

Canadian Council of Churches – 70th Anniversary,
Toronto, Church of the Redeemer, Nov 19, 2014

FAITH IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

A Reflection by Mary Jo Leddy

About sixty years ago, as the season of Advent began, I would walk a mile in the morning cold up the 8th street hill to the early mass at St. Joseph's church. This was Saskatoon in the 50s and at each corner we would pick up more kids who would add to the swelling ranks of our little Catholic battalion. We huffed and puffed up the hill together preparing for the inevitable encounter with the Protestant kids who were on their way to public school nearby. "Papists, papists," they would yell. And we would raise our fists and pump a reply, "Damn right, damn right!"

It was a morning ritual; in which we mindlessly repeated the religious epithets of another time and place. After school and on the weekends we actually became friends, played on the rink together and ran in and out of each other's homes.

In my life time... all of this has changed, seemingly forever. For my entire adult life I have worked for peace and justice with Christians from various churches. I teach at the Toronto School of Theology, not far from here. In my classes are students from the whole spectrum of Christian commitments – and then some. We are colleagues, companions, friends. We have come to appreciate each other's distinctive Christian character, to respect those differences and to value them. This is not some cheap and easy tolerance. It is real, workable, worthwhile.

In my lifetime... And what a short time that is in the long history of Christianity. We can and must remember the long history of the conflicts between Christians, the horrible life wasting wars and persecutions, the discriminations, the slights and slurs, the misunderstandings, the narcissism of small differences. How very recently this has changed, seemingly forever. It is easy to take for granted.

You who are gathered here tonight know that none of this happened easily. The Canadian Council of Churches did not drop down on a silent and holy night. We are able to gather in this church tonight because so many of you have endured the endless meetings, the travel, the negotiations, the late night phone calls when everything seemed to collapse. This ecumenical structure was built up, bit by bit, hour after hour, year after year. It is the work of some who are known and many others who remain unknown. Tonight we celebrate this effort and achievement and

we give thanks that an amazing grace has brought us home to each other. In spite of all the difficulties, the dialogues that ended in silence, the lack of funding and personnel, the impossible expectation, you knew, we knew that there was no other way. We could not be Christians and continue to hate or ignore each other. The love of Christ urged us on...And here today we can stand together and say what is most important: Together we are learning how to be Christians. Together we are privileged to become followers of Christ in this time and place called Canada.

We must never take this ecumenical way of life for granted. We know the children within us can still echo the voices of centuries and yell “Papists” and we can yell back “\Damn right.” And more...We know how fragile our relationships with our Jewish brothers and sisters whenever the topic of Israel comes up. I know, having lived with Muslim refugees in the aftermath of 9.11, how vulnerable they can feel. “What will happen to us?” they asked as they came seeking protection at the Romero Centre on that fateful day. I understood then that the furies can be unleashed and all that is solid can melt into thin air. We must never take our ecumenical faith and our interfaith relationships for granted. These are an achievement and a daily challenge, a call, a summons. You know this. I know this. This is why we are gathered here tonight.

The Loss of Faith in the Public Square

This said, I want to suggest that we all know that great ecumenical achievement that is the Canadian Council of Churches IS TAKEN FOR GRANTED by the vast majority of people in our country. They assume that the churches are part of the landscape of the country, just there. They presume the churches are full or half full of good people who do good things.

The churches, Anglican and Evangelical, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Protestant, Easter and Roman Catholic are taken for granted. They visible in public square – sometimes obvious as buildings or on state occasions. But, it seems to me, the churches are not listened to in the public square. They may speak but who is listening?

Not that long ago it was different. In the 70s and 80s there was an immense flurry of ecumenical activity which resulted in the churches speaking publically on a number of social issues. The interchurch coalitions were vocal advocates on aboriginal rights, human rights in Latin America, the economy, peace, etc. I was part of a group that started an independent Catholic newspaper at that time and we were committed to reporting almost everything the interchurch coalitions did and said. We also commented on what the Catholic bishops said and what the leaders of other churches did and said. This was news, lots of it -- not only within the

churches but also within the broader public square as well. I fielded many calls from the mainstream media asking to help in interpreting the latest statements of the church leaders on a wide variety of issues. It was a time when the voice of the churches in the public square was listened to, criticized and debated in some detail. More than one politician said that the church had no business, no authority or competence in the public square. Yet many Canadians listened carefully to the ethical consideration presented by the various churches. It was a time of conflict (always news!) when the liberal and conservative divisions within the churches were laid bare for all to see. Stories about personalities within the churches and news of intrigue and heroism were read with interest.

We know this is no longer the situation today. There are many important and significant statements that the churches have made, separately and together but they are not news. Very few reporters are listening or watching for what the churches have to say. Even fewer hang on the words of church leaders. Journalists know there is only a very small audience for church stories. This is a huge shift for the mainline churches in particular, churches who have been used to being taken seriously, accustomed to being listened to and treated with respect. It is also a harsh realization for evangelical groups who have made great efforts to influence politicians who share their concerns. They are listened to but have discovered, to their disappointment, that their concerns are often, although not always, largely ignored.

What has happened? It would be all too easy to say that the loss of influence of the church in the public square is due to the diminishment in the various churches – decline in numbers and revenue, the aging congregations. Has the salt lost its flavor? That question is always with us and no more so today than in the past. These self-criticisms can go on forever.

Let me suggest instead that we need to begin by thinking more deeply about the state of the public square itself before we can reflect on the role of faith in the public square. I think the heart of the matter is that many have lost faith not just in the churches but in the public square itself.

The public square is both an historical reality and a metaphor for the public life of a society. In the small democracies of Greece, citizens met and spoke and debated in a space which belonged to the polis, the people. It was different from the private space which was owned by individuals and families. During the medieval period in Europe, most villages had a place called the Commons – a space that was used by all but owned by none. It was used for weddings, sports, meetings or as a grazing ground for the animals. The Commons was the space that

all were responsible for. It was this common physical space that formed the basis for the imagining the notion of the common good in western political and social philosophy.

I am intrigued by the fact that, although the notion of the common good is foundational for much of Christian social thinking, it is almost always presumed rather than defined. I think this is because, at least until the time of the Industrial Revolution, the commons was a shared experience which could easily be described without being defined. People understood what the common good meant because they had seen it, smelt it, walked about it. They were “grounded” in a sense of the common good. They shared it, cared for it and were responsible for it.

In any case, the commons or the public square was the place where citizens also discussed and debated the issues of common concern. As long as this space was vibrant and meaningful, it made sense to discuss how and why the church should enter the public debate over the common good: Would the church or churches be allowed to dominate the discussion because of its moral and spiritual authority? Or should it be banned from secular politics and permitted to legislate only on issues of spiritual and religious concern? Or would the church (or churches), simply be one voice among many, neither privileged nor disallowed – the position taken in many liberal democracies.

However, the situation in Canada now is that the public square has now been emptied out. The federal government has signaled, for some time now, that the only voices that matter in the public square (the House of Commons) are those of the political majority. This trend is not recent nor is it confined to only one party. The voices of minority parties, the voices of other levels of government, the voices of Canadian NGOs and citizens, the voices of the churches –are treated as insignificant.

Defining the common good has become not so much the responsibility as the right of those in the majority government. This means that debate in the House of Commons or any public debate and discussion becomes almost meaningless and inconsequential: yelling, point scoring, shouting down and out. In this situation the role of the churches in the public square becomes as ineffective and irrelevant as that of so many other groups in this country. The public square has become a political fiefdom.

It is as if someone has put up a sign in the public square: Private property. Do not trespass. Trespassers will be prosecuted.

In this situation the churches have to ask whether there is any point in making statements or speeches on matters of social concern if they will be ignored or trivialized or dismissed or used for some other political purpose. The churches are not called to make noise and mumble. We are called to preach the good news.

Not that long ago there were those in the public square who objected to the churches making statements about public issues because they feared that the authority of the churches would demand some privileged position that would drown out other voices. That debate is long over and gone. The question now is whether there is the church can speak above the noise, can speak and be heard, when a majority government rules the public square in a way that silences dissenting voices. It is not as if church people are bound hand and foot with duck tape over their mouths! It is more subtle than that: Petitions are received and filed...away. Church workers who have worked on testimony before House Committees for months find themselves speaking to an empty room. Any amendments to legislation are voted down as a matter of course. There is always the apparently sincere hand shake, the promise to keep in touch and call me anytime. But nothing changes. The churches may be speaking but no one is in the public square.

This silencing has become more obvious over the last few years as churches have felt cautioned to watch what they say in public, what they say about political matters, because their charitable tax status may be revoked. The recent media reports of audits by the Canada Revenue Agency of some churches and NGOs has had a chilling effect. Church leaders think twice before they act and speak on public issues. How much of this self-censoring is prudent or how much is too much, given the real range of options afforded by the law, is a matter of debate. Nevertheless, it remains true that churches think twice about speaking in the public square. Their voices are muted, political, careful.

This is a potentially dangerous situation. We know why the churches have sometimes been cautious to speak and act in the public square. They worry that too much political involvement may distort the true mission of the church. They have reason to be cautious: in trying to change the public square the church itself may be changed. However, this is not the reason for the hesitancy we now see, the reluctance of the churches to engage in a public process that is useless, a waste of time.

Yet we also know from history that it is dangerous for the churches to leave the public square. It reminds me of the dangerous situation in Germany in the time of the Weimar Republic: so many lost interest in politics and vacated the public

square, they minded their own business and went to the cabarets at night and the churches on Sunday. By 1933 the churches themselves signed the Concordat and agreed to stay out of politics as long as they could continue their work in churches, schools and hospitals. Hitler did not have to seize power in Germany – it had been left lying in the streets.

The churches, and many other groups (particularly young people) may have lost faith in the public square but can they walk away and leave it empty?

Having castigated the federal government for making a sham of the public square, let me now turn to reflect on our responsibility as church people for loss of faith in the public square. It is tempting to harken back to the 70s and 80s in Canada as the good old days in which the churches were listened to and taken seriously on matters of public concern. As I reflect back on that time I see that this attention was possible because there was a residue of respect for the authority of the churches. Thus the churches spoke and they were listened to because their authority still had the power to persuade.

This is no longer true – and this is not primarily the fault of the present federal government!! It is no longer true because most forms of authority (whether political, religious, social) are now treated with suspicion: the Monarchy, the RCMP, teachers and doctors are no longer accorded automatic trust. The clergy and sports coaches are not given ready respect because of the lingering memory of terrible scandals involving abuse. We are living in a postmodern culture. If someone in authority says “This is what we believe.” The response will probably be “Yah, whatever.” Pronouncements of any kind, whether from the police, the government, academic figures, priests or even parents are treated lightly. Celebrities, sports figures or zombies seem to be given more consideration.

We must think carefully about this situation. We need to think about preaching, about speaking in church or in the public square. The words fall on deaf ears – not only because of the general din and noise of our culture, not only because we have lost faith in the public square but also because authorities of all kinds have been discredited.

Listen to the young people, some of whom are in our church but most of whom are not, they are suspicious of words. They text and surf and take words so lightly. Ask them who or what they listen to. I have asked the young interns who give a year or two of service at Romero House.

They don't really know what the churches have said in the public square. They are uninterested but they could be. They know words are unbearably fleeting,

easy to compose, to send, to delete. They know words and images are without weight and consequence. They are searching for words that are made flesh, made real. They are impressed by words that have weight and substance words that are consequential. “We listen to the churches,” they say, “but we know they don’t mean what they say. We see how they live and we know they don’t mean what they say.” Yet I also know these young interns will crawl on their knees over crushed glass to listen to Malala speak about the education of girls, to Mother Teresa talk about the poor. And they will listen to the gospel, the words of Christ because his life and his death gave weight to his teaching.

Only our lives give weight to our words in this postmodern culture. This is a hard truth. There is no way of making it easier. We can talk till the cows come home about the church speaking in the public square but young people for sure will not be listening. They will be waiting to see what we mean.

They will be watching to see who stops by the homeless Jesus on the ground in Queen’s Park, a public square/circle just south of here. They will be watching to see who sits beside him and asks “how are you?” And they are waiting to see what we do next.

The Recovery of the Public Square

I have suggested, strongly, that the public square in this country is no longer a place of significant discourse, that the most obvious example of this, the House of Commons, no longer functions as a common space for discussing and debating the common good. It is a place for posturing, scoring points, yelling and screaming.

What then must we do? This is the question the people asked John the Baptist (Lk. 3:10) What then must we do?

We must begin by admitting that the most obvious forms of the public square are not viable. What then? We cannot simply retreat to our private concerns and our separate corners of the world. To do so would be to abandon the world that God loved so much.

Perhaps we can begin by noticing where the public square continues to exist. I take note of the tiny street that I have lived on for almost twenty five years, in a house for refugees on a small street with ten other houses. When we first arrived the neighbours organized and tried to run us out. It was a shattering experience and took years of daily living, shoveling snow for each other, sharing a snow blower, putting out the garbage neatly and hosting fun parties to become good neighbours.

This experience of living on that street has raised the inevitable question. What is it that we hold in common? We do not share a common language, religion, nationality, culture or history. Like the country as a whole we wonder -- what is it that we hold in common.

I have come to realize that the answer to this question is very concrete and not at all abstract. What we hold in common is the street. The street is what none of us own but all of us use. And we are all responsible for it. This was the simple insight of the great urban thinker Jane Jacobs: the people who live on the street ensure that the public space is safe by using it. They watch who comes and goes. Some, especially the elderly, sit on the porches, others wave at each other as they put out garbage in the mornings. We meet most often on the sidewalk, in the space that we share. The street is the good that we hold in common. We keep it safe and sometimes even keep it happy. This is a public space, our local public square. No one owns it but we all use it and feel responsible for it. Those who care for the street, keep it clean and safe and beautiful, are welcome.

I learned that the most important settlement program we could develop for our refugees was to encourage them to participate in keeping the street clean and safe and beautiful. All of us together became guardians of the street.

Each family or group on the street owns a house, has a yard that they own. This is their private property. But the street is owned by nobody, yet is used by all and is the responsibility of all. Once a year we have a fabulous street party in which we close off the street have games for the kids. a potluck supper for hundreds of people, a really corny talent show and a fabulous street dance. The street is shared with others and sometimes complete strangers come and sit on the private lawns. They are welcome.

All across the country there are examples of such streets, parks, public spaces, town halls and even church buildings that continue to function as the public square. This is concrete, this is real.

This reminds us of the other non-tangible but equally real public spaces: the public radio network, public libraries that are repositories of our heritage of culture and learning – a heritage that no one owns but all share and are responsible for. It reminds us of the water that we all share and are responsible for – and no one owns, not yet anyway.

Take notice of these public spaces and find hope...we are sustained by the reality of the public square even as particular institutions, such as the House of Commons, no longer function for the common good.

Yet the public square is not only a reality to be noticed it is also a task to be fulfilled. What can and must the churches do to revitalize the public square? There are surely many groups and individuals who share this desire to recover a working sense of the commons. We are not alone in this desire and effort. Yet, I suggest, there is a particular contribution that the churches in this country have to make. It is a challenge that may define the next seventy years of our history together.

Our contribution, I suggest, has to do with clearing the space for the public square. It has to do with clearing out useless debris and clutter, cleaning out the pollution so we can breathe, shutting down the noise so we can hear. Our contribution has to do with taking a really deep breath, and contemplating our true place in the world, our true place as Christians and as Canadians. Our contribution has to do with offering a spirituality of the common good to replace the strategy of possessiveness and control that has paralyzed the public square.

This spirituality of the common good is grounded in our belief in Creation. No matter what our doctrinal differences as churches, we nonetheless share a fundamental belief that the world is created by God and that human beings are also creations of God. We believe that the world is not an object that we own and have a right to control but a gift from God that we share and are responsible for. It is never to be taken for granted. No matter how far our world has fallen it remains a gift and a responsibility.

We know and believe that the world isn't just there as an object to be possessed and used. It isn't ours to own and abuse. The great sins of history have occurred when we human beings looked on the world, planted a flag or a cross, surveyed and marked out a space and said "I own this place. We own this place." At that moment, the moment of acquisition, the world begins to disintegrate in our hands. How much violence and suffering have taken place when we have said "we own this place, this thing, this person. We have a right to this or that place, thing, person.

This is a particularly modern temptation – the view that the world is there to be used, manipulated, fixed, changed. It is a temptation that afflicts all political efforts from the left to the right of the political spectrum.

It is also an ancient temptation and has also afflicted the churches over the centuries – the temptation to try to control the world, to control the truth, to own it and possess it. We have acted as if Jesus was our private property to be owned and possessed. Our failures have reminded us that Jesus belongs to no one, is believed by all and all of us share the responsibility for bearing witness to his message.

And so we must consider our doctrine of Creation anew: the world as created not manufactured. As something to be recognized as a gift and responsibility not a possession to be owned.

This means actually, really, the earth is our common good – the good that we have been given and that we share – which no one person, people or nations own but all are responsible for.

It is in this context of the common good of the earth that we can situate our country Canada – that we are responsible for this small space of the earth, this particular geography as the good that we are responsible for. The borders of our nation state have been set down through a particular interplay between history and geography. In a way, the borders of our country are artificial human constructs and there is nothing sacred about them. On the other hand, it is possible to look on our borders as a way of setting out our particular area of concern for the earth – these borders set out our particular region of responsibility for the earth. There are the boundaries of our care, our concern and responsibility – our common good as a nation. This means we must care about tar sands, about melting glaciers in a geography that is immensely significant for global climate change.

This is the fundamental attitude towards the world that we must teach, preach, bear witness to in the dayliness of our lives. It is the fundamental attitude which lays the basis for recognizing the importance of the commons, the space for public life, the public square.

It involves living gratefully – not just in a limited religious way but as an all-encompassing attitude that has implications economically and socially.

What a radical difference it would make to link public responsibility to gratitude rather than to ownership?

- It would mean, for example, reworking our relationship to the aboriginal people who had lived in this place by respecting creation. Because of this they were ready to share this space with newcomers from Europe. However, Europeans, most of whom were Christian, treated this space of earth as a territory to be conquered, bought and sold and bartered. It was the beginning of the exploitation of the land – treating it as a place where resources were extracted for profit, treated it as a place where rights of ownership prevailed.
- It would mean, relinquishing our arrogant right that the resources of the place on earth are ours to exploit, to extract, to buy and to sell. It would mean saying that our rights to these natural resources extend only as far

as our responsibility for the good of the earth, for the welfare of this place on earth. It would involve...

- It would mean reexamining our presumptuous/arrogant claim that we own this land, this space, and we have a right to decide who gets in and who stays out. I remember hearing the arrogance of this claim during a refugee interview in a small room at a Canadian government office. I was upset by the arrogance of the officer conducting the interview. "She does have some right," I said. "Listen sweetie," he replied, "in this room I decide who has rights."

It would mean welcoming all those who are prepared to share responsibility for the common good, for the space that none of us own but all of us share.

Let us be grounded in the goodness of creation as we take our place in the public square.

