

**2021 Pax Christi USA “Teacher of Peace” Award  
Acceptance Remarks  
July 31, 2021**

**Fr. Bryan N. Massingale**

I’m at a loss for how I can thank you adequately for honoring me. I deeply appreciate your warm welcome, generous words, and many personal expressions of appreciation. From the moment Bishop John Stowe (an inspiration and ally for getting into “good trouble”) called to ask if I would accept Pax Christi’s award, I have been moved and somewhat embarrassed by your trust. Great giants and pioneers of social justice have received this honor: Dorothy Day, Helen Prejean, Martin Sheen, Ray East, and other outstanding leaders in the American Church. Since learning of your decision, the words of a Sesame Street song have been buzzing in my head: “One of these things is not like the others.” As I shared that sentiment with friends and colleagues who heard the news, they reassured me that I belonged. I am not sure I totally believe that yet, but I trust your judgement and theirs. So, I embrace this award with joy and with pride in the organization that grants it.

I accept this award with pride in Pax Christi USA. The reasons for my pride in you are two-fold. The first is your courageous witness. Standing for peace and justice is not easy. Moreover, Pax Christi is the *Catholic* peacemaking organization, and let’s be

honest: at times, your relationship with the official Church can become strained, to put it mildly. Working for peace in a fractured world – while standing within and speaking out of a troubled and ambiguous faith tradition which too often aids and exacerbates those fractures – takes courage, perseverance, and grace. Your message and witness are not always welcomed by those in power in both country and Church. So, I take pride in being recognized by you: women and men of courage, faith, and perseverance.

The second reason for my pride is that honoring me with this award is itself an act of faithful courage. I mean, honoring someone who is Black, publicly gay, and a Catholic priest who denounces white supremacy and ecclesial homophobia as threats to social peace and forms of idolatrous faith – well, there are easier choices that could have been made. Honoring my ministry opens you to vilification, scorn, and rejection from those who pose as guardians of the faith. If Jesus were alive today, and witnessed the vitriol on certain Catholic websites, he would add to his list of Beatitudes, *“Blessed are you when they blog about you and post vile slander against you because of me.”* Having received more than a few of such rebukes and rejections from church leaders and members for my ministry, I treasure your recognition and support. As I told Bishop John, his phone call with this news came at a time when I was despondent, and wondered, “What’s the use? Who needs this crap?” (Or some other word). All this is to say, this honor – your affirmation of my ministry and advocacy – is more treasured than I can express.

Of course, we are not strangers to each other. I have had the privilege of both working with your Anti-Racism task force and of addressing this national assembly on three past occasions, in 2003, in 2010, and most recently at your 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration in 2013. At that time, I gave a challenge to Pax Christi USA. I declared that if it was to be relevant and on the frontier as a Catholic peacemaking movement with justice, then it had to become more “intersectional” in both theory and practice. Peace, I declared, can no longer be a stand-alone issue. The crises that face us – militarism, racism, ecology, and poverty – are interlocking, overlapping, and compounded. Single-issue groups and struggles will be neither effective nor compel people’s attention. To paraphrase the great Audre Lorde, many people do not have the luxury of engaging single-issue struggles because they – *we* – do not live single-issue lives.

Yes, Pax Christi enters the justice struggle through a particular lens, namely, a deep concern for peace and a decisive “no” to violence. But these cannot be its exclusive focus if it is to not only accurately understand society but also effectively engage it.

So, I challenged Pax Christi USA: To remain relevant and on the frontier as a Catholic movement of peacemaking with justice, you must be perceived as not only anti-war and pro-nonviolence. You must also make explicit linkages between peacemaking, racism, consumerism, and ecological justice. And you had to be LGBTQ inclusive. This award today is a sign of the seriousness with which you engaged that challenge.

In preparation for today, I re-read that address. Everything I said then, I re-affirm today with a resounding “Amen.” “Intersectional” is a word often invoked today, now more than in 2013. While an “academic” sounding word, its meaning is straightforward, namely, that power relations of race, gender, class, and sexuality (among others) are interrelated and work together, building upon and mutually shaping each another. This means that the threats to peace and justice are complex and multiple. So, the work of peacemaking and peacebuilding must be complex and multiple as well.

This leads to my main message today: *The greatest threat to peace in our time, both nationally and even internationally, is the rise of white nationalism.* White nationalism is the existential, visceral conviction that this country – its public spaces, its history, its culture – belong to white people in a way that they do not and should not belong to “others.” That America is, was meant to be, and always should remain, a “white Christian nation.”

This means that multiracial democracy is an existential threat to white nationalism. The results of the 2020 election, with the election of the first president whoever used the phrase “white supremacy,” the election of the first woman and woman of color as the vice president (with the first Jewish spouse of a president or vice president), and the elections of the first Black and Jew as US senators from Georgia – this election was an existential threat to white nationalist hopes and dreams, and a

confirmation of its deepest fears. The election had to be overturned by any means necessary, including allegations of fraud, armed rebellion, and violent insurrection.

The brutal mob violence of January 6 was a clear declaration that many white Americans would rather live in a white dictatorship than in a multiracial democracy. If democracy means sharing power with people of color, and especially Black people, they want no part of it. White nationalism, white supremacy, is inherently violent. It depends upon violence and the threat of violence – police violence, carceral violence, rhetorical violence, mob violence, lynch violence – to create it and maintain it.

White nationalism is the gravest threat to peace precisely because it is intersectional, threatening social stability and human flourishing on multiple levels and fronts. Its commitment to *racist political and cultural supremacy* is obvious, manifested in voter suppression laws, crusades against “critical race theory” (which most of its opponents have never read), and public vitriol. But white nationalism is also *anti-women*, as evidenced in the macho posturing of its former presidential standard bearer, the overwhelmingly male violence of January 6, and the public vilifications of both Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Representative Liz Cheney – indeed, the denunciation of any woman who refuses the directives of male leadership. White nationalism is *anti-immigrant* and *anti-life* with its cruel family separations, inhumane caging of children, and callous indifference to Brown bodies seeking shelter and safety. White nationalism is also *anti-LGBTQ*, as evidenced in its homophobic and toxically masculine rhetoric and

its hysteria surrounding the smallest attempts to recognize the humanity of trans persons. It is *an ecological threat* to the survival of the planet, with its obstinate refusal to accept the irrefutable reality of climate change. And white nationalism is *a threat to global health* and stability, through its irresponsible and reckless denigration of mask wearing and vaccination in the face of the greatest health crisis to afflict humankind in over a century.

I do not exaggerate: white nationalism is a grave threat to both democracy and peace. It is nakedly racist, blatantly homophobic, violently sexist, environmentally irresponsible, and recklessly narcissistic. If Pax Christi is to be relevant as a Catholic movement of peacemaking with justice, it must name white nationalism as the greatest threat to peace. It must realize that this threat will persist for at least the next three years, certainly through the 2024 election cycle, and probably beyond. And your peace activism must understand white nationalism as the intersectional scourge that it is.

This is all very heavy. So let me finish with where I concluded my 2013 address: on the note of contemplative spirituality. White supremacy/white nationalism is a soul sickness, an ailment of the human spirit of a magnitude for which we do not have words to describe. Something catastrophic is happening in our country and our church. Genuine peace – the goal, dream, and passion of Pax Christi – is impossible without a cultural evolution so profound and far-reaching it is almost impossible to imagine – and perhaps even terrifying to envision.

I call to mind a statement attributed to Albert Einstein: “If we want to change the world, we have to change our thinking. *No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it.* We must learn to see the world anew.”

No problem can be solved from the level of consciousness that created it. We need new ways of thinking, living, and loving. New ways of praying and being. This is the deepest call of our faith. We need to be contemplative witnesses of the possibilities of human transformation. We need to be witnesses of a new humanity, of new ways of being human, of the movement beyond *homo sapiens* toward becoming *homo spiritualis*. (We are called, I dare to say, to be among the vanguard and pioneers of human evolution).

For that to happen, we need to be grounded in the Truly Real, in that Infinite Radical Love Who is deeper and bigger than we are. That Radical Love Who sustained our ancestors in the wilderness even as the Holy One led them to new places undreamed and unimagined – the Promised Land. In today’s desert times and wilderness places, we are summoned to a direct dependence on a God that we can understand only intuitively and vaguely. We are summoned to trust in God alone because no other adequate source of life and strength exists.

Contemplative prayer roots us in a horizon beyond the present, which enables us to work for justice despite the odds against us – even despite the near certainty of short-term failures and defeats. For religious hope assures us of a just-filled and peaceful

future by grounding it in the reality and promises of God. In faith we are assured that even though human beings can *delay*, they cannot ultimately *deny* the fruition of God's purpose. We can endure failures and defeats – and risk insecurity, mistakes, and halting efforts toward new ventures and ways of being – because from a faith-filled contemplative stance temporal failures, though real, are not final, decisive, or ultimate.

My enslaved ancestors sang, “We’ve come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord.” Our hope lies not in what is of our own doing. Our hope stems from a quiet, deep, even if at times dark and obscure, trust that the God of *Shalom* accompanies us, guides us, and will not abandon us. For me, this hope is made real today by you, and by this award with which you honor me.

Let us continue to be pioneers for making a world of *shalom*, a world of radical love and inclusive justice for all. I accept this award as an act of rededication and re-commitment to what Martin Luther King, Jr., called “the long and bitter – but beautiful – struggle for a new world.”<sup>1</sup> I invite you to do the same, and to recommit yourselves and this organization to the long, bitter, painful – yet beautiful – struggle for a new world and a new church. A world and church of *shalom*.

Once again, my deepest thanks!

Let the Church say, Amen!

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<sup>1</sup>King, “A Time to Break Silence,” (Riverside Church, 1967), in *A Testament of Hope*, 243.