talk by Jim Forest for the Orthodox Peace Fellowship meeting in Canton, Ohio, on the evening of June 22, 2001:

We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us

In the dawn of time, back in the fifties, my favorite comic strip concerned an assortment of animals living in Florida's Okefenokee Swamp. The artist, a whimsical man named Walt Kelly, referred to them as "nature's schreechers."

There was Pogo, a level-headed, pure-hearted possum overflowing with good will. It was Pogo who gave the strip its name. It would have been a Pogo-like child who told the emperor he was wearing no clothes. The swamp's large cast also included Albert, a raffish, cigar-smoking alligator of large appetites, a turtle named Churchy La Femme who wore a pirate hat and had a keen eye for the ladies, Beauregard, a hound dog with a Sherlock Holmes orientation, an owl name Howland who was the swamp's leading scientist and also occasional newspaper editor, a porcupine named Porkypine who had a knack for seeing the dismal side of things and being disappointed when the worst didn't happen, Madamzelle Hepzibah, a romantic skunk with an accent fresh from Paris who loved to be wooed but was never won, and the fox Seminole Sam, a lawyer by trade who would never walk past a penny without putting it in his pocket, perhaps emptying your pocket while he was at it.

There was also P.T. Bridgeport, a bear in striped jacket and boater hat who spoke in circus-poster lettering and in my mind sounded like W.C. Fields. He was the model showman-salesman in a nation fascinated by shows and selling.

I mustn't leave out Wiley Cat, who at a certain point in the strip's history began to bear an astonishing resemblance to Joseph McCarthy. Wiley Cat saw sedition if the roses had red petals or if he found a red hen in the farmyard. You had to be a brave cartoonist in those days to dare making fun of the junior Senator from Wisconsin -- being laughed at was not something that warmed his cold-war heart.

Not least in the cast was Deacon Mushrat, a severe, bespeckled muskrat who more a black morning coat, had a black string tie, spoke in black Gothic script, was in permanent pulpit-mode, smiled only when receiving the collection plate, and was in favor of kindness to the needy so long as the beneficiaries were abjectly grateful and didn't forget to say "Amen."

It was a well-drawn, wonderfully funny strip packed with puns and poetry and, on occasion, a good-humored political bite. Few people in America took on the fifties as daringly as Walt Kelly, including our obsession with spies, traitors, and nuclear weapons. He got away with it because he pretended this was just a comic strip and that these were, after all, only talking animals in a remote swamp. But of course these verbose animals were human beings in a paper-thin disguise. They were us, we were them. Their swamp was our country.

You may wonder why Jim Forest, who is supposed to be talking about "Following Christ in a Violent World," is instead talking about a comic strip on the 1950s? The answer is that, while I was thinking about what I might say here in Canton, I found myself haunted by a single sentence that Pogo said many a time during the years this strip was being drawn: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

This is a key verse from the Gospel According to Pogo.

We have met the enemy and he is us, as I was to learn later in life, sums up a lot of the writings of the Church Fathers, the principal theologians of Christianity's first millennium.

If you read the Fathers, you find that one of their main subjects is spiritual warfare, a life-long inner struggle against those soul-destroying tendencies the Church Fathers called passions. It is a battle with all those temptations and attitudes that, unresisted, can carry me or any of us to hell. In a world in which bad choices and enmity not only rise up in our darker thoughts but are relentlessly promoted day in and day out via the mass media, spiritual warfare is something no Christian can get along without.

It is striking how often the Church has used military metaphors to describe ordinary Christian life. In the Book of Revelation, John the Evangelist sees a two-edged sword emerges from Christ's mouth. Paul uses not only a sword but helmet and shield in describing basic attributes of Christian life. In doing this he is only enlarging on Christ's own words. He said that he came "not to bring peace but a sword."

Sadly, it's a text that has sometimes been used to justify weapons and warfare, though such a reading goes flat when we notice that Christ had no sword, killed no one, and blessed neither armies nor wars, not even the liberation war that was gathering steam under the Zealots in those days. As St. Tikhon, Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church in the first years of Communism, said in 1919 in an effort to prevent Orthodox Christians from participating in civil war:

"For the Christian, the ideal is Christ, who used no sword to defend Himself, who brought the sons of thunder to peace, having prayed for His enemies on the Cross. For the Christian, the guiding light is the command of the holy Apostle, who suffered much for his Savior and who sealed his dedication to Him by his death.

In the Gospels we meet the Christ of healing and forgiveness, the Christ who brings the dead back to life. He speaks admiringly of the faith of a Roman centurion -- an officer of Rome's army of occupation -- who seeks his help. He prevents the execution of a woman who had been found guilt of adultery. His final healing miracle before his crucifixion was on behalf of one of the men who had come to arrest him, someone wounded by Peter in his effort to use a sword to defend Christ. The early Church took very much to heart what Christ said to Peter on that occasion: "Whoever lives by the sword will perish by the sword."

Yet, reflecting on the lives of the saints and the Church's history, we see that Christ did indeed bring a sword.

There is the sword of division that occurs whenever a follower of Christ obeys God rather than man. The Church's many martyrs are mainly men and women who suffered for failing to be the kind of people the authorities wanted them to be.

The sword also symbolizes truth, with its razor-sharp edge. It's interesting to reflect that Gandhi's word for nonviolence, satyagraha, means much more than the mere avoidance of violence. Satyagraha means the power of truth. Each time we recite the prayer that begins "Oh heavenly King," we remind ourselves that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth. Living in the truth, being truthful people, is a sine qua non of spiritual life, that is life in the Holy Spirit. And it is no easy undertaking. While we remain in this world, it's an endless battle. "Tell the truth," says my wife's screen-saver. "Don't be afraid." She is a profoundly truthful person but apparently even she needs to be reminded not to let fear keep her from trying to know the truth and to tell it.

I learned partly from our daughter Anne just how powerful a symbol the sword can be. Anne was about sword-length herself at the time and night after night she was having dragon nightmares. Our response was to purchase a silver-colored plastic sword from a local toy store and give it to her, hoping it might aid her in her night-time encounters with dragons -- and it did. She felt much safer and stronger when she closed her eyes at night. In the course of several years, she wore out three plastic swords before she decided she no longer need a sword in bed with her. Before that day came, I can recall her surprise when she noticed Nancy and I didn't sleep with a sword. Once at breakfast I mentioned a dream that had disturbed my sleep the night before. "You know, daddy," she said, "if you had sword, you wouldn't have dreams like that."

It is not only children who battle dragons. Dragons symbolize evil. They are an image of anything that makes us afraid. Sooner or later we meet real dragons. We even find discover some of them have dug caves in our own souls. We are obliged to fight them. This is spiritual warfare. This is what the icon of Saint George the Great Martyr is all about. It is not that George had a white horse and went around looking for dragons to test his warrior skills and rescue ladies in distress. This young soldier probably didn't have a horse and never saw a dragon. The actual dragon he met was imperial persecution of Christians. In the era of Diocletian, he suffered torture and was executed for professing his faith. His actual weapon was not a spear but the cross.

However the medieval legend of Saint George reveals the truth in its own metaphorical way and is a profoundly Christian story. An important detail of the legend is that George doesn't kill the dragon; he only wounds and subdues it. Princess Elizabeth puts the dragon on a leash made from her belt and leads it back to the town. Responding to this miracle of courage, the people of the town are converted and prepare for baptism. The dragon to whom they once sacrificed their children in the end becomes their pet.

Another detail worth pondering is that the unbaptized people of Elizabeth's town have long had their own solution to living with the dragon: they sacrificed some of their children to it. Human sacrifice to appease dangerous gods was a common practice in the pre-Christian world, and remains a central element in the pseudo- religion of nationalism: the offering of our children to the god of war.

We don't have to look far to find a dragon. Most of the spiritual warfare we carry on in our lives is in response not to a terrifying creature in the distance but to a familiar adversary we meet in the mirror. The struggle against those soul-destroying tendencies the Church Fathers called passions is a struggle with myself.

We have met the enemy and he is us.

St. Paul tells us that we struggle "not with flesh and blood but with principalities and powers." (Eph 6:12) This is crucial to any understanding of Christian peacemaking.

I say "Christian peacemaking" and just simply "peacemaking" because our center point is not an ideology or philosophy or political movement of peace. It is Christ himself. It is not simply that Christ is peaceful but rather that he is peace. For us peacemaking is not a secular word. It is participation in who Christ is: the Logos, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, our maker and redeemer, who not only came to live us with us as a man among men, but gives us an example of what is to be fully human, to become people in whom the image of God is not only present, if largely hidden, but has become visible; a people in whom God's likeness has been restored.

Battling the principalities and powers rather than flesh and blood is the essence of Christian peacemaking and why in the Beatitudes Christ calls peacemakers children of God.

A large part of our struggle with principalities and powers is recognizing that these powers rejoice in God's sons and daughters being in enmity with each other. This means we have to struggle to overcome whatever makes us into enemies with our fellow human beings. This means trying to identify aspects of the process of enmity -- to see the ways in which enmity plants itself in me and the way enmity can become the organizing principal both of one's own life and of whole societies.

I mentioned the Gospel According to Pogo. We can also speak of the Gospel According to John Wayne -- or any other movie star who plays similar roles. This is our main story. It's a movie we have made thousands of times and continue making. It can be adapted to any background -- not only the 19th century western frontier, but 20th century urban strongholds of the Mafia or an intergalactic backdrop a la Star Wars. These are always stories of how decent, brave men find no honorable recourse but to take up a gun and kill those who are evil and indecent. The latter are always people who rejoice in their malevolence. There is no image of God in them. Repentance and conversion are out of the question. The community can only protect itself from the dangers such men pose by killing them. This is our culture's main story, and a powerful myth it is.

The Christian conviction is that no human being comes from bad seed -- no one is genetically programmed to evil. Neither is any of us lacking a capacity for evil. As Solzhenitsyn wrote:

"The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of hearts, there remains . . . an un-uprooted small corner of evil." [*Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2, "The Ascent"]

The person who commits evil deeds has lost his way but, if we wish to see him with Christ's eyes, we will see him as being in the grip of invisible powers which are making use of his life. The man himself is not our enemy, only the demons who have gained a foothold in his life. Our hope is that the person threatening our lives today may in the future be someone we need no longer fear, and that we might either help in his salvation or at least not impede it. But if we see only an enemy in him, someone to hate, we are already in hell, we are in the kingdom of hatred.

"The Church never has any enemies," Archbishop Anastasios told me when I was in Albania in March. "We may be regarded as enemies but we have no enemies." These words come from the leader of a Church which suffered one of the harshest persecutions in the history of Christianity. This is no vague, distant memory. Many of the persecutors are still alive. Many of them still hate every manifestation of religion, especially Christianity.

As was the case with the early Church, the Church in Albania refuses to have enemies. It is not fighting a "holy war" against them, not even thinking a holy war against them, but rather has a paschal confidence that anyone, no matter how much an enemy he has been or seems to be, can in the blink of an eye become a fellow disciple of Jesus Christ or in some other way devoted to God and no longer anyone's enemy. The key word is conversion.

In the early Church the primary model of transformation is Paul. He was among the most passionate enemies of Christianity at first, a man who approved of Christ's crucifixion and consented to the execution by stoning of the Church's first deacon, Stephen. Yet Christ makes of him not only a disciple but an Apostle as well as one of the authors of the New Testament. We find other models in the repentant thief crucified with Jesus, in St. Mary Magdalene, in St. Moses the Black, in St. Mary of Egypt and in so many others.

Peacemaking begins with the eyes, with the way we see others. A nun friend of mine often uses the phrase "hospitality of the face." Our face should be a place in which others experience a real welcome.

Peacemaking is also a life of prayer for the other, not only those whom we love but also those we fear, those who threaten us. Christ's commandment is, "Love your enemies, pray for them." Take this out of the Gospel and you have removed the keel from the ship. How can we love an enemy whom we do not pray for? It is impossible.

If we want to overcome enmity, it starts with prayer. This is not a small or easy step. The fact is that the last person in the world we really want to pray for is the person we fear or despise. The first glimpse we have of the enemy within ourselves is our reluctance to pray for those whom we fear or hate. We need to keep a list of our enemies and make prayer for them part of our daily life.

Prayer is an invisible binding together. The moment I pray for another person, there is a thread of connection. I have taken that person into myself. Praying for him means to ask God to bless him, to give him health, to lead him toward heaven, to use me to help bring about his salvation. As soon as this occurs, my relations with that person or community of people is changed. You look differently at a person you are praying for. You listen differently. It doesn't mean you will necessarily agree. You may disagree more than ever. But you struggle more to understand what is really at issue and to find solutions that will be for his good as well as your own. In fact, the saints tell us, the deeper we go in the life of faith, the freer we become from worrying about our own welfare, the more we worry about the welfare of others.

Keep in mind that love is not simply a sentimental condition -- happy, joyful feelings for certain beloved persons. Love is how we respond to the other. It is doing what we can to safeguard his life and to pray for his salvation. If you say you love someone but you let him starve to death, there is no love. If you say you love God but you abandon your neighbor, there is no love for God.

Yet how hard it is to overcome the temptation not to seek God's image in other people. On the contrary, how easy it is not to see that image or even to imagine it exists. Truly we have met the enemy and he is us.

Some years ago, at a Syndesmos conference on the Greek island of Crete, I gave a talk in which I summarized Orthodox teaching about war. I pointed out that the Orthodox Church has never embraced the just war doctrine, that the Church regards war as inevitably sinful in nature even in cases where no obvious alternative to war can be found, that no one has ever been canonized for killing, that priests are forbidden by canon law to kill or cause the death of others, and that under all circumstances and at all times every baptized person is commanded by Christ to love our enemies. There was nothing remarkable in what I said, no novel doctrines, nothing borrowed from non-Orthodox sources, yet the lecture stirred up a controversy not only in the hall in which I was speaking but into the city itself, as the translator's words were being broadcast live over the diocesan radio station.

The debate continued that night when the local bishop, Metropolitan Irinaios, and I took part in a radio conversation with listeners. Responding to a man who called in to

denounce Turks as barbarians who only understood violence, I summarized what Christ had to say on the subject of loving one's enemies and pointed out that Christ lived, died and rose from the dead in a country suffering occupation, yet he neither blessed nor took part in the Zealot's armed struggle against the occupiers. "That's all very well," the caller responded, "but now let me tell you about a real saint." He proceeded to tell me about a priest who, in the 19th century, played a valiant role in the war to drive the Turks off the island.

In fact we have soldier saints, like Great Martyr George, but when we study their lives in order to find out why the Church canonized them, it was never for their courage and heroism as soldiers but other factors. Most were martyrs -- people who died for their faith without defending themselves. There are saints who got in trouble for refusing to take part in war, in some cases dying for their disobedience. One saint, Martin of Tours, providentially escaped execution and went on to become a great missionary bishop. There is Ireland's renowned Saint Columba, who is on the Church calendar not because he was co-responsible for a great battle in which many were slaughtered but because he went on to live a life of penance in exile, in the process converting many to Christ.

All of what I'm saying probably sounds fine. It isn't hard to admire saints. Most people realize that the Gospel is not a summons to hatred or violence. But what about our ordinary selves living here and now? What does this have to do with how we carry on our lives?

Most of us will readily admit we are only partial Christians -- that is to say, our conversion is far from complete. When we go to confession, we don't even try confessing all of our sins because no priest in the world would have time to hear them all. We try to think what the main ones are and focus on them, or perhaps deal with them thematically. We're painfully aware that we have far to go.

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One of the great obstacles is that we tend to be more nation- than Christ-centered people. We are formed less by the Gospel than by a particular economic, social, political and cultural milieu. Our thoughts, values, choices, "life style" -- all these tend to be formed by the mass culture in which we are born and raised. In America Christians easily find themselves following a Christ who has been Americanized: a Christ who smiles like a presidential candidate, a Christ of success rather than the cross, a Christ who blesses manifest destiny, a Christ untroubled by our wars, or by the Cuban or Iraqi children made dead by economic sanctions, or all the children killed before birth through abortion, or the many ways we push our neighbors toward tragic choices by our failures to help or to develop structures of mutual support.

Yet we have in the Church so many saints who provide us with models of what it means to follow Christ wholeheartedly, without holding anything back.

One such saint -- not yet formally canonized -- is Mother Maria Skobtsova, a Russian refugee in France who devoted herself to the care of the homeless and destitute -- and also to the renewal of the Church. She and the community she was part of helped save the lives of many people, especially Jews, when France was occupied by Nazi armies. On one occasion she managed to smuggle children awaiting deportation out of a stadium in which thousands of Jews had been rounded up. It is hardly surprising that eventually she was arrested and ended her life in a German concentration camp, Ravensbrük, dying on Good Friday in the place of a Jewish woman. Yet we find in her many letters, essays and the acts of her brave life not a trace of hatred for Germans or Austrians, even those who were captive of Nazi ideology. She was part of the resistance to Nazism, but was no one's enemy, not even Hitler's. Her small community produced two other martyrs: the priest who assisted her, Fr. Dimitri Klepenin, and her son, Yuri, who was then just entering adulthood.

At the core of their lives was the conviction, as Mother Maria put it, that "each person is the very icon of God incarnate in the world." This is not some new idea that was discovered by a few saintly Christians in Paris in that grim time but what C.S. Lewis referred to as "mere Christianity." It is because each person is an icon of God that everyone in the church in honored with incense during the Liturgy.

Mother Maria had been married and become a mother before taking the monastic path. Before that happened her husband left her and one of her children had died. She embraced a celibate vocation, but her understanding of monastic life was not the traditional one of withdrawal. She was opposed to living a life that might impose "even the subtlest barrier which might separate the heart from the world and its wounds." Like any Orthodox Christian, the Liturgy was at the core of her life, but it was seen giving daily life a divine imprint. "The meaning of the Liturgy must be translated into life," she said. "It is why Christ came into the world and why he gave us our Liturgy." She was determined to live a life in which the works of mercy were central. As she wrote: "At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my ascetic exercises, nor how many bows and prostrations I made. Instead I shall be asked, Did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners. That is all I shall be asked."

No one has lived in a more violent time than she, a time in which there were more temptations to keep one's head down and quietly survive. Yet instead she and those who worked with her give us a model of centering one's life on those whose lives are threatened. Then it was especially the Jews. In our time the list of those in danger is much longer, including not only the born but the unborn as well as those who are handicapped or old. We live in what many people have come to identify as a culture of death. The only question each of us must struggle with is where to focus our life-saving activity. It is not just a question of saving lives but making clear to others, through our response to them, that they bear God's image -- thus that there is a God, and that God is love.

We have met the enemy and he is us -- no small foe. Yet if we will only cooperate in Christ's mercy, struggling day by day to die to self, day by day our conversion will continue.

Let me close with these words from St. Cyprian of Carthage:

"You have many things to ponder. Ponder paradise, where Cain, who destroyed his brother through jealousy, does not return. Ponder the kingdom of heaven to which the Lord admits only those of one heart and mind. Ponder the fact that only those can be called the sons of God who are peacemakers, who, united by divine birth and law, correspond to the likeness of God the Father and Christ. Ponder that we are under God's eyes, that we are running the course of our conversion, and life with God Himself looking on and judging, that then finally we can arrive at the point of succeeding in seeing Him, if we delight Him as He now observes us by our actions, if we show ourselves worthy of His grace and indulgence, if we, who are to please Him forever in heaven, please Him first in this world." ["On Jealousy and Envy", chapter 18]

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Jim Forest
Kanisstraat 5 / 1811 GJ Alkmaar / The Netherlands
e-mail: jhforest@cs.com
Orthodox Peace Fellowship web site: http://www.incommunion.org
Jim & Nancy Forest web site: http://www.incommunion.org/home.htm
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