

Peace or Justice: Which Has Precedence?

A Quaker Perspective on the Papal Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris*
Issued by Pope John XXIII on April 11, 1963

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Thank you for inviting me to be part of this lecture series commemorating the significant event which occurred almost exactly 50 years ago, on April 11, 1963, when Pope John XXIII issued the encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*.

I am old enough to have a clear recollection of the encyclical letter's release, and of the excitement and interest it generated. I was 27 years old at the time, and a regular Sunday morning attender at Quaker meeting for worship, although I was not yet a member of the Religious Society of Friends.

War was an ever-present issue of which the public was intensely aware back in those days, and I was initially attracted to Quakerism by its peace testimony. But I realized that, however much people in the Religious Society of Friends might hope to resurrect the Christianity of Jesus and the apostles, Quakerism was a micro-denomination within the religious landscape, and particularly with respect to its peace testimony it seemed destined to occupy a minority status for ages to come. So it was an enormously inspiring and encouraging moment when a great Christian leader addressed the issue of peace in a humane and tolerant spirit from a perspective which was both Christian and universal, and when he did so in the name of the largest Christian communion.

Even before the issuance of the *Pacem in Terris* encyclical letter and before Vatican II had been convened, Pope John XXIII had come to enjoy wide public affection and respect, and so, like millions of other people, I read his text with close attention when it was first released. And while, over the years, I remembered its issuance as a kind of watershed event, the truth is that I eventually forgot exactly what the encyclical letter said, and had John Burke not invited me to participate in this lecture series, I might have remained in this state of uninformed reverence.

Upon rereading the text 50 years later, I find that it takes an effort to reconstruct exactly why it was virtually a sensation when it was released back in 1963. One must recall the superheated rhetoric of the Cold War, rhetoric in which Christian piety often merged itself with political belligerence by demonizing those seen as the enemies of both faith and democracy.

At the time the encyclical was written the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a desperate nuclear arms race governed by a strategy known as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). The theory was that war would be prevented if each contender was assured that any act of aggression it might try would result in its own annihilation by a retaliatory strike by its victim. While in theory this was supposed to result in a kind of permanent equilibrium, in reality there were enormous risks. Each side needed to try to outspend and outsmart the other by producing ever more sophisticated weapons systems to be sure that it had the capacity to retaliate should the other side strike first. There was a constant danger that all these weapons systems on hair trigger alert would get set off accidentally, annihilating civilization as we know it. Another constant danger was that the many small wars and revolutions which broke out around the world would uncontrollably escalate into the feared nuclear conflagration in a way beyond anyone's control, much as World War I seemed to have launched itself.

In the midst of all this tension the Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy gained popularity, and eventually notoriety, by claiming that communists had infiltrated the nooks and crannies of the United States Government, then in the hands of the Democratic Party. He claimed that any political figure with ideas more liberal than his own was, if not communist, then at least "pink," a kind of communist sympathizer. McCarthy, a Roman Catholic, was enormously popular with the Roman Catholic portion of the electorate, so much so that the Kennedy family, although Democrats, felt it necessary to collaborate with him. Robert Kennedy even worked for Senator McCarthy briefly. Senator McCarthy died at a young age before *Pacem in Terris* was issued, but, although he eventually was personally discredited, the attitudes he represented continued to color the political landscape for many years after his death.

The erection of the Berlin Wall, which greatly increased the bitterness and tensions of the Cold War, occurred two years before the issuance of *Pacem in Terris*, and it was only a few months before the encyclical's release, that is, in October of 1962, that the eleven-day-long Cuban missile crisis threatened to bring the Mutual Assured Destruction house of cards tumbling down.

Into this nerve-wracking and poisonous atmosphere the encyclical letter, with its calm affirmation of Christian charity, with its appeal to the possibility that all people, regardless of their faith or lack of it, could reason together, its confident

expectation that good will can prevail, its affirmation that all people have economic rights as well as the full spectrum of political rights traditional in Western countries, its support of the United Nations, and its endorsement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all were a breath of fresh air for a humanity hungering for a hint of sanity from high places. Indeed, the encyclical's overall tone was exactly what was often condemned as "pink," an adjective which could have been applied as easily to the Gospels themselves. So what today might seem to us to be a somewhat unremarkable exposition of decent Christian and universal values was, in the context of its time, a stroke of uncommon boldness.

But our main purpose this evening is not to dwell on this history, but to look at the text from our current vantage point. Since I have been invited as a person who can speak from a Quaker perspective, I assume it will be useful to explore the similarities and differences between the encyclical's teaching and Quaker spirituality, particularly with respect to issues of war and peace.

To provide the necessary background for doing this I hope it will be useful if I spend a minute or two describing the Quaker movement and its situation within the Christian community.

The Quaker movement got started in England in the 1660s. Those interested in English history will recall that the Church of England had separated from Rome more than a century before, in 1534. By the time the 1660s rolled around, England was seething with turmoil as the transition from the middle ages to the modern era was occurring. A great and terrible civil war took place, with an army assembled by the English Parliament on one side, and an army loyal to the King, on the other. In 1649 the Parliamentary army finally prevailed, King Charles I was imprisoned and eventually beheaded, and the Puritan Oliver Cromwell was installed as head of government with the title Lord Protector. A period of republican government followed. But it lasted scarcely a decade, when it collapsed in confusion upon Cromwell's death, and the monarchy was restored.

Religion and politics were closely connected in those days. The King was the head of the Church in England. The church levied its own taxes, known as tithes. The upper levels of the clergy, the bishops, were closely allied with titled people at court, and the common people were oppressed by a kind of ecclesiastical/aristocratic complex. Oliver Cromwell and the Puritan movement he

headed offered some alternative to this, but they, too, were intolerant of views other than their own, and they adhered to a very pessimistic assessment of the human condition and of human nature. Oliver Cromwell's regime is as often described as a dictatorship as it is a form of republicanism.

In this turbulent milieu the Quaker movement sprang up offering an alternative both to high church Anglicanism and to Puritanism. Despairing of the clergy and the modes of worship of both parties, Quakers began a religious movement without a priesthood and without ordained clerical leadership of any kind. Friends sought to establish a ministry of all believers. Instead of liturgies and rituals, Friends gathered simply in silence and waited for an inspiration from God to move any member of the meeting to speak. Friends believed that by attending to the spirit of God as revealed in the hearts of the people Christianity could be restored to the state of perfection experienced by Jesus and the apostles. Thus, Friends sought to revive or restore primitive Christianity or the Christianity of the apostolic age. They believed it was possible to achieve the same kind of transparency to God that was in Jesus himself, that the Christ spirit resided in everyone. They believed it possible to achieve this pure knowledge of Truth and this state of sanctity without the help of any clergy. Needless to say, this seemed arrogant, pretentious, and blasphemous to the people around these early Friends, and they were vigorously persecuted for their views.

Friends believed that it followed from their idea of that of God within that if only people were turned to faithfulness to their own inner Christ-spirit, they would begin to behave differently and social arrangements could begin to conform to God's will; peace and justice would come to earth. So Friends had many expectations about God-led social and political behavior.

They believed in the equality of men and women, and allowed women to speak in their spontaneous worship and to exert leadership on the same basis as men. They established schools where girls could learn mathematics and science on the same basis as boys.

Their schools also rejected the philosophy that it was necessary to teach by rote or to use corporeal punishment. Quakers believed that the natural goodness and the innate love of learning in each student could be elicited by sensitive pedagogy.

Friends believed in racial equality, and eventually many Friends became active in the movement to abolish slavery.

Friends believed in human equality in general, and refused to remove their hats when in the presence of the king, and used the familiar forms of address, like “thee” and “thou,” rather than employing polite forms based on class distinctions.

Friends refused to take oaths in court because they believed that Christ-like people spoke the truth always, and taking an oath would imply that they might lie when not under oath. They refused to haggle about prices in business, feeling that the common practice of requesting an inflated price for goods and then allowing it to be whittled down in a bargaining process was basically an exercise in untruthfulness. Friends in business therefore introduced the single price and the price tag system.

Many of these views and practices, even those that have become commonplace today, caused alarm and outrage among the contemporaries of early Friends -- both monarchists and republicans, both Anglo-Catholics and Puritans.

Since the earliest days of the Quaker movement, Friends have sought to apply Christian principles to society and politics, refusing to accept the idea that the teachings of Jesus are impractical or irrelevant. While many of the early testimonies of Friends are now commonly accepted – such as ideas on gender and racial equality, ideas about education, and the practice of the price tag system – some aspects of Friends faith remain a minority view. The Friends peace testimony, in particular, remains outside the mainstream of European and American social thought. The idea that warfare and killing is always wrong, and that only strategies of non-violence should be employed when conflict arises, remains a minority conviction held only by a few small groups, like the Quakers, the Mennonites, and the Church of the Brethren. Individual members of other Christian religious groups, and of the Jewish and Islamic communities, can hold similar views to those of Friends about war and peace, but they tend to be a small minority within their respective communities of faith. Pacifism and non-violence are more readily understood and accepted in larger segments of the Buddhist and Hindu religious movements.

Like many other Friends practices, the peace testimony arose out of a combination of attention to scripture and observation of what was going on around Friends, observations guided by the Holy Spirit. As Friends read scripture, Jesus' teaching is unambiguously pacifist. At the same time, the horrors of the civil war taking place around them, in which Christians were slaughtering Christians, reinforced the conviction of early Friends that militarism could not be reconciled with a Christian life. Friends were astonished that people could somehow worship Jesus without listening to his teaching about proper human behavior.

The text of the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* is rooted in natural law theory, as one might expect. This, too, is essentially an optimistic theory about the possibility of human beings achieving knowledge of truth. It affirms that the truth can be found by means of the careful observation of the human and natural world around us, together with the rigorous application of our capacity to reason -- both nature and reason being gifts of the Creator. Some lines of Christian thought posit that our capacity for objective observation and clear thought is fatally compromised by original sin, but such pessimism does not creep into the *Pacem in Terris* text, which assumes that observation and reason are universally available to believers and unbelievers alike. It is this universal availability of access to truth upon which the encyclical letter's hope for peace rests.

The encyclical letter is carefully structured to move from its premises to its conclusion through a series of discrete logical steps. Starting with the order of the universe, it applies principles of lawfulness to relationships between individuals in society, to relationships between people and their governments, and to relationships between nations within the world community. I will not try to summarize the encyclical, since I am certain most people here are quite familiar with it. But I will mention some of the points it brings into view along the way which represented striking departures from some commonplace American thought of the time.

One of these, as has been mentioned, is an expansive view of human rights, rights which not only involve political freedom, but also the right to employment, fair wages, and a decent standard of living including food, clothing, shelter, education, medical care, rest, and social services. The encyclical lays upon governments the duty to see that these things are provided. Government officials are not, by virtue

of office, excused from their humanity, but are required to act by the same natural moral laws that govern individual human conduct.

It salutes the efforts of women to participate in political and economic life with all the rights and duties which adhere to them by virtue of their nature as human persons.

It recognizes that nations ought no longer to be content to submit to foreign domination. Having achieved a more advanced degree of economic and social development does not entitle a nation to exert political domination over others.

The encyclical letter defends the concept of private property, but also states that individuals may not pursue their private interests in a way that is unfair and detrimental to others.

It recognizes that governmental laws and decrees which contravene the moral order and the divine will have no binding force on conscience. According to the encyclical letter, the decrees of any government which refuses to recognize human rights or acts in violation of them are wholly lacking in binding force.

The encyclical advocates a cessation of the arms race and the complete abolition of nuclear weapons. It lays upon everyone the responsibility to banish fear and the anxious expectation of war from people's thoughts. It affirms that peace cannot be based upon nations possessing equal supplies of arms, but only on mutual trust. The encyclical letter calls for an unsparing effort on the part of the world's political leaders to ensure that human affairs follow a rational and dignified course.

In paragraph 127 the text declares that it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair violations of justice. In this paragraph the text comes tantalizingly close to a Quaker perspective. Yet, the context of the paragraph makes it clear that the thought only applies to nuclear war; it does not disallow conventional war.

The text moves on to conclude that the shape and structure of political life in the modern world is unequal to the task of promoting the common good of all people, and affirms that, since the achievement of the common good presents us with challenges which are world-wide in their dimensions, they cannot be solved except

by a public authority with the power, organization and means which are co-extensive with these problems. The encyclical letter's text never mentions, at least not in the official English translation, the term "world government," but it does state that the moral order itself demands the establishment of some general form of public authority, the power and scope of which is capable of addressing human activity which itself has become global in scope.

The encyclical letter concludes with positive observations about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations, and ends with an exhortation that professed Christians serving in public life should apply Christian values in their exercise of leadership, including being aware of the good and commendable things which can be manifest even in political movements built upon false philosophies, an obvious but indirect allusion to communism.

As I indicated, this is not an attempt to summarize the text, but to highlight some ideas it contained which ran counter to much popular thought in America at that time, and which therefore heartened some people and scandalized others.

In comparing and contrasting the message of the encyclical letter with Quaker spirituality and experience, I would like to make a general observation which applies to all issues, and then make some specific observations about perspectives on war and peace.

In actual practice, Quakers rely heavily on an immediate and intuitive grasp of spiritual truth, on a mystical apprehension of God's intent for us and for our actions in the here and now. There is much less concern in Quaker thought with reconciling one's present sense of the leadings of the Holy Spirit with the thought and actions of forebears. Quakers do not believe that the Holy Spirit changes its mind from one age to the next, but they are apt to trust their own immediate experience of guidance over conclusions which might have been drawn by others in an earlier time and place and in different circumstances. Friends respect tradition, but their respect is qualified by a belief in continuing revelation, in a belief that God speaks to us today in the same way that was the case with prophets of old. The fact that slavery was practiced from ancient times, and justified throughout history on religious grounds, did not deter Friends from their conviction that a right understanding of the Holy Spirit's guidance indicated the practice to be evil.

It does not follow that Quakerism is a religion of individualism, as is sometimes thought. While we see the Christ-spirit as residing in everyone, individuals are always expected to check their leadings with the group. Thus, Friends practice a kind of corporate mysticism in which the leadings of the Holy Spirit are presumed to be sensed more reliably by the worshipping community than by an individual meditating in solitude.

Roman Catholicism is much more ancient institutionally and is vast and sprawling compared with Quakerism. I believe that what I have described is not entirely foreign to some Roman Catholic experience. Mysticism, the idea that the individual soul can directly apprehend, unite with, and express divine truth does have a place in Roman Catholic thought and experience, although it is often regarded with suspicion as well. But most Catholic practice does, I believe, place more emphasis on philosophy and on rigorously developed theology, as well as on tradition, in the process of finding and expressing religious truth. And certainly the role of the episcopate and the papacy in defining and upholding the faith commitments of the Catholic community have no analogy in Quaker practice.

Quakers are not averse to reasoned arguments, but they are apt to use reasoned arguments to justify their mystically grasped principles of truth to non-Friends than as a ladder by which to arrive at the Truth itself. In other words, Friends are likely to use reasoned arguments to try to convince others why it is possible to give practical expression to religious principles in community and international life.

The Quaker idea that there is that of God in everyone, and that therefore everyone can find Truth by attending to an Inner Light, is a concept derived from the preamble to the Gospel of John, which speaks of the Light which enlightens every person who comes into the world.

In Roman Catholic thought, carried into the *Pacem in Terris* encyclical letter, there is a natural law written in the human heart which enables all people, regardless of religion or background, to perceive truth through observation and reason. This line of thought is generally regarded as derived from Paul's *Letter to the Romans*.

So, there certainly would seem to be some affinity between these Roman Catholic and Quaker lines of thought.

But let us turn to the issue of war and peace, and to the approach of the encyclical letter and the approach of Quakers.

Although peace is announced as the topic in the first words of the encyclical letter's text, from the perspective of a Quaker reader, the topic of "peace" is dropped immediately, with the letter consisting thereafter of a lengthy meditation on the characteristics of a just society. While the text's vision of a just society and a properly organized world order is inspiring, and I doubt that any Quaker would take exception to it, the implication seems to be that the establishment of a utopian society is a prerequisite for achieving peace and for practicing peaceableness. The encyclical letter nowhere mentions the traditional just war theory which, in various forms, has been standard in Catholic and Christian thought from the fourth century to the present, yet the theory haunts the text in that there is no ethic set forth which might be an alternative to the just war theory and which would guide actions pending the utopian achievement of the just world which is visualized.

In Quaker thought, in contrast, war is considered always wrong without exception, never to be regarded as the lesser evil, a means which cannot be justified by any end, a means which invariably poisons and defeats the ends sought. As we read in the Epistle of James: "True justice is the harvest reaped by peacemakers from seeds sown in a spirit of peace." (James 3:18) Even the preparations for war and the maintenance of the capacity to wage war are seen, in Quaker thought, inevitably to incapacitate the effort to build either justice or peace. With the Sermon on the Mount as a guide, Quakers believe that self-sacrificial non-violent resistance to injustice is the only truly Christian alternative. While the encyclical, letter with its long meditation on the characteristics of a just social order, implies that the building of such a just social order is the way to get peace, in Quaker thought there is no way to peace, rather peace is the Way.

It has been common in western thought, from ancient times up until the present, to view reality as divided between an ideal world of spirituality and perfectedness, and a counterpart world of material and practical reality which is fallen and corrupted. This concept began with Plato and was given a theological overlay by Christianity. It invites the idea that truth and beauty are attractive but insubstantial, and that they are impossible of realization, while the demands of practical reality

inevitably require various violent and ugly compromises, and radical departures from ideal concepts of purity and goodness.

Quaker spirituality, as well as other minority streams of Christian mysticism, and most eastern spiritualities, reject this dualistic view of reality. They affirm a true understanding of our situation, which is that the mundane and the divine are one. What so many mistakenly see as realms separate and apart are, in truth, so interdependent that one cannot be understood, or even spoken of, without the other. The official mainstream “realism” which ignores the unity of the ethical and practical spheres has given us a world in which the seeds of future strife and conflict are being sown day after day. There is the growth of a new global economic system which few understand and which no one seems to guide or govern. There are growing disparities between rich and poor. When concentrated wealth collides with extreme poverty, there is a snow-balling erosion of human rights and major threats to peace and freedom. Masses of people are put at the mercy of a few, even though we do not call it slavery; global economic arrangements may lead to malnutrition and death, even though we do not call it murder.

Congress has allocated over 1.1 trillion dollars to the global war on terror, rather than to the alleviation of poverty. Over \$366 billion of this is allocated to the war in Afghanistan and the border areas of Pakistan, where, based on CIA estimates of the number of Al-Qaeda operating, we are spending about \$300 million per year per Al-Qaeda member to eliminate them.

From a pacifist perspective, placing one’s ultimate faith in war and violence leads inevitably to a self-transformation into the evil one is supposedly struggling against. Today, the United States imprisons people it suspects of terrorism without charge, detains them indefinitely, denies them of any knowledge of the evidence against them, and, if they get tried at all, uses procedures which conform to no established civilian or military tribunal. The President manages a so-called “kill list,” using drone airplanes to assassinate people without trial. And indeed, as is now well known, in setting up the interrogation procedures at Guantanamo Bay the United States studied closely and then adopted the torture procedures used by Chinese communists against captured Americans during the Korean War.¹

¹*The New Yorker Magazine*, March 18, 2013. “The Dark Age” by Jill Lepore.

This is happening while the five percent of the world's population living in the United States consumes 30% of the world's resources, while the people in foreign countries living on top of these resources survive only in abject poverty. To prop up this unjust system, the United States military is deployed in over 150 countries around the world. At the same time, here within the United States wealth disparities have grown to such an extent that 1% of the people own 34% of the nation's assets, while the bottom 50% own less than 3% collectively. It is increasingly difficult for ordinary Americans to get a college education, and people in Congress are seriously considering reducing the social security and medicare programs while proposing also to extend the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans.

The idea that the unfettered free market magically transforms the greed of individuals into the common good, and that through it wealth somehow trickles down from the super-rich to the benefit of everyone else, is surely one of the most enduring exercises in wishful thinking humankind has ever known. In addition, the expectation that prosperity depends upon ever increasing growth seems to propel humankind's economic life into a fatal war against the earth itself, a war which threatens irreparably to damage the very basis of human survival.

Attentiveness to the unity of the spiritual and the practical allows us to see that our propensity for war making, in addition to its unjustifiable cruelties, distracts us from the true causes of our problems and, in fact, compounds these very problems. Every ounce of energy given to war-making, every penny of our treasure, every allocation of human creativity, given over to war is taken away from a focus on the true causes of the threats which face us.

As Jesus read the signs of his times, we must read the signs of ours. Each epoch of human history occupies a unique place in the unfolding drama of the Creation and is given a special role to play. We, women and men inhabiting North Atlantic civilization at the beginning of the twenty-first century of the common era, also face such a distinct historical task, as have the ages which came before us. We are at one of the turning points of human history, when the old ways of doing things have become exhausted, having been overtaken by developments which they are inadequate to meet. It is a time in which a new ordering of human thought, feeling and affairs is necessary, not only that we may experience more satisfaction, but for

survival's sake itself. How can frantically spending more and more money to kill more and more people possible carry us forward? Instead, we have the task of carefully listening for leadings that will take us beyond the current state of collapse, that will lay the basis for the next stage of civilization.

Underlying all the complex practical dilemmas we face are quandaries which are essentially spiritual quandaries. After all else is stripped away we realize that we must find a spiritual basis for collaboratively wrought solutions to practical problems. In the world of the future it is increasingly unlikely that any nation will be able to insure its own security at the expense of others. The common good requires our taking steps toward nuclear and conventional disarmament, economic and social development and justice, active conflict resolution, and the rescue of the environment.

Being faithful to God's call and to our human companions is a task fraught with complexity and strain. We live in a time of profound confusion. Disagreement and doubt are everywhere. Our peace testimony has to do, ultimately, with how decency and humanity can be identified and defended in an uncommonly degraded age. Yet authentic and prophetic peace witness means not sadness, not resignation, not anxiety, and not desperation, but joy, confidence and hope. We find hope in the realization that Truth is never without its witnesses: there are always people who are discriminating and independent, yet communicative, and responsive, and willing to join with others in the decent management of our common human affairs. Such people listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit, which shows us what, in existing circumstances, must unfailingly be done. It is to realize that justice and peace are legitimately the goals both of the City of God and of the earthly political order, and that our life in religion and our life as citizens compliment rather than contradict each other. It is to become instruments of the Divine Creative Plan, constantly upbuilding what folly threatens to dissolve, helping the world's people to grow together as a community through the reconciling love of the One in whom all things are One.

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