



# Educating for Peace

**M**y uncle, Francis J. Cusimano, was a member of the New York Province of the Jesuits. Pedro Arrupe, at the time superior general of the order, sent him to Nigeria, where he spent 20 years building schools and parishes before his too-early death over a decade ago. I miss him. He was one of the influences that attracted me to my vocation in Catholic education.

My uncle once led off a homily with the old Jesuit joke: A Franciscan, a Dominican and a Jesuit came upon the Holy Family in the stable. The Franciscan was awed that God was born into poverty among the animals. The Dominican was captivated by the Incarnation. The Jesuit pulled Mary aside and asked her, “Have you thought about where you are going to send him to school?” Uncle Frannie then asked, “Where are you going to school?” Every day the world schools our hearts with lessons in violence, selfishness, greed, materialism—in the false gods of what Blessed Pope John Paul II described as the culture of death. Are we Catholics, then, schooling our hearts instead in God’s call to justice and peace?

It is a challenging question, one that Pope Benedict XVI took as his theme for the celebration of the 45th World Day of Peace on Jan. 1, 2012: “Educating Young People in Justice and Peace.” The Jasmine Revolutions and the birth of the new South Sudan underscore the pope’s message. “Young persons must labor for justice and peace in a complex and globalized

world,” said a Vatican statement announcing the theme, and we all share responsibility for preparing future generations.

The good news is that peace is breaking out. Internationally, the number of major armed conflicts has decreased by half over the past 20 years. The waning of war creates a challenge: how to keep the guns silent. Sustaining peace in regions torn by decades of violence requires going back to school. Children in war zones have learned more than anyone ought to know of violence. How can people learn peace who have never known peace?

Solidarity with the wider church helps in peace education around the world. In Sudan, the Philippines, Palestine, Colombia and elsewhere, Catholic Relief Services partners with local dioceses, parishes and nongovernmental organizations to integrate peace education into the curricula and methods of schools and madrasas. Teachers are trained in “paths to peace,” which include: dismantling the culture of war; building intercultural respect, reconciliation and solidarity; promoting human rights and responsibilities; and cultivating inner peace. Interactive exercises help students and teachers learn how to “do” peace, how to resolve conflict non-violently.

Peace education is hard in places like South Sudan, where the armed forces of Sudan still bomb civilians in refugee camps in the south. The church in Sudan uses Peace Radio broadcasts to reach people outside school and parish settings. Likewise,

Jesuit Refugee Service and local partners educate refugees. Solidarity with South Sudan and pressure by the U.S. government helped bring about a largely peaceful independence for South Sudan last year. International attention and solidarity are still needed to build sustainable peace.

Peace education is also challenging in the United States. In a country at war for over a decade, the word *peace* is treated as suspect. Many dioceses and parishes have renamed their Justice and Peace offices with generic titles like Community Outreach. I understand the political polarization that gives rise to such changes, but I worry: What does it mean if we cannot even name ourselves as followers of the Prince of Peace.

At home, peace education gets personal. Like Ralphie in the movie “The Christmas Story,” our pre-school-age son is obsessed with toy guns. We wake each morning to the sounds of hunters killing duck and deer along the Chesapeake Bay. Our three children, all born after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, have only known their country at war, with military deployments of friends and family, and heavily armed men in the capital. Raising children to “Go in peace to love and serve the world” is very much a countercultural stance.

My uncle’s question, “Where are you going to school?” is no joke. As the pope notes, we all need to step up to the challenges of educating for peace and justice.

## How can we school our hearts in God’s call to justice?

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