

SATURDAY 24 JUNE 2017 10 A.M. TO 2 P.M. A Scripture Retreat with Brian Purfield. Register at livingfaith@rcdow.org.uk or call the automated service on 020 7931 6078 and leave contact details. Venue: Vaughan House, 46 Francis Street, London SW1P 1QN. Suggested donation £14. Please bring a packed lunch

Keep your eyes on the prize of peace

Christ's non-violent message runs through the Gospels and the liturgy of the Mass. To incorporate this in our own lives and the life of our community demands courage, creativity and resourcefulness

ANNE DODD AND PAT GAFFNEY

THE WORD “peace” runs like a thread through the liturgy of the Mass. We hear, “Grace to you and peace from God” and “The peace of the Lord be always with you”. We are told to “offer each other the sign of peace” and we say “peace be with you” to those sitting near us; and, at the end of Mass, we are told to go in peace, glorifying the Lord by our lives.

Each week when we attend Mass, we are reminded of the intimate connection of peace and reconciliation with God and with each other – the wholeness that the Old Testament word “Shalom” expresses. And yet, parishes seem to find little time or opportunity to explore the centrality of peace-making within our Catholic tradition, to dig deeper into this word, “peace”. The Bishops of England and Wales have designated the second Sunday in Ordinary Time (which was 15 January this year) as “Peace Sunday”. For 50 years, each Pope has published a World Day of Peace message on the many aspects of peace-making, including interfaith cooperation, the link between poverty and war and the role of education for peace. The theme for this year is “Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace”.

Pax Christi produces a range of prayer, reflection and action resources to help parishes and communities celebrate the World Peace Day message. This year, the worksheets invite us to explore Gospel non-violence, including the courageous non-violence of Jesus, how to promote non-violence in the parish and the “two hands” of non-violence – non-cooperation with violence on the one hand but remaining open to the humanity of the violator on the other. The materials offer stories of non-violence in action. The theme is to be studied and expanded upon for the whole year.

Every parish receives these resources; and, as with other resources on Christian peace-making, their purpose is to encourage communities to reflect on ways of following more closely in Christ's footsteps. They include homily notes, prayers, stories of peace-making and activities for adults and children. Parishes show great creativity in how they respond.

The young people in one parish used movement and fabric to create the idea of peace flowing like a river during the offertory procession. In another parish, the local primary school cooperated with the parish and the children researched the lives of well-known peacemakers and wrote their own prayers for

To do

CELEBRATE the World Day of Peace message in your parish.

CULTIVATE a Peace Garden – literally “grow peace” choosing plants associated with peace-making or healing qualities, and include messages and words of peace.

RECOMMIT to the centrality of Gospel non-violence with the support of the Pax Christi organisation.

peace which were made into an exhibition.

This year the Pax Christi resources invited the whole parish community to reflect on what it means to live out Gospel non-violence – through education, sacramental preparation, the scripture study of the non-violent Jesus and the promotion of skills. This was to affirm peace-making is an integral part of our life, where life experiences and spiritual values can come together. Such work needs to be encouraged, nourished and resourced.

Lent, with its focus on change of heart and reconciliation, provides another connection with peacemaking. Pax Christi published a Stations of the Cross weaving together scripture and prayer with moving reflections from First World War conscientious objectors who were treated brutally. In this way a traditional devotion was illuminated by these distinct experiences of sacrifice and non-violence. Other Lenten resources have been produced by the Catholic development charity Cafod and the National Justice and Peace Network.

Our parishes can be places where the tragedies and traumas of violence in our world are faced and understood. In the 2017 World Day of Peace messages Pope Francis reminds us that “We are all artisans for peace”. Whether it is addressing the wars in Syria or Iraq, remembering the victims of nuclear war and nuclear testing, upholding the peoples of Palestine and Israel or highlighting the imbalance between huge military budgets and unmet needs, Pax Christi has supported parishes in organising meetings, creating exhibitions or holding vigils.

When days of prayer and fasting have been called for Syria, many churches opened their doors to the whole community, often drawing on interfaith prayers as a way of acknowledging local unity and cooperation. At Christmas

others have taken up Pax Christi's Messages to Bethlehem scheme, creating exhibitions to remind people that the Holy Land is a living land and collecting messages of hope and encouragement to send to communities in Bethlehem.

In an era of “come and go” celebrities we have a crowd of witnesses within our Catholic community whose lives tell stories of steadfastness, courage and non-violence. Yet we are not always good at celebrating and learning from such peacemakers in our midst. Today the life of Blessed Oscar Romero is celebrated in cathedrals and churches around his martyrdom anniversary in March, due to the work of the Romero Trust. Blessed Franz Jägerstätter and the newly beatified Josef Mayr-Nusser are examples of Catholic conscientious objectors of the Second World War. Both were sentenced to death as they lived out their faith with non-violence at its heart. These acts of witness teach the value of forming conscience, discernment and supporting one another in difficult decisions.

Closer to home there is the witness of the Mizen family and the family of Jo Cox who show us how to resist the pull of retribution and hatred. Their stories could help deepen our understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Pax Christi gathers such stories, and would welcome more examples, in order to create school and parish resources on peace-making and active non-violence.

Last April, at a gathering in Rome called by Pax Christi and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Pope Francis issued a challenge to the Church. He said, “In order to see solutions to the unique and terrible ‘world war in instalments’ ... humanity needs to refurbish all the available tools to help men and women to fulfil their aspirations for justice and peace.” That gathering produced an innovative appeal to the Catholic Church to recommit to the centrality of Gospel non-violence. Our parishes, together with the support of movements such as Pax Christi, can be places where this happens, where people are nourished to deepen their faith life, with non-violence at the heart, as Jesus taught us.

Anne Dodd is former chairwoman of Pax Christi and **Pat Gaffney** is Pax Christi general secretary. See www.paxchristi.org.uk and <http://paxchristi.org.uk/news-and-events/peace-sunday/> for more information.