

“Give Peace to the People of the World”:

A Conversation with Dom Helder Camara

One Sunday morning in March 1991, shortly after the Gulf War, nearly one thousand of us traveled to the Nevada desert to pray for an end to the testing of nuclear weapons at the test site, where the U.S. government regularly explodes nuclear weapons. After several days of prayer, discussion, presentations and festivities at a church in Las Vegas, we drove out into the desert for morning worship and nonviolent direct action.

We stood in a circle singing songs of praise to the God of peace. Someone read excerpts from each of the major religions about God's way of peace. A young woman read from chapter nineteen of the first book of Kings, about Elijah's experience in the desert, how he heard God, not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in "the still small voice."

Then, Dom Helder Camara, the saintly archbishop of Recife, Brazil, who dedicated his life to the poor and to nonviolence, stepped forward into the center of the circle to preach. At age 82, he had come a long way to pray with us.

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Born in Fortaleza, Brazil on February 7, 1909, Dom Helder Camara was ordained archbishop of Recife, Brazil in 1964. He helped formed Brazil's grassroots base community movement which today has over 100,000 communities, and is considered a founding father of liberation theology. As the primary organizer of the 1968 Latin American bishops' conference in Medellin, he first promoted "the preferential option for the poor" for the church of Latin American and the world. He campaigned tirelessly against Brazil's military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985, and received many death threats. He was banned from public speaking for thirteen years. The newspapers were not allowed to print his name. In 1985, the Vatican forced him to retire but he remained an apostle of nonviolence until his death at the age of 90 on August 27th, 1999.

"When I feed the poor, they call me a saint," he once said. "But when I ask why there are poor, they call me a communist."

Dom Helder Camara was repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. He was a poet, popular speaker and the author of several books, including *The Desert Is Fertile*, *Spiral of Violence*; *Hoping Against All Hope*, and *A Thousand Reasons for Living*.

Once before, when he joined our desert protest, he declared simply that "because the desert had become the center of the world's greatest violence, with more nuclear weapons exploded here than any other place on earth, it must also become the center of the greatest nonviolence."

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Dressed in a light brown cassock, the small, frail, bald archbishop stepped to the microphone. In a thick Portuguese accent, he spoke about Jesus and the joy of recalling his memory, his life, sufferings, death and resurrection. He said it is a blessing to be united together as a family by the life of Jesus.

"My dear brothers and sisters," he continued, "let us make every possible effort to help love grow among humankind in spite of the different races and various situations of our lives, such as extreme riches and extreme misery.... Let us be an example to create strong families of love that help each other, so that we can love one another. Let us live without war and be peacemakers, the true children of God, that we may never have opulent riches or degrading misery. Let us all be sisters and brothers, children of the same loving God, sisters and brothers of Jesus our brother."

Suddenly, he put his notes down and took off his glasses. He raised both arms up to heaven and called out, "My brothers and sisters! Please, no more war! No more war!" Then, he looked up to the sky. Tears ran down his face. "Dear God," he said, "we really do want peace. We want peace."

Then, he stretched out his right hand high and started to wave to the sky--to God! With that, he walked away quietly, his head down, crying.

There was an audible gasp from the crowd as he waved to God. We were shocked. We turned and looked at one another, and smiled. All of us were deeply touched by his heartfelt witness.

After the closing prayer, seventy-five of us walked across the federal government line onto the site of the nuclear weapons testing ground. A police officer told us we were under arrest and led us to a make-shift jail pen, constructed for the thousands of demonstrators who pilgrimage to Nevada to protest nuclear weapons testing.

Dom Helder traveled all this way to speak from his heart, to plead for an end to war. He could have condemned us for our militarism and greed. He had seen misery in Brazil and opulence in Las Vegas. Yet he did not condemn us or judge us. He was a peacemaker; he brought the good news of peace. He did what none of us would dare do, what all of us would like to do, to wave at our loving God who looks down on us with care and affection.

The jail pen is a poor enclosure. We turned to one another to share our stories. I pondered the desert mountains and looked up to the sky. Though the government continues to wage war against the earth, the Spirit of love moves among us and our prayer for peace still rises higher and higher.

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A few days later, Dom Helder came to Oakland, California, to speak at the Newman Center in Berkeley. Before the talk, he came to our small Jesuit community house in Oakland for dinner. He spoke at length about his dream of "a new millennium without misery or violence."

Over dinner, we asked him about his life and his thoughts on the church. One friend questioned him about the ordination of women. There was a long pause. "Do you

mean to say that Mary the Mother of God cannot be ordained?" he asked with a big smile. Of course he supported the ordination of women to the priesthood!

The next day, I met with him for several hours at a nearby Franciscan church for a conversation. He was tired, and sometimes confused, but whenever he spoke of God, he lit up. He would break into a great smile, swing his arms around, open his eyes wide, and speak with passion and enthusiasm. Throughout our conversation he would suddenly start praying to God, as if God was sitting in the room with us.

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Next year marks the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas. Many church people here in the U.S. are wrestling with their response to this anniversary, perhaps as a time of repentance. What are your thoughts about the upcoming anniversary?

The important thing is that while Columbus' arrival brought many problems, it also brought a great favor, a great privilege, the privilege of faith. When the visitors arrived, they had their intentions, but really, they were bringing the faith of Christ, and this was wonderful for us. For me, the most important thing, in the middle of all the problems, was that the Spanish brought with them faith in Christ. For me, this is very important.

What does Christ's message of peace mean for you and how can we better promote it?

The best way to understand peace is to understand war. In the beginning, there was a man fighting against another man. Then, there were many local wars through the centuries, and then human beings declared a universal war. So many people were killed. Terrible! It was terrible because the Creator created life and wars destroy life.

After this universal, world war, I had the impression, that there would be no more world wars, that it would be impossible to repeat this. But then the Second World War came, and then nuclear weapons.

We have always had wars, but when they created nuclear weapons, I was under the illusion of thinking, now, war is really finished. I had the delusion of thinking that now, wars will end forever, but instead, all we've had are wars, wars, wars.

Today, unfortunately, humanity does not understand the value of peace. Sometimes, they talk about peace, but they do not respect peace. Peace is essential for humanity, but all we have are wars, wars, wars.

What I really want is peace, peace, peace! I want the true peace of Christ here on earth. I am glad that Christ, the son of God, came to our earth to help us have peace. He is our great brother, our divine brother. And he brought peace. Christ is not for war. Christ is peace!

I know that some Christians fight in wars, but when on is really, really in the line of Christ, in the Spirit of Christ, war is impossible. In that Spirit, there will be a great love for all humankind, not only for our brothers and sisters of the same race, the

same country, but a love for all people everywhere. Then, there will be a general peace, a global peace for all human beings.

How can we get more in the line of Christ, in the Spirit of Christ, given our world today, and accept Christ's gift of peace?

First, we need to try to know Christ. Who is Christ? Christ is the son of God. God the Creator created all human beings. God meant us to live together in love. When the first human being killed another human being, when Cain killed Abel, at that moment, the Creator could have destroyed creation. God's intention for creation, for human beings, was not hate or murder. God's intention for creation was love, love among everyone, as families, as brothers and sisters. God created us to live as brothers and sisters.

Instead of destroying humanity after that first murder, God had the audacity and the love to help human beings by sending God's own son, Christ. Christ was born a human being. He was really God, but he was really a human being. And he accepted a life of suffering and he offered his life for peace, to get rid of death and hatred and murder, and to recreate the world.

"God, you sent your son to our earth to help us. I love your son, Christ, the greatest savior of humanity!"

For several years now, you have joined many of us during Lent as we vigil, pray and demonstrate in the Nevada desert to stop the testing of nuclear weapons. Could you say why you have been willing to travel so far from Brazil to join us in Nevada?

In the big cities, there are so many people, there is so much movement. The desert is necessary for human beings. Human beings need to go to the desert, to think about our own faults, and to try to create a new life, a life without hate, without war, and to discover the plans of God.

We go to the desert because human beings are always thinking about war and planning more wars, and we need to pray for peace.

I know the value of peace and prayer, but many times when we are in our cities, with all that movement around us, it is not so easy to pray and to be at peace. But the desert is a good friend. For me, in our times, I think it is a good idea to go to the desert periodically to pray and to be at peace. There, it is easier to see the face of God. In the desert, it is so easy to discover God, God our creator.

Can you say more about how to pray and the importance of prayer in the work for peace?

What is prayer? Prayer means talking with God. God is everywhere. We are living inside God, and God lives inside of us. How can we hate others when we know God is in all of us? But it is so easy for human beings to forget this. It is necessary and a very good idea to go together in groups into the desert to pray.

In the desert, we do not have all the movements of the cities and the world. We have the mountains. We have the earth. It is a great opportunity to see, to look

around at the earth, to breathe. And in this moment, it is possible to hear the voice of God.

God is always trying to speak with us, but with all this movement around us, all these preoccupations, we are so busy that we do not hear God. But when we are in the mountains, among the trees, in the desert, in that moment, we can hear the voice of God.

In that moment, we can say, "God, your presence is so evident here. It is so clear that you are present here. God, help us."

I don't believe in praying, "Help me," but rather, "Help us!," meaning, "Help all of us human beings around the world. Help all humanity!"

How can we become more nonviolent, more peaceful?

It is necessary to be people who do not judge others and do not hurt others but who respond to the privilege and the call to prayer.

We must pray not only for ourselves, not only for our own families, but an end to all wars, for the whole world, and for the whole human family.

"My dear heart, [he says with his hands folded over his heart, looking down at his heart, laughing], I know you have your preference--your family, your friends, your people in the city. But I need you to break and to be given to the whole world!" [With his hands, he pretends to break his heart in two, and then stretches his hands as far out as they will go, with a smile.]

The heart has a necessity of love. It needs love and when we use our hearts, when we fulfill this necessity of love, we are discovering the Creator.

I don't like to pray alone. The best way of praying is praying with Christ.

"Christ, when you were on the cross, your vision was not only for the people standing around the cross, but for all people around the world, and not just in your time, but in all times. Your eyes were seeing the different generations, the different times, until the last person in history, in order to love them. It is so wonderful to have your help!"

Our God is so wonderful!

Dom Helder, where do you find hope these days?

My big hope is Christ. And fortunately, around the world, more and more people are discovering Christ. Large portions of humanity are not Christians. But without knowing it, they have the idea of God. Many times, around the world, people of different races and religions, without knowing it, have encountered Christ. And that gives me hope.

Christ died for the whole of humanity. If a person does not know Christ, Christ still knows humanity, every human being, in all times, all races. He offered his life for all, for every human being. No one was excluded from the sacrifice of Christ.

I am prepared to meet in heaven all human beings, everyone who did not know Christ, who did not know the name of Christ, who did not know the person of Christ, even though Christ was offering himself for everyone.

I also love very much the mother of Christ. When God decided to send Jesus to help humanity, his own son, God had to select one woman in history to be the mother of God's son. It was a very serious selection by God, deciding who would be the mother of God's son. And God selected Mary.

I love the Mother of Christ. To be a mother is a great privilege, but to be the mother of Christ, the mother of the savior of humanity, Ah! Immediately, she was established as the mother of humanity, the mother of all people, all races, and even, [he whispers] all religions. She is the mother of all people, the mother of God. I love you Mary!

You radiate so much joy, faith and hope, Dom Helder!

If I had to solve all the problems, the injustice, and the sins of the world, I wouldn't have a place for joy. But all humanity's sins are being covered by the blood of Christ, by the body of Christ, by the savior. And so I am hopeful.

For me, there are so many, many surprises in store for us when we finally arrive in the house of God in heaven, that gives me joy and hope, those surprises, to know that all humanity is invited into heaven, including those who do not have the privilege of knowing Christ during their mortal lives.

Sometimes, I speak directly with God the Father and say, "God the Father, you are our Father. If it is possible, in your good will, in your universal love, prepare a great surprise for us. So many people have the impression that they are not Christians, that they are not yours, but bring us together in your house."

You have written about the importance of humanity. Could you say a word about how it is connected with peacemaking, with spreading the peace of Christ?

If I have the impression that people are bad or that people do not have sufficient love, but I think that I myself, that I know God, that I myself love everyone, that I love all humanity, that I myself have a large heart--this is evil!

I prefer to have the hope that in the heart of every human being, there are faults and sins, but there is always love. Always. In every heart there is love. I think for human eyes, it is not easy to discover love in certain hearts, but God is able to discover love there.

What message do you have to your sisters and brothers in the United States?

I would say, my dear brothers and sisters in the United States, we must give thanks to God!

I do not think it is true to say that the United States is a rich country without a heart. No, it is a rich country, but with a heart. I have seen concrete examples around the world, of many, many people who are being helped by the North American people.

All countries, all peoples, have their sins and their weaknesses, and this country is a big country, a rich country, but my testimony is: it is not only a big country, a rich country, but a good country, a human country. I can say that the North American people have a human presence, a Christian presence in many places around the world. There are wonderful examples of the Christian presence in the presence of North Americans doing good work around the world.

People of the United States: give peace to the people of the world, not war! Make peace. Keep the peace. You are a big country, a big force in the world. Try to make your presence around the world, a presence not of death, not of war, but of life, of peace, of love. Give peace to the people of the world.