

Raymond G. Helmick, SJ

By Rodney L. Petersen

Born in Arlington, MA, September 7, 1931; died on April 21, 2016; Fr. Raymond G. Helmick joined the Jesuit Order in 1951, and was ordained priest in the Roman Catholic Church in 1963.

A Eulogy

Freedom from fear is one of the Four Freedoms advanced by United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his State of the Union address on January 6, 1941. These freedoms (of expression, of worship, from want, and from fear) were depicted in a winsome way by Norman Rockwell. Although what Roosevelt meant by “freedom from fear” appeared at the time to mean freedom from the fear of national aggression, the phrase has come to connote that and so much more. Fr. Raymond Helmick personified freedom from fear in his person and in his work.

One of Father Helmick’s final books, entitled *Fear Not: Biblical Calls for Faith*, reminds us that fear leads to a reversal of God’s creative design for our lives and for this world. Fear fosters deceitfulness, mistrust, despair, shame and sinfulness. It leads to greed and poverty. Out of fear an individual becomes lonely and alienated from community, while groups turn violent against each other. Fear leads to communal violence and large scale wars. Nothing can be more destructive than the emotion of fear. Freedom from fear leads to courage, trust, and creativity.

Freedom from fear gave Fr. Helmick courage to work in perilous settings. His life is framed by World War II and contemporary conflict, but was marked by a care for others after being locked in a garage with a car engine running by neighborhood kids who hounded him as a “German.” Beginning with the American Civil Rights movement and carrying over to solidarity with Rastafarians in Jamaica (1957-60, 1965–67) during the period of his regency at St. George’s College in Kingston, Jamaica, conflict transformation became his passion. After studies in ecumenical theology at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University, Fr. Helmick’s long history of conflict mediation from his base with NGOs in London and Washington, D. C. began with the Irish conflict. He worked from 1972 almost up to the present with this Protestant and Catholic divide, included in this time were efforts as a mediator with Loyalists and the IRA in Long Kesh Prison, Northern Ireland. This work led to efforts at reconciliation in Mozambique and Angola, with the Kurdish conflict, in Lebanon, India and East Timor. Pointedly, it led to Helmick’s work as a founder of the U.S. Interreligious Committee for Peace in the Middle East and to tireless efforts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as he served as confidant to all sides of the conflict. Nearer to home, as the Islamic community was mistrusted in its effort to construct a mosque in Roxbury, Fr. Helmick led in the effort toward its construction and toward the full inclusion of a Muslim presence in the Greater Boston Ecumenical and Interfaith community.

Freedom from fear not only led to courage, it also gave Fr. Helmick freedom to trust. Fr. Helmick’s *moral imagination* was grounded in the presupposition of Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, saving the proposition of the other. This principle engendered a radical openness to the other, to listening, to learning, and to enabling Fr. Helmick to

serve as a respected interpreter of one side of a conflict to the other. It raises the essential question, “Whom shall I exclude from my moral community?” As with Mennonite John Paul Lederach, Fr. Helmick brought “*Art and Soul*” to the work of reconciliation through the steady adherence to “fear not for I am with you.” Fr. Helmick’s tutoring in *Fear Not* came through the Church and the idea—*What is Church Responsible to do about Conflicts?* This idea runs like a silver thread through his work. It gave shape to the psychological interplay among minorities and majorities locked in conflict as defined by Fr. Helmick’s “Four Factor” theory of conflict dynamics. Concerned about faith, the misuse of faith, about the ways conceptions of election and a fundamentalism of intolerance hijack the ends of faith, his book *Fear Not* functions as an antidote to the fundamentalism of a secularized world that has nothing to do with religious faith but is about power. Whether talking with all (Marc Gopin), cutting back to primary texts (Abdulaziz Sachedina), following a bias toward inclusivity (Miroslav Volf) or fostering the technical proficiency of peacebuilding (Conflict Transformation, Eastern Mennonite University and through the Decade to Overcome Violence of the World Council of Churches), *Fear Not* gives a vision of the elements of trust for the work of reconciliation. It moves reconciliation out of the pew and confessional and into the public square as was manifest in Fr. Helmick’s work in the former Yugoslavia as well as with the attempted release of prisoners held by Hamas, Hezbollah, and Israel.

This is the matrix addressed by Fr. Helmick, S.J. *Fear Not* marks out psychological health. It promotes positive identity formation. It enables a politics of reconciliation. It is a way for churches and other faith communities to live out their essential tenets. “Do not fear” is the charge given to Abraham, alike to Joshua, then with resonances through Jesus to John’s vision, the Apocalypse. The monotheistic faiths tell us that we live in a world of the one God, upon whose goodness we can totally rely. We hear this early in the biblical witness, “Be strong and courageous . . . I myself will be with you” (Deuteronomy 31:23); and it carries into the victory cry of the Lamb who was slain is that, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed” (Revelation 21:4).

Freedom from fear gave Fr. Helmick courage to work in perilous settings. It fostered the freedom to trust. And, freedom from fear gave Fr. Helmick the freedom to be creative with a lightness and a redemptive spirit of joy. Whether that was in building a harpsichord or as an unofficial emissary between paramilitary groups in Ulster, he combined the seriousness of the occasion with a trusting spirit. I remember Fr. Helmick introducing a group of seminary students from the schools of the Boston Theological Institute to “Gusty” Spence, a leader of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) who learned the ways of peace through the fence at the encouragement of Fr. Helmick. During his time in prison Spence renounced violence and helped to convince a number of fellow inmates that the future of the UVF lay in a more political approach. As a Progressive Unionist Party representative he took a principal role in delivering the loyalist ceasefires of 1994.

Fr. Helmick’s creativity continued in his teaching at Boston College, where he chose to work with students from all of the BTI schools in conflict-resolution training, teaching

not only in BC's Theology Department and at St. John's Seminary but also at Andover Newton and Boston University. I remember when I began to teach through the BTI schools it was my endeavor to bring at the end of each academic year a group of students to some region of the world where religious communities were being particularly challenged. After bringing students to visit my friends in Geneva, Fr. Ray said that next we should visit his friends in Rome. That visit led to a private papal audience and a hurried trip through Rome in search of proper Protestant ecclesiastical attire – which we found in a Waldensian Seminary. Time will not permit me to mention additional ways in which Fr. Ray went out of his way to assist students not only from the United States but from places as diverse as Ghana, Romania, Indonesia, and Korea to gain freedom from fear toward courage, trust, and creativity.

While in the midst of keeping a woodshop at St. Theresa's Church in West Roxbury, where he lived in residence with his brother, Rev. Msgr. William M. Helmick, St. Theresa's pastor, Fr. Ray built a free-standing tabernacle modeled on 15th-century examples at Louvain. In these years he was invited to the White House for the 1993 signing of the peace accord between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in recognition of his work toward building not just a tabernacle but a framework for peace. His creativity was seen similarly in his venture with the Rev. Jesse Jackson and other religious leaders during the 1999 Kosovo crisis to negotiate the release of three U.S. soldiers captured by the Serbs. In these very years he served at the Center for Strategic & International Studies in Washington, but wore all such honors lightly. The child, once wounded by others, sought a better world for all. And at this very hour friends in Reykjavik gather in the King Jesus Church to be in spirit with us and with a world on the edge of environmental collapse.

Fr. Helmick was committed to the universal Church, and to local St. Theresa's Church in West Roxbury. In addition to building a harpsichord and a free-standing tabernacle, Fr. Helmick worked on a wall mosaic of the healing Christ and a large mosaic of St. Theresa, which was unfinished when he died. In an article which he wrote on St. Theresa of Avila, Helmick noted, "She had, too, an awareness that God called her to some special work. It was not clearer to her than to most of us just what that work would be. She is altogether improvisatory about it right down to the last, open to the leading from God that she will receive in the very events she lives through, and in that she marks out a way for us too, as individuals and for those parishioners in her parish."

In conclusion, let eulogy pass to elegy in the prayer of St. Theresa of Avila.

**Let nothing disturb you,
Nothing affright you.
All things pass,
God is unchanging.
Patience obtains all:
Whoever has God
Needs nothing else.
God alone suffices.**