

OPEN LETTERS FOR PEACE

(Translated from French)

Dear Maurice,

International relations are becoming much tenser. We can see it in Europe with the war in Ukraine and the recent involvement of North Korea, in the Middle East with the armed conflict around Israel against the backdrop of Iran, and finally in Asia with the tensions around Taiwan. I now fear a third global war, 80 years after the end of the Second. With this in mind, I think back to your article 'Where do I stand between solidarity and witness for peace?' in which you relate a meeting of Quaker Friends in Germany, published in *Lettre des Amis* of France in the summer of 2023. You explain the dilemma some people feel when faced with an aggressor country, and the need to disregard the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' (Dt 5:17). At the end of your article, you ask what the situation is with Friends in France.

For my part, as a man of faith, and like the Quakers who preceded us, I am very attached to the Ten Commandments and the various recommendations of Jesus. To my mind, they are much more than moral guidelines or good rules for living together. They are doors that open onto Life. They are reason itself. You describe this dilemma as follows: 'Here, as in all situations, there is incompatibility between the ambition to conform to an attitude that is considered right or desirable and the impossibility of really living that attitude as soon as it requires a sacrifice of ourselves or of others'. You've put your finger where it hurts.

Jesus tells us: 'But I tell you not to resist the wicked. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone wants to accuse you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak too. If anyone forces you to walk a mile, walk two with him' (Mt 5:39-41). This is not an invitation to become a victim, but neither is it an invitation to become an aggressor; it is an invitation to find a third way. I was talking to some Catholic friends about this, and one of them said, 'You have to be creative!' He found the right words.

I'm thinking of the period between the wars, when a large-scale peace movement emerged with the slogan 'Never again! This movement, based on emotion, collapsed like a house of cards. As a result, the First World War claimed 15 million lives and the Second World War claimed 55 million, with all its attendant horrors, fear and darkness.

Based on this unfortunate experience, I am convinced that we must prevent future calamities and annihilate those that already exist by seeking this third way. To give peace this foundation of reason.

What do you think, dear friend?

Dominique Boillaud

Dear Dominique,

Thank you for getting to the heart of the matter by noting the extent to which the global situation is deteriorating, with no apparent possibility of convincing the warring parties to back down, let alone listen to reason. I agree with you that it is absolutely necessary to find a way, even if it is only the drop of water that the hummingbird carries in its beak to help put out the fire, to make the voice of 'reason from the heart' heard by all those who, blinded by the vanity and irrationality of their identification with nationalist chimeras, lose themselves in their orgy of destructive violence. How many victims, how much destruction of resources and infrastructure, how many destroyed towns and mined fields must we continue to deplore before the ammunition reserves are exhausted, or before the belligerents face up to the fact that all their violence leads only to their own extinction?

But what might this third way be, this 'bedrock of reason' as you call it? As for the attitude needed to walk this path, I absolutely adhere to the Jesuianic source you outline. I can think of no other attitude that can give us the strength we need to withstand what is happening around us and perhaps even with us. In spite of everything, we must, as George Fox encourages us to do, go out into the world (almost rather than in the world) with joy and address (even before responding) that which is of God in every human being we meet, with the unshakeable confidence that comes from the certainty of bearing witness to Life whatever happens.

It's a bit like what I imagine myself to be when Jesus says: 'You will have tribulations in the world; but take courage, I have overcome the world'. For me, overcoming the world means transcending the world within oneself, and therefore knowing that we are in and of (Eternal?) Life, even if we remain in and of the world. So to be reasonable is to recognise that Life wants to manifest itself in everything that lives, and therefore to respect Life in all its forms instead of defining ourselves by intellectual concepts emanating from the pursuit of selfish goals and supported by arbitrary justifications devoid of common sense and, what's more, of compassion.

If I don't agree to die to the world, I can't be 'born to Life'. In my opinion, taking the third path, the path of non-violence, is only possible on this condition. As I said in my 1993 conference, by making the unconditional choice of non-violence I must shoulder the mourning of all the victims that the violence of the other will make. This is the first step in a non-violent attitude. The second step will consist of preparing, establishing and training civil and civic defence attitudes supported by appropriate structures and technical means. I have just read an inspiring leaflet published in Germany by the Association for Civil Defence, presenting a typical dialogue between a pacifist and a sceptic, in which is outlined how it is possible for the victims of an armed invasion to defend themselves concretely without weapons and without committing violence against the aggressors.

Maurice de Coulon

Dear Maurice,

Thank you for your reply and for the short text by Majken Jul Sørensen, who argues that armed defence against an armed aggressor only delays peace and a resolution of the conflict. I think of Gandhi's words: 'It is not the enemy you have to fight, but the enemy's mistake, the mistake your neighbour makes when he thinks he is your enemy. Make an ally of your enemy against his error'. This is a statement full of the reasoning that Jesus gave above.

But all these recommendations cannot be applied in the same way as a law or a belief. This foundation of reason needs to be metabolised, with fortitude, by experience –experience of God in ourselves and in others, of course, but also experience of the evils that devastate humanity.

You do a wonderful job of outlining the first steps that can be taken in this third way: by working hard on ourselves to reach out to others. I've noticed that ordinary Ukrainians and Russians don't talk to each other. Worse still, within the same family, separated by the border, one thinks the other is telling lies. The same goes for other conflicts. We need to encourage links between ordinary people and give everyone, without exception, their divine dimension. As long as people do not love each other, we will pay the price.

I think we're both taking a few steps along the road to this third way. Let's hope that others will continue to think along these lines and gradually make this path practicable.

Dominique Boillaud (France)

Dear Dominique,

Yes, the whole world is paying the price for the fact that human beings do not love each other. But what is the reason for this inability to love one another? Is it just their immaturity, their lack of spiritual independence, the lack of a personality of their own? Or is it perhaps their existential impossibility of overcoming or sublimating their dual nature as animals endowed with reflexive consciousness? Or rather, is it their inability to free themselves from mimetic rivalry in their desire to appropriate the things, both material and ideal, with which they identify?

I think that as long as people do not think and feel within themselves that 'the other is themselves', they will not be able to truly love others and will therefore remain capable of doing violence to them, however close or far they may be. Acknowledging that 'the other is oneself' implies an act of awareness on the part of man, from which emanates the faculty of reasoning himself, at the moment when his emotional nature and instinctive mimicry want to take over and push him irremediably towards an act of destructive violence.

So in my opinion, the only way to establish peace in the world is to redouble our efforts to raise the awareness of man and society, and to train them to control their belligerent impulses, through their reason, having recognised and internalised that 'the other is oneself!'

Maurice de Coulon (Germany)