



An Orthodox Contribution toward a Theology of Just Peace

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The Orthodox Church understands peace and peacemaking as indispensable aspects of her faith and mission to the world. Peace is both a quality of a person, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and the gift of God to families, communities and nations. Peace in Scripture, patristic tradition, and liturgy is a greeting and a dynamic grace-giving reality (Jn. 20:19-21). God Himself is peace (Jdg. 6:24) and peace is His gift. Peace is a sign of communion with God (Ps. 85: 8-13). It grants freedom from fear and threat from enemies; it is inseparable from righteousness, without which there is no real peace. In short “peace” is intrinsic to salvation (Rom. 16:20; 1 Thess. 5:23). Peace is communion with God and Jesus Christ is our peace, since He is the bond of communion (Eph. 2:14-17): “We live in peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). St. Basil the Great calls Christians a peaceable race since “nothing is more characteristic of a Christian than to be a worker for peace.”¹

1. The mission of the Church is to live in and preserve God’s peace and, despite human failures, to communicate prophetically the peace of God to the world as a blessed peacemaker. The calling of communicating the peace of God to the world in situations of conflict, violence, injustice, and oppression, invites the Church to strengthen its contribution to ongoing efforts for transformation of persons and society at different levels toward greater justice, peace, and communion. The peacemaking mission of the Church is inherent to its ongoing commitment and active work toward the unity of all who confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. In today’s global world, the Church in collaboration with others should take proactive steps to prevent violence by addressing its root causes through all appropriate means that promote justice and peace. Christians are

¹ St. Basil, Letter 11. See also Gregory the Theologian, Address 6, 1, PG 34, 741A-744A and “Letter 145 to Various”, PG 47, 248B.

involved in a permanent process of becoming more conscious of their responsibility to incarnate the message of peace and justice in the world as a witness of the authenticity of their faith. This is clearly stated by St. Basil: “Christ is our peace,” and hence “he who seeks peace seeks Christ...without love for others, without an attitude of peace towards all men, no one can be called a true servant of Christ.”² Peacemaking is an art that can be exercised at personal, institutional and global levels. At the institutional level, the church mediates between the person and the state, to the extent possible in given situations. At the global level, the church’s witness may inspire policymakers.

2. The Orthodox Church has an unshakeable belief in the unity of humankind and affirms the intrinsic dignity of all human beings because all partake in God’s love (Gen 2:7; Wisdom of Solomon 10:1; Acts 17: 26) and are created in God’s image (Gen.1:27). Fundamental rights of the human being, such as the right to life and freedom of conscience, are at the heart of the Gospel and essential in the practice of the Church. This is a contributing factor to her involvement in the life of the world, promoting justice and peace for all.

3. The Orthodox Church also firmly believes that all forms of life and natural resources are essential parts of God’s creation and, therefore, partake in the blessedness and goodness of God (Psalm 8). They must be treated with awe, care and respect. Peace among the peoples of the earth and peace with the earth are interconnected. Therefore, it follows that it is inappropriate for us and disrespectful to the Creator to use them as mere objects of greed and selfishness.

4. The peaceable vocation of the Orthodox Church should be carried on in collaboration and joint projects with other Christian churches and faith communities. This is what the Third Pan-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Conference recommended in 1986. “The local Orthodox churches in close collaboration with the peace-loving faithful of other world religions consider it their duty to work for peace on earth and the establishment of fraternal relations between peoples. The Orthodox churches are called upon to contribute to joint effort and collaboration between religions, and thereby combat fanaticism anywhere; in this way, work for reconciliation between peoples, the triumph of the values represented by freedom and peace in the world, service to humanity today regardless of race or religion...”³ Through such collaboration, the Orthodox churches contribute their gifts and efforts to the ongoing process for peace and justice, even as they learn from the experiences and the insights of others.

² St. Basil, Letter 203,2.

³ Quoted by Vlassios Phidas in his article: “Peace and Justice: Theological Foundations,; in *Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation: Insights from Orthodoxy*, edit. Gennadios Llimouris (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990), p. 114.

5. In the ambivalence of conflicts and violence in the present world, the Church lives out a solid biblical and patristic theology of peace. It must also analyze and understand the nature and causes of conflict by taking into consideration the insights of peace practitioners and social scientists. She concretizes the message of peace through conversation with those who are knowledgeable about currently emerging trends of the world, such as general principles of international law on the subject of peace and peacemaking.

6. Peace and justice are inextricably related (Is 32:17; James 3:18). The Orthodox Church understands justice to be restorative and distributive in nature (Rom. 3:25-26). By rewarding the good and disciplining the wrong, a peacemaker ought to be proactive in strengthening good will and forwarding the spirit of reconciliation to prevent evil consequences, just as God with His compassion and forbearance reconciled us and made us righteous through the 'blood of Christ' (Rom 3:25-26, 5:9, Eph 1:7), thus proving His irreproachable justice. Justice should promote a sense of community and fairness, and sometimes requires just compromises. In St. Basil the Great's words, which equally apply to the relation of communities and peoples, those who could give to the poor, but did not, were guilty of injustice and should restore excess goods to their rightful owners. "The bread you are holding back is for the hungry, the clothes you keep put away are for the naked, the shoes that are rotting away with disuse are for those who have none, the silver you keep buried in the earth is for the needy. You are thus guilty of injustice toward as many as you might have aided, and did not."⁴

7. When Christians fail to witness to justice, they fall short of their mission. In addressing situations of injustice, the Church appeals to moral conscience and the spiritual implications of abusing the weak. In some instances, the Church may make this witness by refraining from supporting abusive authorities. The Church is called to console and stand by the poor and the weak (Matt. 25). In facing the global crises of today, the Orthodox Church exhorts a greater sensitivity by policymakers for the poor and the environment because they suffer the most. She encourages creative policies that work toward preservation of the environment and just distribution of wealth. This implies a careful management of the Church's own resources.

⁴ St. Basil, "I Will Tear Down My Barns"