

# Catholic

## UPDATE

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## Lighting the Way to Interfaith Peace

CAROLE ST. LAURENT



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Our faith calls us to warmly accept those we encounter in our lives from different faiths. While this is our reality in Catholicism, current U.S. policy and public sentiment show alarming increases in anti-Muslim activity, and many hate crimes in America target Jews. More than ever before, we need to stand up for and practice religious tolerance individually, in our parishes, and in our countries.

Each year, January 1 marks World Day of Peace, which is fitting since New Year's Day is traditionally devoted to personal reflection, renewal, and adopting resolutions to do better. Peace in the modern world has never been easy, intuitive, or inevitable. And it appears to be ever more fragile and challenging to build in a world rife with acts of terrorism and political tensions. Challenging, but not impossible. In *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Martin Luther King, Jr., advocates that opposing forces have the potential to infer change—light drives out darkness and love deters hate. Jesus and the Scriptures are the driving lights of our faith, which have the power to inspire and inform as well as provide spiritual direction and hope on our paths.

Consider the biblical narratives of Jesus' interactions with people of other faiths. Religious differences bitterly divided Jews and Samaritans in first-century Palestine, but Jesus showed great respect for the Samaritan woman at the well, and used her (a woman in an adulterous relationship) as the first missionary to her people (John 4:4–42). Furthermore, Jesus said upon a mountain, “The hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth” (John 4:23). It's the attitude of the heart, not the location of the body that makes worship holy. In his message for the Fiftieth World Day of Peace, Pope Francis underscores this sentiment: *Whoever accepts the Good News of Jesus is able to acknowledge the violence within and be healed by God's mercy, becoming in turn an instrument of reconciliation. In the words of Saint Francis of Assisi: "As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that you have greater peace in your hearts"* (3).

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I pray that Jews and Muslims will stop profaning the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem with strife and blood, and rather keep peace at the site that is holy to both religions. God forbid that we negate our faiths in the name of defending them.

King David proclaims, “Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:15). In Romans 12, Paul exhorts and shows us how to live at peace with all. God's love for all people and nations is evident throughout the Bible. Universal covenants were initiated through Adam and Eve, then Noah. When God called Abraham, he promised to make great nations of both Ishmael, father of the Arabs, and Isaac, father of the Israelites. Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, worshiped the God of Abraham, who spoke to Hagar and saved her and Ishmael's lives (Genesis 21:8–21). Furthermore, it was God's eternal intention that, through Abraham, all nations would be blessed. Part of that blessing was demonstrating God's kingdom on earth through radical social justice laws which limited capitalism, and welcomed outsiders while also giving them equal rights in line with native-born Israelites, remembering that they were former slaves and refugees from

Egypt: “You shall love the alien as yourself” (Leviticus 19:34). In obedience to Scripture and Jesus' example, let us also live in *shalom, salaam* deep peace, with people of other faiths. We also need to reflect on areas where we might have ventured into the shadows and need to return to the light. We can shine as individuals, faith communities, and citizens advocating for political change.

## What Does Interfaith Peace Look Like?

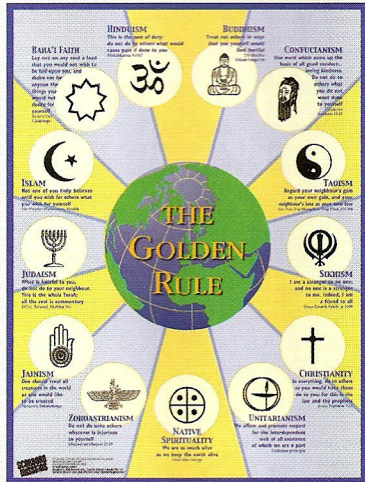
- † It means respectful, harmonious relationships with people of different religions.
- † It upholds the dignity of every human being as created in the image of God, and recognizes his or her inalienable human rights.
- † It fulfills Jesus' command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31).
- † It appreciates the positive aspects of other faiths while agreeing to disagree about the differences.
- † It does not mean compromising one's own beliefs, nor does it ask others to compromise theirs.
- † It precludes calling anyone an enemy based on that person's faith.



CNS PHOTO/TTLER ONSBURN

Since its inception in 1893, the Parliament of the World's Religions strives to be a beacon of light to the interfaith movement. It oversees one of the largest celebrations of interfaith peace. Its stated mission is "to cultivate harmony among the world's religious and spiritual communities and foster their engagement with the world and its guiding institutions in order to achieve a just, peaceful, and sustainable world."

At a reception where plans for a celebration were announced, I felt fortunate to be one of 100 supporters from many faiths and nations in attendance.



Support interfaith dialogue with "The Golden Rule" poster, which shows the golden rule in the sacred writings of 13 faiths.

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Later, as I spoke with a graduate of a program in counterterrorism who is a Muslim, I mused whether those of us who considered ourselves peace lovers and promoters could call ourselves "the 99 percent" or even higher. However large a majority we are, I was struck by the reality that peacemakers in the world far outnumber the peace breakers.

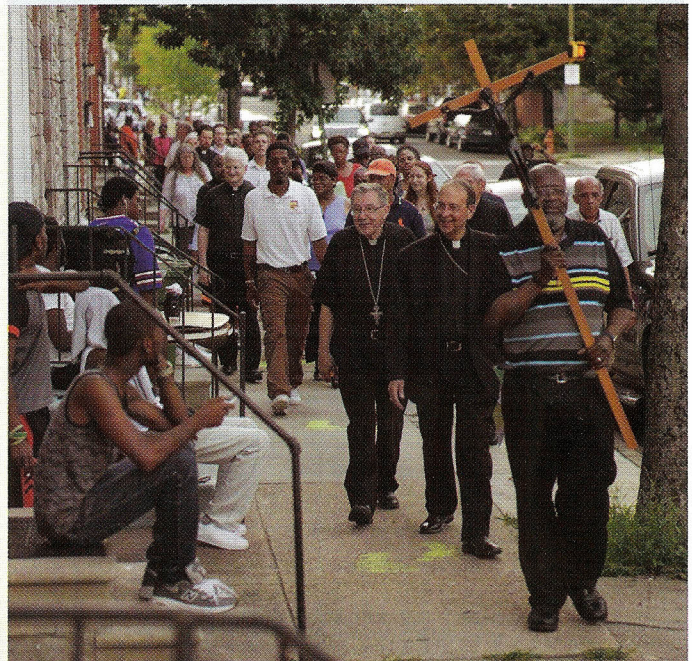
Despite our shared vision for peace, in speaking with different attendees, I found that stories of religious oppression, colonialism,

and prejudice emerged. Essential to bridging these divides is the ability to come to the conversation with humility. We must listen humbly to those from First Nations, Muslim, Hindu, and other backgrounds to understand their personal experiences that have led them to feel like outsiders. We should be quick to understand that, for all the blessings our faith has brought us, others may have had negative experiences with Christianity. In college, I had a close friend who was Muslim. We studied parallel passages of the Bible and the Quran to understand each other's faiths.

While that was my only intentional interfaith activity in college, my life has been rich in other interfaith experiences. I have studied and read about other religions; traveled to primarily Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindu countries; and enjoyed a home stay with a Jewish family over the Sabbath. I visited a Bahá'í temple in Israel and spoke to adherents and friends about their faith. I had a powerful spiritual experience praying in Turkey in the mosque beside the shrine of the thirteenth-century Sufi poet and mystic, Rumi. There was a powerful feeling of love in that place that exploded through my chest as I prayed in the women's prayer room. Instead of a hotel, I chose to stay in a home in the West Bank, living with a Palestinian Christian family for two weeks, deepening my empathy for those who are forced to live in conflict zones. These are some of the ways we can deepen our personal interfaith understanding and empathy, and expand interpersonal relationships.

## As a People of Faith, How Can We Strengthen Interfaith Peace?

- † Let's love each other. Love is more important than knowledge, for knowledge will pass but love is eternal (1 Corinthians 13:3-13).
- † Let's learn about one another. Learn with humility and curiosity, recognizing there are differences in every religion, including Christianity.
- † Let's accept that God is vastly beyond human understanding. "At present, we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face [in heaven] (1 Corinthians 13:12).
- † Let's acknowledge our shared values and desires, such as devotion to God, love for others, and peace.
- † Let's avoid disputing the external details of one's religious practices and accommodate the other's dietary differences (Romans 14:14, 17-20). One way we can put this into action is to support *halal* and *kosher* diets in school cafeterias. *Halal* is anything that conforms to Islamic law. *Kosher* foods are those that conform to Jewish dietary law.



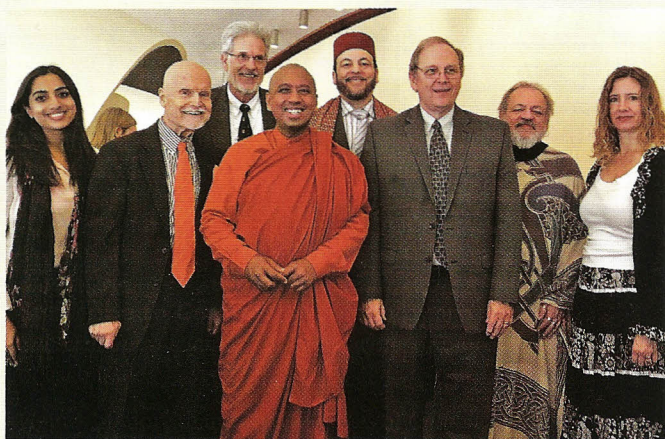
CNS PHOTO/KEVIN J. PARKS

January 1 marks World Day of Peace....Peace in the modern world has never been easy, intuitive, or inevitable.

Jesus reiterates the blessing of the kingdom in his frequent proclamation that “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15). Therefore, join in kingdom activities, which supersede the Mosaic laws of justice with God’s laws of love. In his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), Jesus denounced anger, not just murder and lust, not just adultery, divorce, oaths, and legal retribution. He commanded people to “love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father” (Matthew 5:44b–45a). The Book of Acts shares the exciting story of the radical obedience of the early church and its explosive growth. How would such radical obedience be a source of light and change in society today?

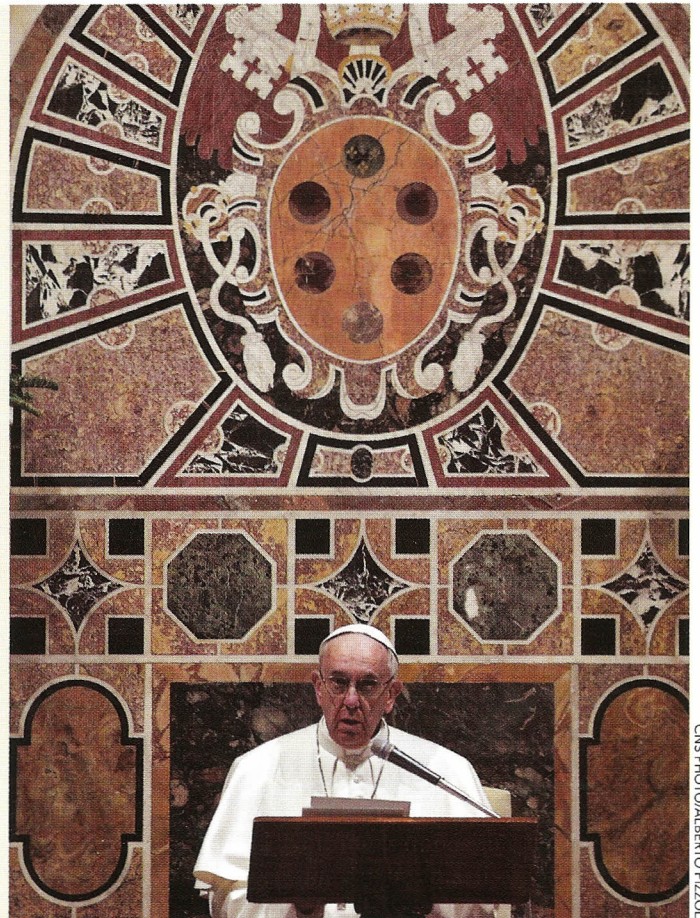
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*Carole St. Laurent, a Canadian, holds a master’s degree in environmental science, specializing in information and communication technologies for international development. Carole has initiated a number of award-winning digital-storytelling projects in this field. She works as a senior advisor for Library Systems at World Vision International. She pursues her passion, world peace, through her organization, Crypeace.org, by nurturing empathy and peace, and sharing digital stories from around the world, including Cyprus, Israel, Rwanda, Turkey, and Uganda, to name a few countries.*



Parliament of the World’s Religions press conference—From left: Sara Rahim, Dr. Larry Greenfield, Dr. Mark G. Toulouse, Bhante Saranapala, Dr. Hamid Slimi, Dr. Robert Sellers, Andras Corban Arthen, Carole St. Laurent.

PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR. PHOTOGRAPHER: MICHAEL WELDON



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### A Word From Pope Francis on Interfaith Peace

“All of us want peace. Many people build it day by day through small gestures and acts; many of them are suffering, yet patiently persevere in their efforts to be peacemakers” (*Regina Coeli*). In 2017, may we dedicate ourselves prayerfully and actively to banishing violence from our hearts, words and deeds, and to becoming nonviolent people and to building nonviolent communities that care for our common home. [Quoting St. Francis of Assisi,] ‘Nothing is impossible if we turn to God in prayer. Everyone can be an artisan of peace.’”

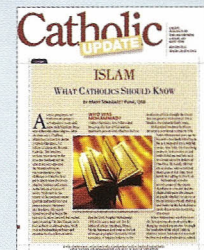
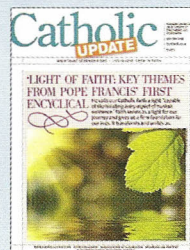
January 1 message for the Fiftieth World Day of Peace, December 8, 2016

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