

The Value of Vulnerability P. 6

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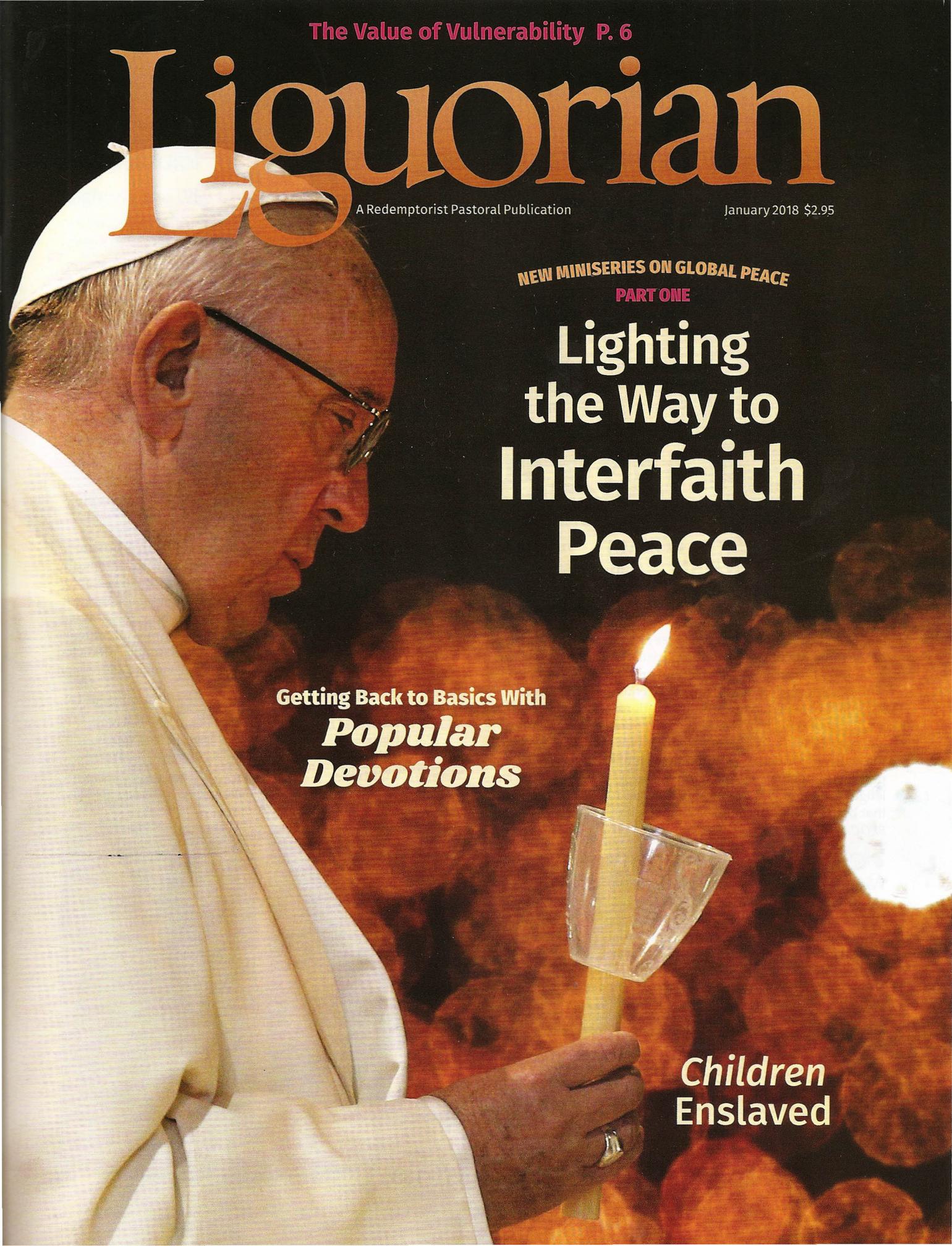
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NEW MINISERIES ON GLOBAL PEACE
PART ONE

Lighting the Way to Interfaith Peace

Getting Back to Basics With
***Popular
Devotions***

***Children
Enslaved***



AS PEOPLE OF FAITH, HOW CAN WE STRENGTHEN PEACE WORLDWIDE?

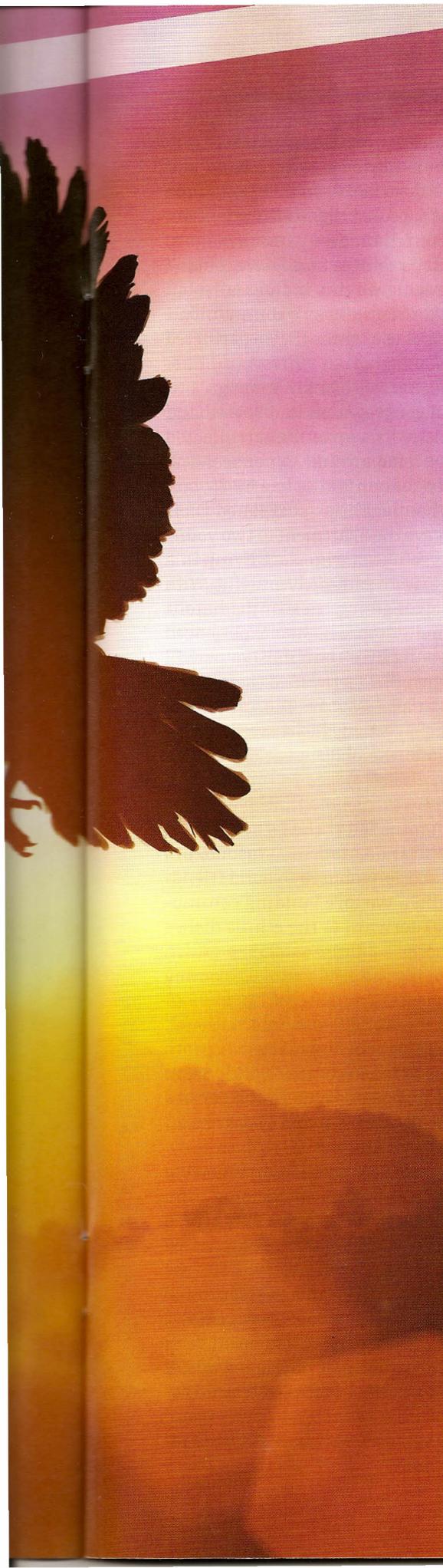
LIGHTING THE WAY to INTERFAITH PEACE

Carole St. Laurent

Our faith calls us to warmly accept those we encounter in our lives from different faiths. While this is our reality in Catholicism, current U.S. policy and public sentiment show alarming increases in anti-Muslim activity, and many hate crimes in America target Jews. More than ever before, we need to stand up for and practice religious tolerance as individuals, in our parishes, and in our countries.

Each year, January 1 marks World Day of Peace, which is fitting since New Year's Day is traditionally devoted to personal reflection, renewal, and adopting resolutions to do better. Peace in the modern world has never been easy, intuitive, or inevitable. And it appears to be ever more fragile and challenging to build in a world rife with acts of terrorism and political tensions. Challenging, but not impossible. In *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Martin Luther King, Jr., advocates that opposing forces have the potential to infer change—light drives out darkness and love deters hate. Jesus and the Scriptures are the driving lights of our faith, which have the power to inspire and inform as well as provide spiritual direction and hope on our paths.





Liguorian encourages you to share in our focus to do better this year and in the years to come by inviting you to work toward building a path to peace. This article is the first in a four-part series that will run intermittently throughout 2018 and examine how our faith has the power to inspire and inform peace. We begin with an examination of interfaith peace and how, as people of faith, we can strengthen it. Next, we'll explore how to build peace amidst terrorism. Then, we'll discuss how to respond to violence peacefully. And finally, we'll celebrate how peacemakers are making a positive difference in their families, communities, and countries.

At this time of year, in the dead of winter, those of us in the Northern Hemisphere are particularly aware of our need for light. But regardless of the season, we always need Jesus' guiding light, which provides spiritual direction and hope on our paths. His light also helps us reflect on areas where we might have ventured into the shadows and now need to return to brightness. Our faith delivers a plethora of tools to help us in our pursuit.

Scripture inspires, instructs, and motivates us to build peace. King David proclaims, "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:15). In Romans 12, Paul exhorts and shows us how to live at peace with all.

God's love for all people and nations is evident throughout the Bible. Universal covenants were initiated through Adam and Eve, then Noah. When God called Abraham, he promised to make great nations of both Ishmael, father of the Arabs, and Isaac, father of the Israelites. Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, worshiped the God of Abraham, who spoke to Hagar and saved her and Ishmael's lives (Genesis 21:8–21). Furthermore, it was God's eternal intention that, through Abraham, all nations of the earth would be blessed. Part of that blessing was demonstrating God's kingdom on earth through radical social-justice laws that limited capitalism and welcomed outsiders while also giving them equal rights in line with native-born Israelites,

remembering that they were former slaves and refugees from Egypt: "You shall love the alien as yourself" (Leviticus 19:34). Jesus reiterates this command during his ministry on earth (Mark 12:31).

Jesus also reiterates that "the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). Therefore, he wants us to join in kingdom activities, which supersede the Mosaic laws of justice with God's laws of love. In his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), Jesus denounces anger, not just murder and lust, not just adultery, divorce, oaths, and legal retribution. He commands people to "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:44–45). The Book of Acts shares the exciting story of the radical obedience of the early church and its explosive growth. How would such radical obedience be a source of light and change in society today?

I personally feel blessed to live in one of the world's great multicultural cities, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. In November, Toronto will host one of the largest celebrations of interfaith peace, the Parliament of the World's Religions. More than 10,000 people from seventy-five countries are expected to participate in this gathering. The stated mission of this interfaith movement, which first began in Chicago in 1893, is "to cultivate harmony among the world's religious and spiritual communities and foster their engagement with the

Part 1
OF A FOUR-PART
SERIES

world and its guiding institutions in order to achieve a just, peaceful, and sustainable world.”

If the announcement reception, attended by supporters from many faiths and nations, was any indication, the next celebration will be a joyous one! During the reception, as I spoke with a graduate of a program in counterterrorism who is a Muslim, I mused whether those of us who considered ourselves peace lovers and promoters could call ourselves “the 99 percent” or even higher. However large a majority we are, I was struck by the reality that peacemakers in the world far outnumber the peace breakers.

Despite our shared vision for peace, in speaking with different attendees, I uncovered stories of religious oppression, colonialism, and prejudice. Essential to bridging these divides is the ability to come to the conversation with humility. As a white, middle-class, Christian Canadian, I must listen humbly to those from First Nations, Muslim, Hindu, and other backgrounds to understand their personal experiences that have led them to feel like outsiders. I have to understand that, for all the blessings our faith has brought us, others may have had negative experiences with Christianity.

If you live in an urban area, you may already graciously demonstrate interfaith peace by being a good neighbor, supportive coworker, or comrade on a sports team with people from other faiths. If, however, you find yourself living in areas where one may not be readily exposed to various beliefs and customs, you may find you have to stretch your mind a little further to expand your understanding and more fully embrace interfaith peace.



What Does Interfaith Peace Look Like?

- It means respectful, harmonious relationships with people of different religions.
- It upholds the dignity of every human being as created in the image of God, and recognizes his or her inalienable human rights.
- It fulfills Jesus’ command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31).
- It appreciates the positive aspects of other faiths while agreeing to disagree about the differences.
- It does not mean compromising one’s own beliefs, nor does it ask others to compromise theirs.



Hindu women pray for peace, Myanmar.
(CNS photo/Nyein Chan Naing, EPA)

Our Church and our parish community can also act as a guide for how to perpetuate peace.

One of my favorite examples took place in my church arts center, which hosted a Jewish band at a fund-raising event for Palestinians. In 2016, when the plight of Syrian refugees captured the world’s attention,

my church made a commitment to sponsor a refugee family. We couldn’t have achieved this individually, but we did so joyfully as a community.

To guide us through, we partnered with a Canadian Christian charity, AURA. Within six months, our small congregation had rented and furnished an apartment, collected \$33,000 for annual expenses, and prayed for our family to arrive.

When legalities postponed their arrival indefinitely, we gave the apartment to two young government-sponsored refugees who were living in a hotel. Rahaf and Esmael were extremely grateful. With generous souls, they began giving back immediately. They started a choir for children who had experienced more trauma in their young lives than most of us will face in our lifetimes. When they performed their trilingual song “Thank You Canada, We Love You Canada” at our church’s Christmas concert, my heart swelled with joy. [For a sample video of the choir, visit cbc.ca and search “Syrian Children Choir.”]

We furnished a second apartment in time to welcome another family a few months later. The father, Rafi, is Christian, and his wife, Linda, and son, Yacoub, are Muslim. The family attends our church to build friendships and practice English. We love building community with them and look forward to the ethnic dishes they share with us at potlucks! Our church has grown well together while enjoying the privilege of welcoming newcomers.

More broadly, I work for World Vision International. One of our programs helps empower children as peace builders through peace clubs. Recently, World Vision helped launch an interfaith peace club in the Central African Republic (CAR), which has suffered cycles of conflict for decades.

An eight-year-old orphan, Sophia, shared, “When I’m at the club, I feel happy....Although we all come from different backgrounds and have our own complicated stories, during our activities we forget our complicated life and just enjoy the moment.”

These friendships among children are essential to helping CAR in its quest to develop a peaceful future. When social interactions aren’t possible because of community division and sometimes physical walls, it is much more difficult to lessen conflict and build cooperation.

For Israelis and Palestinians, this hardship is a re-

ality. A peace group called the Parents' Circle works to bring these communities together in a digital realm. And when travel permits and guards at checkpoints allow it, they join together person-to-person. I had the opportunity to speak to its founder, Robi Damelin. When I broached the subject of how "outsiders" could help, a program participant, Rami, said, "We do not ask you to bring our politics to your side, neither Jewish nor Palestinian, but only to promote peace." The son of a Holocaust survivor, he continued, "Occupying a nation for decades is not Jewish, and fighting it is not anti-Semitic." Another participant, Anton, said, "It was surprising how difficult it was to talk to people who shared my desire for peace. Speaking and eating together was a wonderful, almost spiritual experience." Facilitating conversations between people in conflict is sensitive, and World Vision has developed "Do No Harm for Faith Leaders" training for organizations who wish to pursue this.

I think it's important to separate acceptance from evangelism. While it is the Church's mission to share the gospel, I encourage you to make friends first, unconditionally. Then pray for God's guidance in how to best share your faith in Christ. If you meet people through an interfaith event, sharing your faiths will likely occur organically; however, consider Peter's admonition: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15-16). Don't be pushy or have a hidden agenda to convert people. Do offer to pray for people, especially the sick. Imitate the Apostle Paul's crosscultural ministry: "...I have become all things to all, to save at least some" (1 Corinthians 9:20-22).



As we've seen repeatedly, Scripture addresses interfaith peace indirectly as well as directly. The prophet Micah foretold a time when nations would "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again...Though all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, We will walk in the name of the LORD, our God, forever and ever" (Micah 4:3b, 5). Zechariah foretells a day when people from many nations will seek God in Jerusalem, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you" (Zechariah 8:23b).

This image of nations practicing their own religions in eternal peace is juxtaposed with Jesus' interactions with people of other faiths and his commandment to "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and

As a People of Faith, How Can We Strengthen Interfaith Peace?

- Let's love each other. Love is more important than knowledge, for knowledge will pass but love is eternal (1 Corinthians 13:3-13).
- Let's learn about one another with humility and curiosity, recognizing there are differences in every religion, including Christianity.
- Let's accept that God is vastly beyond human understanding. "At present, we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face [in heaven]" (1 Corinthians 13:12).
- Let's acknowledge our shared values and desires.
- Let's avoid disputing the external details of religious practices, such as dietary differences like halal and kosher diets. Halal conforms to Islamic law. Kosher foods conform to Jewish dietary law (Romans 14:14, 17-20).

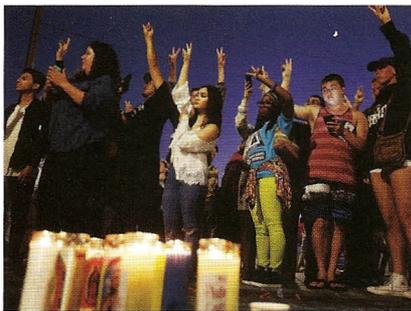
of the holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:16).

Religious differences bitterly divided Jews and Samaritans in first-century Palestine, but Jesus showed great respect for the Samaritan woman at the well, and used her—a woman in an adulterous relationship—as the first missionary to her people (John 4:4-42).

Furthermore, Jesus said the religious conflict surrounding the question which mountain should be a place of worship to God would be resolved by shifting the focus to worshiping the Father "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). It's the attitude of the heart, not the location of the body, that makes worship holy. I pray that Jews and Muslims will stop profaning the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem with strife and blood, and rather keep peace at the site that is holy to both religions. God forbid that we negate our faiths in the name of defending them.

Although I didn't intentionally pursue the path of interfaith peace, it has greatly enriched my journey. It has led to spiritual growth and deep friendships. It has challenged my worldview and paved the way for profound spiritual experiences.

In obedience to Scripture and Jesus' example, let us also live in *shalom*, deep peace, welcoming newcomers from other faiths and lands. I have the privilege of serving an international organization whose mission is to bring life in all its fullness to the most vulnerable children of the world. Indeed, I am blessed! May God bless and guide you in your own individual pursuit of peace. #



Peace Vigil, California (CNS photo/Eugene Garcia, EPA)