Remarks from Lauren Agresti on receiving the Pax Christi USA 2026 Sr. Dianna Ortiz OSU peacemaker award
Trinity Washington University
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Thank you so much to Pax Christi USA for this extraordinary honor, and to everyone who made this occasion possible. Thank you to my colleagues at TASSC for nominating me, and for the tremendous privilege of having worked alongside you.

It's difficult to express how humbled I am to receive an award bearing the name of Sister Dianna Ortiz, whose legacy lives on in torture survivors finding community, rediscovering their voices, and rebuilding lives of safety.

I am not—by any objective measure—an authority on peacemaking.

The footsteps I've followed are larger than life. Sister Dianna survived unimaginable violence and devoted the rest of her life to ensuring that others would not suffer in silence. The scale of her courage is something I most likely, and mercifully, will never have the opportunity to measure myself against.

I'm also a lawyer. I am, by training, an author of conflict. Much of my career has been spent waging war. It's been a paper war, and largely a just war, but war, nonetheless.

Insofar as I know anything about peacemaking, it is largely because I've had the privilege of representing and supporting people doing the front-line work of making peace for themselves.

Earlier in my career, I represented employees and whistleblowers who risked their careers to prevent harm to others. At TASSC, I represented political activists who risked their freedom to demand accountability from their governments. Now, I build capacity for organizations seeking to bring about social change in a world that seems increasingly determined to starve that effort.

My role has mostly been away from the spotlight: to protect the rights of peacemakers, remove obstacles to their self-advocacy, and make it possible for them to continue doing their important work.

Fortunately, my proximity to the front line has taught me a great deal. I've learned three lessons about peacemaking: one from the survivors I represented, one from the colleagues I worked alongside, and one from Sister Dianna herself. Those lessons are shaping where I find myself called next.

The first lesson, from the survivors I represented, is that the pursuit of peace requires a faith that can coexist with a brutal reality.

There's a concept from the management writer Jim Collins called the Stockdale Paradox. It's named for Admiral James Stockdale, who survived years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, enduring repeated torture.

Stockdale described what he believed sustained him physically and psychologically: maintaining faith that he would ultimately prevail while remaining completely honest about the terrible reality of his circumstances.

In Collins's account, Stockdale distinguished that faith from the optimism that release was just around the corner. Some prisoners became convinced they'd be home by Christmas. Then Easter. Then Christmas again. He described how devastating it was when those expectations repeatedly collapsed.

What sustained him was a faith that did not depend on pretending things were better than they were.

At TASSC, our clients already confronted realities that many of us can scarcely imagine. Then, having survived persecution and made their way to the United States, they encountered a legal system that was bewildering, unforgiving, and frighteningly indifferent—even hostile—to their circumstances.

I couldn't promise them that their asylum applications would be granted. Sometimes I couldn't even give them an encouraging assessment of their prospects.

And yet, so many kept moving forward: building families, pursuing degrees, finding work, volunteering, becoming leaders in their communities, and making plans for lives they knew could be snatched from them at any moment.

They did so while they were also exhausted, angry, discouraged, and afraid.

That coexistence of faith and suffering is familiar to our Catholic tradition. The Catechism acknowledges that experiences of evil, injustice, and death can appear to contradict the very promise on which faith rests. It points us toward Mary sharing in the darkness of her son's suffering and death. Faith does not spare her that darkness.

Nor does faith guarantee that we will prevail in every particular struggle. People of extraordinary faith lose their cases. They remain imprisoned. They die, too often, without seeing the justice for which they worked.

The path to peace does not call us to deny suffering or to suspend our responsibilities while we wait for a miracle. It calls us to continue acting in the presence of suffering—to refuse to let injustice have the last word.

The second lesson, which I learned from my colleagues, is that solidarity is not the same thing as speaking for someone.

Lawyers are trained to be advocates. We learn how to make technical arguments and persuade people in positions of authority.

Those are useful skills. But they come with a temptation: to imagine that because we understand the mechanics of legal advocacy, we understand what justice means for the person pursuing it.

Working alongside my colleagues at TASSC—many of whom are survivors themselves—taught me to challenge that assumption time and time again.

Survivors of war, political violence, and torture have distinct, sometimes conflicting views of what it means to achieve justice and work toward peace.

Someone may want accountability that a legal proceeding cannot provide. They may want to speak publicly when a lawyerly instinct counsels caution. They may understand justice in a way that does not fit neatly into the relief the law has put on its limited menu.

Taking their dignity seriously means accepting that your expertise does not give you ownership of their purpose. You can give someone honest advice, careful preparation, and a clear explanation of the consequences of their choices. But respecting their agency requires you to bring your judgment to the relationship without making your judgment the only one that counts.

Catholic social teaching gives us a rigorous framework for thinking about this through solidarity and subsidiarity. Solidarity calls us to assume responsibility for one another. Subsidiarity requires larger and more powerful institutions to respect the capacities of people and smaller communities—and to provide support that helps them exercise those capacities.

It is not enough to tell someone that they have a voice if every practical condition prevents them from being heard. Nor is it enough to invite their participation after all the consequential decisions have been made.

Meaningful participation takes time, information, preparation, and relationships in which people can ask questions and disagree. Those are things we have a responsibility to help make available to preserve the dignity of those around us.

Sister Dianna's founding vision for TASSC, in accounting for solidarity and subsidiarity, created space for survivors to organize, advocate, and help shape their own futures. Carrying that vision forward requires daily work: helping people build stability, develop their abilities, and find opportunities to exercise them.

Working with my colleagues helped me understand my own place in that effort: to bring what I know while remaining willing to learn from the people whose purpose—to make peace on their own terms—the work is meant to serve.

The third lesson comes from Sister Dianna herself: peace is not the absence of conflict.

I never met Sister Dianna. Unfortunately, she passed away before I joined TASSC. Everything I know about her comes from the work she left behind, the people who knew her, and the accounts of her extraordinary life.

What strikes me most is that she did not pursue peace by avoiding confrontation.

She demanded accountability from powerful institutions. Officials attacked her credibility, including by portraying her as dishonest or mentally unwell. She continued demanding answers.

She was a person of profound compassion. She was also, when circumstances required it, profoundly inconvenient. Difficult, even.

I think we need a lot more people willing to be inconvenient.

There is a version of peace that asks us to be quiet. To be agreeable and conciliatory. To avoid making others uncomfortable. To accept an unjust situation in the name of maintaining harmony.

But that is not the peace Sister Dianna pursued.

The Second Vatican Council describes peace as an "enterprise of justice." It connects peace to the ordering of society, the protection of people's well-being, and respect for their dignity. In other words, the Church acknowledges that true peace cannot exist in the absence of justice.

Sometimes, to make peace, we must disturb its impostors: silence, complacency, the appearance of agreement secured through coerced submission.

We must tell truths that powerful people would prefer not to hear. We must confront institutions that would prefer not to change. And we must recognize that the discomfort of conflict is not the same thing as the suffering of injustice.

These lessons have brought me to my freshest calling—a way to be difficult in a new and different way—and to a practical question: what makes it possible for people to take risks, to be inconvenient—and to keep pursuing peace in an unjust world?

Speaking truth to power will always carry a cost. Going along to get along will always bring certain rewards. We may never overcome those human tendencies. But we can change how much of the cost of peacemaking falls on those willing to speak, and we can make the pursuit of justice less punishing for the next generation. We can hold extreme sacrifice in high esteem without making it a precondition of a life well lived.

I look at talented young people being recruited into technology, finance, and certain corners of law—including some work that I personally believe perpetuates profound moral harm. Most of my peers from Georgetown Law—understandably, given the cost of the education—work on behalf of large corporations. Those institutions offer a concrete future: a high salary, benefits, training, responsibility—a place to develop marketable skills and learn from leading minds. And for a long time, we've assumed that sending "good people" from Catholic and other morally minded institutions into positions of corporate power would constrain the worst abuses. The past two years have proven that assumption woefully incorrect. One by one, we saw law firms, technology firms, and banks fall in thrall to an administration determined to antagonize immigrants and wage war.

We—in the social justice space—ask young people to work for justice, and all too often our case begins and ends with how much the work matters. How much it's needed. How much good there is to be done.

The work of seeking peace does matter. But so do rent, childcare, healthcare, education, the ability to care for an aging parent, and the possibility of a financially secure life and a good place to work.

We cannot make one path secure and another precarious and then explain every individual's choice entirely in terms of moral conviction.

Pope Leo speaks about the material conditions of vocation. In Magnifica Humanitas, he connects young people's development to access to work, training, and stability. He calls for conditions in which people can build a future, and for the quality and dignity of work to count among an enterprise's measures of success.

People need the means to enter the work of peacemaking. They also need the support to do it well.

That requires financial investment in organizations, appeals to individuals, and advocacy with lawmakers. It requires progressive taxation, but it also requires financial accountability for bad faith actors—more meaningful sanctions for serial abusers of corporate power and legal process, and less insulation and immunity for government officials who waste resources to terrorize and intimidate vulnerable communities. It requires public service salaries people can live on, opportunities to learn, and leadership equipped to help others do their best work. It calls upon us to work across organizations—to pool resources, to merge, to share expertise, to reward performance and innovation, to stop doing things that aren't working because we've become personally attached to them, and to build coalitions capable of accomplishing more together.

Helping organizations build that capacity is where I'm now putting my own abilities to work.

We cannot remove all the risks of speaking truth to power. But we can strengthen the institutions that support people who do. We can help make it possible for more people to bring their abilities to work that serves the common good.

And so, I intend to continue what I have always tried to do: make it possible for bold seekers of truth, justice, and peace to do their work.

With me, I will carry the lessons of my extraordinary teachers.

Thanks to survivors, I will strive to practice faith without denying the reality before me. Thanks to my colleagues, I will strive to practice solidarity without ego. And thanks to Sister Dianna, I will strive to pursue peace without retreating from necessary conflict.

To receive this award in her name is an extraordinary honor. I accept it with deep gratitude and with the recognition that whatever good I have accomplished belongs in no small part to the people who forged the path. Thank you.