

# *Becoming the Peace We Pray for*

When we completed our previous Bulletin in the spring, we had no idea what terror and suffering would intervene in the ensuing months.

On a Tuesday morning in early September, within a matter of hours, much of the landscape of ordinary life crumbled before the nation's eyes. The attack and collapse of the Twin Towers, burning people leaping to their deaths, thousands lost under the fire, ash, and rubble—the repeated images horrified and sickened us.

The spread of biological agents designed to kill has heightened the vulnerability we already were coping with.

Destruction, death, fear, and now war have filled our waking hours -- our conversation, prayers, and thoughts -- and, at night, our dreams. We sense that our lives have been changed irreversibly by the calamitous events of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath; and we wonder, How? What will this mean for our future, and that of the world?

Nothing justifies the murder of thousands of innocent people. Precisely at this time, when we grope for direction, we need to remember that our responses to this crisis, personally and as a nation, are *not* predetermined.

Our present suffering and anxiety can become an opportunity. Our English word "crisis" comes from the Greek word *krisis*, which means "opportunity." To recognize in the signs of these times an opportunity for a new, humane, and moral response to evil requires the cultivation of *vision*.

Yet the rush to aerial bombardment and other means of warfare tragically has revealed a *lack* of moral vision and creativity. Counter-violence will never stop terrorism; it never has. Has the Twentieth Century taught us nothing?

Thomas Merton, in his important essay "Blessed Are the Meek: The Roots of Christian Nonviolence," observed that "where the powerful believe that only power is efficacious, the nonviolent resister is persuaded by the superior efficacy of love, peaceful negotiation, and, above all, of truth. For power can guarantee the interests of *some*, but it can never foster the good of all. Power always protects the good of some at the expense of all the others. Any claim to build the security of *all* on force is a manifest imposture." <sup>1</sup>

In order for these times to become an opportunity, we will have to embrace a difficult, soul-searching work, and not shrink back from asking fundamental questions.

Surrounded by so much violence and counter-violence, it is hard to even imagine a world without terrorism or war. But, without a vision of such a world, we can never begin to address the many-layered causes fueling despair.

Nothing ever justifies the murder of the innocent. There are, however, many open wounds contributing to the hopelessness that leads some to fanatically commit horrific acts -- the growing disparity between rich and poor; illiteracy; abuse of human rights; the proliferation of weapons;

exploitation by wealthier nations; the 10 years of sanctions against Iraq, claiming a million Iraqi lives; disregard for the legitimate rights and aspirations of the Palestinian people; the illusion that violence "works."

Without vision, we will never be able to ask ourselves, what is this "way of life" we are defending, when it comes at the cost of the impoverishment and despair of millions of people?

Lacking a vision of the goal, we aren't able to engage in the constructive means consistent with, and leading to, that end.

Craig Scott Amundson, 28 years old and the father of two children, was one of those killed in the attack on the Pentagon. His widow, Amber, wrote the following in a column in the Chicago Tribune on September 25:

"My family and I take no comfort in words of rage. If you choose to respond to this incomprehensible brutality by perpetuating violence against other innocent human beings, you may not do so in the name of justice for my husband. Your words and imminent acts of revenge only amplify our family's suffering, deny us the dignity of remembering our loved one in a way that would have made him proud, and mock his vision of America as a peacemaker in the world."<sup>2</sup>

Looking to make sense of our lives in this world, we hunger for the moral nobility that Amber Amundson embodies from the depth of her suffering.

Craig Amundson drove to his work in a car bearing the bumper sticker, "Visualize World Peace."

Visualize world peace: For Christians, our tradition of prayer, at its best, has been a communal "imagining" of a different world order, one that looks more like what Jesus called "the Reign of God." When we pray, and particularly when we celebrate the Eucharist, we enact God's world order (which is meant to be our world), where peace and justice reign, where food is shared, where the unlimited mercy of God is available to everyone who seeks. We practice a world of peace and compassion.

Having been enabled by God's Spirit to enact the vision of God's Reign, having tasted something of its possibility in the midst of this broken world, we receive the vocation to become the very thing we pray for.

This is also the special gift that the monastic tradition offers us today. When we read Benedict's Rule, we nowhere find a separate treatise on prayer.<sup>3</sup> For him, prayer and the choices of daily living were interwoven -- seeking the presence of God in every situation, and bringing the values of the Reign of God to every situation.

Far from being removed from the challenges of life in the world, Benedict saw the monastery as a community of persons who daily imagine God's new world, and who work at practicing that vision "out in the open," through a commitment to nonviolence, service, reconciliation, and just relationships. This is really the fundamental commitment of every Christian, a commitment meant to critique and give direction to all our other "belongings," including the nation.

In communion with all people of faith and good will, the followers of Jesus have a deeply needed gift to bring to the present crisis, in order that it can indeed become an opportunity. But, as Benedict reminds us, we must be profoundly serious about our basic Gospel commitments, and not be afraid to live them "out in the open."

We hold a treasure in our hands, bequeathed to us by the historical and risen Jesus, through his radically nonviolent life and his fidelity unto death.

As Daniel Berrigan reminds us, "The role of the church is to be able to read the gospel, to be literate in the gospel, and to be able to explore it out in the world. Christ says we are not allowed to kill other people. Which gives us a start for understanding our response to war, to any system that results in murder." <sup>4</sup>

By rejecting the claim that Jesus' life and example are irrelevant to the present grave circumstances, and by embracing his life as the pattern for ours, we can help reorient this one human family toward the kind of world that we—and God—desperately long for.

Resources to Nourish a Commitment to Nonviolence

*The Rule of Benedict*. Chapter 4: The Tools for Good Works.

*Peace is the Way: Writings on Nonviolence from the Fellowship of Reconciliation*. Edited by Walter Wink. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 2000.

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Jack Nelson Pallmeyer. *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International. 2001.

*Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History*. Edited by Stoughton Lynd and Alice Lynd. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 1995.

Eileen Eagan. *Peace Be With You: Justified Warfare or The Way of Nonviolence*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 1999.

John Dear. *Living Peace: A Spirituality of Contemplation and Action*. New York: Doubleday. 2001.

Thomas Merton. *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*. Edited with and Introduction by William Shannon. New York: Crossroad. 1995.

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Dorothee Soelle. *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*. Minneapolis: Fortress. 2001.

1. Thomas Merton, "Blessed Are the Meek: The Roots of Christian Nonviolence," in *Peace Is the Way: Writings on Nonviolence from the Fellowship of Reconciliation*, ed. Walter Wink (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books) 44. [return](#)
2. Quoted in Matthew Rothschild, "Not in Our Name," *The Progressive*, November 2001, page 33. [return](#)
3. Michael Casey, OCSO, *The Undivided Heart: The Western Monastic Approach to Contemplation* (Petersham, MA: Saint Bede's Publications, 1994) 18-21. [return](#)
4. Daniel Berrigan, "Connecting the Altar to the Pentagon," in *Peace Is the Way: Writings on Nonviolence from the Fellowship of Reconciliation*, ed. Walter Wink (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books) 95. [return](#)

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