Peacemaking has always been a critical task for humanity since the beginning of history, we are told in the book of Genesis. The eruptions of violence people experience around the world on a daily basis dominate our global experience at this moment in history, which makes the task of peacemaking even more urgent. Acts of war, terrorism, racism, global economic violence, violation of human rights, violence to the earth, which are the consequences of multiple world systems of violence, are headline news every day all over the world. We all cry for and desire peace, but we do so from within a web of local and global systems of violence that continue to produce results contrary to our hope and desire. Humanity is experiencing at this conjuncture a significant failure of world systems that are full of contradictions and lying. The elites who speak for and benefit from these systems continue to preach them promising freedom, democracy and prosperity, while in reality poverty, domination, exploitation of the earth and militarism are on the rise (Coleman and Ryan). This situation of international political and economic bankruptcy and corruption makes the words of Jeremiah to the priests, prophets, and rulers of his time, who all turned greedy for unjust gain, quite relevant for our times:

They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace. They acted shamefully, they committed abominations; yet they were not at all ashamed, they did not know to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall . . . (NRSV, Jer 8:11-12).

If the above quote from Henri Nouwen (Nouwen, 23) is authentic and convincing about the message of our Gospel and our vocation as Christians, which I believe it is,
where then are the Christians in the world today? Where are the Christians who are witnessing to and speaking for peace? Who are they? Where is the concrete Christian alternative to world violence? What is preventing us Christians from taking our vocation of peacemaking seriously?

An important mark of our times in relation to the politics of peace in our world is what Harold Pinter, the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature laureate, calls a “tapestry of lies” that we live in and feed on. The majority of politicians, he argues, are not interested in truth but in power. “To maintain that power it is essential that people remain in ignorance, that they live in ignorance of the truth, even the truth of their own lives” (Pinter, n.p.).

On the same day Pinter delivered his Nobel speech, Pope Benedict XVI issued the 2006 World Day of Peace Message, “In Truth, Peace.” Consistent with modern Catholic teaching on peace, which maintains that “truth” is one of the main pillars of peace, along with justice, love, and freedom (Pacem in Terris), the pope’s message reiterates that humanity will not succeed in “building a truly more human world for everyone: everywhere on earth, unless all people are renewed in spirit and converted to the truth of peace” (Benedict XVI, no. 3). Making reference to the book of Genesis, the Pope notes that lying is “linked to the tragedy of sin and its perverse consequences, which have had, and continue to have, devastating effects on the lives of individuals and nations” since the beginning of history. How can we fail, Pope Benedict asks, “to be seriously concerned about lies in our own time, lies which are the framework for menacing scenarios of death in many parts of the world”? How can we hope, he adds, that the good of peace be realized when countless numbers of people are forced to endure intolerable injustices and inequalities? (Benedict XVI, nos. 4–5).

The questions “What is true?” and “What is false?” asked by Pinter and Pope Benedict must be asked by all. “Truthfulness,” argued Hannah Arendt in the context of the Vietnam War, “has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings.” However, what she found surprising, and is equally surprising to us now, is our ability to continue to live ignoring the facts of what is happening, despite the tragic implications of these facts on the lives of millions of people (Arendt, 4–5). Two significant moral issues of global relevance come up: conscience and human dignity.

Pinter makes an appeal to conscience, “a term very rarely employed these days,” he notes, and argues that a “fierce intellectual determination to define the real truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all.” Hope for the future depends on this determination and its integration in a new political vision for our world. What is at stake is the restoration of “what is so nearly lost to us—the dignity of man.”

The question of truth and peace is very concrete, practical, and is an urgent task for our time. Let us, for example, look at the situation of the war on terrorism and the invasion of Iraq. We are still baffled trying to understand the real motives that led the U.S. and some allies to fight a major war, invade and occupy the country of Iraq, undermine international organizations, and create a global atmosphere of fear and militarism. The President of the U.S. admitted recently: “It is true that much of the intelligence [about Iraq] turned out to be wrong. As president, I am responsible for the decision to go into Iraq” (Bush, December 14, 2005). In another foreign policy speech earlier this year, President Bush presented a “new” ideology for explaining the course of history, understanding and interpreting the world, which describes an
emerging evil, radical, extremist, Muslim empire with murderous ideology that must be defeated because otherwise it will take over the who1e world (Bush, October 6, 2005). When we ask the questions mentioned above, “What is true?” and “What is false?” in such ideologies, the moral crisis of truth in the world conscience becomes very evident.

Poor people around the world are struggling to unmask the big lies about the global economic free market, globalization and the war on terrorism, which continue to be preached and imposed by the power elites of their countries and the world as a gospel of prosperity that advances democracy, freedom, and peace. The clear evidence of the dramatic increase of global poverty and the reduction of democracy in many countries is totally denied. The state of self-deception and arrogance of power in which we live is not only based on lying and will not give fruits of peace, but is also dangerous (Arendt, 36–39). There is no peace in lying!

World peace could theoretically become a reality and is within the reach and capability of humanity. In terms of the resources available and the new communication capacity for sharing information and knowledge, humanity at this moment is capable as never before in history of responding to the needs of the world and to building solidarity and community. These new capabilities make peace not only an urgent Christian vocation and commitment, but also a possibility.

Moral outrage and speaking out are not enough to make the desired peace, which is built on truth, justice, love, and freedom, a reality. Peacemaking with a consciousness of solidarity with the world community (Fahey, 148–87) is much more than moral outrage and speaking the truth. Speaking truth to power is important, and is an essential part of the work of intellectuals and theologians (Said, 85–102), but what is more important, I believe, as Henri Nouwen reminds us, is the building of communities of prayer and resistance (Nouwen, 48–97). A reflection on the themes of prayer, resistance, and community, in the background of the world situation today and the crisis of truth we live in, would demand another article. The new call, however, is “for a conversion of our whole person so that all we do, say, and think becomes part of our urgent vocation to be peacemakers” (Nouwen, 23; Andraos, 32–40).

References


