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Snow and Thunder

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Global Baptist Peace Conference

Snow and thunder

It was early February and the snow was falling outside our conference center in the hilltop town of Castelgandolfo just outside Rome. Then came the loud claps of thunder. Quite unusual. But no more so than our gathering. My son and I had joined about 400 religious workers for peace from 59 countries and five continents to speak of the things which make for a more just and peaceful world. Roma 2009 was not another conference in which people get together, speak about peace and go home. The vast majority of those in attendance came out of environments of conflict, human suffering or a history of violence and warfare.

Some were emotionally depleted from the arduous task of surviving in native lands where government and military are oppressive and overpowering. Most were invigorated by the opportunity to join together with other peacemakers and justice-seekers for mutual support and sharing of stories. Peacemaking often can be a lonely and thankless task. My role at the meeting, along with a few other academics, was to talk about our teaching, writing and research as it relates to peace. In my case, it meant discussing my recent book, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton*, and exploring the intersection of peacemaking and interfaith understanding. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and celebrated author, had written much that was relevant to our gathering as he and his interfaith friends of the mid-20th century encouraged one another to become “signs or sacraments of peace.”

Since the majority of those present were Baptists of “all shapes and sizes,” I also spoke of the work of Martin Luther King Jr., who himself was a Baptist minister. In addition to Baptists, there were representatives of the larger Christian community. Also present were several Muslim peacemakers. A group of Buddhist monks from Southeast Asia, with whom I had intended to meet, were denied visas and could not attend. The week-long conference involved worship in many languages, skills-training workshops, storytelling and meals together.

As the week unfolded, I wondered what my real contribution to the conference might be. Then, it hit me all at once – like the snow and the thunder. I would leave behind the words of Dr. King for others. I knew these words best represent what I had been trying to say for over three decades at Linfield. And I knew it was what we were about at Castelgandolfo this past February. It all came down to love, but not just “any old love.”



Paul and Bill Apel

King’s words on love deserve to be quoted at the end of this essay. Nothing more needs saying (except perhaps thanks to Linfield for supporting my peace and interfaith work at home and abroad all these many years).

When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response...Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door...This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: “Let us love one another; for love is of God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God.”

With this kind of love, we shall indeed overcome someday. Until then, my friends from the Castelgandolfo conference will keep working – and hopefully so will I.

– William Apel
Professor of Religion