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Praying for peace: one man's plan

by Tom Gallagher



Al Forte outside the Old North Church in Boston

Mission Management

Peace and violence follow us into 2010.

The lives of many are filled with the violence of unemployment, the violence of homelessness, the violence of drugs, the violence of abortion, the violence of illness, and the violence of capital punishment. Our lives are filled with the violence of wanton killings like those in Binghamton, N.Y.; New Haven, Conn.; Fort Hood, Texas; Seattle; Darfur, Iraq; and Afghanistan.

How can we integrate God's peace into a wickedly violent world?

For one man in Norwalk, Conn., an authentic path to peace developed over time. Al Forte describes himself as "just a guy from Red Hook, Brooklyn."

"I'm not a peace activist," said Forte. He says he is more comfortable with the label of "prayer activist."

Seven years ago Forte was in Michigan helping his son with a family business. While living with his son and family, Forte continued his participation with Toastmasters International. He was assigned a term

final speech topic, "Influencing others."

Forte simply wanted to get an "A" grade for the speech, and he honed in on the topic of peace and growing closer to God. He made rudimentary prayer cards for distribution to the class during his speech. The cards contained a prayer he wrote, accompanied by a picture of U.S. soldiers in Iraq praying.

Forte got his "A," but he also had dozens of extra prayer cards. What to do?

He began handing them out on street corners in New York, Chicago and Stamford, Conn., in front of the Boston Garden before a playoff game, and in front of the New York Giants, Yankees and Mets stadiums.

Forte has handed out over 15,000 pass-it-on prayer cards.

A regular attendee at daily Mass since his grammar school days at Visitation School in Brooklyn, N.Y., Forte was at Mass one day when, he says, he had a distinct vision. He "witnessed" a Muslim couple looking at their dead children. Forte, who has three children and four grandkids of his own, said he empathized with the couple.

Then after receiving Communion, Forte says he experienced a voice telling him, "Al, you can do something about this." Forte was confused. He asked himself, "What can I do about this?"

The idea came to him that he could at least do a walk like those in support of breast cancer research. Then the idea came to him to walk 950 miles from Norwalk to Chicago.

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The day before he began his journey, Forte began to worry about the what-ifs of the trip. After receiving Communion at morning Mass, Forte says, he heard another voice say to him, "Al, this walk is not about you," and a calm came over him.

In July 2008 at age 65, Forte began his journey by traveling approximately 13-15 miles a day and wearing a "Pray for peace" T-shirt.

His childhood friend, Joe Ross, agreed to accompany Forte by car the whole way. Ross would disappear during the day and rendezvous in the evening for dinner.

"Al is a dear friend, and while I am not fully aligned with Al's mission, the most impressive thing was seeing the positive impact Al had on the people along the way," said Ross.

Almost 80 days later, Forte arrived in Chicago to hugs from his family.

Forte puts his pray-for-peace walk in perspective. At a diner en route to Chicago, Forte met an 18-year-old waitress who shared her story with him. She was a mother of two children, one of whom she had placed into an adoptive home two years before. And Forte thought of his father, who served in World War II. "This young waitress and my father, for example, are more courageous than I in doing this walk," said Forte.

He fully expected to let the Pray-for-Peace initiative come to an end. Yet, it dawned on him that his newfound credibility from doing the long walk enabled him to continue his mission.

In May 2009, Forte led a dozen or so on a 12-mile Pray-for-Peace walk in Fairfield, Conn.

Mike Morris joined the Fairfield walk. "Al's message is so simple that people quickly catch on," said Morris. Peace is needed "both globally and locally, in our families and neighborhoods," he said.

In May 2010, a more robust Pray-for-Peace walk is planned for Fairfield, Conn., with many youth from Protestant and Catholic churches and from synagogues among the participants.

"Youth believe in peace and want to make a difference," said Deacon Steve Pond, director of the Youth Ministry Office at St. Aloysius Parish in New Canaan, Conn. "The young people naturally gravitate to Al's walks."

"Al gives people hope and it's wonderful to see," said Ross.

[Tom Gallagher is a regular contributor to *NCR*. Ideas for a "Mission Management" story? Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

Online resources

For Al Forte's "Pray for Peace Walks," see www.prayforpeacewalk.org.

Pass-It-On Prayer

God grant us peace in the world.
God grant us peace in our own hearts.
Help us to see you in others.
Especially, help us to see you in our enemies
And those we dislike.
-- *Al Forte*

Al Forte's top seven lessons learned

1. Prayer works. Why not do it more often and encourage others to pray?
2. Based on spontaneous comments in response to handing out prayer cards, more people pray than we realize.
3. If good people try to be a little better themselves, the world will be a better place, and there are a lot of good people in the world.
4. Take time to see the beauty of the landscape around us.
5. Get a "kitchen cabinet" together to test your ideas on them.
6. The little things we do for others may be more important than the big things we do for them.
7. Pray and think more about what God's will is for each of us.

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