

Back in the late 1970s and early 80s, a retired couple was alarmed by the threat of nuclear war, so they undertook a serious study to find the safest place on the globe. They studied and traveled [around the world, searching for an isolated, peaceful place]. Finally they found THE PLACE. And on Christmas they sent their pastor a card from their new home—in the Falkland Islands—just prior to the conflict between Argentina and Great Britain [that began in April 1982 when troops invaded the island].<sup>1</sup>

Where is the most peaceful place? On this second Sunday of Advent, this day we proclaim as Peace Sunday, we may ponder that question. As wars continue to ravage the world, our hearts long for peace even more. 2022 has been a year full of conflict—Ukraine, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen. Even our own nation seems to be at war between political parties as we fight over our national identity to discern how our nation is a place of freedom for everyone.

Just where is the perfect place of peace? During this season of Advent, as we prepare for Christmas, I thought of the birthplace of Jesus—Bethlehem. Maybe the birthplace where the Prince of Peace was born and where

angel sang, “Peace on earth, goodwill to all” could be a symbol of peace for us.

I visited Bethlehem in 2007 with an interfaith group, which included Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and Bahá’ís. We visited one another’s holy sites, reading scripture from our various faith traditions at each location. During our visit to Bethlehem, we read the Christmas story from the Gospels at the Church of the Nativity. Emperor Constantine had the church built around the year 330 on the location traditionally considered the birthplace of Jesus. (*Show Church of Nativity photos*)

Surely this place of the birth of Jesus could be a sign of peace. The Church of the Nativity is the oldest continually used place of worship in Christianity, and it’s amazing that it still exists today. Sadly, even here conflicts have occurred. Several times the church’s existence has been threatened.

One occurred during the Persian invasion of 614. According to legend, soldiers of the invading army saw a mosaic depicting the visit of the magi, attired in Persian garb. Assuming that the church was a monument to their own culture, the invaders left it alone.

In 1009, the Fatimid caliph, Al-Hakim, ordered the destruction of all Christian shrines. Local Muslims, however, had long used a section of the church for their prayers, and managed to protect it.

Apart from the occasional earthquake, the biggest risk to the Church of the Nativity over the centuries has been from competing Christian groups. The church is jointly administered by Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Apostolic and Syrian Orthodox religious leaders, who don't always get along. In 2011, Palestinian police were called in to break up a "broom brawl" between rival groups of Christian monks who had gotten into a fight over who had the right to clean certain parts of the building.<sup>2</sup>

So much for thinking that the birthplace of Jesus could serve as a model for peace when even Christians can't get along together!



Even with the conflicts, the Church of the Nativity has a built-in reminder of the importance of getting along. As we approached the church, we noticed a small door, which seems odd. If you look closely, you can see the outline of the original door, which has been resized smaller to prevent anyone from riding horses into the church.



To enter the church today, you have to bend over to get inside as you pass through what's called the Door of

Humility. "Pilgrims who enter must literally make a profound bow as they pass through. The effect is to experience a birth process of sorts—it reminds us of the humility God took on in joining our humanity."<sup>3</sup>

That may be what the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote a letter to the church in Roman: "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

One can translated the Greek word *φρονέω* [*phroneo* /fron·eh·o/ as "harmony, like-minded, be of the same mind as one, taking time to think and sense one's feelings." The letter suggests that we welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed us. Jesus humbled himself, and Paul suggested that church folks need to do the same in welcoming the Gentiles, those considered outsiders. Earlier in this portion of the letter, Paul wrote "We who are powerful need to be patient with the weakness of those who don't have power, and not please ourselves. <sup>2</sup>Each of us should please our neighbors for their good in order to build them up."<sup>4</sup>

We can practice welcoming different ideas in our own church, and even in our families. Last year, Pope Francis offered a Christmas gift of wisdom for families by suggesting:

remember three key words in a marriage: “Please, thanks and sorry.”

“Maybe we aren’t born into an exceptional, problem-free family, but our family is our story — everyone has to think: It’s my story.”

He urged parents to keep seeking help to try to overcome conflicts, including through prayer.

“Remember also that forgiveness heals every wound.”

Francis said a failure to make peace before going to bed at night can lead to a “cold war” the next morning.

“How many times, unfortunately, conflicts originate within the domestic walls due to prolonged periods of silence and from unchecked selfishness! Sometimes it

even ends up in physical and moral violence. This lacerates harmony and kills the family.”<sup>5</sup>

He encouraged families to pray “for the gift of peace.” That’s not always easy, is it? Practicing peace in our families is hard work, but it offers an opportunity for a ripple of harmony that can spread into the world. You and I may not be world politicians striving to bring peace to the far reaches of the globe, but we can offer harmony in our families and our community. Maybe we could even practice here by imagining a small Door of Humility as we bow to enter and exit the church. Try it today as you leave. Bow to one another. Offer peace. And practice living in harmony.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgkin, Michael. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking* (p. 1034). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #977.

<sup>2</sup> [www.homileticsonline.com](http://www.homileticsonline.com), 12/4/16.

<sup>3</sup> <https://faith.nd.edu/s/1210/faith/interior.aspx?sid=1210&qid=609&pgid=32744>

<sup>4</sup> Romans 15:1-2, CEB.

<sup>5</sup> Nicole Winfield, “Pope Francis’ key words for a marriage: ‘Please, thanks, sorry,’” December 27, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/12/27/pope-francis-key-words-for-a-marriage-please-thanks-sorry/>