

Peace and sustainable security: Peace must be possible

The unbelievably high human cost of war is one of the reasons for naming peace and sustainable security as one of the five main themes in the Maryknoll voter reflection guide for the 2008 elections. Originally published in the May/June 2003 edition of *NewsNotes*, the following reflection piece describes the devastating effects of war and the U.S.'s foreign policy focus on defense. The piece contains excerpts from the letters from former Maryknoll lay missionary Cathy Breen, who frequently stayed in Baghdad on and off throughout the war, simply to "be with" the Iraqi people. After the U.S. troops had entered Baghdad, Cathy wrote:

And so it goes. Anger, fear, relief, weariness, sadness, tears. I find tears coming that I can't stop in these last days. Today I spoke with one of the mothers here in the hotel. There are deep dark circles around her eyes. "We are so tired," she said wearily. "Twenty-five years and we are so tired. This is my country. We want no Saddam, no Bush. We are so tired."

So tired of war ... a world so tired of war...

The word of God and the gift of encounter with sacred, threatened lives around the world - make it clear that peace must be possible, there must be another way. If we cannot see it then our lens is too narrow, our vision short sighted - our hope, our claim on life diminished.

I can't express the deep sadness and desperation that afflicts all of us here. Burnt cars, bombed and burning buildings, looting and shooting. A gun can be bought for \$3.00 on the street. Hospitals looted and roads blocked. Ambulances and police cars stolen. Hospitals no longer functional. The sick and dying turned away. There are no longer any statistics to be had. No records of birth, death, health or having studied. Books burned, no school or university. Stores closed, schools closed. Lawlessness and anarchy. No electricity.

The sick and dying turned away ...

A person who works with the Islamic Relief whose offices are in the hotel related having seen five bodies dead on the side of the street today in the city. Someone from our team saw the nurses digging graves for the babies in front of the children's hospital as they can't get them to the cemetery.

Digging graves for the babies ...

The lens through which these experiences force us to look is very wide - it evokes from us a yearning for peace that goes way beyond our national security or even the absence of war and terror. It cannot be accomplished by global control. It is much, much deeper than that - shalom, salaam - an integral well being that embraces all human beings and the rest of creation, drawing us deeper and deeper into the kind of right relationships reflected in the best impulses of every major religious tradition.

Yesterday the Baghdad School of Ballet and Art was looted ... The piece of a shattered violin on the pavement greeted us as we approached the school ...

In one of the rooms where the musical instruments are stored, Hishaam, a member of the symphony orchestra, picked his way through broken rubble of instruments. "I studied here. I taught here and then directed here. Why? Why?" Overcome with emotion, he couldn't go on. As I approached the entrance where the administration and classrooms were, the figure of a skeleton used in Anatomy class with an instrument case leaning on it was strewn by the front door. Tragically appropriate. Death of a civilization and culture. Here a couple of pianos had been dragged out into the foyer ... I heard the sound of someone fingering one of the pianos in the foyer, one that though broken still played! It was Majid, one of the instructors and also symphony orchestra member. I took a broken chair from a nearby room and silently placed it near him. He sat and began to play soulful songs that expressed his own grieving. And he played and he played and he played. On and on and on.

Death of a civilization and a culture ... Will the terrible loss of human life on both sides, the destruction of irreplaceable cultural treasures, the devastation of homes and hospitals and lives, the ecological damage, the psychological and physical injuries have a lasting impact? War is always a defeat for humanity! Can any lessons emerge from the rubble of Baghdad and Basrah to help the human community avoid these scenes in the future? Perhaps we need new architects – the mourning mothers and broken musicians may help us find a place to start.

As this reflection states, "[Peace] cannot be accomplished by global control." The U.S. government response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the wave of public fear that soon accompanied them has so far been one of force and violence, destroying Iraqis' lives and making the U.S. much less secure by fueling anti-American sentiment around the world. This kind of response demonstrates the natural human desire to feel in control of the fearful situation, but the real way to peace comes from a different approach.

"End[ing] the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan," is listed in the voter reflection guide, *Loving Our Neighbor in a Shrinking World*, as one of the important policy goals that follows from an analysis of peace and sustainable security respecting Catholic social tradition's emphasis on the protection of human life. In light of the vast human (as well as ecological, cultural, and other) destruction these wars have caused, those seeking election in 2008 should redefine U.S. priorities from national security to sustainable human and community security. Through stories like these, Maryknoll missionaries, while endorsing no individual candidate, encourage voters in the 2008 U.S. elections to scrutinize candidates' policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the United States and overseas, lack the basic necessities, endure the scourge of racism, live with gender-based discrimination and violence or feel the immediate impact of climate change.

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