Peace-Building and Truth-Telling

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The processes of building peace after a period of conflict hold rich lessons for truth-telling. This article explores some of these contributions, especially as they might apply to pastoral ministry.

Truth-telling is being challenged and the credibility of religious and political leaders is being questioned in many arenas today, and we need to seek help to establish truthfulness wherever we can. One area where insights about truth-telling are emerging can be found in the efforts at building sustainable peace in societies, especially after a time of conflict.

In this article, I would like to explore some of what is being discovered about arriving at the truth and speaking the truth in the field of peace-building, and, perhaps more importantly, what implications it might have for the exercise of pastoral ministry. In order to do this, I will first sketch a little of the history of this work, then look at some of the things that have been learned, and suggest where it might be helpful in pastoral ministry.

History

Since 1996, I have served as theological consultant to the Peace-Building and Reconciliation Working Group of Caritas Internationalis. Caritas Internationalis (CI) is the umbrella organization for 162 relief and development agencies in the

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Roman Catholic Church. Based in the Vatican, its purpose is to coordinate interagency efforts and to provide services requested by the member agencies. In 1995, CI’s general assembly mandated that work be undertaken to develop programs of reconciliation that could be used by the member agencies, as well as provide training programs for its staff. That mandate has been extended twice—in 1999 and in 2003. The working group has produced a handbook to help member agencies diagnose situations and design responses to them (Caritas Internationalis 1999) and a training manual for workers (Caritas Internationalis 2002). The idea was not only to bring to bear the best of what was being learned about peace-building, but also to ground CI’s approach in Catholic social teaching, as well as provide other spiritual resources to sustain workers in this difficult work.

Why did the mandate to do this work come from a federation of relief and development agencies to do work usually associated with conflict resolution? A major reason was that, during the 1990s, there was a dramatic increase of emergencies that these agencies were called upon to address. The increase was not in natural disasters, such as earthquakes and droughts, but events of human construction. The end of the bipolar political arrangement of communist and capitalist orders uncapped a number of local conflicts that had been held in check up to that time. This allowed long-simmering disputes to flare into full-fledged warfare. The wars were more typically fought within nations rather than between them. Agencies quickly saw that they could not tend to the human needs without dealing with the conflicts that had occurred or were still occurring. Often, for example, combatants from both sides would end up in the same refugee camp. Moreover, when natural disasters occurred, they would sometimes happen in a place where there already was conflict, thereby complicating the emergency situation even more. Such was the case in the Aceh region of Indonesia that was at the epicenter of the 2004 tsunami. A separatist group had been battling the Indonesian government for years, and the government was reluctant to let in any aid. A similar situation ensued after the earthquake in Kashmir in 2005.

Alongside live conflicts flaring up, agencies came to realize that an internal conflict could also quickly undo years of development work. This was the experience of a number of CI agencies in Rwanda in the wake of the genocide there in 1994.

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Besides providing theological advice to the CI working group in preparing documents and training programs, the connection with CI has taken me to events on all six continents to help address how Christian faith may help in responding to the need to build peace. These are usually countries where religion is valued highly, and the voice of faith will be heard more than political voices. Even in countries where there has been no armed conflict, CI agencies are realizing the importance of having these attitudes and skills as part of the repertoire of their organizations. Both Catholic Charities USA and the U.S. division of Catholic Relief Services (both CI member agencies) now are developing peace-building programs in the United States.

Lessons Learned about Truth-Telling

The first casualty of war is the truth.” This time-worn adage has been proven over and over again. Truth can suffer even before hostilities begin: the provocation to go to war sometimes is based on an untruth (think of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003). Once the fighting has begun, the truth may be covered up or even denied lest it give comfort to the enemy or discourage those involved in combat.

We know that truth gets distorted in conflict. Are we learning anything about truth-telling from our efforts to undo such distortions? Peace-building involves principally two activities: undoing the mistruths about the past and laying a truthful foundation for a renewed society. I will look at each of these activities in turn. To begin these reflections on truth-telling, I examine two moments involving conflict situations: rumor control and documenting wrongdoing as it occurs.

Rumor Control in Preconflict Situations

A great deal has been written about conflict prevention, that is, stopping the coming together of volatile elements that ignite into open conflict. One of the most significant and dangerous of those elements is inciting a group to fear or hate the other group, so that there is a willingness to attack them. A key means for doing this is spreading rumors about what the other group is planning to do or has already done. It also sometimes involves identifying the other group as the source of criminal acts that have been committed. In a number of instances of violence between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia in recent years, the death of a child would be imputed to the other group as a means to incite violence. Likewise, rumors were put out that conspiracies were underway to attack. In these instances, rumors do not have to be proven. If they conform to our perceptions of the other group as hostile and menacing, they need no verification. President George W. Bush appears to have followed such a path in spreading rumors. After first identifying Iraq as part of an “axis of evil,” he then claimed that Saddam was stockpiling chemical weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. This set the stage for
the preemptive invasion of that country in 2003, even though the weapons have never been found.

Religious leaders can play a key role in staunching rumors. They can use their moral authority to discredit the rumors and to stop the use of religious legitimation to engage in violence. An instance from Afghanistan in the early 1990s can illustrate this. As two rival Muslim groups prepared to begin hostilities with each other over who was truly following Islam, the imam in the village went through the streets shouting: “No one will attend the funerals of those who die in this conflict!” The implication was that death (martyrdom) in this conflict would not assure immediate entrance into Paradise. As a result, the battle never took place (Bock and McCauley, 23f.).

Proclaiming the truth against what people are inclined to believe and naming untruths when they are spoken are important means of stopping violence. It also underscores the importance of truthfulness for maintaining a just society.

**Documenting Truth in Conflict Situations**

Very little, if any, peace-building can be done in the midst of conflict itself. Those who care about building peace generally must focus on protecting and rescuing the vulnerable who are caught in the crossfires of combat. But there is one thing that religious leaders can do about truth during the conflict: they can document the wrongdoing. Events can happen very quickly, and in the trauma that ensues it may be difficult to remember just who did what, when, where, and how. To the extent such documentation can be done, it will be of immense help after the conflict has ended. Through most of the oppressive years of the regime of General Augusto Pinochet in Chile (1973–1988) the Roman Catholic Church maintained in the capital city of Santiago what it called the Vicariate of Solidarity, whose purpose was to document wrongdoing perpetrated by the government, especially the use of torture. This documentation helped the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that met in the 1990s and in subsequent hearings. Such on-the-scene documentation is especially important if hearings trying to establish the truth do not happen until years after the wrongdoings were committed.

**Establishing the Truth after Conflict: Truth Commissions**

More often, however, establishing the truth is something that happens after open conflict has ended. Efforts to establish just what did happen during the conflict and what motivated the parties involved to act as they did becomes important for a number of reasons.

First of all, before justice can be done both to wrongdoers and victims, there must be a clear record of just what happened. If the justice to be done is going to
be more than vigilante justice or simple revenge, there must be a regular and public procedure by which the facts of the past are ascertained. Engaging in such acts of seeking the truth helps establish not only justice, but also the foundations of a new and more just society.

Truth commissions, a procedure to discover what happened in the past, have come to public awareness especially since the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. There have been more than forty such commissions established since 1970 (Bronkhorst; Hayner). The original model was the Nuremberg trials after the Second World War, where leaders of the Nazi regime in Germany were prosecuted in a military court. Today truth commissions are more likely to be civilian, nonjudicial bodies established either by the new governments (as was the case in South Africa) or by an outside, international body (as is the case currently in Cambodia). They typically prepare reports that are then handed over to the new government to serve as a documentary basis for judicial or executive action.

One of the things that has been learned from the work of truth commissions is that they must be carefully planned—both with an eye as to what can be discovered and also for what ends the information may be used. Typically, their purposes include exonerating those who were criminalized by the old regime or during a conflict and fostering healing of memories of the traumas experienced. It has also become clear that digging into the past may not bring about healing but instead threaten to ignite the conflict once again. This is especially the case when the end of a conflict takes the form of a cease-fire rather than an outright victory for one side over the other. For such reasons, truth commissions have not been established in places such as Northern Ireland and Mozambique: to dig into the past would only provoke new armed conflict in those settings.

Second, establishing the truth may be important for rebuilding the reputations of those victims who were criminalized by the conflict. People resisting an oppressive regime are deemed enemies of the state, when often, in fact, they are speaking out for truth and for justice. Establishing publicly their innocence is part of their rehabilitation. This is true for the dead as well as for the living.

Third, how the search for truth is conducted can set out a pattern for the new society. Where once lies could hide behind a veil of secrecy, now there is a transparency where all can judge the facts for themselves. Establishing conditions that
allow for those who have been oppressed to speak openly and relate their painful experiences can exhibit the care with which the new government wants to deal with the most vulnerable of its population. Here, seeking for the truth reaches beyond getting the story straight; it becomes an exercise in cultivating truthfulness as a hallmark of the new government.

**Types of Truth**

Another of the things learned from truth-telling as a means of peace-building is that there are different kinds of truth. Or perhaps better said, our relation to the truth has multiple dimensions. In the process of truth-telling as it has been practiced in truth commissions, at least three such perspectives emerge on what constitutes the truth. The first is called *factual* or *forensic* truth. This is an account of what happened that corresponds to the events themselves. This is the most common understanding of what truth is and an indisputable requirement for what one would consider to be the truth.

The second is *dialogical* or *personal* truth. This kind of truth probes behind the events to seek the impact of the truth on personal relations. Survivors of crime or their relatives will want to know what motivated the wrongdoers to act as they did. The sundering of relationships that violence brings about cries out for a reestablishing of human bonds. We are interdependent beings and are only whole when we are in relationships. Behind the “what happened” question always lurks a “why did it happen” question as well. Motivation, purpose, and agency all reconnect us to the world around us. Truth is more than a bundle of facts. It is a relationship as well.

The third kind of truth is *existential* truth. This is the dimension of the truth that illumines our identity and helps reestablish our sense of self and community. Such truth resonates with what we know about ourselves and our community and helps us rebuild our relations with ourselves, the community, the larger world, and with God. By providing the deepest meaning or significance of events, it helps us understand our place in the midst of all things and with God. Discovering existential truth is a much slower process than establishing factual or personal truth.
It may take a generation or more. Think, for example, of attempts to discover the existential truth about the Holocaust during the Second World War. We still have only a tenuous and uncertain grasp on its significance.

From this we can see that seeking the truth and telling the truth is a complex enterprise. Ascertaining the facts is but the beginning of the quest. The probing that heals broken relationships and reorients ourselves to others and to God is a process that takes a much longer period of time and collective effort.

**Pastoral Lessons from Peace-Building**

Are there things that can be learned from the efforts at seeking the truth in peace-building that can help us in ministry? This work is still in its early stages, yet a number of things can already be discerned. Let me explore just a few of them.

**Uncovering the Truth**

Certainly the most significant contribution of peace-building to truth-telling has been the truth commissions. It has already been noted that they can be constituted in various ways and serve different purposes, from exonerating those falsely accused to establishing an environment for a new government. There is no blanket formula as to how they should be set up and what ends they will achieve. There are also instances, as we have seen, where they may do more harm than good. Yet they have caught the public imagination and could be utilized for purposes of healing.

Some have suggested that there should be a truth commission in the wake of the clerical sex abuse disclosures that have been taking place since 2002. Those proposing such a possibility feel that it would help to create greater transparency in dioceses in the future. Others who are sympathetic to such an idea warn, however, that the litigious nature of U.S. culture would prohibit any disclosures. Such new information might lead to another round of lawsuits. And still others fear that victims speaking in such instances about their traumatic experiences in the past might risk making them victims once again.

Could such a use of truth commissions have a positive effect on the life of the church? A few thoughts come to mind that might help frame a response to this question. Just what would be achieved needs to be looked at carefully. A study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) in the spring of 2006 indicated that the effects of the abuse crisis has not had a significant impact on U.S. Catholic Church attendance or on giving to the church (CARA 2006). The pollsters interpreted this as saying that Catholics acknowledge the seriousness of the wrongdoing but see the church as more than the leaders who have been wrongdoers. If this is the case, then a truth commission would not be needed to reestablish
the credibility of the church. In other words, we do not need such a commission to establish the factual truth about what happened.

More useful perhaps would be what such a commission could do to promote personal and existential truth. After the litigation has passed, such testimony could help to restore and to heal relationships that have been broken. A framework for doing this might have two goals.

The first would be as part of a process of apology to victims and to their families. There have been many attempts at apology by bishops—even at the level of the bishops’ conference—after the revelations were made. But hasty apologies are rarely satisfying to victims. They have the ring of inauthenticity and appear to be an escape from responsibility rather than an embracing of it. Apologies that are constructed with the victims help establish the relationships necessary for healing. Victims are likely to feel they have been heard. In the process they will have had the chance to gauge the genuine remorse of the wrongdoer. Wrongdoers have the opportunity to hear just what damage their deeds have done, and to establish a new relationship with those whom they have harmed. A diocesan or parish truth commission could serve the ends of providing the basis for a genuine apology that might make new relationships possible in the future.

Second, a truth commission could contribute to creating a new environment of transparency and truthfulness. Examining the stories to discover where things were allowed to go wrong can point to how things might be done differently in the future. In a way, the child protection programs now being implemented contribute to this already. But the experience of engaging in truth-telling can also set the tone for how things are done in the future. It can provide a larger environment in which truth-telling can lead to healing and reconciliation.

A second thing that truth-telling in peace-building has taught us is that factual truth is only the beginning of the process. Creating a space for cultivating personal and existential truth is a necessary consequence of seeking the truth. Here ministers can turn to the deeper dimensions of the biblical understanding of truth. What has been called factual truth here derives its sources from the Greek tradition. What becomes especially helpful here is the older Hebrew understanding of truth. Truth there resides first and foremost in God—not in the sense that God has the truth, but that God is the truth. The Hebrew word ‘emet connotes trustworthiness, reliability, and steadfastness. The Gospel of John picks up this understanding in

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Truth . . . resides first and foremost in God—not in the sense that God has the truth, but that God is the truth.
a special way. Jesus proclaims himself to be “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). At the Last Supper he prays that the disciples be consecrated in the truth (John 17:17). It is dwelling in truth that makes us whole, authentic, and at peace.

For us humans, truth is something toward which we struggle. We find ourselves falling short of it time and again. To come to truth we must engage in practices that will get us closer to our goal. We must be ready to acknowledge our failures, both in not reaching the truth and also in deliberately turning away from it. Acknowledging our sinfulness is part of finding our way to God, who is truth.

The twists and turns of violent conflict and of oppression have taught us how easy it can be to subvert the truth and how difficult it is to regain it. Violence feeds on a culture of lies and can only be stopped by the presence of the truth. For truth to be present we must not only speak it but practice it as well. Our ministry can learn much from recent efforts in peace-building to find truth. It can draw upon the resources of the biblical tradition to nourish that quest.

References


