

Becoming Peace-makers

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01. *In the Kuki-Paite clashes in Manipur (India) in 1997, some 400 people lost their lives, hundreds of villages were burnt, and thousands of people were rendered homeless. The violent struggle lasted several months. We succeeded to hold peace parlays with the representatives of the two groups in Guwahati and Churachandpur. I still have a bullet in my drawer which I earned at Churachandpur. Peace came at last in 1998. Hardly 1% among the people are Catholics, though many are Christians*

02. *In the Bodo-Advasi conflict around Kokrajhar, Assam (India) during 1996-97 a similar number of people died and over 200,000 were rendered homeless. At least 180,000 people still remain in refugee camps. The Church leaders earned credibility among the people doing relief work for several months, and organized a series of peace-meetings at Guwahati, Kokrajhar and Gossaigaon, till the hostilities ceased. About 5% of the two communities may be Catholic, most are not Christians.*

03. *It was my good fortune to have been able to organize, with the help of my ecumenical friends, not only activities like peace meetings, campaigns, rallies, prayer-meetings, symbolic actions, signature campaigns, peace clubs, and produce educative materials like booklets, posters, and slogans; but also to have been closely associated with direct peace negotiations. I give below a few of my learnings from my peacemaking experience.*

04. With increasing instances of violence the world over, peacemaking has become a central task urgent upon every citizen. We have been fed for over a century on philosophies of struggle and so inspired by the ideals for fighting for justice and striving for our rights, that our combating spirit has grown. And our reconciling skills have sagged in proportion.

05. We know that the Bible glorified peacemaking (Mt 5:9; 5:20; 5:40ff; Rom 12:17-21), while people like Nietzsche critiqued compassion and glorified violence.

06. If, in a conflict, we take for granted that one side is definitely right and another side assuredly wrong, that one is a demon and another a helpless victim, and that we have to take sides and fight to a finish, we shall not succeed to become mediators between the two. Most contenders in the fray are convinced that they are fighting for a good cause. They claim that they are striving for justice for their own people. Correspondingly, we will find that the other side too is waging a war in behalf of fairness for their community or their set of interests. Thus, perceptions of justice clash. And when justice clashes with justice, the peacemaker becomes helpless. So the first learning from experience in this area of peacemaking is that the **peacemaker should be prepared to fail.**

07. The next learning is this: **you will not be in a position to initiate a reconciliation-dialogue with contending groups unless you have a measure of sympathy for their cause in your heart.** Excessive preaching and repetition of pacifist platitudes in the early stages of the dialogue will sound provocative and humiliating to them. Hasty condemnations will enrage them. Even if you believe that their claims are exaggerated, unless you can empathize with them at depth and are touched by the passion they have for their goals and the sense of justice that motivates them, or their approach to the problem, or at least some aspect of their cause, they will not open out to you.

08. But if you are profoundly struck by the magnitude of their grievances and are able to understand (not necessarily approve) the excesses to which their legitimate anger (at least the way they think) has driven them to, they may gradually, and with caution, begin to respond. The same will be true of the other community as well.

09. Neither group is asking you to condone their immoderation, they are asking you to understand how they felt compelled to go to such lengths. They are not asking you to say much, but feel much. **They are not asking you to appropriate their anger, but to experience their pain in the inhuman situation in which they are imprisoned at the moment (which, of course, they themselves had a share in creating).**

Winning Credibility

10. Another learning we gather from peacemaking experience is that **there is a profound longing for peace even in the heart of the sternest combatant.** But peace at what terms? At whose terms? Not certainly at the cost of their community's central interests. Not certainly at the price of having to compromise their honour or damage their image. If the peacemaker wants to retain his credibility, it must be clear to the contestants that he is not going to sell out the gains they have made during a lengthy struggle or compromise their future; that he understands that they were compelled to resort to violence only because they wanted to convey a message most powerfully, especially to the opponents.

11. Carl Jung once said that the strongman must somewhere be weak, and the clever man must somewhere be stupid...otherwise it would not be true to reality. In the same way, the violent man must somewhere be peaceable.

12. Thus, even the fiercest fighters are looking forward to an era of peace. That is why they keep a little door open for the peacemaker, which they can snap shut any time they feel threatened. It is this hidden entry point that the peacemaker tries to target. But often, sadly, that secret door remains bolted and barred. And a truly religious peacemaker says, since I am helpless only the Lord can help me.

13. The peacemaker ultimately finds the "Open Sesame" formula when he has established a welcome presence in the subconscious of the warrior-group. If he and his community have been around for a significant period of time in beneficent services and non-controversial activities among the groups in collision, exhausted belligerents may

turn to him as a peacemaker, or welcome him when he takes his own initiative. His ability to build up confidence-generating relationships with the parties concerned is the key to his success. Those who have fought hard for justice need not consider themselves excluded from the privileged position of becoming peacemakers, if they have always taught non-violence, sought to be fair to all parties concerned, consistently avoided exaggerated ego-claims, have a special skill for establishing warm-hearted relationships with people, and their universal outlook on public issues is well-known.

14. The peacemaker begins by interacting with the two groups in hostile relationships. If he presents himself as a self-appointed mediator or arbitrator, he will be rejected. If he has already earned a measure of credibility through the evidence of neutral stands and convincing works, he begins with an advantage.

15. Criticizing one party to the other is not the best way of proving his neutrality. **A commitment to humanity that comes through in one's words, deeds, and relationships is far more convincing.** This quality is far more important than some techniques that he may have picked up in a recent conflict-management seminar. A universal outlook, a sensitivity to human pain no matter who suffers, a keen desire to come to the assistance of people in anxiety, these are some of the qualities that a peacemaker needs to cultivate.

Getting the Right people for a Dialogue

16. As battles rage, bringing the right people together for negotiations itself is an achievement. Now, who are the right people? It is not likely that the frontline fighters will come to talk. Their skills lie in another direction. It is not likely either that the war hawks will deign to sit for dialogue. They have a vested interest in keeping the fires burning. I would describe the people who matter in a peace-dialogue as “socially important people”: people who are respected in society; groups whose opinions have wide acceptability among both radicals and moderates, like thinkers, writers, speakers and people who stir society with their charismatic leadership or prophetic utterances.

17. Their “importance” is not to be measured by their rank in the social hierarchy, the size of their purse, or the number of thugs they command. The people who really matter in the fighting federation are those who think, provide a philosophy for action, develop strategies, keep public contacts, and control publicity.

18. Do not be bewildered by these qualification. Very often the ‘big’ man is a small man. He may not be a graduate. He may even be illiterate. He may be a humble, soft-spoken person, a stocky and stunted figure. But he is a perceptive person, and has the ear of the militant ‘boss’ and his confederates. Plato thought that we would have the ideal society if it was ruled by philosophers. I do not want to discuss the merit of this view, but merely want to say that it is not the thinkers that often rule.

19. Even in political or militant movements the same is true. The doer is not always the thinker. He acts fast, but does not always reflect. So, after organizing a few agitations, he

is exhausted; or after killing a few harmless people and inflicting severe injury on the other party, he runs short of ideas, and the entire movement fizzles out. It is the thinker that interprets history, constructs a theory, visualizes a future in order to sustain the movement. I am not referring necessarily to just one person. There may be many at different levels of the hierarchy scattered in the various units.

20. It is not likely that you will easily persuade the key-thinkers of a militant organization to come to the negotiation-table. The next best thing to do is to draw those who are close to them; and the next best thing again is to get those who are close to those who are close to them. In other words, we may have to work through mediators, or at least such people as, we think, have some influence on the guiding-group in the organization. Though we have such comprehensive plans, those who really come for dialogue may be persons totally remote from the frontlines. But at least they should be respected persons in their own society. Even if ultimately those who turn up are people who are known to be peaceable, as long as they have the confidence of their own societies, the message will ultimately reach intended circles.

21. A last piece of advice is this: it is not sufficient to send a routine letter of invitation to the participants in the parleys. The peacemaker may have to do a certain amount of personal canvassing (directly or through respected representatives) to make sure that key people will not be missing. Or else, he may be greatly disappointed with the turn- up.

Actual Dialogue

22. There are times when negotiators representing conflicting interests will feel unprepared to meet each other. Even if they are already at the venue, they may feel emotionally and mentally not yet ready for direct discussions. It would be best that they spend some period of time in separate gatherings, to thrash out their own two separate points of view, and get themselves ready for actual negotiations. Some time also may be very profitably spent at a common gathering of all the participants of both parties, in which the peacemaker himself or some other neutral animator(s) may make a passionate appeal for peace, basing themselves on arguments from human experience, philosophical thought, wisdom of the respective societies, (and if they are believers) teaching from the scriptures. Depending on the charisma and moral authority of the animator(s) a great measure of mental transformation takes place during such an exercise. Experience is witness to this fact.

23. It is only when both parties feel ready to meet each other, does the peacemaker invite them to come together. After a few motivating words from the peacemaking team, one spokesman (spokeswoman) from each side places the entire problem before the general assembly as his/her group perceives it, expresses his/her desire for peace, points to possible difficulties, proposes solutions and alternatives, invokes collaboration from the other side in the most acceptable way possible, and concludes. After this, there may be common discussions to deepen the understanding of the problem and of each others' position on the entire matter. A few rounds of separate and common meetings to narrow

the differences and widen the areas of consensus may bring the participants to the final stage and conclusions. Often such efforts fail, and the peacemaker has to begin all over again.

24. I would suggest that during the entire period of the negotiations the peacemaker remains merely helpful and intelligent, leaving full freedom to the contestants to thrash out their differences. Only during a deadlock should he offer some suggestions, mostly regarding procedures. Occasionally it may serve to draw the attention of the debaters to some point of view they had overlooked. The less he presses his vision, his course of action or his set of solutions on the participants, the better. If the solutions are their own, they have a better chance of winning wide acceptance and of being implemented.

25. The best role of the peacemaker is that of the confidence-builder, facilitator, creator of a serene atmosphere...an atmosphere in which interactions become easy. If he remains inconspicuous and keeps a low-profile, his long-term contribution can be greater. But the temptation to win recognition and wide acclaim is so great, that the peacemaker, if he is successful, rushes into the roles of a mediator, arbitrator and judge. Even if the contestants agree to such an idea, it would be unwise to assume such roles. Winning the headlines may be flattering, but the fruits therefrom may not last long. The simple reason is that the solutions you propose are not theirs. **Doing things as though not doing it----- that is the role of the true peacemaker.**

26. Premature publicity is fatal to the cause. By this I do not mean to say he should keep media at a distance. But he should feel free from having to play up to the gallery. He should not give chance to those opposing the cause of peace to track him down at every step and make him stumble. If he is not careful, they can undermine his initiatives long before they begin to yield fruits. That is why I say premature publicity can leave you exposed and vulnerable.

27. **Living together always means being prepared for compromises.** This is true of a family, a village, a nation or the international community. The most valuable contribution the peacemaking team can make is to lead opposing partners towards a gradual awareness of this great truth. Self evident as it is, if you rush to conclusions urging compromise and quoting adages and aphorisms when the anger is still high, the pedagogic process you have initiated may be disturbed. It is far more profitable to draw their attention to the disastrous consequences of on-going conflict. You have to walk a long distance with them sharing the pain of their people. Only when they are mentally prepared to look for alternative solutions, is it pedagogic to propose compromises.

28. It is unwise too to prompt specific issues on which a compromise may be worked out. It is best that they emerge from the participants' lived experience and their own agonizing search for a way out of the deadlock they are caught up in. Prodding compromises in the area of their central concerns may appear insensitive to them. What they themselves are ultimately willing to concede is their gift to God in view the future of their community and that of humanity.

29. Often the negotiators themselves have no authority to decide on issues in behalf of the two contending communities. But they can make recommendations. And if these are well-phrased, balanced and respond to realities, they may evoke a good reaction. The participants in the first trend-setting meeting we have described above, can make an effort to organize similar meetings at the local level, try to reproduce the same atmosphere and goodwill, and discuss the recommendations that they have drawn up for the public. Each community will do this with their own people and then with others. If there is wide acceptance of the proposals, the communities may move on to final negotiations in the presence of civil authorities, in which the peacemaker need not take part at all. If in the process he is clean forgotten or is marginalized, he should rejoice, for it is God who is the author of peace no matter who all served the cause.

Problems related to Peacemaking

30. The problems that the peacemaker will have to face are of infinite variety. There may be stiff opposition to the entire effort from interested parties on either side. The peacemaker may appear a threat to militants committed to violence and to those benefiting from the insecurity created by armed conflict. **Violence is not broken by superior violence, it is broken by another power: a tremendous capacity to endure suffering. If you want to save the lives of others, be prepared for death.** Several peacemakers have given their lives for this cause: in recent History, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

31. In the same way, representatives of the Government may be suspicious. Petty-minded officers may be jealous. Anti-Christian groups may be critical and unhappy about the influence that the Church seems to exert. There may be negative interpretations in the press. There may be repeated failures in the peace-promoting work itself.

32. Negotiators whom the peacemaker contacted may refuse to put up an appearance. Their ears may be poisoned against Christian initiatives. Follow-up efforts may never take off. People may get discouraged from the recurrence of violence. Collective anger may be rekindled if their community is hit again unexpectedly. Malicious rumours may be deliberately spread. The press may inflate the number of victims, interpret the issues wrongly, ignore the peacemaker's initiatives and successes. He may feel left alone to struggle. But even in the midst of troubles, he should hold his head high. He need not try to refute every charge and counter every opposition. He could respond to these difficulties with simple explanations or even by allowing things to happen and events to flow. He could let people speak just as they wish for a while. But he should be honest and upright in his intent and ego-less in his service. His very non-resistance may prove a turning-point for the current to reverse the flow. And finally, the truth reveals itself.

33. He may come across another type of difficulty as the dialogue progresses. It will seem to him as though words have changed their meanings. For example, someone may

be using the word 'justice' to refer to the advantage of his own community only, not of others. By 'peace' he may mean retaining in serenity a whole lot unfair advantages and privileges. 'Democracy' may mean doing as one pleases, freedom to do injustice, or total chaos. Sometimes discussions cannot make headway because the contestants have their own style of using words, their own way of interpreting history, their own strategies of making allegations, their own fashion of creating myths. The peacemaker should not give up.

34. He may come across contradictions between professed intentions and actual conduct. This is as much true of local gunmen and World Powers. Wars may be fought for saving democracy on the one hand and salvaging one's imperial interests on the other, or for defending human rights and the flow of oil into one's tankers. People who claim to be allegedly fighting to save their ethnic identity and cultural heritage, may, in fact, be striving to keep the routes of their drug-trade clear. Even so, at depths they all have some good will. The peacemaker does not turn cynical, but tries to ransom people from their own inconsistencies.

35. If memories of historic injuries are alive in people's hearts and if negative stereotypes of each other have developed, it will be difficult to solve the problem in a short time. In such a case, every peace-agreement is a truce. Hostilities may be renewed any time. But the peacemaker finds renewed strength and motivation in his faith and love. He is ready to begin all over again. He gets busy with the healing of historic injuries and demolishing of stereotypes. For God will is with him.

The Mysticism of the Brief Moment

36. Don Bosco's gift to us was the ability and the skill to discover God in the midst of people, intense activity, problems of life and at brief moments during the day. During our relief operations at Kokrajhar in 1996 when 400 volunteers (priests, seminarians, sisters, doctors, nurses, youth, Christians and non-Christian activists) worked for 4 months in hearty unity, the Eucharist in the morning and brief prayer in the evening gave us the needed strength to toil tirelessly in the rain and in the heat. The mysticism of the brief moment to which we clung passionately during those difficult days, helped us to welcome new volunteers as they came, to create a climate of mutual esteem and collaborate across cultures, to overcome tensions, to recognize our vulnerability and seek remedies, to join hands together ecumenically and inter-religiously, and serve 200,000 victims of an ethnic conflict. **Silence is strength, prayer provides energies.**

Peace is God's gift

37. Most peacemakers in history failed in their central objective. Peace did not always come in response to their efforts. Not rarely, they lost their lives. Their accounts read like a tragic waste. But nothing is lost in God. Peace comes in His own good time, independently of all that the peacemaker can do. The fighting may end for many reasons: weapons run short; fighters are exhausted; army pressure mounts; good sense comes to

prevail. **There are many ways in which God makes people beat swords into ploughshares.**

38. The peacemaker's effort is like the flickering lamp over the high altar, which **speaks of a Presence and whispers hope**. And when His peace comes at last, there is sunshine and joy over every hill and in every valley. It is a sunshine that pierces the secret thoughts of every heart, dispelling gloom and holding out hopes.

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