

Defending peace and justice

Pax Christi's mission for 80 years

Founded in 1945, Pax Christi is celebrating 80 years of fighting at all levels and around the globe. Martha Inés Romero, the movement's Secretary General at international level, looks back at its history and current projects.

How has the movement been prophetic since its creation in 1945: on what subjects and at what key moments in history?

With a network of over a hundred local organisations around the world, Pax Christi addresses the root causes of violent conflict and its consequences, giving a voice to marginalised local communities in global discussions within decision-making bodies, to find context-specific solutions. Pax Christi has a fundamental message: **only through nonviolence can we build a more peaceful world.**

The movement was born to reconcile two divided societies - Germany and France. Since then, Pax Christi International has been involved in virtually every major conflict: in dialogue with other Christians - Protestant, Orthodox, and others during the Cold War - in advocating dialogue and diplomacy; in seeking to mobilise Christians and other civil society organisations; in promoting civic service for young people in what are now called the peripheries. And over the last two decades, by strengthening the capacity of communities to analyse contexts, transform conflicts, engage in active nonviolence and defend their rights in the face of injustice, exclusion and the extraction of raw materials.

Who are the great figures in the history of Pax Christi who can inspire us?

Of course, in our long history, many women and men, some of them martyrs in the cause of peace and justice, have left their mark on our lives and inspired our actions as a worldwide movement! Here are a few examples: two former presidents of Pax Christi International, both conciliar fathers: Cal Bernard Alfrink (Netherlands) and Mgr Luigi Betazzi (Italy). But also Dorothy Day (United States), Franz Jägerstätter (Austria), conscientious objector during the Second World War, Saint Oscar Romero (El Salvador), whose life and witness offer a remarkable insight into the extreme challenges we face today - the challenge of incarnating the words and witness of Jesus. There is also Berta Cáceres (Honduras), an indigenous environmental defender who inspires our nonviolent struggle for ecological justice at a time when Mother Earth is being damaged.

"Pax Christi International has always been involved in public debates."

When did Pax Christi make the voice of the poor heard beyond the movement?

Pax Christi International has always been involved in public debates, speaking out for the poorest and most excluded! This includes the East-West conflicts during the Cold War; the conflict in the Middle East, advocating - with our partners on both sides, Israel and Palestine - more than ever now in the face of the genocide in Gaza and the violence in the region led by the Israeli government - for the right to live in peace and dignity; the conflicts in the Balkans, East Timor, Sudan, Nicaragua, West Africa, Myanmar and many others. The movement's voice has had an impact on governments, on other faith-based networks, in the decision-making arenas of the United Nations, the European Union

and the African Union. As members of ICAN1, we played a decisive role in the approval and slow ratification process of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). We are calling for the rights of communities in the countries of the South to be rapidly taken into account in European and national laws, and for energy transition policies to be fair, inclusive and democratic for these communities and for the future of the planet.

What are the main challenges to peace today?

Without a doubt, **the first challenge concerns geopolitical conflicts**, that ‘fragmented world war’ to which Pope Francis refers, which is causing serious humanitarian crises, as in Sudan, Gaza, Myanmar and Ukraine. Linked to this is a situation that challenges us all: the true capacity of the United Nations to be what it was founded to be: the organisation responsible for protecting future generations from the scourge of war... Along with other civil society organisations, we support the reform of the UN (including the Security Council and its power of veto), because of the urgent need to make it more representative, inclusive, transparent, efficient, effective, democratic and accountable.

The second challenge to peace is the environmental degradation caused by the techno-economic paradigm of this system. Pope Francis says in *Laudate Deum* (9): *“The reality is that a small, richer percentage of the planet pollutes more than the poorest 50% of the total world population, and that the per capita emissions of the richest countries are far greater than those of the poorest.”* We humans are part of an Earth community that must be healthy and just if we are to survive. There is an interconnection between war and preparations for war, environmental damage, climate change and the scarcity of essential resources.

The third challenge is the ‘crisis of civilisation’, which is much more than an ‘economic crisis’, or a concatenation¹ of several ‘development’ crises as traditionally considered. The historical process of ‘globalisation’ over the last fifty years, particularly through the belief in ‘unlimited prosperity’ and mass consumerism, and the acceleration of an economic model promoted by the countries of the North with serious repercussions in the countries of the South. The impact of the stock markets is affecting Bolivia, South Sudan and East Timor. As for science and knowledge, they are subordinated to the instrumental rationality of technology, which is governed by the principles of profitability, efficiency and accelerated fluctuation. Moreover, anthropocentrism and patriarchy lead to the instrumentalisation of the non-human world and of women, and to contempt for migrants. There is a crisis of ethical and cultural values. Fortunately, indigenous peoples, people from grassroots movements and peacebuilders around the world are resisting this steamroller with their own spiritual, cultural and social values.

Does each region have its own ‘cry of the earth’?

I would say each region, but also several issues such as the **nuclear threat**, this senseless and morally flawed strategy of nuclear deterrence and autonomous weapons (killer robots). We campaign for the elimination of nuclear weapons and for a nuclear-free world. We support the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), raise awareness of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear war and work with other organisations to put pressure on governments to take concrete steps towards disarmament.

The members of Pax Christi in the countries constantly urge their governments to respect their obligations under the NPT and to support measures in favour of nuclear disarmament. In regions

¹ Concatenation: a chain of causes and effects.

affected by nuclear testing, they mobilise and advocate for an end to these tests. Recently, in Geneva, Pax Christi Netherlands 'cried out' for the victims of nuclear testing: *"The more than 2,000 nuclear tests - mainly carried out by the nuclear-weapon states present in this room - have forever changed the lives of thousands of women, men and children, especially little girls, because girls exposed to the use and testing of nuclear weapons have developed cancer twice as often as boys."* Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand calls on the United States to quickly take practical steps such as withdrawing its missiles from high-alert areas, ceasing nuclear threats and declassifying 'near misses'.

The second 'cry from the earth' concerns the work of one of our groups for **a just peace in Palestine and Israel and, since 7 October 2023, in the Middle East**. In Palestine, both in the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank, the humanitarian crisis is severe, and these dramatic circumstances will lead to genocide before our very eyes. Pax Christi International systematically condemns violence on all sides and calls for an end to the blockade of Gaza. We support initiatives that promote dialogue and reconciliation, advocating for international pressure to protect human rights and establish a lasting peace. Our efforts include advocacy meetings at the UN and the EU, coordinated letters to religious leaders, as well as participation in demonstrations, masses and moments of prayer. We also work closely with and continue to support our members, partners and friends in the field. In September 2024, we held the PCI 2023 Peace Prize ceremony in Rome, honouring the Parents Circle Family Forum.

The third theme relates to **the cry of the poor in the countries of the South**, affected by the extractive industries. For Pax Christi, there can be no peace without ecological justice. Armed conflict and resource extraction projects have a significantly negative impact on the way communities interact with their environment - and this affects us all. Conflicts over land, water and other resources are increasing, and global approaches are needed to transform these conflicts. Pax Christi International's approach to environmental issues is strongly informed by the encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

In partnership with other organisations, we raise awareness of the link between environmental degradation and conflict (including nuclear-related environmental damage). We advocate sustainable policies by supporting local movements. We support indigenous communities and vulnerable communities affected by the extractive industries, who are resisting through non-violent means for the preservation of the environment and fair, democratic and inclusive transitions. In Latin America and the Caribbean, we learn with humility and solidarity from our partners, through the way indigenous and Afro-descendant communities live an eco-spirituality rooted in their relationship with Mother Earth and the care of Creation. We supported the campaign for religious institutions to divest from fossil fuels and reinvest in solutions to the climate crisis. Across the regions, our movement is present in many ways, actively listening to the cries of the poor and the Earth and advocating with decision-makers for sustainable peace.

Pope Francis has promoted a global ethic of nonviolence. He calls on the Church and the world to understand and adopt nonviolence as the way of Jesus and a powerful practice for building social peace. Current conflicts underline the urgency of such a paradigm shift. We regularly publish statements, organise webinars and reflect on how our Movements should continue their nonviolent struggle for a lasting and just peace in the world.

"Pax Christi's spirituality is based on an absolute belief in the dignity and worth of every human being."

What links can we forge between Hope and Reconciliation?

Pax Christi was born out of an initiative for reconciliation. Our spirituality is based on a belief in the absolute dignity and worth of every human being and the need to care for Creation. Our spirituality and practice also link reconciliation and justice for victims, so **reconciliation is at the heart of our mission.**

At a time when there is so much mistrust, violence and animosity, a lack of unity and love, Pope Francis' Fratelli Tutti reminds us that there is still a chance to revive these values that are fundamental to the survival of humanity. A proposal for a world of fraternity/sorority, where all countries can be part of one great human family, appears to be a welcome challenge.

When we celebrated our 70th anniversary in Bethlehem, the Assembly concluded: *“Real peace is what we strive for, and hope is one of our deepest values. It makes us what we are, courageous peacemakers, connected across regions and continents, addressing complex violence through nonviolence and promoting truth and reconciliation in our local communities.”* **For Pax Christi International, nonviolence is at the heart of the Gospel and a way to face the crises of our time.** It is a force for unity and reconciliation that mobilises kindness, imagination, humility, courage and tenderness. It is agape love and the holiness of life in action. It decolonises the spirit. It defies cruelty. It rehumanises the traumatised. It fosters trust and connection. **It is a healing response to the cries of the earth, the cries of the poor and the cries for peace.** It is essential to a Laudato Si' future. Without hope, vision and solidarity, neither the oppressed nor the oppressors can find a way out of violence, war and the culture of death. **Defending life, peace and reconciliation is Pax Christi's international responsibility.**

Interview by **Marine de Vanssay**, [Pax Christi France](#).