

Palestine/Israel: A Model for Non-Violence and Just Peace?

International Conference on Nonviolence and Just Peace:
Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence.

11-13 April 2016. Rome - Italy.

By: Nora Arsenian-Carmi

My Armenian roots and my 69 years of Palestinian experience, have brought me to a strong conviction, that the Armenian Genocide, the Palestinian Nakba ‘catastrophe’ that made me a refugee, and the ongoing Israeli occupation and terrible injustice cannot be “just” or be part of God’s “plans” for those created in His image. It was faith that miraculously brought my genocide family survivors to the Holy Land. In 1919, my Armenian grandfather wrote in the foreword to his memoirs¹ “I have great hope that by reading these life memoirs, my children will learn some lessons.....that they will learn to scorn injustice and face hardship, never to get discouraged, and become leaders in control of their lives and models of behaviors to others.” The Nakba brought new dispossession and more suffering but without grudge or hatred, the family continued to serve all the communities with equity and Christian love. A new form of tribulation befell in 1967, and once again the choice was to survive with dignity and strive peacefully, non-violently in the face of systematic state policies and measures trying to dehumanize and denigrate God’s creation. I inherited that legacy of not reacting to evil with evil.

Despite some phases of armed struggle in the Palestinian history, for over 100 years the response to injustice has largely been peaceful, as documented in Dr. Mazen Qumsieh’s book.² Sit-ins, marches, civil disobedience, strikes, prayers, popular artistic stands against the Separation Wall or throwing stones were all met with collective punishment in the form of home demolitions, evictions, incarcerations, extrajudicial killings and extreme military force. Concerted efforts of advocacy, political negotiations and rare implementation of international laws and decisions have still not yielded the aspired liberation of the cradle of three monotheistic religions proclaiming justice, peace and reconciliation.

However, this is the only way forward! We have learnt the positive power of “not resisting with death but rather through respect of life” The Kairos document of 2009 clearly states “True Christian Theology is a theology of love and solidarity with the oppressed, a call to justice and equality among peoples.”

¹ *Towards Golgotha*, Arda Arsenian Ekmekji, 2011 Haigazian University Press

² *Popular Resistance in Palestine: A History of Hope and Empowerment*, 2011, Pluto Press

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Non-violence is not a tactic but a way that emphasizes the concept and sanctity of life. Not only does it resist all forms of evil with methods that enter the logic of love, but it also draws upon all energies to make peace, including economic measures such as commercial cultural, educational boycott, divestment and sanctions. Lives are thus saved and protected from the ravages of wars and, both, the perpetrators and the victims of injustice are liberated.

Religious leadership has a very crucial role. The Catholic Church can have more clout. In the words of a 2014 statement of the Catholic Holy Land Commission for Justice and Peace:

“Our role as religious leaders is to speak a prophetic language that reveals the alternatives beyond the cycle of hatred and violence. This language refuses to attribute the status of enemy to any of God’s children; it is a language that opens up the possibility of seeing each one as brother or sister. Pope Francis at the invocation for peace cried out: *“We have heard a summons and we must respond. It is the summons to break the spiral of hatred and violence, and to break it by one word alone: the word ‘brother’. But to be able to utter this word we have to lift our eyes to heaven and acknowledge one another as children of one Father.”* Religious leaders are invited to use language responsibility so that it becomes a tool to transform the world from a wilderness of darkness into a flourishing garden of lifeⁱ. The Church has to accept the costly discipleship of daring to speak out and deliver the Gospel “good news” by being present in its service of society, education, health and welfare. With sound theology, the church can promote cultures of peace, adopt and rescue vulnerable communities, and to also transform structures of violence.

Together we can be contributors to peace in Palestine/Israel, and make out it a “**Promising** Land” for all.

ⁱ“ *Call for a courageous Change*” (8.7.2014)