

Peace is God's gift and our response

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

I wish to share with you today the reflections I offered this past Sunday at an Ecumenical Prayer Service at Sacred Heart Cathedral. These reflections well express so much that is on my mind and in my heart through these sensitive days. The Scripture text is Colossians, 3:12-17.

Dear Sisters and Brothers:

In view of all that has happened in our world this week, I join you for prayer on this occasion with a special sense of need to be with you, and to be strengthened by your faith in God. I must confess to you that never in my years as a bishop have I been so deeply saddened by any event, nor have I been so strongly challenged to explore the moral implications of my faith as I have been by the outbreak of war.

So as I stand before you today, privileged to preach on this occasion, I do so not as one who possesses all truth, but as one who searches with you for a deeper knowledge of the truth and who, like you, yearns for the wisdom and courage that only God can give.

Dear friends, I believe that we do find encouragement in our faith, in the Word of God to which we have opened our hearts, and in the presence of God in the company of friends from the several faith traditions represented here today.

We Christians are aware that among us there is still division that causes sadness and pain for all of us. We acknowledge that we have and still do hurt one another. And

we ask God's pardon for that. We acknowledge, too, that we have in the past and still do harm other people even to the death — sometimes, sadly and tragically, in the name of Jesus, whom we recognize as the giver of peace. In the presence of friends here present from other faith traditions, we acknowledge our sin and ask pardon for it.

The great hope of our reading and the powerful sign of this assembly is that we are capable of much better, that we can in the power of God's love be faithful, loving daughters and sons of the God in whose image we are made, that we can live in such a manner that our God-given capabilities to reason and to make loving choices will prevail over our tendencies — sometimes very strong — to resort to dominance and violence to solve human problems, that we can live in constructive harmony even with those with whom we experience sharp disagreement about substantial issues.

We do believe that we are capable of the heart-felt mercy, the kindness, the meekness and the patience in which we are called to clothe ourselves. We desperately yearn to forgive whatever grievances we hold against each other. We know that to be faithful fully to the forgiveness we have received we must forgive others — even from the hidden part of hearts. We believe it! We know it! But we need constantly to remind ourselves that we can do it only when we surrender our hearts to the God who made us all and allow God full play at the very core of our being. Without God there is no hope. With God there is no limit to what we can achieve.

I believe that is what Paul's message to the Colossians and to us is when he says, "Over all these virtues put on love which binds the rest together and makes them

perfect."

In our Scripture passage, I believe that the sacred writer shares his and the community's reflection on a mystery that for centuries has challenged humankind, especially those who probe God's revelation in light of human experience, and human experience in light of God's revelation. That mystery, that ever-challenging question, is that of the intersection of God's majesty and human freedom. On the one hand, if it's all up to God, why should we bother? What difference does any of our action make? On the other hand, if it's all up to us, what possible hope do we have? Isn't our proneness to sin and destruction abundantly clear by now?

Dear friends, I raise the question not to solve it — it will never be fully solved! — but to express an intuition I have that all of us here, however our several traditions might probe the question, agree that somehow we hold the following in common: 1) that we will not achieve lasting peace on earth apart from a total dependence on God, and 2) that to be faithful to that conviction, we must work ceaselessly, unstintingly for the kind of merciful, humane justice that is the only true foundation for lasting peace. To put it more briefly, peace is both God's gift and our response.

In these tense days as I have watched and heard the news, as I have spoken with persons who hold widely divergent opinions, as I have tried to let these realities speak to my faith and my faith speak to these realities, I have tried to think of how we can work for justice and peace. Permit me now to share with you 12 thoughts that come to me in this process. I offer them to you with the sincere hope that you will take what I offer and make them much better than they are by your additions, deletions, correc-



tions or any other kind of amendment you may care to offer. My only absolute certainties as I present them to you are that they are impossible without God and without committed work from all of us.

In that spirit, I place before you the need for all of us:

- 1) to open our hearts to the God who made us all and to the God-given dignity of every human person;
- 2) to recognize our own sinfulness and the need we have for personal forgiveness and reconciliation with others;
- 3) to be open to the truth wherever it may be found;
- 4) to judge others no more harshly than we would have them judge us;
- 5) to rest content to judge the actions of others with the best of our lights, to resist the urge to judge the hearts of others because such judgment belongs only to God;
- 6) to allow others to change;
- 7) to respect others with whom we differ, so as never to become violent in our work for peace;
- 8) to avoid depersonalizing any human being by the language we use to refer to or to describe any other person;
- 9) to avoid making or accepting universal statements about any group of people, especially when these statements are negative;
- 10) to allow real and reasonable distinctions to be made in public speech and expression, even when it is possible that the speech or expression may be misinterpreted by others;
- 11) to refrain from using words, actions or symbols that may give us great personal satisfaction but that will inevitably evoke the rage of others, thereby decreasing rather than increasing our ability to engage in civil, public discourse;
- 12) to pray mightily and daily that we live the words of Michah the prophet — "You have been told what is good and what the Lord requires of you; only to do right and to love goodness and to walk humbly with your God."

Dear friends, peace to you all.

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