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The Practice of Renouncing Violence

**Transcript of an interview with Sr. Mary Margaret (Meg) Funk
for the annual United in Prayer Day
with Pamela Begeman
recorded February 1, 2018**

Pamela: What I wanted to do today is delve into what inspired you to explore this topic in yourself, and then share it with the rest of the world, both in this conversation and the book that you have written, which as I understand is in the process of being finalized. And I thought maybe where we could start is having you share your story of what inspired you, and then we'll go from there with some other questions.

Meg: Okay. First of all, when I say I love your topic of healing violence, it took me a while to get my title of this book. It's ending up to be *Renouncing Violence* -- it turned out to be about renouncing and not as much about violence. Violence, everybody has a grip on. The working definition would be "forms and forces that cause harm" and so I love your "healing" the harm is really what this day of prayer is about, and that prayer is one of the ... Well, the most powerful energetics to heal the harm. So it does literally heal the violence.

We had so many violent eruptions in the world -- something had shifted. And because of the human condition, I can't really trust all my thoughts, my emotions, my inclinations. So I had to literally put this to the Holy Spirit and ask, "what is it that you want me to do?" The Holy Spirit maybe wanted a book. And I, also, thought that the Holy Spirit was very available to me to answer what I should do, really, and not just other people should do, or be into the chaos of reaction.

A big insight came in even discerning the book, was to write the book with the practice of renouncing violence. So I started the practice with the writing. Mainly I read books, but when I was tired, I stopped. Closed the books. I listened to the Spirit, when to get a cup of coffee, when to fast, when to eat, when to get more sleep, less sleep, when to talk to somebody, not to talk to somebody, when I talked too much to somebody. So, you see, the renouncing violence became the practice of writing the book. Did I need a new computer, not a new computer? Who was helpful, who wasn't.

I must admit, Lent now, my observance is to continue the renouncing of violence. The book is at the publisher. I'm done writing, but I am not done learning the practice of renouncing violence. So even for this conference, to prepare, I went in to a little bit more sleep, rest. I had lunch with the nuns and I asked their prayers. I paused.

So the whole thing of renouncing violence was the practice.

Pamela: If you wouldn't mind, I wanted to read the first paragraph from the preface just as a context.

Meg: Okay.

Pamela: Because I think it actually speaks to a brief summary of the book.

Meg: Got it.

Pamela: "Violence needs no introduction. Renouncing violence needs a whole book. The intent of this book is to gentle down. Calmness prevents and scatters violence. When violence is tamed, we find peace of heart.

"A working definition of violence is form or forces that cause harm. We can do something about violence. I've known that there's no wrath in God, no anger in Jesus, and we have the Holy Spirit to help us. So why then is this so hard?

"We can ever so confidently take the next step. Through renunciation, both individually and together, we can reduce, redirect, refrain, and reprogram our instinctual propensities towards reaction, retaliation, recompense and rage."

And then one of the things that you say later is that we are in a "global bad mood."

Meg: [Laughter]. Yes, I think so.

Pamela: I love that phrase. It's a disease that affects all of us, at least in my experience, and I remember last fall, you told me a story about discovering your own anger. I think it was during the election. As I recall, that was the seed of seeing the impulse to do something about your own anger and to renounce your own violence, and I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that?

Meg: Yes. I made a retreat, a single-purpose retreat to reduce and refrain, and to literally root out my anger. Again, anger gets in the way of your prayer. It covers over your consciousness and makes you blind, and you lose your judgment, and you're not really that relational, because you can't listen. You can just exude your anger.

So I went to a very trusted friend, a mentor, Sister Catherine Griffiths out in Boston area. Anyway, she just gentled me down and we prayed it out. But then I realized I needed to keep it out, keep it out, because the environment didn't change at all. So to

come back home and live my monastic life, and be engaged in the various groups that I relate to, that was the bigger challenge, to really use the practices myself in order to not be angry, so that I could even write this book on renouncing violence. What was the Holy Spirit really saying to me?

I was wondering if you wanted to hear a little bit ... I have a chapter on anger. Would you like to hear that story, if I could do it rather briefly?

Pamela: Yes. Yeah. I think that would be wonderful.

Meg: Okay. It is called "The Dispute with the Chaplain." [Reading from the book ...] Several years ago, when I was prioress, I had a dispute. The archbishop appointed this priest to provide liturgical services reserved for ordained clergyman. I had observed troubling events. It prompted me as the superior to believe he wasn't helping, but, in fact, not a good fit for our community, so I wanted him replaced.

So I said, "We need another chaplain." I told the archbishop, "You must get somebody," and then he told me, "You just might get somebody worse or no priest at all." So I went to my council of advisors within my community and they said, "He's good enough. He gets along with the rest of us."

So I fussed and fumed. My displeasure with this chaplain continued to bloom into a full-blown affliction of anger. It appeared I could do nothing. I had to go to mass like the other nuns, listen to him, but *nobody* listened to me, the superior. He, also, had a residence on our monastery gardens. He got a stipend, a house, all the services. There was 100 nuns at the time.

My anger swelled into a full fog over my consciousness. I was long past the tipping point of a working relationship without inner resistance.

I'm not sure what the turning point was. However, one day I asked our Lord if I couldn't get rid of the chaplain [laughter], would our Lord help me get rid of my anger? Every day for three or four months, I went to the monastery oratory, where there hangs a large crucifix. The oratory is an intimate space, room for about eight nuns sitting the presence of the crucified Christ. Each day and sometimes a few times a day, I would sit there, lay out my angry thoughts at the feet of the crucified Lord.

At first, I would pour out my tears of frustration. Now, I wasn't contrite. I was right! I wasn't soft-hearted, or converted, or reconciled to the fact that I could not relieve myself of this chaplain, whom I felt interfered with *my* way of praying in church. I was still attending masses, but he was the presider, and *I* still wanted him replaced with a chaplain *I* thought more suitable.

I felt no compassion for the man, only a hard heart. I continued to put that anger with a point by point detail at the feet of Jesus, and I continued to ask God to

remove that anger. Also, it felt to me, to encounter this chaplain every day was worse than carrying around a cold, heavy, hard heart.

So, in effect, I had two problems, the chaplain and my anger. When I sat before the crucifix at the oratory, whatever angry thoughts or feelings came, I lifted them up mentally and placed them on Jesus' feet. You can probably guess the outcome. First, I began to feel a certain ease. It carried over into liturgies I had to attend at which the chaplain officiated. There was ease, too, in my consciousness. Walking from here to there, I no longer obsessed with the thought of getting rid of the chaplain.

Then I experienced a shift in mood. Whenever I would sit at Jesus' feet, I would be present and nothing, no thoughts at all, certainly no angry thoughts. I would just be there, that is, me at the feet of our Lord.

I imaged myself someone like the woman at the banquet had poured out her tears, anoint them on Jesus feet, and dried them with her hair. Of course, it wasn't quite that dramatic, because I merely sat there dwelling in Jesus. Just sitting there time and time again at the feet of Jesus. *Sitting was the prayer*, and after about a year, get that? After about a year, the entire affliction passed. By the grace of God, my anger moved past that glaring conscious stage of alert rage against the chaplain.

He remained with our community for years, beyond my term as prioress. In those post-leadership years, I was able to reach out to him. ... *My foe became my friend*. My anger affliction also became my teacher.

My dispute with the chaplain wasn't the biggest problem I faced in my time as prioress. My anger was. My attachment to my own righteousness was formidable. It created a steady stream of wrath, sarcasm that radiated around me. Living in this state of rage was destructive, mainly to me. The most serious damage was that it produced a very hard heart. I lacked compassion toward the chaplain, who in the time of my anger was directed at him, was in the early stages of cancer. My anger was more dangerous to me than if I had cancer. Anger was ingesting, eating all away to the light of my eyes.

Something else happened, too, in my hours before the cross. By the grace of God and the prompting of the Holy Spirit, I encountered the first stage of conversion. I realized that my situation was out of my control and power. As long as I was carrying this affliction, I was going the wrong direction and taking my community with me.

So, there was a metanoia. There was a change of thinking, and there was a recognition that *I needed help*. I wanted our Lord to lift this affliction from me, because it was harmful to others and to me.

The one thing all people with addictions realize is you can't get on the other side of an addiction by your own efforts. You need help. I needed help. The harm was to me -- I could not pray. The directive of the Holy Spirit saved me. I wanted to take

this affliction, lay it on the feet of Jesus. The affliction was my prayer. I lifted up my hard heart to God.

The ongoing stage is to listen to the promptings of grace. In my case, I found a prayer form sitting in front of our Lord Jesus crucified on the cross, where I could lay out my heart. The way out of this affliction was a grace. Earlier in my journey, perhaps I would have thought just some aspirational prayer would relieve my suffering. But I needed grace, and, also, I needed to sit there every day, be humble at the feet of Jesus, to bow my head and kiss those feet, put my hand in his side asking for help. I needed this personal gesture as well as formal prayer I continued to do with my community.

I, also, realized that just going to confession would not ease the grip of this affliction. Since during one of our community penance services I was tempted to go to confession to this chaplain, and I was walking toward the missal ... This is really a true story, believe it or not. I was walking toward the confessional, and I pivoted toward another priest as I realized I was going to use the confession to let this chaplain have a piece of my mind.

Pamela: [Laughter]

Meg: He was blasted in the confessional [laughter]. My affliction didn't ease quickly. It needed long, pleading prayer, even at the point when my mind became conscious of the change I wanted in my heart. It took a long time to move that anger out of my heart, out of my body, out of every cell that was infected with the intoxication of my self-righteousness, the scourging thought that I was so right and everyone else was so wrong. This disease, this virus, this absolute infection of anger did not move out suddenly. It took time, and it moved out in surprising ways. I never had a moment of conversion during my sitting at the oratory or at the common prayers in chapel. My affliction of anger moved out gradually in various other places, walking, driving a car, correspondence.

Anyway, it takes time, and it takes form, and it takes a steady practice. You know, practice. Your thing about healing, healing violence, this takes practice. It isn't merely a question of resolve. I refrain from resolutions, because I know they wouldn't do it. They would only serve as measurements of my failure to live up to my own resolve. It took a kind of natural, organic pattern of letting go and moving on, because my desire was not to be angry. I saw that anger was an obstacle to my prayer and my relationships, my service, my well-being and my body. It causes anxiety and it causes agitation. When I'm perturbed, I react quicker to triggers, because I can transfer that anger instantly to somebody else. It's a learned response.

Now, my experience of anger with our chaplain and how the affliction eventually left me at the feet of our Lord, can change behavior I no longer want. It is in one sense quite a gentle transformation, and yet my anger was extricated, literally pulled up by the roots. It's a grace available to all of us who have suffered this affliction.

So that's the end of the story.

Pamela: Wow. So as you said, it takes time and it takes commitment, and vigilance, because as your story of the confessional states, the self-justification can be so sly, and it will use any avenue to release itself [laughter]

Meg: Right. Right. I still remember I was darting across the church, and I literally had to pivot on my feet and go to somebody else. But, again, that's the problem. End stage stuff doesn't really work. This is the teaching that practice, that form. Practice needs a form. We just can't have a conceptual aspiration in our minds. That just doesn't do it.

It's physical. We really have to reprogram our minds and our bodies, and remove this toxicity of the memory that's encapsulated in every cell in our tissues. It's really physical.

Pamela: So I guess the thing that you highlight is realizing that the violence is within and it's a poison. It's a poison to the mind, the heart, the body. It's material, and that practice is the way that violence is rooted out.

Meg: That's right.

Pamela: In other words ... because it's so easy to externalize it and say, "Well, it's that chaplain," or, "It's that politician," or, "It's that group of people."

Meg: Our work, our first work, our agency is to root out our affliction, so that we can see the guidance of the Holy Spirit as to what we are supposed to do externally. Notice, I was just righteously going to the archbishop and to my council, instead of asking in prayer what do I do about this, this dispute? Then I was worse off than he was.

So, again, violence has an insidious grip on us, and one of the things in the research is we don't know why of violence, not really. There's all kinds of theories, but that it is, that it is, and that Jesus has overcome it, and through prayer and practice, we can, even in the midst of violence, experience a calmness and peace, and the gentleness of God.

Pamela: There's a section in your preface where you talk about the why of renunciation. It's an interesting word to use ...

Meg: Renunciation is just the earliest form of contemplative living, that the basic theory is that the spirit, the inner nature, the life force within us is available. But because of our consciousness, because of our inabilities and our weaknesses, we don't experience it.

So what we do is renounce anything that isn't exactly our vocation. Not exactly. That's too strong of a word. We go toward our vocation, but then we renounce all else, so that the vocation, the calling from God, surges through. So like I renounce

everything except being a nun, and whatever helps me be a nun, I renounce that, or in my mind, I want to continue my realization and experience of God, so I renounce these afflictions that are in the way of this continuous abiding experience of God.

So renouncing is *my* part of the job, and then God is already there. So it's really kind of a positive thing. But I'm in a form, like a nun in a convent, that helps me renounce the other things. But other people are in another form, like marriage, or single life, or designated life choices that put a condition and environment around them, so they can live out their calling, their vocation -- which comes from God. We don't make that up. No. That's not for us to determine. So we just renounce whatever gets in the way of that calling, that vocation.

Does that make sense?

Pamela: Yes. Yes. I love the phrase "renouncing is the opportunity to change and lift up toward God for the common good. We respond with a root action deeply benefiting our domain of the humble human." How beautiful.

Meg: Again, when we're in our home space, we can really be fully available to the common good.

These afflictions cost us a lot, because they take away our well-being and our home place -- space, time, relationships. So renunciation, and it's a classical term. It's really the original idea behind baptism -- "do you renounce Satan?" and you are plunged into the waters and you come out through Christ. So you renounce -- a technical term is called the world -- but just all that is not of God, and so renunciation. It got sidelined in history just to be monks and nuns, but the contemplative way of life that all of you practice is a life of renunciation for the sake of the good, and it's not grits and guts. It really gives you a sense of freedom. The tiniest bit of a right fit just has an exponential gladness of heart.

Pamela: What it's making to clear to me is that it's a moving towards something, and as I'm moving toward that, I'm realizing the obstacles that are in the way of it. So I'm moving towards God, I'm moving towards the good, and realizing within myself what's in the way, what the afflictions are that are in the way.

Meg: Absolutely. The corollary partner, companion, whatever you want to say, our renunciation, is because God is so good. The goodness of God -- no wrath in God, no anger in Jesus, no punishment due to sin.

So when we renounce, it's just lining ourselves up with this Holy Spirit that is just really holding us from center to center.

Pamela: Now you mentioned your way of throughout that year and in the example that you gave, your way of practicing renouncing violence, and a way of prayer and inner vigilance, sitting at the foot of the crucifix day after day after day, and pouring out your heart, and asking for help. With our global community of Centering Prayer

practitioners, and people who also pray Lectio Divina and Welcoming Prayer -- the commitment to those practices really do the same thing.

Meg: Absolutely. And those are my ongoing practices. The point is a practice, and the practice, also, comes from the Holy Spirit, and then to be very confident that practice is given to you and it's to be treasured and honored, and seldom, seldom challenged. These practices are very, very cherished, and should be absolutely ... They're little treasures. These are gems.

The point behind that, the whole point is practice, form, and change of your mind. It's training of the mind, and then rooting it out of your body, and replacing it with faith and ongoing confidence just in Presence. Notice, I didn't have a bunch of prayers I said. I just sat there.

Pamela: Yes. Trust in Presence that never leaves. Yes. That rings very true with me.

Meg: And see, again, when we get to know as many people as you know, the variety of practices and the way people come to their center and to the center of the universe -- it's totally inclusive. I mean there are just no place for exclusivity.

I even wondered about this insight, because I don't want people coming to the oratory pouring out their heart on Jesus' feet. That's not the point, to start another devotion. That is not the point. The point is practice, form, faith, and then let Jesus lead to your next form, you know?

Pamela: The other thing that strikes me is that your definition of violence is very broad.

Meg: Any violence that causes harm through its forms and forces, and that could be environmentally, that could be politically, and it could be intimate relationships with married people, friendships, rivalries.

So violence is seemingly escalating a bit. But, also, is our ways of responding to it, and I, also like the way you talked about responding through healing, the contemplative healing through your presence, through your prayer. See, again, [what] keeps the cycle of violence going is reaction. So conscious, poise, pause, prayer, sitting in the Presence, but listening to the inner directives of the Holy Spirit, and then, again, that back door essentially why we need to get our afflictions some place, so that we can hear that voice.

Pamela: Well, let's move to the topic of holy water. Now, for people who are not part of a Catholic or monastic tradition, the use of holy water might be a little bit foreign. So maybe you could give a little context to where you came to with holy water and how it plays a role in renouncing violence.

Meg: Well, I started the holy water ministry, I call it, in the year 2000. A lot of people I was listening to felt evil forces. Holy water is an antidote to evil, and it seems to me that

we cannot go towards evil, because it's another domain that we have not the strength for. We don't have the skill. We're ignorant of how to deal with evil.

So the tradition of dealing with evil is holy water, and it's in every tradition, Hindu. There's some Buddhists, they sprinkle the holy water after the puja.

But, anyway, in the Catholic tradition, it's connected with baptism. Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan ...

But what we're doing with holy water is just putting our faith on something to ask Jesus to sanctify, and to bring God to do what we can't do ordinarily. Holy water is used for protection. Though we know from faith, evil ultimately is vanquished, but how has many zones of danger. Now, we need that out of time zone of peace that protects, guides, holds fast those living and these in-between times. Holy water creates, celebrates, constitutes zones of peace. We use holy water as a real substance to ride our faith through space, time and place. Beyond this little gesture, we're asking God to sanctify this place, person, space, even interior troubles or bliss.

See, again, because of the insidiousness of evil, we are not up to it. So we need something, and this comes out of the deepest, oldest tradition, and it's, also, generic. It's faith. It just says through these healing sacred waters, Jesus In our tradition, we'd say, "Jesus heal, and comfort, and lift the sorrows."

In other words, the gesture itself is the prayer, and you can say whatever, given the situation.

Pamela: Yes.

Meg: We need it. We need it. It's just a way to ride our faith in a very stronger way.

Now, again, I envision many of you sitting in prayer and sending the goodness, and light, and prayers toward good. That really does equalize these vibrations that are chaos. But if we want to access our tradition and find some more help, I would just say this holy water is not a small thing. It's really a tradition that you bring with you, just a whole force of angels and saints. So, how's that?

Pamela: [laughter] I don't see any downside!

Meg: When I was writing this, I spent a lot of time in Ireland, and I just found my Irish side just kept coming out in this book!

With the practice and God's grace, you really can get on the other side of the afflictions. But that's the good news, and then when you're on the other side of them, you can determine ... I put it in the book, too, a couple of discerning things like well, then what am I supposed to do about violence? Is there some other thing after I write a book? What am I supposed to do?

But the whole point would be it doesn't really matter what you do. It's that you do it, and that it is of God, and you do it without ego, and not bringing -- you do it in a way that it does not contribute to the cycle of violence. It really does heal. I love your word healing violence.

Pamela: One of your lines in the preface says, "Renouncing is a poised, but an active way of living. We pause, and then lean into the right and good, rather than react from our default defenses." I'm wondering if you could just say more about that, because as contemplatives, from our prayer practices, from the forms that we establish for ourselves, out of that we are called.

Meg: Right. The immediate "now what" is to Lent, live Lent in this non-violent way, with all the practices of Lent, to come at them gently.

In Exodus 14:14, right before the Exodus, [there] is several translations, but it says that to trust God, and do not fear, and stop and be poised and calm, and the enemy will panic. Your calmness will panic the enemy and you will go free. So I love that image that if we just [have] poise, and stopping, and calming, and I'd say if we would refrain from panic ourselves. Any symptoms of panic, that's the enemy. But God, the God of the exodus, who is going to help us walk right through the Red Sea, we're going to do it calmly, because this God of ours does preserve us, and gives us the insight of what to do. Anyway, that's Exodus 14. That's calmness.

So then the idea of when we are calm, then we would know ... First of all, we would have some inner healing ourselves, and we could get about the healing of others. Now, folks are really hurting, and it's only in calmness that they can experience our empathy. See, if we're in a panic and anxiety, we're just going to toxify and continue that virus. So this calmness heals, and then holding, holding all these relationships together in an appropriate manner through the directives of the Holy Spirit.

So that's the idea behind it. But Lent is a good opportunity for this, because we would refrain from any self-directed ego sacrifices, and just really stay calm, stay in the calmness, and rejoice, and heal, and be pleasant, and take action only when the Spirit guides. Doesn't that sound like a wholesome way of being?

Pamela: That sounds like a whole different kind of Lent.

Meg: Yes, it does.

Pamela: It sounds like a moving towards something in wholeness.

Meg: The operative word is gentle, gentle. It is gentle. In Centering Prayer, one of the best words we use there is ever-so-gentle, ever-so-gently lay your sacred word on the thought. The gentleness is absolutely ... probably the practice.

So I'd like to conclude with ... The end of the book is the prayer of holy water, and I need to tell you that I had this Irish blessing that was written in Irish and then in

English, and then I had 20 verses of a real dynamic, striking, ego-centered poetry from Meg Funk, and then [laughter] I ended up with just this: "Father, Son and Spirit, calm, heal, hold, now and forever. Amen."

Pamela: Amen. Thank you, Meg.

Meg: You're welcome.

[Music, with Meg playing the wind instrument]

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About Meg Funk:

Mary Margaret Funk (Meg) is a long-time friend of Contemplative Outreach. When she was prioress of her Benedictine community in Beech Grove Indiana (1985-1993), she received a Lilly Endowment grant to retrieve, reclaim and re-appropriate monasticism for women. She was advised by her Catholic University mentors to study under Thomas Keating, OCSO. She traveled to Snowmass and was smitten with Contemplative Outreach and the Centering Prayer intensive retreats. She invited Fr. Thomas to her community and the whole community learned Centering Prayer.

With Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler and Father Carl Arico, she hosted the Contemplative Institutes at Beech Grove; the first one was on the Christian Apophatic Tradition and the second one was on the tradition of Lectio Divina. At the first Institute, Fr. Thomas initiated his first faculty gathering with regional Centering Prayer coordinators. He also initiated his Contemplative Outreach faculty. Sister Meg joined the faculty that met often in Denver and she also served on the Board that held meetings at Chrysalis House, Warrick New Jersey. Sr. Meg was often invited to be a presenter at many of the contemplative conferences.

At the invitation of Thomas Keating, Meg was seated as a member of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Board. From 1994 - 2004, she was Executive Director of MID. Several of the board meetings were held at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. Recently, Meg gave the annual monk's retreat at the invitation of Abbot Joseph Boyle. Meg has been ever grateful to Fr. Thomas and Contemplative Outreach for its twin influence in her monastic outreach: meditation practice and monastic interreligious dialogue.

Sr. Meg is the author of the five books of the "Matter Series" published by Liturgical Press: *Thoughts Matter*, *Tools Matter*, *Humility Matters*, *Lectio Divina Matters* and *Discernment Matters*. In late spring 2018, Liturgical Press will release her newest book, *Renouncing Violence*. This book is about the practice of shifting harm to healing in oneself from the perspective of the monastic tradition.