

Advent 2001

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission throughout the world

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

Even before the tragic events of September 11, I had thought about making peace the theme of this year's Advent letter. Now, after the hijacking of four airplanes, the brutal killing of more than 6000 innocent people, the collapse of the Twin Towers, the destruction of a large portion of the Pentagon, and the crash of a final plane near Pittsburgh as its passengers struggled with terrorists — events witnessed on television by people throughout the world — the theme of peace imposes itself. Somehow, as I write, I fear that reflections on peace may sound hollow this year, that the angels' song may seem only a dream, almost an idyllic fairytale. So many conflicting emotions fill our hearts. In the face of such terrible violence, we instinctively feel compelled to protect the innocent, even with force, and to assure that lives will not be so senselessly destroyed in the future. An innate human longing for justice urges us to find and punish those who plotted to take human life so callously or helped others to do so. Confronted with what so many describe as “unthinkable” and “incomprehensible,” we yearn for a restored sense of security.

What is the correct politico-military response to terrorist attacks? As a professor (in a former life!), I used to teach a course on peace and war, describing the profound, but varied Christian tradition that has grown up over 2000 years concerning this theme. The voices in the tradition are many. It includes eloquent, non-violent spokespersons like Justin the Martyr, Cyprian of Carthage, Martin of Tours (a former soldier), and in modern times Pope Paul VI, Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day. The tradition also includes articulate just war proponents, among whom stand some of the most eminent theologians in history, like Augustine and Aquinas. The question that keeps popping into my mind in these days, and that I ask others too, is: “What would **you** do if you were the decision-maker who had to formulate an effective response to terrorism right now?” I do not profess to know the answer to that question, but I ask the Lord to give wisdom to world leaders, and to us, that we might choose paths that respect innocent human life, even though much innocent human life was brutally destroyed on September 11.

In Luke's gospel, as they announce the coming of the Lord, the angels' prayer is peace (2:14). Peace ranks near the top of the list of New Testament

blessings: “Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thes 1:1; 2 Thes 1:2; 1 Tm 1:2; 2 Tm 1:2; Ti 1:4; Phlm 1:3). One of the most significant biblical texts on this theme identifies Jesus himself as our peace: “But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity” (Eph: 2:13-14). Jesus comes to create communion, to reconcile opposites. Paul writes of Jesus’ wall-breaking role again and again. He tells the Galatians (3:28): “There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus.” He repeats the theme in similar words to the Romans (10:12), the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:13) and to the Colossians (3:11).

Peace, Jesus assures us, is his gift to us (Jn 14:27). Peace is the constant greeting of the Risen Lord (Mt 28:9; Lk 24:36; Jn 20:19, 21). Peace is one of the first fruits of the coming of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). The early Christian community rejoiced in this gift, but it was also convinced that the gift bore with it a responsibility — that we should be peacemakers too (Mt 5:9; cf 5:43f; Lk 6:27f).

What does our Vincentian tradition teach us about peace and peacemaking? Three levels are evident in St. Vincent’s life and works:

1. Personal. St. Vincent holds up *gentleness* to his followers as a key missionary virtue. He tells the rather combative François du Coudray (SV I, 66) that the conversion of others is possible only through gentleness, humility and patience. He assures another priest of the Mission (SV IV, 52) that we can win the poor over only by gentleness and personal goodness. He insists that personal peace is essential to good judgment. “I think,” he writes near the end of his life, “that the ability to discern things is granted only to those who are gentle” (SV XII, 190). Vincent’s life matched his words. Abelly tells us that many regarded him as the gentlest man of his time.
2. Relational. St. Vincent encouraged the members of the Congregation of the Mission to work at healing broken relationships. One of the goals of “the mission” was reconciliation (CR XI, 8). Actually, missionaries frequently reported to St. Vincent about their success in settling quarrels. It is clear from his letters that Vincent himself attempted to mediate many disputes in his lifetime among the members of the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and others whom he counseled.
3. Societal. In the wars that afflicted France during the mid-17th century, Vincent worked actively as a peacemaker. He witnessed the ravages of violence firsthand and saw the grief that war brought to the poor

especially. Around 1640, during the civil strife in Lorraine, he went to Cardinal Richelieu, knelt before him, and pleaded for peace. Richelieu refused, responding that peace did not depend on him alone. In 1649, during the civil war, he left Paris quietly, crossed battle lines and forded a flooded river (at almost 70 years of age) to see the Queen and beg her to dismiss Mazarin, whom he regarded as responsible for the war. He also spoke directly to Mazarin himself. But again his pleas went unheeded. Mazarin, in return, noted in his secret diary that Vincent was his “enemy.”

This Vincentian tradition poses three questions for us at Advent time:

- Are we peaceful ourselves?
- Do we attempt to heal broken relationships?
- Do we work in some practical way toward world peace? How?

As this Advent begins, under the shadow of violence, I think of the words of a Jewish philosopher: “Every moment can be a small door through which the Messiah can enter.” The Lord comes not just as the Rising Sun. He often arrives in the night, like a lover. At this time of darkness where there are “wars and rumors of war” (Mt 24:6), I encourage you to be at peace and to seek peace.

All genuine peace is built on justice as its foundation. When Isaiah envisioned the Messiah he wrote: “Justice shall be the band around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips. Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid. The calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them” (11:5-6). Is that too just an idyllic dream? Meister Eckhart, a 13th century mystic, said that God is bringing the world to birth, but that every birth is painful. This Advent we surely recognize how painful the coming of the Lord in his fullness is. But, with you, in spite of the darkness, I believe in the Lord’s coming and in his gift of peace.

I ask you to join me in a rousing 18th century hymn that proclaims the angels’ message, and our faith, in a musical rendition of Luke’s second chapter:

*Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King;
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
With th’angelic host proclaim,
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”*

*Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"*

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General