

Justpeace

PAX CHRISTI

International Catholic Movement for Peace

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FOOTSTEPS FOR PEACE

Eighty years ago, under the hot summer sun of 1946, a great peace pilgrimage converged on Vézelay in France, as war-weary people turned to the Cross in their longing for pardon, reconciliation, and peace for the world.

It was this anniversary that inspired the theme for our current *Justpeace*, highlighting some holy places of pilgrimage and peace. Many followers of Pax Christi are used to purposeful walking, whether in protest, marching to Parliament, to a nuclear base, an arms factory... or as a reflective journey to some place which nourishes the spirituality and culture of peace. The destination may epitomise the brutal violence of war - the fields of Flanders, Hiroshima, Oradour-sur-Glane for example - but now symbolises forgiveness and a sombre dedication to peace. Pax Christi has also traced the footsteps of our peace heroes in well-known places like Assisi, or hidden ones, such as St Radegund, birthplace of Franz Jägerstätter. In a secular version of pilgrimage, members have also played a part in creating 'Peace Trails' around our own cities to make visible the history of peacemaking.

With this *Justpeace* theme already chosen, we heard about the death of John Geary, the person who brought Pax Christi to this country. He came across the movement through the 'routes', the



Some Pax Christi members approaching Vézelay in 2016. The monastery was a traditional departure point for pilgrims to Compostela.

international walks which brought hundreds of young people together each summer. So it could be said that our branch of Pax Christi was actually born on the road and footpath, and moves forward with hope, companionship, and discussion to articulate the vision, the destination, and the promise of peace just over the horizon.

CRUSADE FOR RECONCILIATION

'Cross of Christ, give us peace' became the constant refrain of the British pilgrims who walked across France in 1946. The initiative for this great pilgrimage had come from the Benedictine monks of Vézelay to commemorate the 800th anniversary of the second crusade preached by St Bernard of Clairvaux to thousands of armed knights gathered there in March 1146.

If the word 'Crusade' had evoked ruthless bloodshed, this peace crusade, the Benedictines proposed, would respond to Pope Pius XII's appeal for Catholics who would forge 'a new world in which all nations, healed from the wounds inflicted by violence... would advance in concord along the path of goodness'. Fourteen crosses representing the Stations of the Cross would be brought to Vézelay from the extremities of France and abroad in a fervent prayer for reconciliation.

Marthe Dortel-Claudot, who, with Bishop Théas, had founded Pax Christi just the year before, was quick to pledge its support. Their newsletter for Easter 1946 called on members to pray with and join the pilgrimage if they could. She also wrote to Cardinal Griffin of Westminster, asking whether one of the crosses might be brought from England.

It was Gerald Vann OP who picked up the invitation. He had established in 1937 the 'Union of Prayer for Peace' (much more acceptable to the bishops than PAX) and his 1939 book *Morality and War* had helped many Catholic conscientious objectors. In 1946 hundreds replied to his appeal in the Catholic press for men willing to walk 300 miles carrying a heavy cross — and donations poured in too. Thirty volunteers were selected, aged between 22 and 65, from all parts of the UK, and from all trades and professions. Many had been recently demobbed from the armed forces. An ex-miner ex-publican from Blackburn walked in his wooden clogs. Two young Dominicans, Columba Ryan and Simon Blake, were part of the group.

They all met on 29 June at St Dominic's Priory in London where they were commissioned, and the solid oak cross, six foot high and weighing 90 lbs, was blessed. After a 5am Mass the next morning the pilgrims set off. A triumphant reception greeted them in Dieppe, with religious and civic dignitaries, flags flying and bells ringing, as thousands of people lined the route: small girls in white, Young Christian Workers, scouts and guides forming a guard of honour.

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Bowled over by the fervour of French Catholics as they venerated the cross, it dawned on the pilgrims that they were embarking on something very significant.

In some regions, more secular or Communist, no one came out to greet them, but for much of the journey they were accompanied by local people. Flowers were brought to wreath the cross or carpet the road. In one place a parish priest came bare-foot; in another two girls helped to carry the cross; villagers shared their rations; some knelt in the road as the cross passed by. 'It is a pilgrimage of perpetual adoration,' wrote the group's diarist, with the rosary being said or sung the entire way, and rousing French hymns alternating with their English and Latin repertoire.

The scars of war were everywhere: buildings in Rouen with huge jagged rents from Allied bombing, ruined churches, prayers by the roadside grave of a Resistance



*The German Cross of 1946
made by Prisoners of War*

member and by the wooden crosses over two buried British soldiers.

It was a truly penitential journey. The diarist recorded that taking one's ten-minute turn at carrying the cross was 'an ordeal for the toughest of us'. The edges of the cross cut their clothes and bruised their shoulders. On the longest day they walked 36 km. By the end 'the heat, the burden of the cross, sore and aching feet and downright illness - all have taken their toll'.

After eighteen days, the British pilgrims looked down on Vézelay from the hill assigned for their final night's vigil. As some knelt around the cross, others gathered wood for a bonfire beacon. When the abbey clock struck ten a monk sent up a flare, and rockets responded from the neighbouring hills. 'The pilgrim groups had answered: "All present".'

On Saturday 20 July all the crosses were brought in a silent torchlit procession to the Basilica. Five came from Belgium, Luxembourg, Austria, Switzerland and England; the rest from different parts of France. But 'a fifteenth cross was raised that evening with the shout of "Germany"'. It was a rough-hewn, heavy cross, made by German prisoners of war working in Vézelay. Grouped behind it were the soldier prisoners in field-grey'. To this day the crosses stand around the basilica walls as a reminder of that historic pilgrimage of faith and hope in the peace that Christ promised.

Valerie Flessati

PEACE-SEEKING AND THE CELTIC SAINTS

Brought up in the North East I knew the 'Holy Island of Lindisfarne' both as a childhood playground, and as a place of pilgrimage in the footsteps of Aidan and Cuthbert.

Lindisfarne was a major legacy of the Iona monastic community of the seventh century, inheriting its mission of peace. Iona's founder, Columba, may have departed Ireland in self-exile to expiate a conflict. In CE563 Columba's monastery was established on Iona, West of Mull. There the monks fished, farmed, illuminated manuscripts - perhaps even the Book of Kells - and preached Christianity in the quarrelsome kingdoms of Northern Britain.

Oswald, future ruler of Northumbria, sheltered there in one such conflict. He would fight for his kingdom, establishing himself at Bamburgh, opposite Lindisfarne. To establish peace, he summoned Aidan from Iona to convert his people. Thus began the Golden Age of Northumbria, producing the Lindisfarne Gospels, devotion to St Cuthbert and the writings of Bede, only ending with the Viking invasion of CE793. Lindisfarne pilgrimages continue to this day, witnessing to the Lindisfarne Anglo-Saxon peace legacy.

Iona's major Viking raid occurred in CE806, killing 68 monks, destroying the foundation, a later medieval abbey being ruined at the Reformation. Only in the 1930s, through George Macleod, did Iona begin to grow to its current international pilgrimage status.

The visionary George Macleod had fought in the First World War, receiving the Military Cross and Croix de Guerre, though later he became a pacifist. A Glasgow minister during the Depression, he saw mass unemployment, and with schemes to improve living conditions, he attempted to make religion more relevant to poor people, seeking to fuse work and faith. He resigned from his church, heading Northwards to Iona, taking with him 12 local men,



*Iona community volunteers
taking a break*

including several craftsmen and ministers of religion, to rebuild the ancient abbey.

His aims were, first, that they should all live communally. Secondly, they would deepen their Christian faith, and thirdly they might discern the church's role in an industrial age. Iona again became a place of pilgrimage, with a new focus on Macleod's vision of community. It would demand a dedicated

prayer life, accountability of time and money, and crucially, a commitment to disarmament, racial and international justice.

My own recent Iona pilgrimage was influenced by these ideals, though a beautiful island away from pollution and noise certainly attracted me! The Iona volunteers (I became one) live together with guests, and prioritise reconciliation: of rich and poor, men and women, ethnic backgrounds. We held ecumenical services, and reflected particularly on our response to climate change, which is a major concern of the Community.

My greatest takeaway from my three-month pilgrimage remains a deep joy in the ecumenical services we were expected to lead, whether men, women, young, or old. I have never experienced such inclusive Christian community practice before or since. This alone was worth the pilgrimage.

Barbara Kentish

Eager to bring the Vézelay experience to England, in 1947 25 men carried a cross to Walsingham. Then, in July 1948, veteran pilgrims organised 14 groups, each walking about 200 miles, to Walsingham. The first Student Cross pilgrimage was held in Holy Week 1948 and continues annually to this day.

THE PEACE TO BE WON AND FOUND



Slowly, the long line of footsore pilgrims shuffles forward into the Slipper chapel. We sit or kneel to pray in silence before the Virgin's statue and the empty tabernacle that marks this day as Good Friday.

Outside, our wooden cross joins the others that have been shouldered and carried the many miles to Walsingham. I thank God that my 'leg', the Midland Leg of Pilgrim Cross (or Student Cross as it was previously known) has made it here safely for another year. Tomorrow night, we shall sing our way through the village from the Anglican shrine to the Vigil in the Catholic parish church, holding aloft our candles (if they've not blown out in the wind) in joyous celebration of the Lord's resurrection. Two contrasting moments, each telling in a different way of the peace to be won and found on this annual pilgrimage.

There's a peace to be 'won', because the success of the pilgrimage has to be worked for. It's a joint-effort. There's the initial work of the lay leadership team before the week begins, contacting the parishes which will host us along the way, and the 'recce' of our route. The liturgy secretary and chaplains must identify a theme and put together a 'Faith Pack' for the week with liturgies and material for 'group stations' (discussions on the theme). On the week itself, there's the daily business of loading and unloading

luggage, making sandwiches, and acting as 'Road Leader', or as Back or Front 'Traffic', who alert the group to passing cars and lorries. Each day there's the opportunity for several people to offer an individual 'station' by the roadside or in a church (a brief reflection on the theme or on the pilgrimage more widely). Then, there's the real work! My Novice Master, Herbert McCabe OP, wrote how 'the experience provides a crash course in the meaning of Christian community: the difficult and extraordinarily rewarding business of learning to live with people with whom you are thrown together....those who walk too fast or too slow, those who complain too much or who try to organise everyone or who seem offensively immune to sore feet and aching muscles'. Yet, as Herbert wrote, in the shared hardship 'there emerges gradually... a shared prayer and a shared vision of the gospel'.

So, there's also a peace to be 'found', an unearned grace, gifts delighted in as the week unfolds. Something comes from the pace, as we enjoy the countryside through which we tramp - from the village of Keyham, just outside Leicester, through the rolling Rutland hills, across the wide-open (and sometimes bleak) fenland skies that begin beyond Stamford and continue for mile after mile to Crowland with its abbey ruins, and on to Kings Lynn, before we rise up once more into North Norfolk lanes. Then, there's the laughter and the singing - as we walk, or at the pub in the evening. There's the humbling hospitality and kindness of so many people who make us welcome, feed, and water us. There's the gift of friendships formed, renewed, and deepened. There's the insight, the compassion, the solidarity shared in reflection and conversation. And through all of this we sense the peace that comes from sharing in the cross of Christ and so the extraordinary, overwhelming, experience of meeting the Risen Christ at Easter. In the Tobbie Norris at Stamford on the evening of Palm Sunday, the room resounds with the raucous singing of 'Let union be in all our hearts, let all our hearts be joined as one...' - and by the gift of God they are.

Richard Finn OP (a participant 25 times)

REST IN PEACE JOHN GEARY 1934-2026 - FOUNDER OF PAX CHRISTI IN BRITAIN

Pax Christi members who knew him were very sad to hear that John Geary - who brought Pax Christi to Britain - died in April. Anne Dodd and Fausta Valentine represented us at his funeral in the Romford parish which he and his wife, Geneviève, had attended for 60 years. Hearing how they met, Fr Dominic Howarth remarked how he hadn't realised that, as well as being a peace organisation, Pax Christi was an international dating agency. (See picture, right, of John and Geneviève shortly before they married in 1959.)

John had studied accountancy and worked in the civil service. Reliable and efficient, he was the most modest and gentle man. His eldest son, Thomas, noted his 'measured advice', and that's what he brought to Pax Christi too, as Treasurer into the 1970s, whilst never standing in the way of more adventurous projects. He remained a lifelong member and was evidently pleased (in his very self-effacing way) to see Pax Christi grow and flourish. His verdict? 'It was a privilege and an education to play a small part in the grand design.'



The following are some extracts from a 1986 interview in which John remembered the early days of Pax Christi.

Valerie Flessati: How and when did you first hear about Pax Christi?

John Geary:

Two friends took part in the 1955 international route to Nijmegen, Holland, and spoke enthusiastically of the experience. As a result of their reports, I went on the international route to Klöster Weingarten in West Germany in 1956. Having little French,

we relied on other routiers to interpret for us and Geneviève helped us a lot.

VF: How did you get things started in Britain?

JG: Having made friends among the French, German and Spanish routiers, I kept in touch and subsequently took part in the international routes in Italy in 1957 and Brittany in 1958. Following the 1958 route Père Bernard Lalande encouraged me to try and set up a

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small group. In September 1958 about five people held a meeting in London. We used the Young Christian Workers' 'Cell' plan, with a gospel enquiry, and for a social enquiry we used the short encyclical of Pope Pius XII 'World Peace and Church Freedom'.

VF: Who else became involved?

JG: A few English people and some Pax Christi members from France, Germany and Spain temporarily working in London. Our numbers grew slowly through personal contact. In May 1961 we issued a duplicated Bulletin. 100 copies of the first issue went out to members and, we hoped, potential subscribers, who were asked as a minimum commitment to pray daily for peace. They were mainly Catholics and mostly under 30 years old. In 1961 we were heartened to find a keen priest, Fr Bruce Kent, a curate in Kensington, who agreed on a very informal basis to act as chaplain/advisor to the London nucleus.

VF: What was the main motivation, issue, or activity for the group to start with?

JG: We were probably more concerned with trying, even on a tiny scale, to foster international friendship than with political issues. By about 1966 there came a new influence in the group as our Chairman, Brian Midgely, would not let us forget the nuclear issue...

Between 1966 and 1970 a big development was the setting up of a summer hostel which was first located in the old parish school in Soho and then another school in Clerkenwell Road, EC1. Anne Overmeer [Anne Dodd], Mary Warrenner and Alan Gerrard, and latterly David Daniels and Ursula Morrissey, were the people to whom the credit is due for the success of the early hostel ventures in London. Financially this was a big leap forward. Another critical development of vital benefit to Pax Christi was the appointment of Fr Kent as Chaplain to London University and the use of the Chaplaincy for meetings and other events.

John recalled that in the early 1960s he attended several meetings of the International Executive Committee in Paris. A British section of Pax Christi became recognised, with himself as the secretary. In 1969 the group offered to organise the 1970 Pax Christi International Congress in London. This was a milestone in the development of Pax Christi in Britain.

For your diary

6 AUGUST (THURS) 11am–1pm LONDON - Pax Christi vigil and stall outside Westminster Cathedral

9 AUGUST - 83rd Anniversary of the death of Franz Jägerstätter—details of service in London tbc

1-11 SEPTEMBER, ROME The Catholic Institute for Non-violence is offering a training course in Gospel Nonviolence. It will include a 2-day conference (see below), and end with a day of reflection in Assisi. <https://files.constantcontact.com/c9a3ccbf501/31b44106-106b-440b-aa54-50afefb6ffe7.pdf>

9-10 SEPTEMBER, ROME - Conference on 'Unarmed and Disarming Peace'. <https://files.constantcontact.com/c9a3ccbf501/21b30575-12af-413d-b55b-55c3a0acb718.pdf>

20–26 SEPTEMBER - World Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel

21 SEPTEMBER–2 OCTOBER - Catholic Nonviolence Days of Action

SOWING SEEDS OF HOPE

This was the optimistic theme for Pax Christi's Annual General Meeting on 6 June. The morning session, devised by Fr Joe Ryan as a 'Mixed Grill', gave a flavour of the international movement which he and others had found inspiring when they attended the World Assembly in Florence last year. So we heard from Martha Innes Romero, the Secretary General of Pax Christi International, Sr Filo Hirota from Japan, Mary Yelenick, PCI Representative at the UN in New York, and members from Europe, Africa and the US.

Two of our intergenerational 'Peace Pairs' gave vivid accounts of the experience. 'Energising' was how Carol Burns and Naomi Orrell described their conversations, centred particularly on the authenticity of nonviolence applied to direct action on climate change or Palestine. Joan Sharples and Owen Butler brought us a set of stimulating talking points that immediately engaged every table in discussion.



Thank you Aisling!
Leaving after eight
years as Pax Christi's
Schools and Youth
Education worker

Bishop Arnold, our new President, was with us for the day. Kathryn Lydon, the outgoing chair, explained that the Executive Committee has been undertaking a thorough review before recruiting a replacement for Andrew Jackson later in the year.

After eight years as our Schools and Youth Education worker, Aisling Griffin is returning to teaching, so for a while we will not have anyone in her post either. For the first time no one had offered themselves for election as Chair or Vice-Chair, so Kathryn appealed for members to seriously consider whether they might be co-opted on to the Executive Committee. We were especially grateful, therefore, to hear that Colin Kerr will be the new Treasurer, and that Anna Blackman has agreed to be co-opted for the coming year.

While new staff are recruited, two people will be helping Pax Christi. Lucy Irven will be our 'Acting Co-ordinator' for one to two days a week, and for one day a week Matthew Neville will keep our social media and website going. If you could volunteer to help manage zoom events please get in touch with the office.

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