

Creating a culture of peace in our schools

Matt Jeziorski



There was great joy in the Pax Christi office recently when the news broke that a miracle due to the intercession of Blessed Oscar Romero had been approved confirming what so many of us were already sure of – that Oscar Romero is a Saint. His faithful witness to the Gospel, his readiness to speak truth to power, his solidarity with the oppressed, and his tireless work for peace and justice make Romero a hero for us. He is one of those peace people whose lives we often look to for encouragement and inspiration.

Reflecting on work for peace and the power of nonviolence to transform situations of injustice Archbishop Romero said that Christians are peacemakers, not because they cannot fight, but because they prefer the force of peace. This is a force that is not passive nor cowardly, neither it is the easy option, but it is a force that faces the violence and injustices in our world and transforms them through faith and love.

This is the force that Pope Francis speaks of when he reflects upon the need for us to us to banish violence from our hearts, words, and deeds, and become nonviolent people and build nonviolent communities. Everyone can be an artisan of peace was his bold and ambitious claim in his 2017 message for World Peace Day.

That Pope Francis desires artisans of peace is telling. The need is for skilled workers; craftsmen and women, trained and qualified in peace and peacemaking. The world wants for a deeper pool of people able find creative nonviolent means to address the root causes of war and violence. Our schools can play a crucial role in responding to Pope Francis's call by ensuring that their work of Christian formation includes an apprenticeship in Christian peacemaking – and peace education is the key to achieving this.

Schools can sometimes appear nervous about peace education. I have lost count of the number of anxious phone calls I have received from teachers who have booked some of our Pax Christi peace education workshops and find themselves having to reassure a senior member of staff that I am not visiting to campaign, to criticise, or to brainwash. I have had Heads concerned that my workshops might be seen as promoting extremism under the Prevent agenda, and I had one Head take me to task for sowing seeds of dissent amongst my staff during an INSET day.

Yet at the heart of what we are doing in our work of peace education is exactly what Pope Francis demands of us – helping young people to critically explore how they are called to be peacemakers in the world today. We follow Christ who, in telling us to put down your sword,

points us towards the path of peace and nonviolence – peace education breaks open this Gospel call to nonviolence and challenges us in how we live our lives. It may not always be comfortable but any nervousness is misplaced for this is wholly authentic Christian witness.

The Church of course has long held up for us examples who, like Bl Oscar Romero, point to what it means to be an artisan of peace: St Martin of Tours in refusing to fight in the army due to his Christian faith; St Francis of Assisi – the Pope's own patron – in his radical poverty and great efforts to negotiate peace in the Holy Land; Blessed Franz Jägerstätter and Blessed Josef Mayr-Nusser both executed for following their conscience and refusing to fight in Hitler's army and the Servant of God, Dorothy Day, in her radical pacifism and steadfast commitment to campaigning against war and the injustices that perpetuate it. Pope Francis is building on a rich heritage.

Much of Pax Christi's peace education work is one-off, an invitation to work with groups of students over the course of a day in support of their GCSE or A-level religious studies, part of the schools chaplaincy or citizenship provision, or as part of sixth form general RE. Whilst sure of the quality and importance of these workshops, their value can be limited to some extent if they remain a one-off encounter. Our work is at its best when it is complimenting and supporting the wider mission of the school.

This is why Pax Christi encourages schools to make a firm commitment to peace and to nonviolence as part of their Christian vocation. Becoming a Pax Christi school means recognising that peace and nonviolence are at the heart of the faith life of the school and can touch every area of school life.

A Pax Christi school begins with the prayer and liturgical life of the school. Prayers for peace are incorporated into the regular rhythm of prayer life of the school. The feast days and secular memorials with a peace link throughout the school year are observed and celebrated. These prayers are rooted in the sometimes messy realities of the world and the heartbreaking stories of violence in our communities and our world.

Joining acts of public prayer, such as the Ash Wednesday witness against nuclear weapons at the Ministry of Defence, has engaged one Pax Christi School over several years. In reflecting prayerfully on these realities we pray that, as peacemakers, we may grow in understanding of our role in bringing peace.

Special care is taken over acts of remembrance that ensure that war

is never gloried nor celebrated but recognised for the failure that it always represents. As we remember sacrifice and the heroism of various forms, our prayer will always be that most basic one for peace: Never again!

A Pax Christi school educates for peace. Peace issues are included in the curriculum but, more than that, the way teaching is practiced models the principles of nonviolent peacemaking including respect, empathy, and nonviolent conflict resolution. The practical skills of being a peacemaker are also taught. Conflict resolution skills are promoted across the school with student leaders being specifically trained in peer mediation. In modelling the principles of peace and nonviolence the school might reflect on the role of the military and arms companies have in supporting work experience, careers events, or STEM days. Alternative, more life-affirming, options are available.

A Pax Christi school stands in solidarity with the victims of violence and those working nonviolently for peace around the world. They are supported through prayer and fundraising, their stories are shared to raise awareness, and advocacy is done on their behalf to those in positions of power and influence in our own country.

A pilgrimage to Palestine to meet children and young people living under occupation is a profound and transformative experience for

school groups. Closer to home, participation in the Pax Christi International young journalist project has connected young people with refugees in their area – creating an opportunity for them to write articles and produce podcasts to amplify the refugee experience.

A Pax Christi school campaigns for peace at home and abroad. Having carefully considered a situation and reflected upon it in the light of faith members of the school community are confident in taking action to bring about positive change for peace. Joining together with other peacemakers they stand in vigil, they protest, they write, they lobby, and they raise their voice to demand action.

When a culture of peace is fostered and allowed to prevail in our schools then an apprenticeship in peacemaking becomes a natural consequence. In this way our schools are training those artisans of peace that Pope Francis so desires and our world so desperately needs.



Matt Jeziorski is Schools and Youth Outreach Worker for Pax Christi www.paxchristi.org.uk



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