Catholics, Nonviolence, Just Peace (Rome, April 2016)
PRE-CONFERENCE REFLECTION PAPER
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In 1999, I walked into Camp Rakovica. There were 1,500 Kosovar refugees in this camp on the dusty outskirts of Sarajevo. They had come by bus, car, and on foot. First held in the expansive bottling rooms at the Coca Cola factory, the refugees now live in an old cattle barn, in tents, and on an open field.

We were invited into the barn's converted milking room and given the best of the plastic seats around a plywood table. Forty families live here in 6-by-8 foot cubicles separated by curtains. The men told us that Serb soldiers herded them out of their homes. One asked us to find information about his brother, who he presumed was dead in Kosovo. Adem, the oldest man in the camp at 80, wore a blue wool beret and his weatherworn face glistened with tears. Thirty members of his family had been killed by Serb paramilitaries in Kosovo.

The women stand around the ring of conversation holding children on their hips. They served us coffee in chipped red cups. Harija, in her mid-30s, shot her words at us like fire. "How can I live with this pain that my neighbor—my husband shoveled snow from her walk before he even cleared our own—stood in our yard while I was hanging laundry and spoke aloud how she was going to kill me and my children? She was trying to decide between mortar or sniper."

There was no doctor in this camp. The outhouses were overflowing. The only food available was bread and canned vegetables. The graffiti on the wall shows a young man with a gun to his head.

One man led me down a shoe-strewn hall. He opened the curtain and there, on the bunk bed, lay a 2-day-old baby boy wrapped in clean linens and a rough army blanket. The mother looked worn and happy in her torn T-shirt and dusty skirt. I prayed over the Muslim child, making the sign of the cross on his forehead. No one seems to mind the mix of religious symbols.

War is the great evangelizer. As NATO tossed Tomahawks into Slobodan Milosevic's tinderbox, Madeleine Albright said she'd pray for Serbia. At the same time, in the foxholes of Belgrade basements, cultural atheists were coming to Christ. While Belgrade burned and Pristina became a ghost town, prayer seemed to be the most powerful weapon in our arsenal. But how do we separate the arrogant petitions of the powerful and the desperate pleas of the weak from that revolutionary act that "moves mountains"?

Authentic prayer brooks no illusions. It is a process of disillusionment. Disillusionment requires education. Education requires context.

For more than 40 years, Tito and his successors squelched religious affiliation or ethnic identity for the sake of a "unified" Communist Republic of Yugoslavia. After Tito's death, the country went into sharp economic decline. In 1982, *The Wall Street Journal* ran a story on the upheaval caused by an International Monetary Fund austerity program in Yugoslavia. The program was causing unrest, especially in a small province called Kosovo.

**Lesson one.** The end of communism's enforced monoculture produced a renaissance of ethnic and religious identity and pride in the Balkans. Genuine pluralism cannot be produced by force.

**Lesson two.** Budgets, international monetary systems, and structural adjustments are moral issues with real and ethical consequences.

In 1986, Slobodan Milosevic became head of the Serbian Communist Party. He made a powerful nationalistic speech in Kosovo that effectively stole the national agenda from democratic forces and the Serbian resistance movement. His rallying cry was that Kosovo could never be separated from Serbia. In 1989, with massive popular support, he cracked down on opposition, purged the party of reformist rivals, and abridged autonomy in the regions of Kosovo and Vojvodina, establishing de facto martial law.

**Lesson three.** Past behavior is an important indicator of future behavior. Milosevic was an educated, urbane, and charismatic leader. He was also cruel and desperate to hold on to the last stronghold of communism in Europe. While we must always appeal to the "king within the man," we should not be surprised by—and more importantly, we should be prepared for—the response of the tyrant.

While Milosevic was preoccupied with genocide in Bosnia, Kosovar Albanians—under the leadership of Ibrahim Rugova—organized a pacifist resistance movement modeled on Gandhian strategies. It was mainly unrecognized and unsupported by the international community. The death knell of the resistance was the Dayton Accords, when the European Union not only recognized Yugoslavia and Milosevic as its leader, but also rewarded Bosnian Serbs, who had committed the worst acts of genocide since the Nazis, by giving them half of Bosnia.

**Lesson four.** Appeasement has no place in building a sustainable peace with just foundations.

Early in 1998, after the Dayton Accords, Serb forces massacred ethnic Albanian civilians in Kosovo during a seven-month "anti-terrorist" sweep. Albanian dissident Adem Demaqi promoted a more aggressive nonviolent approach to Kosovo independence, calling for mass demonstrations and strikes. The Serb military responded with brutal force. As despair built among the Albanians and the war in Bosnia wound down, the militant Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army formed. They smuggled in weapons and began an armed guerrilla offensive.

**Lesson five.** By the time we come to a place where violence seems the only option, the failure is not simply in the moment, but in how we arrived at the apparent lack of options. The time to address a situation is before it devolves to violence. Once we are in the midst of violent conflict, peacemakers must be active in negotiating justice between the warring parties and interceding on behalf of the victims—all the while building the groundwork of a just peace.

**Lesson six.** Nonviolence is like horseback riding. When you get thrown off, you have to climb back in the saddle. Grappling with the hard questions about applying nonviolence in real-world situations can make us stronger, even when we don't have simple or clear answers.

In the U.S. Christian commentator Chuck Colson decried the lack of church protest against the war. "What makes this silence even more disturbing," he said, "is that the situation in Yugoslavia raises profound moral questions that the Christian church is uniquely qualified to address." Theologian and activist Ched Myers reminds us that the body politic can be possessed by a vicious demon of silence just as the mute boy was in the gospel of Mark. Jesus tells us that the demon of silence can only be exorcised by prayer and fasting.

The prayer we are called to is at once profoundly personal and profoundly political. It consists of contemplation and resistance. Contemplation is the process of dismantling illusions and authentically seeking truth. Resistance is the act of rebuilding, both personally and politically, on a firm and true foundation.[]