

Pax Christi International/Catholic Nonviolence Initiative
Reflections gathered during the workshop on
Path of Nonviolence: Towards a Culture of Peace
4-5 April 2019, Rome

As Christians committed to faithfully following in the footsteps of Jesus, we are called to take a clear stand for active nonviolence and against all forms of violence. In this spirit, people from many nations gathered for *Path of Nonviolence: Towards a Culture of Peace*, a consultation held at the Holy See's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on April 4-5, 2019 in Rome. This was an important follow-up to the Nonviolence and Just Peace conference held in Rome in April 2016 co-sponsored by the then-Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International.

Our recent gathering of people of God from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Oceania, Europe, and the Americas included lay people, theologians, members of religious congregations, priests, bishops, and cardinals. Many of us live in communities experiencing violence and oppression. All of us are practitioners of justice and peace.

We are grateful for the special focus that Pope Francis has placed on the spiritual and practical power of active nonviolence to promote integral human development and cultures of peace, including through the 2017 World Day of Peace message on "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace," where he proclaimed: "To be true followers of Jesus today...includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence." We know that Jesus consistently practiced nonviolence in a context that was extremely violent, but "nonviolence was not just a response to particular situations in the life of Jesus – it was the whole life of Jesus" (Cardinal Peter Turkson, University of San Diego, October 7, 2017).

Signs of the times in the light of faith

The Second Vatican Council taught us to see and respond to "the signs of the times" so that the Church can discern how we are called to live the way of Jesus in our lives and our world today. Our recent two-day gathering in Rome urgently called our attention to two critical "signs of the times:" the global crisis of violence with the unspeakable suffering it unleashes and, by the grace of God, the spread of active and powerful nonviolence. Violence, which includes killing, is not in accord with human dignity. Rejecting the legitimization, reasoning, and actualization of violence and war, we need a new path – a paradigm shift to full-spectrum nonviolence – to take us into the future.

Just peace is the goal, nonviolence is the way. A sustainable culture of peace can only be established by nonviolence that absolutely respects human dignity. Rooted in the interconnectedness of God's creation, it also opens the way to an "integral ecology," as expressed by Pope Francis in *Laudato si'*. Violence undermines this interconnectedness. Nonviolence sustains it. Nonviolence teaches us to say "no" to an inhuman social order and "yes" to the fullness of life.

This is a spiritual reality, but also a practical truth. Over the past century nonviolent practice has increasingly been applied successfully inside and outside the Church to transform lives and to create change. We rejoice in the rich concrete experiences of people engaged in work for just peace around the world, many of whose stories we heard during this gathering. They illuminate the creativity and power of nonviolent practices in many different situations of potential or actual violent conflict. Moreover, credible empirical research into nonviolent and violent conflict in the twentieth century has confirmed that major nonviolent resistance campaigns were found to be twice as effective as violent (or armed) campaigns. And even when they fail, the consequences of their failure are not as disastrous as the consequences of violent approaches.

For the Church, alleviating human suffering is not a pretext, but a moral duty. As Christians we must not "stand idly by the blood of a neighbor" (Leviticus 19:16). We have a duty to protect the life of our neighbor with every tool of nonviolence available to us. In the same way, we have a duty to prevent violence, preserve just peace, and promote reconciliation.

Actively embracing the nonviolent way in the Church and the world

We encourage the Church as institution and people of God to a deeper understanding of and commitment to active nonviolence – following Jesus, embodiment of the nonviolent God, crucified and risen, who taught us to love our enemies (Matthew 5: 44), to put down our sword (Matthew 26: 52), to offer no violent resistance to the one who does evil

(Matthew 5: 39), and to not kill. This commitment to nonviolence is formed of compassion and nourished by Eucharist, enabling a nonviolent encounter with the broken heart of God. Through him we discover and apply concrete ways to embrace nonviolence as a core teaching of our faith; to resist violence without violence; to put the power of love into action; and to develop the virtue of nonviolent peacemaking.

In this kairos moment, we strongly urge the Church to bring nonviolence from the periphery of Catholic thought on war and peace to the center – to mainstream nonviolence as a spirituality, lifestyle, a program of societal action, and a universal ethic.

As we recommit ourselves to furthering Catholic understanding and practice of active nonviolence on the road to just peace, and challenged again by stories of hope and courage in these days together, we call on the Church we love:

- to recognize that the Church – ordinary people, saints and martyrs – have done much to promote peace and nonviolence, while confessing the past and present complicity of our Church with cultural, structural, and direct violence; to restructure relationships in the Church to just partnerships; and to embrace an ethic of nonviolence as the pathway to genuine and enduring reconciliation, in fidelity to the consistent call of Christ in every situation of conflict;
- to root our conversion to nonviolence in the intense experiences of those most affected by violence – women, youth, migrants and the earth itself – and to recognize that their sufferings are an urgent call to that conversion process;
- to integrate Gospel nonviolence at every level of the Church – dioceses, parishes, families and the “domestic Church,” religious orders, seminaries, universities, and schools – through formation, preaching, pastoral life, advocacy, research, and education, with particular attention to developing nonviolence and peace studies programs in all Catholic universities;
- to commit to a nonviolent just peace ethic for Catholic teaching on sustainable peace and conflict, violence and war; to include in the Catechism of the Catholic Church a definition of nonviolence, key nonviolent practices, and the norms of a just peace ethic;
- to advocate for increased public and private, intellectual and financial investment in education for nonviolence and in key nonviolent practices such as restorative justice, nonviolent communication, unarmed civilian protection, trauma-healing, nonviolent resistance, and nonviolent civilian-based defense;
- to consider poor and suffering people, especially those in violent conflicts, as the first persons to be protected by nonviolence and a theology of peace, even as we will seek to protect all people;
- to promote integral disarmament for humanitarian purposes – eliminating weapons already banned and nuclear weapons, continuously reducing all arms and weapons, and ending the development and production of new weapons systems;
- to consider nonviolence as a necessary condition of integral human development, as well as an ecological and social way of mutual relationship and mutual hospitality;
- to initiate a global conversation on nonviolence within the Church, with people of other faiths, and with the larger world to respond to the crises of our time with the vision and methodology of nonviolence;
- to contribute to an ecumenical theology of peace, promoting dialogue between believers and all people working for a peaceful world.

In every age, the Holy Spirit graces the Church with the wisdom to respond to the challenges of its time. In response to what is a global epidemic of violence, we are being called again and again to invoke, pray over, teach, and take decisive action in the spirit of Jesus’ nonviolence. Nonviolence is at the heart of the Gospel. It is the calling of the Church. It is not passive or naïve. It is a way of faith and action. It is an effective alternative. It is a constructive force to protect all people and our common home. It includes a broad spectrum of approaches and activities. It is the core of a new moral framework. It is essential to integral human development and at the heart of a culture of peace. It is at the core of the witness and action of Jesus and many who have come after him, including Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Dorothy Day, Beatus Franz Jägerstätter, Saint Oscar Romero, Berta Cáceres, Lanza del Vasto, Wangari Muta Maathai, and the many people involved in nonviolent social movements.

In a violent world, nonviolence nurtures hope. Actively embracing the way of nonviolence can renew the Church and invite the entire world to discover the powerful hope of creative nonviolent solutions to the monumental challenges of our time.