

Olga Bonfiglio  
3308 Pine Bluff Lane  
Kalamazoo, MI 49008  
(269) 226-8727  
[olgabonfiglio@netzero.net](mailto:olgabonfiglio@netzero.net)  
[www.OlgaBonfiglio.com](http://www.OlgaBonfiglio.com) (click ARTICLES)

### Hildegard Goss-Mayr – World Peacemaker

She's been invited to over 60 countries on various peacemaking missions for 54 years and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times.

Among her friends and colleagues are distinguished peacemakers like Dorothy Day, Bishop Tutu, the Dalai Lama, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Dom Hélder Câmara, Karl Rahner and Bernhard Häring.

Hildegard Goss-Mayr, 79, a petite, low-key woman of faith who focuses on living the radical Gospel message, has worked in some of the most volatile areas of the world to bring peace, reconciliation and healing.

Ms. Goss-Mayr was born in Austria in 1930 and grew up in a time when fascism was spreading across Europe. In 1942 when Hitler triumphantly entered Vienna, she sensed the power of evil and refused to salute him. It was then that she vowed to “resist evil and remain faithful to the God of peace,” says her biographer in *Marked for Life*.

After the war, she began working as a peacemaker with her World War I veteran father, who was part of the first leading team of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) in the Netherlands. She then teamed up with her husband, Jean Goss, who worked for IFOR until his death in 1991.

IFOR was founded in 1919 in response to the horrors of war in Europe. It has taken a consistent stance against war and its preparation and worked for healing and reconciliation by “envisioning a world based upon love in action,” according to its website ([www.ifor.org](http://www.ifor.org)).

Ms. Goss-Mayr said one of her guiding stars in this work is *Gaudium et Spes* (“Joy and Hope”), one of four Apostolic Constitutions resulting from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), that told the faithful “not to close their eyes to the modern world but to be positive and to help transform it.”

Below is an interview I conducted during her recent visit to the United States after she received the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award in Davenport, Iowa.

**Question:** In the United States and Europe where religion seems to be going the way of “passivity” as you call it, what is the place of religion and peacemaking in the Catholic Church and how can it be made more vital?

**Ms. Goss-Mayr:** Our churches often preach the radical message of the Gospel but it is not taught and practiced. That is betraying the Gospel by making it an easy Gospel.

Jesus came to show us we are called to transform sinfulness, egoism, exploitation and hatred in the world.

Whenever you approach a situation that needs peacemaking, the first thing you do is analyze it. Secondly, you avoid losing too much time focusing on existing rivalries because these hurt the people very deeply. In order to do peacemaking in a coherent and effective way, we must remember that economics and social justice cannot be separated and that there is also a link between religion and politics, which some people use to support their own position. We must remember that religion is an important element for all human beings.

We must also remember that what we live is a more important witness to those who stand opposite our position than our critiques of them.

In Austria where I live, the Church is divided between the liberals and conservatives, just like in America. However, nonviolence and helping the poor are two areas all people can agree is the mission of the Church. What's important, but which I find difficult, is seeing positive things in the other side. We have to be aware that there is no group inside our churches that is all negative. So we must learn from the other side and remind ourselves that our opponents may have good elements that our side lacks.

**Question:** In a book about your life, titled *Marked for Life*, several of your writings are included. One of them discusses the need to "tend to the dictator in ourselves." How do we do that?

**Ms. Goss-Mayr:** There is no human being that is completely nonviolent. We always have to observe ourselves and deal with our negative aspirations and reactions. That is a task that goes on throughout our lives.

We must work on inner reconciliation; that is very important. But we can't do it on our own. We need help through prayer, meditation, personal growth and we must let ourselves be helped by others. Every evening I ask myself how I dealt with the people I encountered today and how did I respect the Other?

We must also deal with conflicting situations in a constructive way through "empathetic listening." For example, if you spend time with young people today, you quickly find that there are many who don't have adults to talk to about their own suffering and problems. That way they are hurt and they become aggressive.

In order to help them, we invite them to meet with us in small groups and invite each person to speak about things they never shared with anyone, but which has bearing on their minds and souls.

But there are rules for these groups. Each person is totally respected and all the members of the group are committed to trusting each other. No one is allowed to contradict what is shared. Listeners may clarify, but not critique.

As each person shares, s/he is taken into the group members' hearts. This approach invites the person to speak freely about issues s/he may have carried for many years without dealing with them. Speaking of these issues is the beginning of the healing process so that the person is not left alone with the problem.

In the end, the listeners may ask questions or share their similar experiences. What they discover is that they're not the only ones with hard problems. What they discover is that struggle is what it means to be human. Little by little, then, we ask the group members what they can do

and how they can work toward real reconciliation.

**Question:** How do we deal with terrorism and what is to be done to stop it?

**Ms. Goss-Mayr:** The shock of September 11 was immense but we must admit it was and still is used as political exploitation in the name of defense and security.

The important thing always is to go to the root of a problem and ask, for example, why people become terrorists and what is behind their terrorism.

We must also ask why terrorism exists and under what conditions it might grow? From such an analysis, we learn how to change conditions at their roots so that we attack the problem not the symptoms.

September 11 resulted from a long development in the Arab world where people felt disregarded by the Western world. The Arabs are a very proud people and Europe and the USA disrespected them, took away their importance in the family of nations and didn't understand their old culture and their religion.

On the other hand, the Arab states built up an enemy image of the West. That's why they bombed the centers of U.S. economic and military power. This was very clear!

Consequently, it is comparatively easy to understand why the young Arabs, educated by Islamic radicals, chose to become terrorists. In their view, they worked for justice of their own people and that's why they were willing to give up their lives as suicide bombers.

But terrorism is growing in all regions of the world that suffer from injustices. Hitler and the Nazis grew in prominence and strength because the Germans and Austrians lived under unsupportable economic and social conditions of the times. When people live under such conditions, the possibility of the growth of terrorism and nationalism is there.

What is to be done then about terrorism? Obama has spoken about this subject quite well. He wants to replace military action with peaceful and constructive actions that can help build more just conditions. When people feel they are respected and that they have an equal chance in the world, that's the best way to diminish terrorist.

**Question:** How should USA deal with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?

**Ms. Goss-Mayr:** Obama says he wants peace but he has inherited a situation of armed conflict in Afghanistan and he continues the war. The question remains: how to get out? Like everybody else, I do not have an easy answer.

Afghanistan has never been subdued by any foreign power and is stubbornly resisting that it ever will be. That makes a military solution against the Taliban an illusion. At the beginning of that war, Germany was aware of this fact and decided to only send people for reconstruction purposes and for peacekeeping. In order to prepare for a peaceful solution, it is necessary to rebuild the country economically with an infrastructure and a police force. That's my European point of view.

German peace groups and peacekeeping troops, however, have difficulty linking the rebuilding of the country with a military presence. The Afghan people can't distinguish them either. All troops are seen as an occupation force. Rebuilding has to be separated from any military action. Rebuilding is what will make the people in those places see the United States more favorably. Simultaneously, discussions need to take place with local warlords in order to prepare for negotiations that include all forces involved in the conflict.

At the moment, due to the military escalation, such an initiative seems very difficult. The Taliban has strength because of the people who needed aid due to poverty and social suffering. They relied on the Taliban to help them have a better way of living. This holds true in particular for the rural areas. The Taliban consider themselves to be freedom fighters against the occupation forces. But there is, of course, also the fear of an Islamic regime, in particular in the cities. We need to understand the motivations of the people who live in Afghanistan.

The Bush administration knew too little about the people and their history before it went into the country. The Afghan people are proud of their country; they saw the Russians as invaders just as they see the Americans as invaders.

**Question:** The recent G-20 talks in Pittsburgh were comprised of the top 20 rich countries fashioning economic life for the rest of the world. How shall we think about them from a spiritual point of view?

**Ms. Goss-Mayr:** Let me give you an example of how we work for more consciousness and greater justice on the international level. When war broke out in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the late 1980s, IFOR formed a committee with Pax Christi and a few other peace groups to learn more about the situation and to determine how we Europeans were co-responsible for the war in the D.R.C. German firms, for example, were taking out rare precious minerals and causing strife among the ethnic groups. So the IFOR objective was to create more consciousness among the Germans and Austrians for their role in the war.

We wrote a statement of the situation of war and its causes. It included, among other items, the conflict with Rwanda (which produced hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing to the Congo) and the Europeans' taking of precious minerals. We named those European firms that were involved. We also listed where the arms for the war were coming from. We sought signatures from important personalities in Europe denouncing the war, which included leaders from the Catholic Church, among them several Cardinals, as well as of the World Council of Churches, national presidents, ministers and parliamentarians, etc. We then went public with a petition of three demands to the UN and we held press conferences. Here are our demands:

1. The UN should send peace-building troops to the Congo.
2. A conference of all the states involved in the conflict should be prepared.
3. An embargo for sending arms into the region should be pronounced.

As a result of the media coverage, the people in Germany began to learn about the war and their role in it.

It is most important to analyze the situation and be objective when presenting the facts. That is to say: we must speak the truth. It made an impact on the UN, which then sent 5,000 troops and subsequently was able to protect civilians from the conflict in certain regions.

**Question:** How did IFOR assist in the overthrow of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines in 1986 and encourage the "People Power" movement that brought Corazon Aquino to the presidency?

**Ms. Goss-Mayr:** The situation in the Philippines at the time of the Marcos regime was so bad that the people were hungry for change.

Benigno Servillano "Ninoy" Aquino, Jr., was the only strong person to speak up against the regime of Ferdinand Marcos. He was sentenced to death and served nearly eight years in solitary confinement for his resistance. In prison, he read the Bible and was attracted to the power of truth. Then, because he was seriously ill, he was allowed to go to the USA for treatment. In 1983 he returned to the Philippines to help to restore democracy and social justice, but knew he might eventually be killed.

On August 21, 1983, as he left his plane upon his return from the United States, he was assassinated at the Manila International Airport. His death then catapulted his widow, Corazon Aquino, to the limelight and subsequently to the presidency, replacing the 20-year Marcos regime.

Ninoy had said: "If they kill me, one million people will stand up and resist." In fact, at his funeral, one million people attended.

I think that if someone has the courage to go to the very last, that is, to have a Christ-like willingness to give up his life for the sake of those who suffer, there will be repercussions. In giving his life for his people, Ninoy made an impact and millions joined in demonstrations calling for human rights and democracy. These nonviolent demonstrations were emotional, but not yet organized.

So, in 1984 IFOR was invited to look at the situation and help build nonviolent resistance. My husband, Jean Goss, and myself were charged with this mission. We traveled throughout the Philippines to learn more about the people and the situation. When we met with people we asked them if they wanted nonviolent resistance. This was an important question because there already was an armed resistance in progress and the population was left in between the guerrillas and the army. A third nonviolent power that avoids civil war had to be built up with the consent of the population.

We held meetings with various people all over the country and many came, including the Aquino family. One of the leaders of the political opposition attended a meeting and approached me. He had founded a political party to work for change, however, at this stage, he wondered what he should do as a Christian: prepare for civil war or work for change through nonviolence. In this dramatic situation, a group of opposition leaders got together. They fasted for 10 days, prayed and analyzed the situation and then reached the conclusion that they would commit themselves to nonviolent resistance.

Thus, "People Power" started. We were invited to help with the training and planning. It became one of the most outstanding examples of combining spiritual power—the nonviolence of Jesus—with political liberating action. Several million people participated in this combat, and finally the dictator, who was supported by the USA, had to leave and Cory Aquino became president.

"People Power" was a victory over dictatorship carried out with the nonviolent strength of the Philippine people. It served as an example for other nations that suffered from similar conditions like the D.R. of Congo and Madagascar. The Philippines never forgot this experience of their own power, even when the succeeding president betrayed the example of Cory Aquino. In this continuing combat for social justice, the Philippines can build upon this strength.

[Olga Bonfiglio](#) is a professor at Kalamazoo College in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and author of *Heroes of a Different Stripe: How One Town Responded to the War in Iraq*. She has written for several national magazines on the subjects of food, social justice and religion. Her website is [www.OlgaBonfiglio.com](http://www.OlgaBonfiglio.com). Contact her at [olgabonfiglio@yahoo.com](mailto:olgabonfiglio@yahoo.com).