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Revisiting 'Pacem in Terris' personally after 50 years

by Jerry Filteau

NCR Today

Washington, D.C. — At a lunch with an old friend this Tuesday [April 10] I reminded him how much Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* ('Peace on Earth') had changed our lives.

In 1970 both of us — he from Brooklyn, I from the Diocese of Fargo, N.D. — left Theological College, the U.S. bishops' national seminary at The Catholic University of America.

With the low-salary entry-level jobs typical for ex-collegians with liberal arts/philosophy/theology majors, we and a third ex-seminarian joined up to share an inexpensive apartment in the Washington suburbs.

The Vietnam War was raging, the government was in the closing phases of the Selective Service draft (soon to be replaced by an all-volunteer military), and my friend was a sincere conscientious objector to war. I (slow learner, I guess) was still a supporter of the war in Vietnam but I was on the cusp of what would later become selective conscientious objection.

The U.S. armed forces at that time did not (and still today do not) accept selective conscientious objection to specific wars as valid grounds for exemption from the draft, and the draft tended strongly toward viewing Catholics, who had a long tradition of just war teaching, as incapable of sincere conscientious objection to all wars.

So when my friend/roommate was selected for military service and applied for alternative service as a conscientious objector, he asked me to testify as to his convictions against all war.

He in his own declarations and I in my testimony on his behalf both cited *Pacem in Terris* No. 127. In this age which boasts of its atomic power, it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument

with which to repair the violation of justice? ? as legitimate grounds for any Catholic to object conscientiously, as a matter of faith, to all war, not just selectively to specific wars.

My friend won his conscientious objector status and ended up doing alternative service as an aide to patients at Georgetown University Hospital. Thank you, Pope John, for saying that even in the context of Catholic just war theory, it is possible in this nuclear age for faithful Catholics to be complete pacifists.

At Georgetown my friend met a young nurse, who was also from Brooklyn, and asked her out for a date. The next day he told me she had a roommate that I might like to meet.

Long story short, in 1974 we traded roommates: her roommate and I were maid of honor and best man at their wedding, and two weeks later they were matron of honor and best man at our wedding. Now we're trying to figure out how to celebrate the 40th anniversaries of our marriages together.

In matters of faith and theological analysis, I look back to *Pacem in Terris* as a landmark encyclical that advanced church teachings on an incredible number of subjects, among them:

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- The equal role of women in public life.
- The interdependence of nations and the need for global structures of authority to address universal common good issues that individual sovereign states cannot deal with adequately.
- The obligation of nations/states to protect rights of their citizens, including rights of freedom of conscience on religious matters (reversing centuries of teaching that upheld rights of Catholic governments to suppress rights of non-Catholic believers).
- The social nature of the human person.
- The relationship of human rights and duties, balancing the church's long natural law tradition, with its emphasis on human obligations or duties, and the Enlightenment/U.S. constitutional emphasis on human rights, often divorcing rights from correlative duties.
- The novel idea (subsequently borne out in Vatican II documents) that interreligious dialogue can contribute to mutual understanding.
- The important role of peacebuilding, which many Catholic and other non-state organizations have begun to explore effectively in the past 20 years or so.

I could go on about the theoretical implications of *Pacem in Terris*, but I want to end this note on that peace encyclical with a short thank-you to John XXIII that departs from my usual editorial objectivity.

Today I and my long-time friend would not be approaching the 40th anniversaries of marriage with the loves of our lives if it were not for *Pacem in Terris* and its direct impact on Catholic social teaching that shaped our convictions and lives more than 40 years ago.

Thank you, Pope John.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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