

# Building peace and harpsichords, one note at a time

By Julie Bourbon

It is hard to know where to begin writing about Fr. Ray Helmick. An authority in conflict resolution and mediation, he has worked on some of the most explosive and important political issues of our time, engaging in the peace process in Northern Ireland, mediating conflict in the Balkans, working to establish better relations between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

He knew Yasser Arafat personally and has corresponded with the Vatican about the conduct of Catholics in East Slavonia, with Slobodan Milosevic during the Dayton Peace Accords and with Secretary of State Colin Powell about the Middle East. He maintains that the famous Pottery Barn rule — “you break it, you own it” — evoked by Powell and later mangled by Sen. John Kerry in one of the presidential debates, was his analogy.

He marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., protested the Vietnam War and studied ecumenical theology at Union Theological. His most recent book, “Negotiating Outside the Law: Why Camp David Failed” was published in late 2004.

“I thought I was going over there for a summer,” said Helmick (NEN), 73, of his first visit to Northern Ireland in 1972 as part of a mixed group of Catholic and Protestant theology students. Working at the nexus of churches, political parties and paramilitary groups, Helmick sought common ground among hostile groups who believed they had none.

“I came up with projects,” he recalled of those first days, during “The Troubles,” as that time is called. “I was looking for something they could acknowledge as a common interest. It wasn’t hard — they all needed jobs.” Helmick approached American and British companies and asked them to invest in jobs in Northern Ireland, which involved negotiating on the ground for the safety of the employees and structures, as well as access for the workers, who would be a religiously mixed work force.

In 1973, Helmick became the associate director of the Centre for Human Rights and Responsibilities, working out of London because the Church in Northern Ireland did not want him living there: The Centre was a joint project of the English and Irish Jesuits. He was actively involved in the training of community associations in Belfast from 1972-1981. “At this stage, I was into something I couldn’t walk away from,” he said.

During those years he was also working with Iraqi and Turkish Kurds, and leaders from South Africa, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, East Timor and, “of course,” with principals in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “That way I got into all of these different conflicts,” he said, which seems to be the way it works with Helmick.

In 1999, Helmick was part of a team of negotiators, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who traveled to Belgrade during the bombing campaign to bargain successfully for the release of three American soldiers

activists. “They’re still in contact with each other.”

An indefatigable letter writer, he has sent correspondence throughout President Bush’s tenure in office to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, to Powell and to Bush himself. Only Powell, now on his way out of office, ever responded, although not about Iraq but rather the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Helmick is, not surprisingly, against the current war in Iraq, which he predicted would result in insurrection in Iraq and the overthrow of Arab governments friendly to the United States, including probably Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. “We’re in the process of losing the war,” he said, clearly distressed, adding, “I’m very much concerned with the Israeli-Palestinian connection.”

Such weighty matters are always on his mind. At Boston College, he has been a professor of theology for 20 years; most of his theology classes deal with conflict resolution, and his conflict resolution classes are theological, he said. Helmick has also become involved in documentary film making. A byproduct of Helmick’s regular travel abroad with groups of students from the BTI, the films, several of which have been shown on PBS, have covered Northern Ireland (twice), Jerusalem, South Africa, the Balkans and, most recently, Sicily.

“Killing Silence: Taking on the Mafia in Sicily” aired earlier this month on PBS and was screened at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The College of Fine Arts at B.C. has been instrumental in getting the films made. Another trip, perhaps prompting another film, is scheduled for this coming summer to Syria and Lebanon.

But what about when he isn’t negotiating for peace? That’s where it gets really interesting. Helmick has, for starters, built his own harpsichord. A student of the piano and organ since his childhood, Helmick realized years ago “I was playing Bach on a piano and I needed to be playing a harpsichord.” So he built a few clavichords first, “just to get over the fright,” and then proceeded to construct an 8’ long 18th century French harpsichord which has accompanied him across the Atlantic to England and Ireland and which is with him currently in Boston. “I play

anything with a keyboard,” he said.

The harpsichord adventure came about while he was a graduate student at Union Theological Institute in the late 60s and early 70s, and it led him into furniture making generally. “My own tastes run to Chippendale,” he allowed; he initially made furniture using measured drawing copies, before learning to design his own.

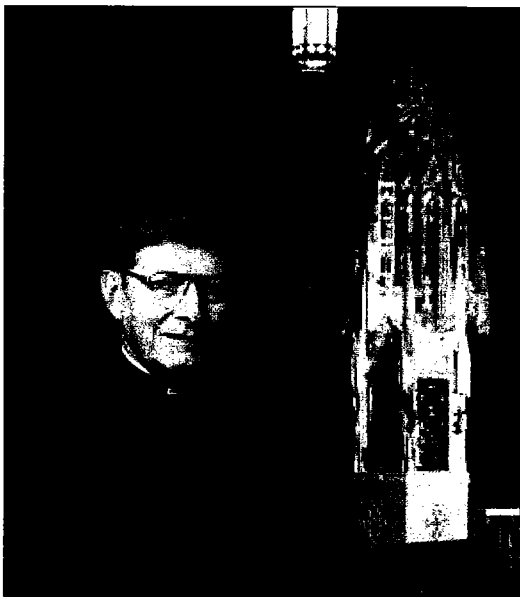
All of that was a precursor to the big event, helping his brother William, a diocesan priest in Boston, build a tabernacle for his neo-Gothic church, St. Theresa of Avila, built in West Roxbury, Mass., in 1930. Helmick constructed a 16’ tower structure for the tabernacle, made of wood and gold leaf, based on a Flemish model. It took him almost eight years to complete (1990-97) and cost him the tip of his thumb in a table saw accident. “My first expletive was ‘piano,’” he laughed, but his piano playing was ultimately unaffected by the mishap.

He is now working on another project for the church, designing and installing colored glass mosaics depicting the life of St. Theresa of Avila on one wall and the healing miracles of Christ on another. The glass is imported from Venice. “These things take a long time,” he said, reluctant to predict when the project might be completed.

This convergence of music, wood and glass work and the priesthood has been a providential one for a young man who planned a career as a pianist or an architect until he and the Lord “decided otherwise,” Helmick said.

“I’m having fun,” he said, after recounting his many adventures. “Going into the Jesuits, blind obedience and all that stuff — I find I have more freedom.”

Once he had become involved in conflict resolution, his province had a hard time assigning him and ultimately said Helmick had to determine where he wanted to go on his own. And where was that?



Fr. Ray Helmick stands before the 16’ tabernacle he designed and built at his brother’s parish. Photo by Lee Pellegrini.

captured by the Yugoslavs. They tried also to reinstate some diplomacy into the situation, which “was just stone dead,” meeting with the Serbian and Montenegrin government and the Orthodox hierarchy, including the prelate and the synod of bishops.

That experience, in part, led to the organization through the Boston Theological Institute (BTI) of a trip to Switzerland for a 10-day conference of theology students from throughout the Balkans in 2000. Representing the Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic and Protestant faiths, they were about 40 in all. “I knew this was going to be a hard slog for them, meeting people they had seen as the enemy,” Helmick said. Although the first few days were tense, the students ended up breaking through their defenses and finding that which Helmick has sought to help others find for years: common ground.

“It was a very great experience,” he said, recalling those days and the young people, many of whom have since become peace

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