



## **Pax Christi International Peace Award 2013**

***Speech delivered by Marie Dennis***

***Co-President of Pax Christi International***

It is my sincere honour and pleasure to present the 2013 Pax Christi International Peace Award, which is given each year in recognition of a person or group that embodies the ideals of the Pax Christi movement, and that has worked in an exemplary manner for a more peaceful and just world. Since the first Peace Award was bestowed in 1988, a remarkable collection of groups and persons from all continents have been honoured, drawn from all levels of society, men and women of consummate character, committed to the values of peace, reconciliation, active non-violence and the promotion of dignity and human rights around the world.

### **Peace Award 2013**

The Board of Pax Christi International and the Cardinal Bernardus Alfrink Peace Fund, a Foundation established in honour of one of Pax Christi's first International Presidents and sponsor of the Peace Award, *have decided to present the 2013 award to International Memorial Society of the Russian Federation for its deep commitment to the promotion of human rights in their country and for its outstanding efforts to keep alive the memory of the victims of political repression in Russia's recent history.*

We are pleased to have with us two representatives of the International Memorial Society: Mr. Arseny Roginskiy, President of the Board of Directors, and Mr. Alexander Cherkasov, Director of the Human Rights Center.

### **Promoting human rights**

Pax Christi International acknowledges Memorial's comprehensive work in the field of human rights. For Pax Christi, peace and human rights are intimately connected. There cannot be peace without the fundamental recognition of the value and dignity of every human being – which is at the core of every human rights instrument; at the same time, only in a framework of peace can human rights fully develop.

Through its over 60 member organisations Memorial reveals a continuous dedication to bringing Russian society closer to the ideals of democracy through the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. Its member organisations are widely engaged in research, education, and advocacy. Issues such as xenophobia, racism and discrimination, protection for refugees and forced migrants, and human rights during armed conflicts within the Russian Federation are well-known to Memorial members. We remember vividly Natalya Estemirova, who, in her work with Memorial, struggled to bring to the surface the truth about war crimes

and human rights violations in Chechnya. Natalya was killed on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009, while examining specific serious cases of torture and impunity. She had made public the existence of secret prisons in Chechnya, where people were being held by the newly installed Chechen government. Despite the murder of Estemirova, Memorial is still active in the North-Caucasus. The International Memorial Society is also an active promoter of youth engagement in educational initiatives to increase historical awareness.

### **Keeping the memory of the victims alive**

Since its inception in the late 1980s the International Memorial Society has been committed to preserving the historical truth about the crimes of totalitarianism and resistance to it; to perpetuating the memory of the victims; and to offering social support to the survivors. By doing this Memorial helps support transitional justice efforts and reconciliation processes, as well as the construction of a re-imagined political community, paving the way for future generations and the prevention of future violence.

Pax Christi believes that acknowledging the truth about a violent past that generated contemporary problems is essential to building peace now and for the future. Furthermore, if it is to help consolidate peaceful and democratic societies, this truth must reflect the experience of victims and survivors of the violence. Facing the past and engaging in transformative justice processes, a community may be able to prevent the inter-generational transfer of victimhood and fuel for inciting new violent conflicts and thus undermine the backbone of the spiral of violence.

### **A challenging present**

Pax Christi member organizations and partners in Russia, including Memorial, brought to the attention of the gathering we had earlier this year in Poland an urgent contemporary challenge, which is the increasing lack of freedom for civil society organizations in Russia. Since 2006, a new law on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) has put pressure on human rights defenders, making their work more difficult, for example, through stringent financial requirements. Authorities and government owned media have spread disinformation about the unreliability of NGOs, stating that they are betraying the country in exchange for money. In addition, the Law on Extremism has affected human rights defenders since revealing serious human rights violations was made an act of extremism and of state treason. In addition, since 2012 all foreign funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Russia have had to register if they were involved in political activities; and if so, they also had to publish in their organisational statutes that they were acting as a "foreign agent". The label of "foreign agent" brings back old memories of Soviet repression. On 30 April 2013, Memorial received a letter requiring them to register as a foreign agent.

In light of the pressure experienced by NGO's in Russia today, the award also symbolises Pax Christi International's solidarity with all defenders of human rights within the International Memorial Society, and with the Russian human rights community at large.

### **Highlighting Contemporary Peacemakers**

The Pax Christi International Peace Award highlights the accomplishments of women and men throughout the world who are having a tangible impact on violence and injustice in the

spirit of Pax Christi. This award is designed to promote the work of contemporary peacemakers, who strive for peace and promote the universal values of human rights and human dignity on a daily basis and with deep conviction.

Too often we fail to pause long enough in our work for peace and human rights to honour and celebrate the important contributions to a more peaceful and just world of so many wonderful people and organizations around the world. Our award is an effort to do just that.

Dear Mr. Roginskiy, dear Mr. Cherkasov, we are inspired by the courage and decided commitment of all members of the International Memorial Society in favour of a peaceful and democratic society, fully respectful of the rights of every citizen. Congratulations on receiving this Award.

Leuven

14 November 2013