

Vatican Radio Interview with Marie Dennis

Pope John XXIII's Cold War era Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* or "Peace on Earth," remains "extremely contemporary" and can act as a guide to peace-building in today's world. That's what Pope Francis told participants at a three day Vatican conference this week celebrating the 50th anniversary of the 1963 Encyclical Letter. Experts from Catholic universities and institutions and from the UN, the Council of Europe, the African Union, and the Organization of American States gathered in Rome at the request of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace to discuss the relevance of *Pacem in Terris* to their peace building efforts in today's world.

Among them were the leaders of the global Catholic peace network Pax Christi International. Philippa Hitchen caught up with co-president Marie Dennis, the first woman and first lay person to hold that leadership position. She explained why *Pacem in Terris* has served as a kind of Magna Carta for the work of that organization. Listen to the interview [here](#).

Philippa Hitchen: You are listening to Vatican Radio. Pope John XXIII's Cold War era Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* or "Peace on Earth" remains extremely contemporary and can act as a guide to Peace Building in today's world. That's what Pope Francis told participants at a three day Vatican conference this week, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the 1963 Encyclical letter. Experts from Catholic universities and institutions and from the UN, the council of Europe, African Union, and the organization of American states gathered in Rome at the request of the pontifical justice and peace council to discuss the relevance of *Pacem in Terris* to their peace building efforts in today's world, among them were the leaders of the Global Catholic Peace Network, Pax Christi International, I caught up with Marie Dennis. The first woman and first layperson to hold that leadership position – she explains why *Pacem in Terris* has served as a Magna Carta for the organization.

Marie Dennis: In many ways, of course, the timing, Pax Christi international was a new organization founded after the Second World War, and so by the time *Pacem in Terris* was written, Pax Christi International was listening very carefully to the message of the Holy Father. And so much of what was included in *Pacem in Terris* reflected the commitment of Pax Christi at that time and still now... to reconciliation, to peace, to a fullness of peace... and many of the concerns that are described in the documents were our concerns, and also much of the vision that the document holds out in all of its optimism is the vision that we've been promoting for almost 70 years now.

Philippa Hitchen: Of course the circumstances have changed enormously, that was back in the days of the Cold War. How relevant really is the document today to the work that you are doing?

Marie Dennis: That's a very interesting question because, of course, the context is almost completely different. But, as we have gone through the document over the last few years of reflecting on it, what we believe is the heart of the document is still very very relevant... that some of the optimism, that some of the expectation that we would move to a world beyond the colonialism and so on... that was so prevalent in the document or just breaking out when the document was written. We have moved to other problems so some of the specifics may not match exactly, but in every other way... from the recognition that peace was much more than the absence of war, that it included attention to poverty, to human rights, and to solidarity, the heart of the document is still very relevant including right up to and including these times as we look at the challenge, for example, before the United Nations to be relevant, to be placed where nations of the world come together to deal with the global issues that are effecting our lives. Interestingly, *Pacem in Terris* pointed in that direction very clearly, and we are still figuring out how to do that. The vision is very important.

Philippa Hitchen: You are talking about optimism in the document, and yet wouldn't you agree that there are many disappointments? Here we are half a century on, still looking about how to avoid war.

Marie Dennis: Absolutely I thought it was very interesting in looking at the document how optimistic it was because it was in the middle of the Cold War. Pope John the XXIII hadn't seen the great nonviolent movements that really brought down the Berlin Wall... that shifted the global reality so dramatically. Yet it was very optimistic. At the same time, many of the problems still remain... that we are still struggling with war. We have not reached a good balance between sovereignty and respect for sovereignty and an unwavering commitment to human rights and to peace. So there is a great deal of relevance and much work to be done

Philippa Hitchen: What impact, I'm wondering, has this document had on you and your commitment to justice and peace? And if I'm not mistaken, you started your career as a physicist designing nuclear submarines, is that right?

Marie Dennis: I did, yes, that was a brief career. *Pacem in Terris* was in many ways one of the very earliest challenges that I personally encountered as a young girl and a young woman. Growing up, I went through Catholic schools. I went to a Catholic college. I was very attentive to the voice of the Catholic church, but with *Pacem in Terris*, *Mater et Magistra*, and then with the Council, my whole understanding of faith expanded so tremendously to include not only my own personal journey in relationship with God, with Jesus... but most especially, the obligation that we have as followers of Jesus to engage in the affairs of the world to promote the in breaking and the flowering of the new creation. So,

Pacem in Terris has had a tremendous impact on my life. To have had the voice of the church so clearly calling for deep peace and for what I would say now is sustainable peace, that there are connections to our relationships with other people, that whole sense of right relationships and we are more and more understanding of the relationship to the rest of creation. I think *Pacem in Terris* really started that journey for me in many ways.

Philippa Hitchen: You have also asked for the church to if not end, at least review, its so called just-war theory. Haven't you?

Marie Dennis: In many ways the church has been moving over the last 50 years from looking at nonviolence or pacifism as a legitimate position for individuals but not at a direction in which public policy could go. I think that the church has moved. I think that we have, as people trying to be faithful, come to realize more and more that on the one hand Jesus witness was a witness of nonviolence all the way to the cross, and on the other hand, we live in a world where the possibility of war that is so called just-war is almost non-existent. What we are calling for certainly is at the very least that we rename the criteria that we are using to judge the next steps in terms of our response to potential violent conflict. So just holding on to the idea of a just-war theory implies that actually a just-war is quite easy, and it just has to go through these steps and then this war is just. But of course, that is not the reality at all. So a set of ethical criteria that were designed to make conflict and violence rare, very rarely justifiable have been used much too often to give us an easy entrée to war and violent conflict. So we think that it is time to move beyond that language. Obviously the criteria that would evaluate any direction in terms of international response or internal response to violence, to potential conflict, to oppression, repression and so on – those criteria need to be applied to whatever is our response and we believe that our response is and that our obligation is to identify clearly a much more diverse toolbox of nonviolent tools that can be used in response to threats. The threats are real and we do have to respond to them. But to think we can respond to them with war, we think is just not viable anymore. How to move to new language, to new images in the context of international relations? So often a nonviolent response is dismissed as naïve and just cannot be done. That is just not true! More conflicts that were either already violent or potentially violent were resolved in the 20th century using nonviolence than were using the resort to war. I even think in the most recent examples like in Syria.

Philippa Hitchen: I was going to say what impact, how important is the voice of the Pope and this particular initiative have for Syria?

Marie Dennis: I think that it is tremendously important. The clear insistence that military action was not an appropriate response and that there were other ways to respond, the powerful witness of Pope Francis and all the many

people, Catholics and people of many other faith traditions who prayed with him for peace, I think had a tremendous and very real political impact. Our message as Pax Christi in the very intense debate in Washington was that if we believe in a world where the nations of the world must come together to resolve our greatest challenges than this is the perfect time to do that, that the United States cannot act alone. The nations of the world must find other ways to do it. I think the evidence is really quite wonderful to see the progression so far of steps in diplomacy that have begun to bear fruit, and I think it has been a great example and clearly the moral force and the credibility of Pope Francis in his calling for prayer for peace was very very important. I think it had a big impact on politicians in the United States.

Philippa Hitchen: You've spent a lot of your time with politicians, haven't you? That's what you do in the World Bank and the IMF and the White House. Do you see a changing response to the voice of the church? Do you see a greater willingness to listen to the moral ethical arguments rather than just the real politics?

Marie Dennis: I do. I think that in the world of politics that there always competing voices. I do believe the voice from a moral perspective, from the church, from faithful leaders, especially one like Pope Francis who is his own personal witness has so beautifully claimed credibility, international credibility... I believe that that voice is heard and does have an impact in places where important political decisions are made. But there has to be consonance between our words and the way we act as individuals, as communities, and as a church. So the more coherent we are, the more faithful we are to what we believe, I think the clearer the message is that we bring into political places. I think they are heard. It was quite interesting in this very intense short debate in Washington over the potential military action in Syria. The impact on both the Obama administration, the White House, State Department and the impact on the US Congress of people of faith including the Catholic community calling for another way was beautiful. It was really very helpful, so yes, I do believe it has an impact.

Philippa Hitchen: If words must be backed up by actions by the way the church behaves presumably you are very encouraged by the idea of reforms that we are hearing about now with the meeting cardinals towards the church, that he is more out there serving the people.

Marie Dennis: Absolutely, the message of the Holy Father in the last 6 months has been such a beautiful message of what I understand as the message of the gospel which is a message of service, of solidarity, of accompaniment, of welcome, of inclusion. So the more we as the church can echo that witness in the way that we are present in the world, the more effect we will have in a positive way in helping to nurture peace and to encourage genuine responses to poverty ...through a time in the world in the last how many decades of what I

think of really tragic overwhelming selfishness that – this is certainly true in the United States where we have such a strong individualistic inclination. “I will get mine. I will provide for my security. I will care about my own small circle of friends.” – The message that Pope Francis is making so clear is that that can't be the answer. We have to live in a world where we are all sisters and brothers, where a community is a community that reaches to all of the margins of our world. I think it's a really beautiful moment. I think it speaks very loudly. I'm certain it is true in every corner in the world like in Washington, the United States that many people who have not listened to the Catholic Church for a long long time are listening very carefully and are inspired in very significant ways by the way in which Pope Francis is encouraging us to move.

Philippa Hitchen: One final question, since the beginning of your work, you've been very concerned about the role of women, haven't you in fact? You are the first woman to be president of Pax Christi, how do you feel about the future? We've heard talk about developing a feminine theology. Where do you see the church moving in that sense?

Marie Dennis: Yes it's a great challenge. I do believe that what has most significantly been a sign of hope for me has been the inclination and commitment of Pope Francis to relationships. It's evident that he has friends, that he has friendships, that he treasures respectful relationships. I believe, I hope that we are moving as an institutional church, as a community, to a place where women's voices and experiences will be heard with respect... where relationships within the church with women will be honored and treasured. Yes, I have understood the impetus and the positive impetus to talk about a theology of women. But, actually, we have spectacular women theologians who have been developing a very articulate, deep, challenging theology from the perspective of a woman's experience. I am hopeful that that richness that is so evident around the world among women will be welcomed in a way that it can also nourish the church. I hope that will happen. I think that as more women are included in the circles of conversation and decision making that becomes more possible. I'm hopeful, but it's a great challenge.