

Sudan – the value of one

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For post-World War II baby boomers like me, living in the comfort and security of Australia, news of the atrocities that have been perpetrated on the black African tribes in the Darfur region of western Sudan would once have been shocking. But today, the scenes of torture and murder that reach into our homes via TV and the Internet are commonplace, and it can be hard to feel more than a flicker of dismay at where civilization is heading. That's why I'm grateful for the example of humanitarians such as Dr. Raphael Lemkin, a Polish international lawyer who worked diligently for human rights and was nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Lemkin's story

In 1933, Lemkin, disturbed by news of the continuing massacre of Christian Assyrians in the Middle East (as well as the memory of Armenians massacred during World War I), began to examine these atrocities as crimes, in an effort to prevent and outlaw what he called "such acts of barbarism." To this end, he drafted a resolution and presented it to the Legal Council of the League of Nations. His proposal failed. Then in 1939, when Poland was invaded by Germany, he was forced to flee to Sweden where he continued with his work.

As a refugee in Sweden, Lemkin analysed the laws and systems that had been put into place in Nazi Germany, which had allowed for the systematic elimination of people. During this time, Lemkin coined the term "genocide" from the ancient Greek word *genos* (race or tribe) and Latin *cide* (killing) – meaning the deliberate extermination of a racial, national, religious, or ethnic group as an intentional strategy. The next year, his analysis was used as one of the bases for the Nuremberg trials program. He then presented a draft convention on the prevention and punishment of genocide to the Paris Peace Conference in 1945. Once again his proposal failed.

Refusing to quit, Lemkin continued to campaign without funding, official status, or support from a government or an accredited organization, for the establishment of barbaric acts as a crime under international law. (See www.europaworld.org.) Finally on December 9, 1948, as a result of Lemkin's dogged determination and persistent lobbying, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was adopted unanimously by the 55 member states of the United Nations at its third General Assembly in Paris.

Today, in the present Convention, which now has 132 signatories, genocide is defined as "any of a series of acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group. These include: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." (See www.europaworld.org/issue40/theconventiononthe prevention22601.htm.)

Quite an accomplishment for the man described by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as "one of the unsung heroes of the international human rights movement" who "almost single-handedly drafted an international multilateral treaty declaring genocide an international crime, and then turned to the United Nations in its earliest days and implored Member States to adopt it." (See www.charitywire.com.)

The value of one person

Raphael Lemkin's fight to have genocide recognized as a crime against humanity inspires me to remember the value of just one person. It reminds me that as an individual I too can help make the world a better place. I may not be an international lawyer or an aid worker, but I can still take action. I can pray – for law and order, and for people to find non-violent ways to end conflict.

Such prayer is effective. And it often begins with our willingness to help resolve conflicts closer to home that can be on a much smaller scale. I had confirmation of this recently when the peace of my neighborhood was shattered by drunken men screaming and swearing late into the night in a nearby house. For several weeks they kept ten families awake. Sleep deprivation made people angry. One furious householder threatened to "knock someone's block off" if the disturbances didn't stop. Neighbors met, contacted the police, and considered all legal avenues. When no solution could be found, I decided it was time for prayer.

Lying in bed one night, I prayed, "Dear Father, You created us to live together in peace. None of Your children can be self-seeking or hurtful. Selfish behavior is no part of the spiritual nature You have given us. You made us to be considerate of each other. There has to be an answer. We can resolve this conflict peacefully, and I know that You can help me find a way." Then I listened for God's direction.

Finally, this thought came to me: "If you have aught against your brother, go to him and tell him" (see Matt. 18:15). My first reaction was, "That can't be the answer! I'm not going near the men in that house. They might attack me." But then, two afternoons later, I decided to follow my prayerful intuition. Accompanied by my husband, I went to the house and knocked on the door. A man answered. We told him how upset all his neighbors were at the late-night disturbances. To our great surprise, he immediately apologized. He was the owner of the property, and said he would tell his new upstairs-tenants to be quiet.

It has been peaceful ever since.

Although this incident cannot be compared to barbaric acts of genocide, it nevertheless encourages me to believe that our heartfelt prayers for peace and harmony can and do lead to healing resolutions.

The value of each prayer

"The only thing needed for evil to prosper is for good men to do nothing." These words attributed to the 18th-century Irish-born philosopher Edmund Burke help pull me back from the brink of skepticism or apathy about praying for my neighborhood, community, Sudan, or any other trouble spot.

Prayer for the establishment of humane behavior in the world is somewhat like a pebble that's thrown into a pond. The pebble doesn't sink straight to the bottom without having an effect. It creates ripples that continue to move outward. In the same way, each time I pray with conviction that the power of good will ultimately triumph over evil – that decency and harmony will prevail, that sanity and compassion will override barbarism – I think of my prayers as sending out ripples that can heal hateful and destructive thinking. I also believe that I assist those individuals, people like Lemkin, who strive to benefit humanity. Mary Baker Eddy once wrote: "A dewdrop reflects the sun. Each of Christ's little ones reflects the infinite One, and therefore is the seer's declaration true, that 'one on God's side is a majority'" (*Pulpit and Press*, p. 4).

This reminds me of the value and effectiveness of each sincere prayer. God never stops caring for each and every person in the world. Praying for evidence of this fact is never a burden, never a waste of time. Your prayers for peace and healing will send out beneficial ripples. Each one will be a powerful force for good in the world.

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