2021

Review of A Pilgrim People: Becoming a Catholic Peace Church

William J. Collinge
Mount St. Mary's University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters

Part of the Catholic Studies Commons, Peace and Conflict Studies Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, Social Justice Commons, and the Sociology of Religion Commons

Book Review:
A Pilgrim People: Becoming a Catholic Peace Church

William J. Collinge
Mount St. Mary's University, Maryland

Gerald W. Schlabach. *A Pilgrim People: Becoming a Catholic Peace Church.* Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019, pp. xvi+416, paper, $39.95 US. ISBN 978-0-8146-4454-6.

My study window looks out on a portion of the Gettysburg battlefield, where eight thousand soldiers and one civilian were killed in a battle over whether some human beings may hold other human beings as property.[1] Two blocks in the other direction, for Memorial Day, children put a flag on my father's grave in the Catholic cemetery to honor his service in World War II. Were the Union soldiers justified in fighting? Was my father justified in serving in a wartime army? Catholics such as I have inclined to invoke the just-war theory to answer such questions in the affirmative.

In the opening lines of *A Pilgrim People*, Gerald W. Schlabach issues a challenge to us: "The pages of this book aim to do nothing less than tweak and prod and shift the world view of Christian readers, particularly Roman Catholic ones, until ultimately their worldview is transformed" (p. 1). Though Schlabach is a pacifist, this book is not an argument that the Catholic Church should adopt a pacifist standpoint, but rather that it should become a "peace church," a church that strives to "make active nonviolence normative" in its teaching and its practices (p. 13).

Rather than a tightly argued brief, *A Pilgrim People* should be read as a summation of Schlabach's life work, a work that reflects its author's personal history. Born in 1955, he grew up a Mennonite, the son of Theron Schlabach, a Mennonite theologian. Gerald Schlabach attended Goshen College, a Mennonite school, and in the 1980s worked several years in Central America for the Mennonite Central Committee. In 1990 he received a master's degree from what was then Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and went on to the University of Notre Dame, where he received a Ph.D. in theology in 1996, writing a dissertation on Augustine under the supervision of Jean Porter. From 2000 until his retirement in 2020 he taught theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1999 he convened a meeting between Mennonites and Roman Catholics, which developed into Bridgefolk, an annual gathering of Mennonites and Catholics, who come together "to celebrate each other's traditions, explore each other's practices, and enrich one another's contributions to the mission of Christ's Church."[2] On Pentecost 2004 he was formally received into the Roman Catholic Church, converting, he said, from a "Catholic Mennonite" to a "Mennonite Catholic."[3]

A Pilgrim People not only reflects Schlabach's religious history, it also reflects a lifetime of reading and writing. Various sections of *A Pilgrim People* rework material Schlabach has already published, both as a Catholic and as a Mennonite, dating back to 1991. The book contains excursuses and short essays on a broad range of issues, from mimetic social theory to immigration policy, many of which appear in its sixty-eight pages of notes. Schlabach himself describes his argumentation as "complex yet simple—wide-ranging yet looking back home," and holds that the ultimate warrant for his argument is "the overarching coherence of the interlocking arguments and

the practical wisdom that these pages offer" (p.34). In what follows, I endeavor to disentangle the main lines of argument on war and peace; I direct the reader to the book to follow the often-engaging bypaths.

Schlabach's pacifism is rooted not so much in specific gospel texts as in the person and work of Jesus, taken as a whole. "In Jesus, God, the deepest reality of the universe, has shown nonviolent suffering love to be the strongest power *of* the universe" (p. 9, emphasis in original). This pacifism is presupposed and at times defended throughout *A Pilgrim People*, but the ethics of war and peace, violence and nonviolence, becomes a central focus only in the last two chapters. Much of the book, as its title indicates, develops an ecclesiology, a theology of what the church is and ought to be, and, as the subtitle suggests, it is within this ecclesiology that Schlabach formulates his idea of a *peace* church. "Catholic peace theology," Schlabach echoes Stanley Hauerwas, "cannot *first* be about what to *do* in the world. . . . It must first be about how to be in the world as a Christian community" (p. 57, emphasis in original).

Key to Schlabach's understanding of the Church is that it is and ought to be in *diaspora*, hence "a pilgrim people." *Diaspora* ("scattering" or "dispersion") was first used to describe the Jews in the late Old Testament period, dispersed among the many cultures of the known world, developing a rich, distinctive religious and cultural tradition among them. The notion of diaspora binds two of the strongest influences on Schlabach's thought. One is the Mennonite pacifist theologian John Howard Yoder, who advocated diaspora Judaism as a model for Christian social engagement. Schlabach has great respect for Yoder as a thinker and something of a mentor, while struggling with aspects of his intellectual and personal legacy (pp. xiv–xv).[4] The other is mid-twentieth century Catholic theology, represented in the book's title, quoted from Vatican II, and in its employment of Karl Rahner's idea that the Church is and ought to be in diaspora in the modern world. For Rahner, this means that the Church is no longer bound up with one culture, as in medieval Christendom (and its successor confessional states in the early modern period), but is spread throughout the world, interacting with and shaped by many cultures, while retaining its identity in distinction from any of them.

What is the Church's identity? Two chapters of *A Pilgrim People* follow Yoder and Vatican II (and Rahner), respectively, in speaking of the church as "Abrahamic Community" and as "Sacrament of Human Salvation." In calling Abraham in Genesis 12:3, God promises to make of him a great nation and to bless him, in such a way that "all the families of the earth will find blessing in you." The community is unique in being chosen by God, but it is chosen in order to be a blessing to all. This is not confined to the Old Testament or to Judaism; it is "the grammar of Gospel" for Christians. Schlabach traces this theme through the Church Fathers' conception of Christians as "resident aliens" in the world and especially through Book 19 of Augustine's *City of God*, which, though sometimes seen as the charter of Christendom, really is an argument for how Christians can work for the good of the earthly city while holding primary citizenship in the heavenly city. Thus, for Vatican II, the Church is a "pilgrim people" who are called to be "the sacrament of the world's salvation, 'a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race'" (p. 191, quoting *Lumen gentium*, no. 1).

In using biblical language to speak of the church as a "nation," Schlabach does not mean that it is something like a nation-state. It is instead a "transnational nation," which lives in diaspora among

many nations around the world. This is "the nation with which Christians should identify their primary citizenship" (p. 196), though it seeks the common good of the nations and nation-states among and within which it lives. It responds to God's all-embracing love and seeks to reflect it in love for all human beings (p. 69). This requires that it become a peace church, "committed to engendering the virtues necessary to practice normative nonviolence and extend active love to enemies" (p. 35). Thus, "To embrace life in diaspora . . . is to loosen the grip of that force that has most often turned Christians away from the call to be a peaceable, peacemaking people—the tribalistic and nationalistic identities that come to trump our baptismal citizenship in the transnational people called church and to override our primary loyalty to its Lord" (p. 26).

Early in the book Schlabach argues that the Roman Catholic Church is in process of becoming a peace church. He traces the Church's increasingly restrictive teaching on the use of military force and increasing emphasis on active nonviolence from Vatican II to an official Catholic-Mennonite joint statement in 2007, which declared, "The Church is called to be a peace church" (pp. 36–63, at 63). But the Catholic Church has never given up its acceptance of military action as a last resort, relying on the principles of the just-war theory. For a pacifist, Schlabach gives a notably sympathetic account of the just-war theory's origin in Augustine and of its classical formulation in Aquinas and others. Augustine took love of neighbor seriously, to the point of doubting whether it was permissible to kill in self-defense. "But what if I have two . . . neighbors, and one of them is attacking the other?" (p. 248) -- it was the question of the defense of others that led Augustine to draw on Cicero to formulate his thoughts on justified war. Schlabach agrees with David Hollenbach's characterization of Christian just-war thinking as "'a theory of *exceptions*' to the 'general obligation of nonviolence'" (p. 249, emphasis Hollenbach's). Its intent, if not always its use, is to limit violence, not to clear the way for it.

But you can't build peacemaking (or peacebuilding) on a theory of exceptions. Even if a "peace church" might allow justified violence, it cannot be a peace church unless it "at least has the skills and sociology to make 'exceptional' recourse to violence truly exceptional. It must be a community in which peacemaking is becoming 'church-wide and parish deep'" (p. 14). Schlabach follows Pope Francis in considering the Sermon on the Mount as a "manual" for this process (see also Schlabach 2020). In doing so, Schlabach relies on Glen Stassen's interpretation of the Sermon, according to which its central teachings should be read not as dyads, "You have heard it said . . . but I say," that juxtapose a traditional teaching with a nearly impossible demand, but rather as triads. As Schlabach summarizes Stassen, "Jesus *first* named the *traditional righteousness* that his Jewish listeners had heard either from rabbis or popular morality, *then* diagnosed the *vicious cycles* from which traditional righteousness could not escape, *and then* offered realistic, practicable *transforming initiatives* to escape those vicious cycles at last" (pp. 253–4). Thus, for instance, Stassen sees Jesus's instructions to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, and give freely (Mt 5:38–42) "not as passive non-resistance but as prototypical examples of active nonviolence that transform conflict by humanizing oppressor and oppressed alike" (p. 256).

Schlabach emphasizes that "Jesus never rejected traditional righteousness as far as it went" (p.286). Jesus recognized that "an eye for an eye" was an improvement over indiscriminate mayhem. Schlabach draws on Yoder in holding that "just-war thinking could . . . play a salvation-historical role in forming God's people and drawing them closer to kingdom practices, akin to what the traditional righteousness Jesus cited in the Sermon on the Mount had done" (p.289).

Yoder cites the examples of Daniel and Philip Berrigan and Thomas Merton, who began as just-war advocates but became pacifists as they "began to see that atrocity is normal for the military system" (quoted in p. 289). Within official Catholic teaching and Catholic moral theology, just-war thinking and pacifism have converged in a belief that nonviolence is normative and war is justifiable, if at all, only as a rare exception. In his concluding chapter, Schlabach argues that the just-war/pacifism disagreement need no longer be church-dividing between Catholics and Mennonites. Catholicism long ago rejected the view of the sixteenth-century theologians Francisco de Vitoria and Francisco Suárez that pacifism was heretical, and the Church has made room for the Berrigans and Merton, as well as, for that matter, Schlabach himself. It is more difficult for Mennonites to accept just-war thinking, but Schlabach argues that they could do so if they saw it in the way Jesus saw traditional righteousness: "No more than any other form of traditional righteousness does just-war teaching yet free us from vicious cycles of violence. But so far as it goes, it is good and deserves a guarded affirmation" (p.291). In support of this argument, he alludes to the possibility (which he has explored elsewhere without asserting it) that justifiable military intervention might be construed as policing; some Mennonites have acknowledged a need for policing, even on an international scale.[5]

In the end, however, Schlabach remains skeptical about any exceptions to pacifism (p. 275). He does not see how a Christian can be faithful to Jesus's injunction to love your enemies if one is at the same time trying to kill them. That is a strong objection, decisive for many Christian pacifists, but I could imagine situations in which one might love someone and yet use lethal force against them, though without a direct intention to kill them. Consider a situation in which a mentally-ill person is using a lethal weapon to attack a family member, and another family member intervenes to defend the person who is attacked. Such situations occur occasionally and can be lethal to the attacker (as well as to others). The intervening family member loves both the victim and the attacker, but not what the attacker is doing, and is seeking to defend the victim, not to kill the attacker. Some who have gone to war may have had analogous thoughts about what they were doing. For instance, some members of families divided by the Civil War continued to express love for the brother or other relative against whom they fought (Taylor 2005).[6]

The history of American wars in Schlabach's lifetime might be enough to incline any Christian toward pacifism. And yet we might also see times when military intervention should have been done but wasn't, or should have been done sooner—Rwanda 1994? Srebrenica 1995? Could people have been justified in going to war in the conditions that prevailed in 1861 or 1942? Whatever may be the answers to these questions, Catholics today who espouse the just-war theory must work to make sure that war is truly a *last* resort. First and foremost, I agree with Schlabach, our task is to become more of a peace church, "learning, practicing, and promoting contemporary transforming initiatives such as those identified in just-peacemaking theory, which actively nurture the just and peaceable social conditions that avoid war" (p. 293).

Endnotes

[1] As a sign that was popular in Gettysburg last summer reads, "This battle was fought because Black lives MATTER."

[2] https://www.bridgefolk.net

[3] Most of the biographical information in this paragraph is taken from Schlabach's website, www.geraldschlabach.net.

[4] Central among these aspects is Yoder's practice of sexual abuse and his attempts to rationalize that practice theologically. Schlabach addresses this issue briefly in the pages cited here and in detail in Schlabach 2014.

[5] See Schlabach's contributions to Schlabach, ed., 2007.

[6] Taylor notes that reconciliation in such families was difficult and often could not be achieved.

References

Schlabach, G.W. (1991). *To bless all peoples: Serving with Abraham and Jesus.* Peace and Justice Series, no. 12. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991.

Schlabach, G.W. (2014). "Only those we need can betray us: My relationship with John Howard Yoder and his legacy." Interviewed by Paul Martens and Jonathan Tran. https://www.geraldschlabach.net/2014/07/10/only-those-we-need-can-betray-us-my-relationship-with-john-howard-yoder-and-his-legacy/.

Schlabach, G.W. (2020). "A 'manual' for escaping our vicious cycles: Practical guidance from the Sermon on the Mount for a just peace ethic." In *A just peace ethic primer: Building sustainable peace and breaking cycles of violence*, edited by Eli S. McCarthy, 11–33. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Schlabach, G.W., ed. (2007). *Just policing, not war: An alternative response to world violence.* Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

Taylor, A.M. (2005). *The divided family in Civil War America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.