Prayer, Dialogue, and the Call of Conscience as a Recipe for Peace

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Prayer and Dialogue:
The Legacy of Assisi

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By Prof. W. Cole Durham, Jr.*

I. Introduction

My first exposure to the significance of St. Francis came during piano lessons given by my grandfather, a notable 20th century musician in my religious tradition. While his efforts to instill piano playing talent in me were largely unavailing, I have never forgotten his testimonial that the hymn "All Creatures of Our God and King" was the greatest hymn in our hymnbook. This was my introduction to St. Francis, and I believe that my grandfather's testimonial remains true.

The hymn as I have experienced it had its origins in St. Francis' "Canticle of the Creatures" or "Canticle of Brother Sun"--one of the first pieces of literature composed in the Umbrian vernacular. It was composed late in St. Francis life, and in some ways constituted a distillation of his life's work. It came down to us through a plurality of sources: it was loosely translated into English for children by William Henry Draper in early 20th century England. The influential 20th Century composer, Vaughan Williams, then put it to music drawing on a 17th Century German hymn that celebrated Easter. It is unquestionable a hymn of praise, a prayer that congregations from countless denominations can join in singing. As such it represents an important model of how prayer, dialogue, and its deeper reverberations in conscience can bring souls together in shared praise and exultant peace.

II. Expanding the Vision of Dialogue and Peace

St. Francis' ministry of course extends far beyond the Canticle of the Creatures. I would like to focus on one example that is slightly problematic but seems particularly relevant to

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understanding Francis' experience in connecting prayer, dialogue and peace. What I have in mind is his visit to Egypt during the Crusades, where he entered into dialogue with the leader of Muslim forces, Malik al-Kamil (1180-1238). Essentially, St. Francis asked permission to cross enemy lines to preach Christ to the sultan al-Kamil. The situation was delicate, and the cardinal in charge worried that missionary zeal could trigger death for Muslims who were converted, to say nothing of death for St. Francis and his associates. But Francis remained undaunted and ultimately managed to get to meet with the Sultan. While the Sultan thought Francis might be bringing the possibility of reopening peace negotiations, Francis focused instead on claiming he was an Ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ. Disagreement remained civil but did not lead to conversion on either side. Taken at face value, St. Francis' maneuver appeared to reflect a naïve assumption that peace could be achieved by reaching religious unanimity through quick conversion. In retrospect, the effort to achieve peace through dialogue in this way was courageous, impressive particularly to other Christians, but in the end largely unavailing. On its face, this story represents a caveat on how best to extend dialogue toward peace.

It is significant to point out that it did not take St. Francis long to back away from this position and to adopt a stance committed to simply loving those of other faiths, leaving to God the business of changing other hearts.

III. Subsequent Reflections on Dialogue, Peace, and Conscience

More recent Catholic reflections on the need to take conscience into account in analyzing the relationship of prayer, peace, and dialogue seem much more in the spirit of St. Francis' ministry. Significantly, when Saint John Paul II spoke here in Assisi forty years ago, he was conscious of Assisi as the home of St. Francis. In his words, "I have chosen this town of Assisi as the place for our Day of Prayer for Peace because of the particular significance of the holy

man venerated here—Saint Francis—known and revered by so many throughout the world as a symbol of peace, reconciliation and brotherhood."[1] Notably, John Paul II recognized the significance of prayer "as another dimension of peace and another way of promoting it."[2] He emphasized that "in the great battle for peace, humanity, in its very diversity, must draw from its deepest and most vivifying sources where its conscience is formed and upon which is founded the moral action of all people."[3]

IV. The Significance of Conscience for Prayers of Peace

What the foregoing reflections evidence is that prayers for peace will ring hollow if they are not predicated on the call of conscience—including diverse consciences. This is at the core of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, as recently reemphasized by Pope Leo XIV in *Magnifica Humanitas* where he reaffirmed the teaching of *Dignitatis Humanae* that "religious freedom is a fundamental right grounded in human dignity that must be guaranteed by law so as to prevent people from being forced to act against their conscience or impeded from seeking and professing the truth both privately and publicly."[4] Moreover, as Paul VI has emphasized, "as long as there are people in the world who are excluded from the development befitting human dignity, the Christian community cannot be content with a theoretical proclamation of peace."[5] By linking dignity with access to development, Catholic Social Doctrine has further strengthened the linkage of conscience to prayer and peace. Dialogue in this domain needs to be extended to encompass diapraxis. Prayer and dialogue cannot stop short of practice if peace is to be achieved.

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[1] Address of John Paul II to the Representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities Gathered in Assisi for the World Day of Prayer, Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, 27 October 1986.
[2] Id.
[3] Id.
[4] Maganifica Humanitas, Section 34.
[5] Id., Section 36, *citing* Saint Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (14 May 1971), 4-7: *AAS* 63 (1971); 404-406.; Saint John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (30 December 1987), 36: *AAS* 80 (1988), 561.

V. Freedom of Conscience as a Foundation for Peace, Peacemaking, and Peacebuilding

Peace is not merely an environmental condition—the "absence of war" to use Hobbes' definition.[6] It is a result of action. The teaching of the Beatitudes is that it is peace*makers* who "shall be called the children of God."[7] That action can of course consist in part in prayer and dialogue, but those are merely antecedents of what peacemaking and peacebuilding require.

The reality is that we have more empirical evidence today than ever before about the relationship of religious freedom to countless other social goods.[8] Significantly, of the many goods that freedom of religion and conscience reinforce, peacebuilding stands out. It is "fundamental to the structure of peacebuilding. Without it, no society can be fully just, and processes aimed at achieving stable and lasting peace are necessarily incomplete."[9]

The reverse is also true. It is not merely discrimination against minorities that is problematic.[10] We are learning that there is a "paradox of privilege."[11] When governments grant privileges to dominant religions, thinking that will stabilize society, they allow majorities to become more aggressive and less civil.[12] "Privileged religious majorities tend to engage in

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[6] Thomas Hobbes, *of Man, Being the First Part of* Leviathan XIII para. 8 (vol 34 of Harvard Classics, New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1909-1914), http://www.bartleby.com/34/5/13.html.
[7] Matthew 5:9.
[8] Allen D. Hertzke, *Why Religious Freedom Matters: Human Rights and Human Flourishing* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2026), 16-20; *see generally* Brian J. Grim & Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[9] W. Cole Durham, Jr. and Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Place of Religious Freedom in the Structure of Peacebuilding," in Atalia Omer, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding* 281-306, 281.
[10] *See, e.g.*, Jonathan Fox, *Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me: Why Governments Discriminate Against Religious* Minorities (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020; Jonathan Fox, *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State: A Time Series Analysis of Worldwide Data* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jonathan Fox, *The Unfree Exercise of Religion: A World Survey of Discrimination Against Religious Minorities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008);
[11] Hertzke, *supra* note 8, at 150.
[12] *Id*., 150-51.

intimidation or even violence against religious minorities, often with impunity."[13] It is thus no surprise that the "vast majority of religious violence in the world today is generated not by repressed religious minorities but by religious majorities emboldened and radicalized by the privileges they enjoy from governments."[14]

The fundamental idea is that freedom of conscience protects pluralism, and pluralism tends to stabilize rather than destabilize society. This idea was advanced as early as the writings of John Locke, but has been vindicated by over three hundred years of intervening history.[15]

The significance of freedom of conscience to peacebuilding can be seen at every stage in the cessation of conflicts. For example, at the constitutional moments when constitutions are distilled out of conflict, religious and ideological liberty plays an important role in assuring those about to enter into a new society that their respective positions will be protected and afforded deep respect. International legal frameworks and commitment to freedom of conscience also play a significant role in shaping the contexts within which peace can crystallize.

Further, religious freedom can play a significant filtering role, helping to support the social goods flowing from religion, while setting limits to and blocking adverse social developments emanating from the darker side of religion.

Freedom of conscience also It helps protect the role of religious leaders as trusted individuals who can assume peacekeeping roles themselves and who can lead their followers to do likewise.

At still another level, by contributing to the generation of social capital, religious freedom can help lay the material foundations for social stability. It can also avoid the need for religious

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[13] *Id.*, at 151.
[14] *Id*., 149. See also William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[15] For a more exhaustive treatment of the issues in the paragraphs that follow, see Durham and Clark, *supra* note 9, at 284-306.

organizations to spend a substantial portion of their resources in self-defense maneuvers necessitated by persecution or discrimination.

VI. Conclusion

In the end, "Prayer, Dialogue and Peace" fits within the "Legacy of Assisi" because it ultimately comports both with respect and even love for the dignity of the individual and corollary respect for the call of conscience. Initially, prayer can give place to the joy of "All Creatures of Our God and King" and the unity of peace and even joy. But such pray needs to move beyond inner peace to the respect inherent in outer peacemaking and peacebuilding. Such respect is critical to peacemaking and peacebuilding at every point in time and history when these virtues take hold. The process starts with a profound version of the early apostles' question when told by Jesus that one of them would betray him: "Lord, is it I?"[16] While others may be more clearly at fault, the starting point is the searing pain that is felt when the possibility and ultimately the reality of such personal betrayal sinks in. It was not only Peter who was an imperfect witness. The miracle is that even a small and imperfect experience of St. Francis-like renewal, if joined with love and respect for freedom of conscience, can form the basis for robust pluralism that can engender lasting and just peace in modern societies. May we find ways to make it so.

[16] Matthew 26:22.