

Chapter 7

Christ the Prince of Peace

In this chapter we continue to take a long, loving look at the reality of Jesus Christ. We do so as disciples of the Lord who are committed to peace. The gospel call to walk with Christ entails a commitment to live in peace with ourselves and with others and to serve as peacemakers in the world. Jesus names peacemakers “blessed,” and he promises that they will be called “children of God” (Matt 5:9). And so we move from reflecting on Christ as priest and brother to gazing on Christ the prince of peace.

Whenever I preside at the celebration of the Eucharist, two of the prayers at the liturgy that speak to me very directly immediately follow the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. I usually find myself vocalizing these prayers with particular emphasis. In the first, the priest says, “Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil, graciously grant peace in our days, that, by the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.” And in the following prayer the priest directly addresses Christ: “Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your Apostles: Peace I leave you, my peace I give you, look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and graciously grant her peace and unity in accordance with your will.” As the years have gone by in my ministry as a priest, these prayers have come to be very significant to me, and I connect them closely with the meaning of the Eucharist.

In the Letter to the Colossians, Paul (or the Pauline author of this letter) enumerates a list of virtues in which the Christians should “clothe” themselves. He exhorts these believers to exhibit compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. And then he says, “And let the

peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace in which you were also called in one body” (Col 3:15). The peace of Christ is something to which those who comprise the Body of Christ in the world are called. The peace of Christ is a kind of “vocation” within the Christian vocation. It lies at the heart of the Christian vocation. Ultimately, this peace is a gift from Christ, the prince of peace.

Knowing that we are called to live in the peace of Christ is inspiring and encouraging, yet many believers have difficulty in actualizing this teaching in their lives. Even when I pay special attention to the prayers of the Eucharist just cited, I find it to be a formidable challenge to internalize Christ’s gift of peace. We live in a fast-paced, rapidly changing and stress-filled world. It is difficult not to allow that stress to get inside of us. We extol the capacity to “multi-task;” applicants for jobs highlight their ability to multi-task on their resumes. Often when I teach theology, even graduate theology, I have to remind my students to put away their cellphones unless they need them for something that directly pertains to the class. Despite that reminder, some students cannot resist the temptation to text their friends during class. I also see people texting when crossing a busy Chicago street, sometimes while pushing a baby stroller at the same time. It seems that we are very often trying to do three things at once.

We also live in a world that is plagued by violence. Every evening, the broadcasts of the national and local news set this violence before our eyes, whether it is the gun violence that afflicts our city streets or the various arenas of international conflict around the globe. The scourge of violence has even struck our schools, taking the lives of innocent children. It is difficult to fathom the fact that elementary and high school students now must conduct regular drills to prepare for an active shooter on the school premises. The drumbeat of violence that we see and hear on the news, and sometimes up close, has a way of getting inside of us after a while.

Peace is a precious and rare commodity in the contemporary world. Heeding the call of the Letter to the Colossians to allow the peace of Christ to control our hearts remains an abiding challenge for all of us.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and the Gift of Peace

When I gaze on the face of Christ the Prince of Peace, I am reminded of the book written by the late archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (d. 1996)– *The Gift of Peace*.¹ In this gem of a book, Cardinal Bernardin reflected on the journey of what were the final years of his life. During those years, he was faced with the onset of cancer and with a false allegation of sexual abuse by a former seminarian. *The Gift of Peace* is filled with wisdom about life with God, especially about living within the peace of Christ.

Writing about his arduous journey through surgery and postoperative treatment for cancer, Bernardin says that he prayed to God for the grace to handle those experiences without undue bitterness or anxiety. He observes, “God’s special gift to me has been the ability to accept difficult situations, especially the false accusation against me and then the cancer. His special gift to me is the gift of peace.”² Further along in the book, after receiving the news that his life expectancy was less than one year, Bernardin recalls what he said to the news media about the situation: “While I know that, humanly speaking, I will have to deal with difficult moments, I can say with all sincerity that I am at peace. I consider this as God’s special gift to me at this moment in my life.”³

In thinking about Cardinal Bernardin’s personal testimony, I have wondered what it was that he did to create an openness within himself to receive Christ’s gift of peace throughout the tumultuous final period of his life. If peace is Christ’s farewell gift to us (see John 14:27), then

we need to be open enough to receive that gift. We need to fashion within ourselves a receptivity to the gift of peace. Three recurring themes in Bernardin's book stand out for me: his commitment to personal prayer; his effort to let go of things he could not control; and his desire for reconciliation. It seems that these commitments, which Bernardin made and kept, paved the way for his reception of Christ's gift of peace at the end of his life. I believe that these same commitments also pertain to us in fashioning a receptivity to Christ's gift of peace.

Commitment to Personal Prayer

Cardinal Bernardin offers a very honest account of the challenge that some of his diocesan priests presented to him while he was bishop of Cincinnati. He recalls that at the time he was not setting aside adequate time for personal prayer. He writes, "It was not that I lacked the desire to pray or that I had suddenly decided prayer was not important. Rather, I was very busy, and I fell into the trap of thinking that my good works were more important than prayer."⁴ At a dinner with three priests, two of whom he had ordained, Bernardin shared some of his difficulties with personal prayer. The priests were quite honest in their responses, telling him that he was urging a spirituality on others that he was not fully practicing himself. They went on to challenge him to set aside quality time for prayer. As a result of that conversation, Bernardin decided to give God the first hour of each day, in order to be present to God in prayer and meditation so that he could open the door ever wider to God's entrance into his life. He recalls that this practice put his life into an entirely new and uplifting perspective.

Throughout his book Bernardin returns to this theme of personal prayer again and again. It is a leitmotiv of his book. He describes how difficult it was for him to pray after his surgery. He wanted to pray but, like many who suffer from illness, he found himself too distracted with

the physical discomfort to do so. He told friends who visited him in the hospital, “Pray while you are well, because if you wait until you’re sick you might not be able to do it.”⁵ He describes the way in which his regular prayer in the morning helped him to stay connected with the Lord throughout the remainder of the day. Bernardin encourages his readers to “keep plugging away” at prayer even when it does not seem to be going well. He observes that “if you do give the time, little by little you become united with the Lord throughout your life . . .”⁶ He then proceeds to say, “Without prayer, you cannot be connected or you cannot remain united with the Lord. It’s absolutely essential.”⁷

Mature Christians are accustomed to hearing exhortations about the importance of prayer. In some ways, it is “standard fare.” Such advice is so familiar that we can easily become deaf to it. But in my own journey of faith and ministry, I have slowly realized the wisdom and essential importance of advice about prayer like that offered by Cardinal Bernardin. And I have noticed that when I fail to give adequate attention to prayer in my own life, my chances of experiencing Christ’s gift of peace decrease significantly. While prayer is not a “magical potion,” there seems to be a direct correlation between a deeper life of prayer and a deeper experience of peace

We can build on Bernardin’s observations and explore the insights of three other thinkers who can be helpful in deepening our understanding of personal prayer. The first is the great twentieth century German theologian, Karl Rahner, whom we have already encountered in this book. The second is the popular spiritual writer Bishop Robert Morneau. And the third is Pope Francis.

Often when we do take time for prayer, we find it difficult to attend to what we are doing. I find that to be the case in my own life, particularly when I am being pressed by multiple demands. I become easily distracted. Karl Rahner addresses that experience in his book, *On*

*Prayer.*⁸ This spiritual classic is based on a series of Lenten sermons that Rahner delivered at Saint Michael's Church in Munich, Germany in 1946 – less than a year after the end of the Second World War. Rahner was asked to preach a Lenten mission in the church in which he had been ordained fourteen years earlier. He chose the topic of prayer. It is difficult to imagine what the parishioners must have been feeling at the time, as they were trying to recover from the trauma of a brutal war and were beginning to grapple with the horror and shame of the Nazi atrocities.

In his sermons Rahner evokes an experience that must have been imprinted on the memories of the parishioners. He refers to their experience of fleeing to air raid shelters when their city was being bombed during the war. After the explosions, the people would emerge from the shelters covered with debris. Rahner says, “Let this be taken as the symbol of modern life.” He suggests that we often find our hearts to be obstructed, buried beneath all of the rubble of life.⁹ We frequently find our hearts to be covered with debris.

I find Rahner's image of the rubble-covered heart to be illuminating. This “rubble” can consist of many things: the worries and anxieties that flood our minds; experiences of disappointment and suffering, which can leave our hearts hardened or even embittered; the resentments that we harbor because of the ways that others have treated us. When we come to God in prayer we need to ask God to set our hearts free. We must invite God to clear away the rubble that covers our hearts and minds so that we can be free enough to attend to God's presence with openness and love.

Sometimes our time of prayer becomes an exercise of worrying in the presence of God. We remain fixated on a particular problem or simply preoccupied with all that we need to do. At other moments our hearts are rubble-covered with feelings of disappointment or resentment, and

we forget to ask the Lord to clear away the debris and to set our hearts free. Rahner's advice about praying for the grace of freedom is essential for receiving Christ's gift of peace. We must continually ask God to liberate our hearts.

Bishop Robert Morneau proffers ten basic principles to guide people in their prayer.¹⁰ The centerpiece of Morneau's principles of prayer is deceptively simple. He writes, "In prayer I must bring this me to the living and true God."¹¹ We might call this the "honesty principle" of prayer. It actually forms the foundation of genuine prayer. Morneau observes, "To play a role in the presence of the Lord prohibits encounter at the deepest level of our being. To demand perfection flowing from the ideal self only leads to guilt. God invites us to come as we are, in our grace and our sin."¹²

Knowing that we are invited to come to the living and true God as we are can be a liberating discovery. It can also be a daunting challenge at times, even for people who are experienced in prayer. This truth is liberating because it is grounded in our belief in God's compassion; as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, Christ is our compassionate high priest. It is freeing because we come before the God who knows us through and through and takes us as we are. A close reading of the gospels assures us that when anyone came to Jesus sincerely seeking his help, he never sent them away. He never said, "Go home; get your life straightened out, and then we will talk." He always took the person where they were and helped them to move to the next step in their journey to God. So our belief that we can bring "this me" to the living and true God is grounded in the life and ministry of Jesus.

At the same time, this honesty principle can also be challenging for us because sometimes it is difficult to come before God as we are. For any number of reasons, we may be inclined to try to conceal aspects of ourselves and our lives from the Lord, even though we are

aware that it is impossible to do that. If we are haunted by the gut feeling that we will never quite measure up – if that is the “default position” of our psyches – we will find it too risky to share our real selves with anyone, even with God. If we think that we can bring ourselves to the living and true God only after we have addressed all of our personal problems, we will never get there. In order to become a person of prayer, it is essential to speak to the Lord as honestly as possible about everything that is going on in our lives. Cardinal Bernardin’s spiritual testament reflects the honesty of his own conversations with the Lord. And that was one of the keys to his realization of the gift of peace in his life.

Pope Francis has often spoken about the importance of prayer for the life of every Christian. He envisions a church that is contemplative. In *The Joy of the Gospel* he emphasizes that the evangelizing work of the church must be fueled and sustained by prayer. Francis observes, “What is needed is the ability to cultivate an interior space which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity.”¹³ He employs strong language to underline his point: “Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless: we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervor dies out.”¹⁴ The words about prayer that Francis originally addressed to a group of catechists gathered in Rome are particularly compelling. The pope told the catechists about a young man who had approached him and explained that, while he was very happy to meet the pope, he did not have the gift of faith. Francis did not berate him or chide him for his lack of faith. Rather, he urged the young man not to become discouraged, and he assured him of God’s love for him. Then he suggested that the young man should let himself be gazed upon by God. Francis then proceeded to say to the catechists, “And this is the same thing I would say to you: let yourselves be gazed at by the Lord.”¹⁵ He spoke similar words

to a group of priests about prayer before the Blessed Sacrament: “When we priests are before the tabernacle, and we pause there for a moment, in silence, we then feel Jesus’ gaze upon us once more; this gaze renews us, reinvigorates us.”¹⁶ Francis’ invitation to allow ourselves to be gazed upon by the Lord reflects his vision of a church that is contemplative. His words also open a way to experience Christ’s gift of peace in our lives.

Letting Go

Cardinal Bernardin begins *The Gift of Peace* with a section that he titles “Letting Go.” And the challenge of letting go, of learning to entrust himself more fully into the hands of God, permeates his reflections throughout the book. He admits that this was an ongoing struggle for him, as it is for all of us. Bernardin remarks, “Still, letting go is never easy. I have prayed and struggled constantly to be able to let go of things more willingly, to be free of everything that keeps the Lord from finding greater hospitality in my soul or interferes with my surrender to what God asks of me.”¹⁷ In a reflection on the mystery of suffering, he says that “our participation in the paschal mystery . . . brings a certain *freedom*: the freedom to let go, to surrender ourselves to the living God, to place ourselves completely into his hands, knowing that ultimately he will win out! The more we cling to ourselves and others, the more we try to control our destiny – the more we lose the true sense of our lives, the more we are impacted by the futility of it all.”¹⁸ Bernardin suggests that “it is in the act of abandonment that we experience redemption, that we find life, peace and joy in the midst of physical, emotional and spiritual suffering.”¹⁹

After Bernardin found out that his cancer had returned and was inoperable, he presided at a communal celebration of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick in a suburban Chicago

parish. He told the people gathered for the liturgy that they must place their lives completely into the hands of the Lord. As he put it, “We must believe that the Lord loves us, embraces us, never abandons us (especially in our most difficult moments). This is what gives us hope in the midst of life’s suffering and chaos.”²⁰

Despite the evident wisdom of Bernardin’s remarks, many people, including me, find it quite difficult to let go of the things that we cannot control in life. The motto by which some of us tend to live is: “It’s never too soon to start worrying.” I often find it very difficult to place everything into the hands of the Lord, especially when I am faced with multiple demands and responsibilities. But the Lord has ways of slowly teaching us these things, often through the people he places in our lives. For me one of those people was a young adult who participated in a summer conference for Catholic young adults that I directed a few years ago. John had been an excellent athlete in high school and was on his way to play football in college. But on the day of his high school graduation, he dove into his family’s above-ground pool, hit the bottom, and suffered a severe spinal cord injury that left him paralyzed from the waist down. He uses a motorized wheelchair and drives a specially equipped van. Having now graduated from college, John teaches at a high school.

John has a wisdom and sense of self-possession that are far beyond his years. At the opening session of the summer conference, there was the usual icebreaker in which participants were asked to talk with the person sitting next to them and then introduce that person to the entire group. Each person stood as they introduced their partner. When the time came for John to introduce his partner, he put the entire group at ease by simply saying, “I think I’ll stay seated for this one.” Our group encountered a number of mobility challenges throughout the week at the sites we visited. Some of the venues were not as accessible as we had been led to believe,

making it awkward and embarrassing for John and for us. But John never seemed to become flustered by any of it. He just took it in stride and made the best of it. I was amazed at the serenity that he exhibited throughout the week, even amidst unexpected and difficult circumstances. He seemed to be a young man who was at peace. I believe that Christ taught me something about letting go through this inspiring young adult.

The ability to entrust our lives and our projects to Christ frees us to live emotionally and spiritually healthy lives. It enables us to take time for rest, for the Sabbath time that each of us needs. Psalm 127 is a beautiful prayer that serves as a healthy reminder for all who have difficulty letting go of their work and its results: “If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labor. If the Lord does not keep watch over the city, in vain do its watchmen keep watch. In vain is your earlier rising and your going later to rest, when God pours gifts on his beloved while they sleep.” The ability to let go enables us to recognize that maintaining relationships with significant people in our lives is essential, no matter how busy we may be. Those relationships help to keep us human and whole. The willingness to let go also makes possible the necessary detachment from the results of our endeavors. For those who minister in the church, this means that ministry does not become “all about us.” The familiar adage attributed to Mother Teresa of Calcutta can sound a bit hackneyed, but there is genuine wisdom in it: The Lord does not call us to be successful but to be faithful. Letting go of success – however we define success – is terribly difficult at times. It does not entail approaching our work in a haphazard or unprofessional manner. But we know well that we often have little control over the results of our efforts. So the willingness to let go instills in us a certain freedom and peace. Cardinal Bernardin’s insight into the importance of letting go forms an enduring dimension of his witness to the gift of peace that he received from Christ.

The Desire for Reconciliation

Cardinal Bernardin's well-known meeting with the man who falsely accused him of sexual abuse points us to a third dimension of his experience of the gift of peace. He writes about his desire to meet with Steven Cook after the accusation had been retracted and the legal case withdrawn. He said: ". . . I felt deeply that this entire episode would not be complete until I followed my shepherd's calling to seek him out. I only prayed that he would receive me. The experience of false accusation would not be complete until I met and reconciled with Steven."²¹ When they finally met, Bernardin told Steven that he had prayed for him every day and would continue to pray for his health and peace of mind. In reflecting on their experience of celebrating the Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist together, Bernardin says, "Never in my entire priesthood have I witnessed a more profound reconciliation. The words I am using to tell you this story cannot begin to describe the power of God's grace at work that afternoon. It was a manifestation of God's love, forgiveness and healing that I will never forget."²² Bernardin related this event to the work of the Good Shepherd, "to seek and restore to the sheepfold the one that has been, only for a while, lost."²³

We explored the theme of reconciliation in chapter five. There I mentioned the important work of Robert Schreiter on reconciliation and forgiveness. Schreiter observes that, while reconciliation requires concrete strategies that are effective, it is really more of a spirituality than a strategy. Reconciliation is about something much deeper than technique. As he states it, "If reconciliation is principally God's work, then we are but 'ambassadors for Christ' (2 Cor 5:20)."²⁴ Schreiter speaks of building communities of reconciliation; such communities "are places where memory can be recovered, a memory that is redemptive of the suffering of the past

and not a continuing destroyer of persons and communities.”²⁵ Communities of reconciliation are also communities of hope, where a common future can be built together.

It appears that what Schreiter says about the spirituality of reconciliation was evident in the life of Cardinal Bernardin. He became an ambassador for Christ in his outreach to Steven Cook, as well as to many other people. And his desire for reconciliation was an essential dimension of his finding peace in his life. Each of us is invited to embrace the spirituality of reconciliation of which Schreiter speaks. This is an approach to life and to other people that seeks to heal and unite rather than retaliate and divide. A spirituality of reconciliation continually strives for liberation from the chains of resentment. It is on the lookout for possibilities of dialogue where there has been misunderstanding. It searches for common ground where positions and perspectives appear to be irreconcilable. The spirituality of reconciliation impels believers to create communities where the grace of forgiveness is the “atmosphere” within which they live and relate to one another.

At the end of *The Gift of Peace*, Bernardin offers these remarks: “What I would like to leave behind is a simple prayer that each of you may find what I have found – God’s special gift to us all: the gift of peace. When we are at peace, we find the freedom to be most fully who we are, even in the worst of times. We let go of what is nonessential and embrace what is essential. We empty ourselves so that God may more fully work within us.”²⁶ Cardinal Bernardin’s path to receiving Christ’s gift of peace included three personal choices: his commitment to personal prayer; his effort to let go things of he could not control; and his desire for reconciliation with others, including the man who very nearly ruined his life. I suggest that our own path to the peace of Christ entails these same three choices. And Bernardin is certainly correct in his final

observation: when we are at peace we find the freedom to be most fully who we are as disciples of the Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your Apostles: Peace I leave you, my peace I give you, look not upon our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and graciously grant her peace and unity in accordance with your will, who live and reign forever and ever.

For Personal Reflection

- What does Christ's gift of peace mean in my life?

- How can I experience Christ's peace more deeply by strengthening my commitment to personal prayer, by letting go of things I cannot control, and by striving for reconciliation in my relationships?

¹ Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace: Personal Reflections by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997).

² *Ibid.*, 96.

³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁸ Karl Rahner, *On Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ Robert Morneau, "Principles of Prayer," in *Spiritual Direction: Principles and Practices* (NY: Paulist Press, 1992), 11-28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17-18.

¹³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)*, 262.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Pope Francis, Address to the Participants at the International Congress on Catechesis, September 27, 2013, *The Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2014), 16.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, Speech Prepared by the Holy Father and Given during the Meeting with Diocesan Priests of the Cathedral (Cassano all' Jonio), June 27, 2014, in *Disciples Together on the Road: Words of Pope Francis for Priests* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2016), 36.

¹⁷ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²² *Ibid.*, 39.

²³ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁴ Robert Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁶ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 152-153.