

**Love of God and Neighbour**  
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The famous words of Jesus, “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13, 34-35), link explicitly love of God and love of neighbour. The two great commandments, found in both the New Testament and the Hebrew Torah, are one. Love of God is love of neighbour; love of neighbour is love of God.

With Gordon’s encouragement, I’d like to talk briefly about some remarkable people of varied backgrounds, who live or have lived out their faith, combining love of God and love of neighbour often in the face of major adversity. Hopefully you will find them both inspiring and relevant.

**Shahbaz Bhatti**

Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan’s Minister for Minorities, was assassinated almost one year ago. He was well aware of the dangers he faced; indeed, he decided not to marry to avoid exposing others to what ultimately befell him. A few years ago, I’m told he led a group of Christian aid workers after an earthquake struck the country. They found a house where the roof had fallen and a man was trapped underneath. Bhatti helped him get out and then noticed slogans on the walls against Christians, such as “Kill the infidels.” Bhatti asked what sort of facility it was. His answer was in effect that it was a training location for Al-Qaeda. The man added, “And you came here to save my life?” “Yes,” Shahbaz replied, “Christianity is all about saving lives.” For Bhatti, it was also about speaking up for all of Pakistan’s religious minorities until the day of his death.

Bhatti’s legacy was dialogue, compassion and religious freedom. Bishop Andrew Francis of Multan (Punjab) praised him as “a man who lived to promote the Gospel values, such as compassion, unity, and care for the marginalized. From here our work begins. We are called to be compassionate with all people, regardless of faith, race and culture, especially

in times of need....”Another important aspect, says the Bishop, is that of dialogue: “It’s our job, respecting the memory of Bhatti, to continue to tirelessly promote dialogue as an instrument to understanding and appreciating each other and building peace. In Pakistan, it is expressed mainly in Muslim-Christian dialogue. In this, we are called to send a message to the nation, to build harmony and unity among the Pakistani people.”

The third point stressed by Bishop Francis is “the strong call for freedom of religion, speech and conscience. ...(Bhatti) always had in the forefront of his mind the importance of these values ...(which) we will continue to encourage ... at all levels.” “Bhatti”, concludes the Bishop, “teaches us, finally, that there should be fruitful cooperation with the Government and the civil authorities for the common good of the nation. Looking at the life of Bhatti instills in us greater courage, greater commitment, and deeper fidelity to ...the Church.”

### **Laszlo Tokes**

Laszlo Tokes was a Hungarian minister in Transylvania, Romania in the 1980s, when he was in effect banished to a small church in the city of Timisoara. He soon built up the congregation to about 400. In mid-December, 1989, thousands --Hungarians and Romanians-- joined his congregation around the church to protect his pregnant wife and him when police came to arrest them. The continuing and growing street protests in Timisoara—so similar to what we have seen during the Arab Spring—led directly to the fall of the Ceausescu dictatorship in Bucharest within days

(Last year, I learned from a Canadian, broadcaster Arpad Szoczi ([www.euronair.eu](http://www.euronair.eu)) , why the authorities went to arrest Tokes. Szoczi and his father had raised the funds to send two Canadians --a journalist and a former Quebec Cabinet minister-- to interview Tokes secretly in Timisoara in the spring of 1989. Like Bhatti, Tokes spoke out fearlessly. When a Hungarian television station later broadcast the interview, Ceausescu - as well as many residents of western Romania - saw it. Ceausescu sent his dreaded Securitate to arrest him and what Tokes judged “the turning point” in the Romanian Revolution arrived. Tokes is now an elected member of the European Parliament (since 2004) and one of its vice-presidents (since 2010)).

## **Gao Zhisheng**

China's party-state uses force to suppress voices advocating dignity and the rule of law. One is Gao Zhisheng, a twice Nobel Peace Prize-nominated lawyer often called "the conscience of China". A decade ago, he was named one of China's top ten lawyers. He became a Christian after attending a Beijing house church in 2005, concluding, "In addition to physical needs, man also has his equally important spiritual needs..." He later gained worldwide acclaim for his pro bono legal defense of workers, evicted farmers, dissidents and the disabled. The Party wrath was released, however, when Gao started defending Falun Gong practitioners. It began with the removal of his permit to practise law, an attempt on his life, a police attack on his family, and a cessation of any income. It intensified when Gao responded in the nonviolent tradition of Gandhi by launching nationwide hunger strikes calling for equal dignity for all nationals. One of his communiques described more than 50 days of torture in prison. In January 2009, his wife and two children escaped China, obtaining asylum in the U.S.

On New Year's Day 2012, Gao's wife wrote him a reassuring letter "...I am no longer afraid of the police....while I was in China, I was often bullied by (them)... which left me paranoid." She also recalled, "Do you remember what (our young son) said ...? 'I have a red string in my heart, and no matter where (Father) goes, the red string will be tied to him.' ... Even if you go to the ends of the earth, we will remain connected to you..." [If that's not a love story for Valentine's Day, then I don't know what is!]

## **National Prayer Breakfasts In Ottawa**

A word now about Canada's National Prayer Breakfast in Ottawa and about three speakers, among many, who have addressed either the breakfast or seminars afterwards and struck me as being especially strong on love of neighbours.

## **Romeo Dallaire**

Retired General Romeo Dallaire is Canada's national hero for his work as commander of the U.N. peacekeeping mission during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. He was one of few officials from any government who acquitted himself well throughout the entire ordeal, although he still insists on blaming himself. His personal courage and that of his tiny band of U.N. peacekeepers, while so many other foreigners were 'turning tail', seemed based on

the Great Commandments. Dallaire says, "There must be God because I have shaken hands with the devil." In October 2010, he published a new book, *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children*, about the plight of the estimated 250,000 child soldiers used by military and paramilitary organizations today across the world. He continues to be the leading humanitarian voice on behalf of those facing genocide and against the use of child soldiers.

### **Phan Thi Kim Phuc**

Another of our speakers was Kim Phuc, whose photograph as a young Vietnamese girl running from napalm (which touched about 40 percent of her body) was judged in Japan to have been the most important one of the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. She now lives in Canada and her biography, *The Girl in the Picture*, was written by Denise Chong. Kim Phuc spoke on reconciliation and how after she became a Christian she was able to forgive all who had caused her grief, including the American who authorized bombing near her home. She also met with Captain John Plummer, the pilot who dropped the bomb which hit her - and forgave him. (He is now a minister living in Virginia.) Kim Phuc has a special place in her heart for children, heading up the Kim Foundation International, a private charitable organization dedicated to providing funds to support the work of international organizations that provide free medical assistance to children who are victims of war and terrorism.

Such organizations might manufacture prosthetic and orthopedic devices for children; fit children with those devices; provide therapy, medication, wheelchairs, and rehabilitative services; or help families, schools, and other institutions find ways to support the efforts of disabled children to become full members of their communities.

### **Diane Morrison**

Diane Morrison has been Executive Director of the Ottawa Mission for homeless men for 21 years, since she first brought skills as an innovative school teacher and committed Christian to an organization run by men since its founding in 1906. Under her guidance, the Ottawa Mission has been transformed from a small emergency homeless shelter to the active community resource that it is today. The Mission serves 1200 meals daily and provides a place for 233 men to sleep each night. Funding is provided by donations (60%) and government (40%). Yearly donations of about \$5,000,000 help to support a school, drug and alcohol treatment, chaplaincy, job training, housing and health services for

homeless men, women and children. Diane, the staff and volunteers provide an atmosphere of encouragement, hope and acceptance to the most vulnerable people in the city. They see many lives changed as they strive to end homelessness and change the face of poverty in Ottawa.

But what does it mean to follow Jesus today? People with whom we rub shoulders ought to see in us God's message of kindness and unconditional love for the human family with all persons of equal value. Here are vignettes about two more persons who practice devotion to God and the social gospel:

### **“Mayu” Brizuela de Avila**

“Mayu” Brizuela de Avila was the highly-respected Foreign Minister in the government of El Salvador from 1999-2004. “God”, she feels, “gives talents to everyone; the more one has the greater the responsibility to be a ‘beacon’ for Him”. At every meeting where we were both in attendance, her contribution was profound and unique, including the signing of the Democratic Charter by Organization of American States (OAS) foreign ministers on 9/11/01 in Lima about an hour after the second plane hit the World Trade Tower in Manhattan.

An example of Mayu's grace occurred when she was invited to speak at an OAS student forum in Edmonton, first flying for more than 12 hours from San Salvador to L.A. and from there to Vancouver and on to Edmonton. Her message to the students transmitted her faith and positive attitude on life, encouraging them to excel in their daily lives. While there, she wanted to meet the Salvadorian community and a meeting was arranged at a church. She insisted on arriving early so that she could greet each person as they arrived. She saw God in every one of the political refugees who had fled her war torn country at the time. After public office, “Mayu” Brizuela de Avila continues working at a regional level, as she serves the Lord in Latin America through corporate social responsibility projects. In short, she sees her work as a path to sanctity, a path to serve her country, her region, her fellow citizens and God.

### **Tommy Douglas**

The Prairie Canada Baptist minister Tommy Douglas believed that building the Kingdom of God on Earth required introducing radical measures. During the Great Depression, he transformed himself from a preacher into a social democratic legislator. As premier of Saskatchewan for 17 years, he worked to protect farm families from banks in Central

Canada. He then turned his efforts to building the first universal health care system in North America, battling the provincial and later the Canadian and U.S. medical establishments. By getting Medicare with a single government insurer to work in sparsely-populated Saskatchewan, he proved that a health system ultimately based on the premise that all lives are of equal value for Medicare purposes could work nationally and beyond.

### **Living our Faith**

Having observed Christians over many years, I'm constantly struck by how essentially similar are their answers to the question of how we can live our faith today. Many Christian women, men and youth attempt in their daily lives to be points of light wherever they are. We all believe in a patient, loving God who calls us as Christians to a human relationship of respect and tolerance with neighbours of different faiths (or no faith at all). Our faith sets us free to be open to the faiths of others, to risk, to trust, and to be vulnerable.

Grace – God's love for all humanity– merits the final word. It is the one thing that only churches can provide in a world which craves it the most. Grace can bring transformation and hope. As Philip Yancey expressed in *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, it is hunger for grace that brings people to any church. "I rejected the church for a time because I found so little grace there," he writes. "I returned because I found grace nowhere else." In a world filled with 'ungrace,' we believers should seek to dispense grace wherever we find ourselves, but always bearing in mind the words from 1 Corinthians (8:1-13) That "...knowledge puffs up, but love builds up...."

Finally, let me quote from the end of Karen Armstrong's book, *The Case for God*. "The point of religion (is) to live intensely and richly here and now. Truly religious people are ambitious. They want lives overflowing with significance...Instead of being crushed and embittered by the sorrow of life, they (seek) to retain their peace and serenity in the midst of their pain...They (try) to honour the ineffable mystery they (sense) in each human being and create societies that protect and welcome the stranger, the alien, the poor and the oppressed."

God bless your vitally important work as you strive to “honour the ineffable mystery that (you) sense in each human being...” As Paul wrote in one of his letters, “Finally, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Thank you all for allowing me to share my thoughts with you today.