

Bridging the Divides

International conference on faith-based reconciliation and peacebuilding commemorating the 30th anniversary of *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* by St. John Paul II and the Year of Jan Karski

“Some consider reconciliation as an impossible dream which ideally might become the lever for a true transformation of society. For others it is to be gained by arduous efforts and therefore a goal to be reached through serious reflection and action. Whatever the case, the longing for sincere and consistent reconciliation is without a shadow of doubt a fundamental driving force in our society, reflecting an irrepressible desire for peace. And it is as strongly so as the factors of division, even though this is a paradox.” RP 3

Theme:

If it can be argued that religion contributes to conflicts all over the world, then it must have its part in a reconciliation process. With this thought in mind the Centre for Thought of John Paul II organises the **Bridging the Divides** conference focused on whether religion might prove a factor in reconciliation processes after and beyond the solutions offered by high politics. The main question around which the conference will evolve is what role does religion play in reconciliation processes and does it have a potential for peacebuilding which politics is blind to? Can a Catholic religious imagination shape the approaches, goals, and horizons of peacebuilders? To what extent is the figure of Jan Karski a source of inspiration?

Date: November 3, 2014

Venue: Centre for Thought of John Paul II, Foksal 11, Warsaw, Poland.

Conference synopsis:

“The originality of this proclamation is in the fact that for the church reconciliation is closely linked with conversion of heart: This is the necessary path to understanding among human beings.” RP 8

The idea of peacebuilding is elusive and defies straightforward definition. Understood as a process, it is not as easy as eliminating violence. In fact, the exact moment of terminating given conflict is often impossible to pin down. Furthermore, the efforts necessary for creating a durable peace are neither short-term nor finite. Thus, peacebuilding is an ongoing process, though with a specific purpose: to rebuild nations and communities torn apart by disagreement and to prevent recurrences of conflicts. This is also true of reconciliation. Fostering understanding between groups of peoples divided by violence and mistrust is a long-term undertaking which needs to be implemented on many levels. True reconciliation must not be limited to the political, social or economic spheres; instead it ought to encompass the spiritual realm too. Peacebuilding is a way of conflict transformation which

strives to comprehend the nature of a conflict in its full range, including the deep historical roots as well as the personal and individual dimensions.

It is often asserted and accepted without proper analysis that religion is a cause of violence rather than a force for peace. Religion has played an important role in peace processes because of the enterprising efforts of various religious actors. However, even if religion at times becomes part of the problem, it is only logical that it also must constitute a part of solution. Accordingly, in an attempt of enhancing the study and practice of Catholic peacebuilding, the conference aims to cover the theology, doctrine, methodology, and experiences of faith-based efforts to build peace and foster reconciliation.

A special source of inspiration will be the figure of Jan Karski, who brings the issue of morality and the issue of conscience back into International Relations. The conference will draw upon his legacy by reminding the values which guided Karski – a nonpareil exemplar of bridging the divides between people of different races, faiths and political orientations. Jan Karski's legacy and the values he represents will be analysed in the contemporary context during a special memorial lecture.

The main issues discussed are religion and peacebuilding, theology of peace, peace processes and mediation, violence prevention, early warning, conflict resolution, negotiated settlements, redress of grievances, human rights protection, restorative justice and the deployment of other instruments. The main goal of the conference is three-fold; we aim to:

- examine the role of theology, the dynamics of institutional relationships, and spiritual strength provided through the Catholic Church to peacebuilding efforts and reconciliation processes in the world;
- analyse the role of grassroots peacebuilding initiatives carried out by religious groups and the faithful;
- investigate the nature and direction of a true dialogue and collaboration between various religious traditions.

Program Agenda:

Welcome

Keynote address

Papers and Panel discussions

The following issues will be mentioned and explored:

- *Religious Paradigms of Peacebuilding (examining how religious strategies for peacebuilding and reconciliation can be implemented in conflict);*
- *Religious versus Traditional Practices of Peacebuilding (analysis of historical and contemporary case studies of disputes and conflicts from across the world to identify best practice guidelines);*
- *Religious Actors as Peacemakers (with exploration of new approaches to peacebuilding and reconciliation)*
- *Institutions, Organisations and Peace (assessing and identifying the cooperation in promoting peace and reconciliation);*
- *Why Religion Matters? (considering the faith-based approach to peacebuilding and reconciliation);*
- *Bottom Up or Top Down? The role of civil society and local communities (identifying and discussing the best approaches in peacebuilding and reconciliation);*
- *The Role of Catholic Church – hopes and challenges;*
- *Faith-based Reconciliation: Forgiveness – the missing link;*
- *The figure of Jan Karski as an exemplar of bridging the divides.*

Synthesis and closing remarks.

Lunch break and coffee provided.

The conference features **keynote addresses** by **Dr William T. Cavanaugh**, Associate Professor of Theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. He holds an MA in Theology and Religious Studies from Cambridge University and a PhD in Religion from Duke University.

The keynote address will dispel the myth of religious violence:

The idea that religion has a dangerous tendency to promote violence is part of the conventional wisdom of Western societies, and it underlies many of our institutions and policies, from limits on the public role of religion to efforts to promote liberal democracy in the Middle East. William T. Cavanaugh challenges this conventional wisdom by examining how the twin categories of religion and the secular are constructed. A growing body of scholarly work explores how the category 'religion' has been constructed in the modern West and in colonial contexts according to specific configurations of political power. Cavanaugh draws on this scholarship to examine how timeless and transcultural categories of 'religion' and 'the secular' are used in arguments that religion causes violence. He argues three points: 1) There is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion. What counts as religious or secular in any given context is a function of political configurations of power; 2) Such a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion as non-rational and prone to violence is one of the foundational legitimating myths of Western society; 3) This myth can

be and is used to legitimate neo-colonial violence against non-Western others, particularly the Muslim world.

Other conference participant is **Thomas Ryba, PhD** - Notre Dame Theologian-in-Residence at the Saint Thomas Aquinas Catholic Center at Purdue University, as well as Adjunct Professor of Philosophy and Adjunct Professor of Jewish Studies at Purdue University.

Call for Proposals:

Policymakers and professionals involved in peacebuilding projects and reconciliation processes around the globe have fallen into the fallacy to look at conflicts, especially when they occur in failed states or nations in transition, as phenomena belonging purely to the material realm. Too often, it is assumed that political, social or economic conflict occurs due to palpable factors and, without looking more deeply at these relationships, that religions' only role is only as a factor contributing to violence and never as a reconciliation agent.

Centre for Thought of John Paul II invites papers for presentation and publication that support a shift from the focus on religion as a cause, to finding and utilizing the advantages of faith-based reconciliation and peacebuilding. The goal is to explore the potential of religion and culture to effect reconciliation around the world debate the effectiveness of faith-based peacebuilding and to consider the integral role which religious groups play in reconciling warring parties and repairing the social fabric. Preferred papers will include modern examples with an emphasis on practical application or refer to Jan Karski as the source of inspiration for bridging the divides.

Proposal Guidelines:

Proposals should include an abstract not to exceed 800 words in length, which describes the substance of the paper in relation to conference theme, the title of the paper, biographies of the author(s), and any affiliated agency, organization, or institution. All proposals should be sent to Dr Monika Gabriela Bartoszewicz by email at mbartoszewicz@centrumjp2.pl by **September 15, 2014**.

Abstracts will undergo a double blind peer review.

Accepted proposals will be notified by September 20, 2014.

Accepted authors should submit complete papers by October 20, 2014. Please note that the presentation should last maximum 20 minutes, thus adjust the length of your paper accordingly.