sign of hope. It affirms the belief that a nonviolent community is possible.

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step, observed Confucius. Certainly, this vow of nonviolence is a small step, but step nevertheless, toward that time when we, too, grasp the full impact, comprehend all the levels of implication in the demanding but joyful journey into the beatitudes.

*A seeker, it is said, searched for years to know the secret of achievement and meaning in human life. One night in a dream a Holy One appeared, bearing the answer to the secret. The Sage said simply, "Stretch out your hand and reach what you can." "No, it can't be that," said the seeker. "It must be something harder, something more satisfying to the human spirit." The Sage replied softly, "You are right, it is something harder. It is this: stretch out your hand and reach what you cannot."*

Can we reach for something harder, something more satisfying to the human spirit? Are we ready to risk the gospel? Can we chance all we are on the beatitudes? Can we follow the nonviolent Jesus? Dare we - all of us together - stretch out our hands and reach what we cannot?