Conversion, Not Domination

Inga Leonova interviews Jim Forest

Thank you, Jim, for speaking to* The Wheel *about your lifelong advocacy of peacemaking as essential to Christian witness. To begin, perhaps you could talk about the historical understanding of war in the Christian tradition, including the doctrine of Just War, which has found many adherents.

The Just War theory emerged in Western Christianity and never became rooted in Eastern Christianity. Instead, in the East, there is a relatively undeveloped theology that war is sometimes forced on a nation under attack, but is only justified to the extent that the nation is defending itself from invasion. Even then, many restraints were placed on the practice of war. If you examine Byzantine history and theological writings about war, it is striking to see the extent to which war was avoided. Many emperors made compromises and paid huge amounts from the imperial treasury to prevent war. As for a theology of war in the East? There simply is no "Just War" doctrine in the Fathers.

How about Orthodox hymns such as the Troparion for the Cross, which originally read, "Grant victory to the Orthodox emperor over his enemies"? And what about warrior saints? How do you reconcile this part of Orthodox tradition with the exaltation of peace in the Gospel?

Hymns such as the Troparion of the Cross do raise issues. But, of course, victory need not mean *military* defeat of the enemy. It could mean something more like their conversion to a different attitude toward us—a transformation of their behaviour. I think this is, in fact, the correct way to understand these hymns. Orthodox Christianity is essentially a religion of conversion rather than domination.

As for warrior saints—their *Lives* are complicated, but also surprising. Take Saint George, the most famous example. On the one hand, we know very little about the historical person, George. He was a martyr, but we can't say much more. He may not have been an *actual solider*, but perhaps was a soldier more in the sense that Saint Paul uses military metaphors to describe the ideal Christian life: George had courage, he was armed with truth, his feet were shod with the gospel of peace. It wasn't until the composition of the *Golden Legend* in the thirteenth century that the story of battling the dragon emerged. Of course, the historical George never saw a dragon, but again, metaphorically and spiritually he certainly battled dragons: he battled fear and the command of the emperor to make pagan sacrifice. For that reason, the dragon story—though a legend—is inspired and compelling.

In fact, I would say that the life of Saint George is entirely a metaphor of conversion: the saint arrives on a white horse, symbolizing courage; his shield bears the sign of the Cross, showing that he is a soldier of Christ, not of the world; in many icons, he is shown wielding a lance thinner than a pencil—hardly a mighty weapon of war; and he has a dispassionate expression, not a warmongering look. Also, we should remember that he does not kill the dragon but only wounds it, and in many icons the rescued pagan princess is shown putting her girdle around the dragon's neck and leading it away.

Perhaps we might also think of Saint Alexander Nevsky. Why was he canonized? Because he was victorious in battle? Or because he became a repentant monk and peacemaker who, in a somewhat scandalous way, made compromises with the Golden Horde, which led to a period of peace? It is striking that it was not until the reign of Peter the Great that he was depicted as a military saint. The icons before that time did not show him in this way, but rather as a monk.

So it seems that the exaltation of military might is a matter of subsequent interpretation, necessitated by political circumstances?

Absolutely. It's a matter of post-mortem militarization—often a very long time after the saint died, as in the case of Saint George and Saint Alexander. We must remember that, in the nineteenth century, the West (including Russia) was swept by a wave of nationalism, and many of these saints were recruited as military heroes for the nationalist cause. I am certain that if we study the lives of the saints and learn to read their hagiography correctly, we will not find a single one who was canonized because of military achievements.

This leads us back to the issue of domination and onward to our contemporary situation. In the last twenty or thirty years, the world has experienced wars waged by and between Orthodox nations. The aggressions of Russia in Georgia and Ukraine, for example, have been shrouded in the pseudo-religious rhetoric of* Russkiy Mir *("the Russian World"), which asserts the religious primacy of the Russian church and state over all the Orthodox of Slavic Tradition. What do you think about the relationship between Christianity and nationalism?

The first thing that springs to mind is Saint Paul's comment that there is "neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal. 3:28). It is so obvious from the New Testament that Christianity is not a national religion. There is no such thing as *Russian* Orthodoxy, there is only Orthodoxy in the *Russian tradition, in the Greek tradition, in the Antiochian tradition*, and so forth. To the extent that religion becomes confused with national identity, it is no longer a form of Christianity.

One of the items discussed at the 1917 Moscow Council was whether the Church should be called "The Orthodox Church in Russia" or "The Russian Orthodox Church." The council fathers chose the latter, which I think is unfortunate, because it gives the impression that Russian identity has primacy over the identity conveyed by the words that follow. "The Orthodox Church in Russia" strikes quite a different tone.

Perhaps the fathers of the Orthodox Church in America had a better ear for language and therefore chose a better name? The OCA was in some ways

Ai Weiwei, *Soleil Levant*, 2017. Installation of migrants' life jackets at Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, Denmark. Photo: TeaMeister, flic.kr/p/YjLvkF.

intended to overcome the diasporic national divisions of the Orthodox in America—but, of course, it hasn't been entirely successful in that regard.

And, of course, those responsible for securing the OCA's autocephaly weren't caught up in national struggles in the same way as the fathers of the Moscow Council. The OCA was named at a time when national identity for Orthodox Christians in America was not a consideration in the same way as for Russians in 1917.

Let's talk a bit about your own work as a peacemaker. In your seminal essay, "Salt of the Earth," you lay out a number of aspects of witnessing to Christ's peace, especially in times of war.[1] For those who are unfamiliar with your work, perhaps you could explain them to us?

Yes. I think there are at least seven aspects of Christian peacemaking. The first is *loving our enemies*. Here we have to repair a damaged word, because love has been sentimentalized, and the biblical meaning of the word is quite different. Christ calls his followers to love their enemies. If we understand love as a euphoric feeling or pleasurable sentiment, then fulfilling this commandment is impossible. But if we understand love as doing what we can to protect the life and seek the salvation of a person or group whom we fear or hate, then it is very different. An essential aspect of response to that commandment is to pray for our enemies—a thread of daily connection through prayer.

The second aspect is related: *doing good to enemies*. Jesus teaches his followers, "Do good to those who hate

[1] Jim Forest, "Salt of the Earth: An Orthodox Christian Approach to Peacemaking," *In Communion 54* (Fall 2009), incommunion.org/2010/01/10/salt-of-the-earth-3.

you, bless those who curse you" (Luke 6:27–28). This teaching is often viewed as unrealistic—but, in fact, it is a teaching full of common sense. Unless we want to pave the way to a tragic future, we must search for opportunities to demonstrate to an opponent our longing for an entirely different kind of relationship. An adversary's time of need or crisis can provide that opening.

The third aspect is *turning the other cheek*. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "If someone strikes you on the cheek, offer him the other also" (Matt. 5:39). Contrast this with the advice provided in the average film or novel, where the message is often: "If you are hit, hit back. Let your blow be harder than the one you received." In fact, as we saw in the U.S. attack on Iraq in 2003, you needn't be hit at all in order to justify striking others. Provocation, irritation, and the fear of attack are warrant enough. Turning the other cheek is often seen as an especially suspect Christian teaching. For a great many people, it seems contrary to natural justice or, at the very least, it isn't "manly." Only cowards turn the other cheek, they say. But what cowards actually do is run and hide. Standing in front of a violent person, refusing to get out of the way, takes enormous courage. It's a way of giving witness to confidence in the reality and power of the resurrection.

The fourth aspect of peacemaking is *forgiveness*. Nothing is more fundamental to Jesus' teaching than his call to forgiveness: giving up debts, letting go of grievances, pardoning those who have harmed us, not despairing of the other. Every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to forgive us only insofar as we ourselves have extended forgiveness to others. Which of us doesn't know how much easier it is to ask God to forgive us rather than to extend forgiveness to others? We are wounded and the wounds often last a lifetime. Sins—often quite serious sins—have been committed against us. Others we love have suffered or may even have died through the evil done to them. But we are not only victims. In various ways, we are linked to injuries others have suffered and are suffering. Yet, we are moved to condemn the evils we see in others and to excuse—even justify—the evils we practice ourselves. In fact, we all both need and must offer forgiveness.

The fifth aspect is *breaking down the dividing wall of enmity*. We live in a world of walls: competition, contempt, repression, racism, nationalism (as we discussed above), violence, domination—all of these are seen as normal. Enmity is ordinary. The self and self-interest form the center point in so many lives. We tend to be fear-driven. Love and the refusal to center one's life in enmity are dismissed as naive, idealistic, even unpatriotic, especially if one reaches out constructively to hated minorities or national enemies. But we must break down these walls if we want peace.

The sixth aspect is *nonviolent resistance to evil*. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil" (Matt. 5:38–39). When Peter used violence to defend Jesus, he was instantly admonished: "Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). For several hundred years following the resurrection, the followers of Jesus were renowned for their refusal to perform military service. But since the state became a patron of Christianity, Christians have been as likely as any

other people to take up the sword, and often use it in appalling ways. Refusal to kill others can be a powerful witness, yet Christian life is far more than the avoidance of evil situations. Christians cannot be passive about those events and structures that cause innocent suffering and death. More recently, nonviolent struggle has become a recognized alternative to passivity on the one hand, and to violence on the other.

The last element of peacemaking is *aspiring to a life of recognizing Jesus*. In his teaching about the Last Judgment, Christ tells us, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). It is a scene represented in icons and relief carvings in many ancient churches. Looking at such images, occasionally the question is raised: "Why are we judged collectively?" Perhaps it is because each person's life is far from over when he or she dies. Our acts of love and failures to love continue to have consequences until the end of history. What Adam and Eve did, what Moses did, what Herod did, what Mary the mother of Jesus did, what Pilate did, what the Apostles did . . . what Caesar did, what Hitler did, what Martin Luther King Jr. did, what Dorothy Day and Mother Maria Skobtsova did . . . what you and I have done and are doing—all these lives, with their life-giving or death-dealing content, continue to have consequences every single day for the rest of history. What you and I do, and what we fail to do, will have consequences until the end of time.

If I cannot see the face of Jesus in the face of those who are my enemies, if I cannot see him in the unbeautiful, if I cannot see him in those who have the wrong ideas, if I cannot see him in the poor and the defeated, how will I see him in bread and wine, or in life after death? If I do not reach out in this world to those with whom he has identified himself, why do I imagine that I will want to be with him, and them, in heaven? Why would I want to be for all eternity in the company of those whom I hated and avoided every day of my life? Christ's kingdom would be hell for those who avoided peace and devoted their lives to division. But heaven is right in front of us. At the heart of what Jesus says in every act and parable is this: Now, this minute, we can enter the kingdom of God.

That's a very powerful mandate. Of your seven aspects of peacemaking, which would you say is the hardest to carry out?

They're all hard! In the Beatitudes, the first—poverty of spirit—is the most difficult. But without poverty of spirit, the rest do not follow. Without poverty of spirit, you will never have purity of heart, for example. Without poverty of spirit, you will never embrace the Cross. I think it's the same with my seven aspects of peacemaking: the first, love of enemies, is the hardest. Yet it is foundational to Christianity. And I'm not saying that as someone who finds it easy to love his enemies! I can easily be aroused to the point of wishing that my enemy would suffer and die. It is easy to manipulate my emotional response to enmity. I'm just like anyone else. But I cannot understand the gospel apart from the commandment to love one's enemies.

It seems to me that love of enemies is a lesson which the Christian Church has struggled to learn and practice throughout history. In each generation, some succeed more than others, some fail more than others. Even to *want* to love an enemy is extremely

challenging. But here, the idea that I mentioned above, about de-sentimentalizing the word "love," is key to beginning to practice this commandment. It has to be understood in the context of a life of conversion: seeking our own conversion, seeking the conversion of others. Our conversions are interconnected. In this way we can begin to grasp its meaning, and have some hope of moving in that direction.

Prayer is essential here, too. Prayer is the beginning of love. To the extent that I can sincerely pray for my enemy and for his or her welfare, enlightenment, peace, health, salvation, I participate in God's own connection with that person and discover that they are connected with God's life, just as I am—perhaps even more so. Jesus explicitly links love of enemies with prayer for them. Without prayer, love of enemies is impossible. Saint Silouan of the Holy Mountain put special emphasis on this. He became a monk after nearly killing another young man in his village—in fact, for some minutes he thought he had become a murderer. Not long afterward, he went to Mount Athos. Much of his teaching later in life centered on love of enemies. He insisted that he who does not love his enemies does not have God's grace.[2]

Mural of Mother Maria Skobtsova and Dorothy Day, Church of the Holy Wisdom, New Skete Monastery, New York.

Right, because when you pray for a person, he or she really becomes a person—and ceases to be an abstract idea or an obstacle to my goals. Prayer contributes to a process of personalization. Speaking of prayer and love in action, you've written extensively about Saint Maria Skobtsova of Paris, who was a great light during the Second World War. What about her life captured your imagination?

I was brought to the writings of Mother Maria by one of Metropolitan Kallistos Ware's books, and it seemed to me then that her writings were almost identical with those of Dorothy Day, who played a major role in my own life as my first spiritual mother. She was the founder of the Catholic Worker movement and, although she was a very devout Roman Catholic, she was the first person to bring me into an Orthodox Church.

There are actually tremendous similarities between the lives of Dorothy Day and Mother Maria. In the same year, 1933, they both founded houses of hospitality in major cities: Day in New York and Mother Maria in Paris. Both were committed to what I would call radical hospitality toward those in danger, whether of dying on the streets or being taken away by the police. In Mother Maria's case, this cost her her own life, because she took in Jews and did everything possible to save them from the Nazis. Both women were also involved in ecu-

[2] See Jean-Claude Larchet, "St. Silouan: On the Love of Enemies," *In Communion 68* (2014), incommunion.org/2014/06/03/st-silouan-on-the-love-of-enemies.

menical dialogue, especially between Orthodox and Catholics.

In terms of their writings, you could almost take a paragraph from each, scramble the sentences, and play a game to figure out which sentence was written by which woman. It would be impossible to decide unless you already knew the quotations. I was captivated by the sentiment I found in both women, that God is present in every person and must be venerated in each person. Each person is an icon of God. Dorothy Day prepared me to encounter this in Mother Maria.

When one looks at the life of Mother Maria, one sees not only that she was a great theologian—and one must not forget that she was and remains a great theological voice, one of the most important theologians of recent Orthodox history—but also that she had the opportunity to live out her theology. She saw in each person another face of Christ. For these reasons, I have been fascinated by her and her writings, and I am glad to have been able to arrange for the publication of some of her work in English.[3]

Finally, sometimes people say that religion leads to war. This seems to be true of the current "culture wars," for example. How would you respond to this charge, especially with respect to the militant stance that religious groups often assume in culture wars?

I have tremendous respect for some of the so-called "culture warriors." David Bentley Hart, for example, is someone whose writings I admire. But the main task for Christians is to bear witness to Christ, who does not kill. The fact that Jesus killed nobody has implications for us. When we see Christianity being leveraged to promote conflict, which can easily lead to war, then we have to say that it is no longer Christianity but an ideology. Unfortunately, Christianity—like all religions—can easily be transformed into an ideology and then become quite deadly.

We Orthodox are too comfortable with what is a quite remarkable phrase, which we use without any resistance: "the precious and life-giving Cross." When we actually contemplate what that means, it is very difficult to *revere* the Cross, to want to be *on* the Cross, to see anything *good* about the Cross. If we reimagine the Cross as a modern instrument of murder or execution, like a guillotine or an electric chair, then we become more aware of how shocking it is to speak about "the precious and life-giving Cross."

One of the earliest depictions of the Cross on a Christian building is found on the huge doors of the Church of Santa Sabina in Rome, which date from the fifth century. It is interesting to me that it is not terribly prominent. Christians in Rome at that time clearly weren't yet ready to embrace "the precious and life-giving Cross"—perhaps because Rome was a place where people had been crucified. It was still shocking. We need to recover that. We need to grasp what it means to worship a God who practiced peace and did not fuel the cycle of war and violence. ✠

[3] Maria Skobtsova, *Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

Jim Forest is the international secretary of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship and the author of numerous books, including *Loving Our Enemies: Reflections on the Hardest Commandment*, *Ladder of the Beatitudes*, *Praying With Icons*, *Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness*, *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage as a Way of Life*, and *The Root of War is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers*.