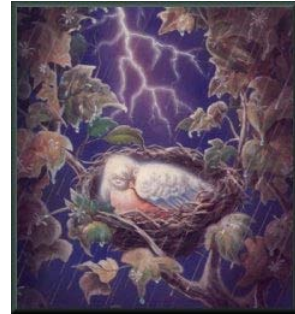


## Sixth Sunday of Easter

***“Whoever loves me will keep my word...Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you...the Father will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth...”***  
John 14, 23-29



It seems to me that the peace which Christ bequeaths to us in today's gospel is not some warm and fuzzy feeling that leaves us smug and contented. Rather, it's an attitude to living and a perspective we adopt towards everybody and everything we encounter. Peace becomes a reality when we act with compassion, gratitude and generosity of heart. While we stop and consciously pray for peace every Sunday during the Eucharist, it might be worth pausing to ask ourselves: "What exactly am I praying for when I join in the prayer for peace just before communion?" The peace which Christ promises in today's gospel is surely a prayer in itself. The peace we celebrate in the *Gloria*, when we pray: "Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth!" involves hard work and persevering, intentional effort.

Let me illustrate what I'm trying to say through reference to an article I read this week in the Winter edition of *Divinity*, a journal published by the School of Divinity at Duke University, North Carolina.

Angelina Atyam is a nurse-midwife who lived with her husband and six children in the town of Lira in Uganda. One of their children, Charlotte, attended St. Mary's Catholic Boarding School for girls in the parish of Aboke, about 10 miles from the family home. One night in 1996, rebels from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) stormed the boarding school and abducted all the students. The school's deputy headmistress, a petite but formidable nun, and a male member of staff pursued the rebels into the jungle. When they caught up with them, they pleaded for the release of the girls. The rebel leader reluctantly released 109 of the girls but 14 year old, Charlotte was not one of them. The tiny nun proceeded to argue with the commander for the release of the other 30 girls but his response was merely a threat to kill the whole lot of the students if she persisted. Those 30 girls were taken into neighbouring Southern Sudan where they were brutalised for the next seven years.

Angelina and the parents of the other captured girls then started to meet weekly in their local church to pray for the release of their daughters. No amount of praying, however, seemed to lift their spirits and their requests for help from the police and the Ugandan government got them nowhere.

"I was confused and bitter, and very deep in my heart I was thinking: 'How do I avenge this?'" says Angelina. "Yet, we continued to pray and call upon the LRA to release our children, protect them, bring them home, and make peace again." That is, until a priest was leading the parents one day in the Lord's Prayer. When they got to "forgive us our sins", they suddenly stopped. They could not go on and say "as we forgive those who sin against us." Realising that they were praying for forgiveness of their own sins, yet were unable to forgive the rebels for stealing their children, they filed out of the church in silence. "We went back home to examine ourselves and our

communities,” says Angelina. “What was it that was burning - the anger, the bitterness, the corrosion of our souls? We had put a curse on the rebels, but in the process had put one on ourselves.” When they met to pray again the following week, a transformation in them had begun. As they prayed to forgive the rebels, their own sorrow began to lift. They decided to share their forgiveness, first with other people in their communities, and then in neighbouring districts where other children had been abducted. They organised meetings to tell their story. Angelina even sought out the mother of the rebel commander who had made Charlotte his wife and reconciled with her, telling her that she had forgiven her son.

Angelina helped to found a group called the Concerned Parents Association (CPA) which advocated for the release of all abducted children in Uganda, the peaceful resolution of the armed conflict and forgiveness of the LRA. They petitioned the United Nations to intervene and Angela was eventually invited to address the UN Security Council in New York. Her advocacy attracted the rebels’ ire and their chief offered to release Charlotte on condition that Angelina cease her activity. Angelina’s response was that she would desist if all 30 girls were released. The commander refused and so did Angelina.

While in captivity, Charlotte gave birth to two children. One day, she escaped with the younger child and found refuge in a Ugandan army camp. Once Charlotte was safely reunited with her family, Angelina went in search of Charlotte’s other son. She eventually located the 5-year-old in one of the camps that had been established for the one million Ugandans who had been displaced during the civil conflict. The youngster had fled the rebel camp during an air raid, convinced that his mother and younger brother had been killed. Angelina continues the work of the CPA, promoting a culture of peace and reconciliation among Ugandan youth who still carry the scars of war and violence. Charlotte is studying hospital management at the University of Health Sciences in Kampala.

The peace that Christ offers is certainly not passive. It calls for an active response from each of us, motivating us to dismantle barriers that divide, to seek to understand others, to forgive those who hurt us. It nudges us to open ourselves to the promptings of God’s Spirit and to become advocates ourselves for the poor, the forgotten, the dispossessed and the alienated. That’s how we become instruments of the peace that Christ extends to us.