

The Power of Active Nonviolence in a Violent World:

At the Heart of the Gospel and the Growing Call of the Catholic Church

**Contributions to the
2024 General Assembly
Of the Synod on Synodality
On Two Themes:**

Managing Conflict in a Nonviolent Way

Nonviolence and Legitimate Self-Defense



**The Catholic Nonviolence Initiative
A program of Pax Christi International**

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INTRODUCTION

“I think of nonviolence as a perspective and way of understanding the world...”

–Pope Francis, *“Theology of Veritatis Gaudium in the Mediterranean Context”* (2019)

“Violence does not build, it destroys. ...We need the prophecy of nonviolence... We need the gentleness of nonviolence... Through the path of nonviolence, you reach sincerity and reject all hypocrisy.”

–Pope Francis, *Exchange with University Students* (2022)

“‘Put your sword back into its sheath.’ The words of Jesus resound clearly today ...In the Gospel of Luke’s version of the story, Jesus tells his disciples, ‘Stop, no more of this!’ Jesus’ sorrowful and strong, ‘No more,’ goes beyond the centuries and reaches us. It is a commandment we cannot avoid. ‘No more’ swords, weapons, violence, war.”

–Pope Francis, *Peace on Earth: Fraternity is Possible* (2021)

In this time of global violence which Pope Francis calls a “Third World War fought piecemeal,” the Catholic Church is turning again to the nonviolence of Jesus, who commanded us to love our enemies, put down our sword, respond to violence without violence, and to become peacemakers. The Church is deepening its awareness that nonviolence is at the heart of the Gospel and thus is at the core of its life and mission. It is increasingly recognizing how nonviolence is a universal ethic, a spirituality, a way of life, a strategy for change, and a method for resolving conflict, which combines the rejection of violence and the refusal to harm others with the power of love in action.

In its Synthesis Report, the General Assembly of the Synod on Synodality in October 2023 noted a range of issues related to the life of the Church which would benefit from further research, dialogue, and reflection. Two of these themes relate to the increasing attention the Church is paying to nonviolence: “managing conflict in a nonviolent way” and “nonviolence and legitimate self-defense.” Pax Christi International’s Catholic Nonviolence Initiative offers this publication to the Synod on Synodality and its members gathering in Rome in October 2024 and around the world as a resource on these two themes.

The following text seeks to shed light on these two questions, but it also strives to contribute to the overall synodal process, which itself can be understood as *a nonviolent practice fostering a more nonviolent Church and world*. Synodality, we suggest, is an example of nonviolence in action.

Pax Christi International and the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative

Pax Christi International is a global Catholic network of over 100 organizations on six continents rooted in their local realities and working for peace, justice, and reconciliation. For eight decades, Pax Christi members around the world, including many who have lived in the midst of extremely violent situations, have nurtured a deep commitment to active nonviolence. Fifteen years ago Pax Christi began to collect stories about the methodology and impact, success or failure, faith-connection or not of nonviolent practice from often very violent contexts where Pax Christi members live and work. The organization began to see amazing creativity, wisdom and, frequently, the effectiveness of nonviolent strategies.

For the past decade, inspired by Pope Francis' vision of nonviolence, Pax Christi's work in this area has accelerated. His Holiness has provided hope to people everywhere by addressing the most serious challenges facing the world, by denouncing violence in its many forms and by shedding light on nonviolent pathways to a more just and peaceful future. Encouraged by Pope Francis' leadership, Pax Christi International's Catholic Nonviolence Initiative has joined with people around the world to affirm, nurture, and advance the vision and practice of active nonviolence at the heart of the Catholic Church. In 2016, Pax Christi International co-sponsored with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace the landmark "Nonviolence and Just Peace Conference" at the Vatican, followed by the "Path of Nonviolence: Toward a Culture of Peace" gathering in Rome co-sponsored with the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development in 2019. In December 2022, Pax Christi International sponsored the "Pope Francis, Nonviolence, and the Fullness of *Pacem in Terris* Conference in Rome.

Pope Francis has relentlessly denounced many forms of violence and injustice around the world, from capital punishment to economic injustice, from environmental destruction to war and its preparation, and so much more. But simply calling for their end is not enough, which is why he has also urged the Church to work for a culture of nonviolence, which includes embracing the concrete, nonviolent ways of confronting and transforming these massive challenges. Inspired by his leadership, the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative has from the beginning asked a few simple questions:

- What if the 1.3 billion Catholics worldwide had a full understanding of the power and effectiveness of active nonviolence and the connection of nonviolence to the heart of the Gospel?
- What if we all knew how to apply nonviolent tools to defuse conflict before it became violent?
- What if the Catholic Church committed its channels of communication and diplomacy, its vast spiritual, intellectual, and financial resources to promoting active nonviolence?
- What if Catholic schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries integrated programs on nonviolence and just peace into their curricula, their research and their community outreach efforts?

Violence and Conflict

“Violence is not the cure for our broken world ... May charity and nonviolence govern how we treat each other as individuals, within society and in international life ...especially in situations of conflict, let us respect this, our ‘deepest dignity,’ and make active nonviolence our way of life. ...To be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing His teaching about nonviolence. ...I pledge the assistance of the Church in every effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence.”

—Pope Francis, 2017 World Day of Peace Message

When Pope Francis calls us to “make active nonviolence our way of life,” he is urging us to embark on a path free from violence and to take up a faithful, nonviolent practice as the People of God in order to make this concretely possible. Doing this first requires grasping clearly what we mean by *violence* and *nonviolence*.

Violence is not only physical or direct. It also can be verbal, emotional, cultural or environmental. Violence is experienced at all levels of our wounded world: personal, interpersonal, social, systemic, and worldwide. Violence destroys, dehumanizes, diminishes, and dominates billions of people and our fragile planet. It includes the violence of war, terrorism, massacres, but also racism, poverty, colonialism, gender inequality, environmental destruction, and many other forms of systemic injustice.

For thousands of years, cultures of violence have existed, rooted in values of empire-building, domination, patriarchy, militarism, exploitation, all enforced through a spectrum of violent strategies and a shared cultural belief system, which the scripture scholar Walter Wink called “the myth of redemptive violence,” a deeply embedded belief that “violence saves us.”

We live in the midst of a culture of violence rooted in a core belief in its effectiveness. This global culture of violence is organized systemically, fueled by fear, aggression, hatred, greed, and powerlessness, and reinforced by structures that benefit from it. Violence is a form of power: “power-over” people and the planet.

Violence is found throughout the structures of our world. It also flows from the many forms of conflict that have not been sufficiently prevented, engaged or transformed. If conflict and violence are so rampant, how can we respond effectively?

Alternatives to Violence

While violence is often touted as the answer to violence, a contradiction lies at the heart of this claim. Promising to solve our conflicts, violence more often worsens them. Violence frequently increases and reinforces violence through retaliation and escalation and rarely settles the conflict at hand or its deeper causes. Avoidance, accommodation, appeasement, submission and violent counter attacks are not

solutions. So humanity has long sought to discover an alternative to both *violence and passivity* in dealing with conflict.

Mohandas Gandhi believed that this alternative, which he called “nonviolence,” is “as old as the hills.” Violence, because it is retaliatory and escalatory, threatens to spin out of control and destroy us. In response to retaliation and escalation, the dynamic of nonviolence has been used from time immemorial to create peaceful alternatives, even though it was not called “nonviolence.”

This dynamic is signified by “the two hands of nonviolence”: *noncooperation with injustice* and *steadfast regard for the opponent as a human being*. Nonviolence says “no” and “yes.” It resists and refuses to cooperate with violence and injustice while remaining open to the humanity of the perpetrator and to the possibility of a solution. Nonviolence “defeats injustice, not people.”

Nonviolence, therefore, doesn’t simply appeal for peace. Nor does it simply condemn violence. Instead, it is a concerted process of standing against violence and injustice in such a way that both parties can discover solutions addressing their conflict’s deeper causes and needs.

It engages in this struggle because *violence is ineffective* and because *passivity is ineffective*. Nonviolence is often more effective than these traditional approaches because it can seize the moral initiative, break open new possibilities, create options, and foster transformation, healing, and reconciliation.

It is a force for goodness. It seeks to transform conflict and create new unity. It mobilizes this power for healing by challenging violence and injustice in a way that does not harm the opponent but creates the possibility of cooperation and new outcomes, all without violent means.

Nonviolence

“Nonviolence” names a constitutive reality of the Gospel, in which Jesus combined a wholehearted rejection of violence with the power of love, truth, dignity, and reconciliation so that we could “have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Gospel nonviolence is a way forward toward the “new creation” of reconciliation, unity, and peace.

The word “nonviolence” comes from an ancient term meaning “the power unleashed by refusing to do harm” (*ahimsa*). This power flows from a synthesis of the rejection of violence with the process of love or regard for others. It is qualitatively different from the power of violence, which is “power-over.” Nonviolent power is “power-with”: the capacity to achieve more effective solutions through communication, transforming the “us versus them” dynamic, practices of transformative justice, risky confrontation, and constructive struggle.

Nonviolence is more than the absence of violence. It is broader than pacifism. It is not passive. It has been affirmed in papal and episcopal statements, in an expanding body of theological research and biblical exegesis, in educational programs and pastoral practices, and in the lived experience of Catholics and

others around the world who are living nonviolently as a journey of faith and as a courageous witness for justice.

Nonviolence is the way God calls us to live, no matter the immediate results. At the same time, we are increasingly learning that nonviolent strategies and approaches often succeed. Nonviolence is a more effective response than violence or passivity to war and gun violence, to indifference and domination, or the structural violence of racism, economic injustice, ecological destruction and more. Rigorous quantitative research has established that nonviolent civil resistance strategies were twice as effective as violent resistance from 1900-2006, and three times as effective from 2010-2019, as the work of Harvard University Professor Erica Chenoweth and others studying civil resistance have found. They also found that nonviolent civil resistance is at least ten times more likely to lead to a durable participatory political system. Nonviolence actively rejects this global culture of violence and shows the world a concrete way forward toward the fullness of life.

One of the great gifts of the past decade is this clear empirical evidence that active nonviolence is a positive, constructive, and powerful force for social change. Diverse nonviolent approaches are effectively dealing with violence without lethal force; transforming conflict; protecting people, communities, and the earth at risk; and fostering just and peaceful alternatives.

Nonviolence and Synodality

During its first three centuries, the Church practiced the nonviolence that Jesus taught and lived. As part of this, it developed participatory assemblies and councils. Practices of dialogue, airing and mediating differences, and working through thorny conflicts were consistent with Gospel nonviolence and laid the groundwork for synodality and its history of periodic gatherings for Church reform and theological consultation and resolution over the course of the history of Christianity.

The Church's tradition of synodality exemplifies Gospel nonviolence. In October 2021 Pope Francis launched the Synod on Synodality, inviting Catholics around the world to actively participate in a process of nonviolent transformation for renewal of the Church. This seemed natural, given his prophetic stance on nonviolence, as when he has said: "To be true followers of Jesus today...includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence." Or as he has said elsewhere: "Faced with too much violence spreading throughout the world, we are called to a *greater* nonviolence, which does not mean passivity, but active promotion of the good."

In light of the call of the Gospel, contemporary theological reflection, the leadership of Pope Francis, and its own experience around the world, Pax Christi International is convinced that the "revolution of tenderness" which the Synod on Synodality is facilitating, is itself an expression of nonviolence opening new possibilities of fostering a more nonviolent Church and world.

Let us now turn to the two themes on nonviolence that the Synod on Synodality has lifted up for further consideration: "managing conflict in a nonviolent way" and "nonviolence and legitimate self-defense."

MANAGING CONFLICT IN A NONVIOLENT WAY

Part I. 5 of the 2023 Synod General Assembly Synthesis Report entitled of “A Church from ‘every tribe, tongue, people and nation,’” states:

Increasing conflicts, with the trade and use of increasingly powerful weapons, opens up the question, raised in several groups, of more reflection and formation in order that we can manage conflicts in a nonviolent way. This is a valuable contribution that Christians can offer to today's world in dialogue and collaboration with other religions.

Here the Synod is opening a potentially fruitful line of inquiry. In light of conflicts around the world, how might the Church address these realities nonviolently, and promote nonviolent options? Implied in the formulation of this statement is the assumption that the Church should not only advocate nonviolent solutions but should actively work for them – grapple with them, engage with them, take action to transform them, so as to “manage conflicts in a nonviolent way.”

It is further implied here that key to this kind of effective engagement are “reflection” and “formation.” It will not be enough to preach for an end to destructive conflict. What is needed, this theme suggests, is that the Church should discuss, clarify, and analyze together what it might mean and entail to “manage conflicts in a nonviolent way.” “More reflection” is needed to accomplish this conflict transformation. The Church can advance “managing conflicts in a non-violent way” by thinking more about this.

But this passage also proposes that, even more than thoughtful discussion, managing conflict nonviolently requires formation: education and training for the Church and its members to be prepared to put Jesus’ nonviolence into concrete practice for managing conflict in a powerful and effective way. Using the word “formation” points to the need for a conversion of heart and spirit in the Church to make Gospel nonviolence a reality in this age of global violence. It also means that nonviolence must find a central place in the life of our Church: in its preaching, ministries, pastoral life, and our very identity as follower of Jesus.

The following section invites the Synod on Synodality participants to explore the wealth of specific ways the Church and the world can manage conflict nonviolently. In addition to the specific facets of conflict transformation laid out here, the following ideas rooted in the experience of people of faith and conscience across time and space are offered as concrete ways to embody the gift of Gospel nonviolence which Jesus proclaimed and lived. The path to peace is nonviolent, our identity and calling as followers of Jesus is to bring the spirit and practice of nonviolence, which is constitutive to the preaching of the Gospel, alive in the Church and the world.

In light of the 2023 Synod General Assembly’s insistence that the Church take up the call to manage conflict nonviolently, this section explores:

- I. Nonviolent Approaches: enumerating the spectrum of nonviolent approaches that manage, transform, and resolve conflict.
- II. The Church Embracing Nonviolent Approaches: exploring potential formation processes for integrating Gospel nonviolence and its spectrum of nonviolent approaches throughout the life of the Church.

I. Nonviolent Approaches

Nonviolence is the power of universal love in action for resisting violence and injustice, refusing to harm others, transforming conflict, illuminating human dignity, and fostering justice, peace, and healing for all. It is a strategy, a way of life, a spirituality, and a universal ethic for managing, preventing, transforming, and resolving personal, interpersonal, social, and international conflict without violence.

Violence is the spiritual crisis of our time. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis deepens our understanding of the global culture of conflict and violence when he describes the interlocking economic, political, social, and technological structures that have congealed to create a catastrophic “us versus them” world, dividing the privileged minority from billions of others, including the poor, migrants, women, the sick, the elderly, and all who have been subjugated to the merciless dictates of global economic systems, racism, gender violence, environmental destruction, and authoritarian regimes.

Violence will not solve violence. Nor will passivity. Instead, we are called to actively respond to conflict and violence with the crucial facets of active and liberating nonviolence: a spirituality fully aware, as the Gospel tells us, that we are all sisters and brother; with a way of life that resolves our daily differences and our global crises; with a method that mobilizes the people-power needed for global healing; and a universal ethic that grounds us in the life of the God of Peace.

Active nonviolence opens the way for constructive outcomes and even reconciliation in response to a wide range of conflicts and forms of violence - from the virulence of war to the inherent violence of the arms trade; from racist divisions to economic domination; from the destruction of the earth to hatred in all its forms. This is why the Church has increasingly re-discovered Jesus’ nonviolence to manage, transform, and heal the conflicts we face.

Prevention, Engagement, and Systemic Change

“Managing conflict nonviolently” includes *preventing conflict nonviolently* (preventing conflict by meeting needs, solving problems, responding to emergencies); *engaging conflict nonviolently* (addressing conflict and violence when it arises by engaging in nonviolent struggle to end violence and to foster just and peaceful outcomes), and transforming systemic conflict nonviolently (challenging the roots of conflict and violence, including structural violence and unjust systems; fostering policies, institutions, systems for well-being of all; and nurturing a nonviolent culture and moving toward a paradigm shift).

Each of these categories of conflict management—prevention, engagement, and systemic change—has five dimensions:

- **Nonviolent Strategies and Options:** Include initiatives taken to prevent conflict and to create more just and peaceful outcomes, and systematic approaches designed to engage, resist, and transform forms of violence or injustice.
- **Nonviolent Practices and Tactics:** Concrete tools or applications which foster ways to manage conflict nonviolently, from nonviolent communication and compassionate listening to trauma healing and nonviolent campaigns for peace and justice.
- **Nonviolence Education and Training:** Increases knowledge and trains us how to manage, transform, and resolve conflict. A concerted formation process in Jesus' nonviolence and its implications for our lives and our world is crucial to effectively "managing conflict nonviolently."
- **Nonviolence Awareness and Visibility:** Increases understanding in the Church and world of the power and potential of nonviolence and nonviolent strategies. We cannot manage conflict nonviolently if we don't know that nonviolent approaches work. Fortunately, the effectiveness of nonviolent approaches has been established quantitatively and qualitatively. To manage conflict nonviolently we need to overcome stereotypes that regard nonviolence as ineffective, passive or utopian.
- **Culture of Nonviolence:** A shared understanding of nonviolence as a way of life, spirituality, method for change and universal ethic that we can embody in our lives, our relationships, our societies and our world. This becomes a foundation and context for "managing conflict in a nonviolent way."

	NONVIOLENT STRATEGIES AND OPTIONS	NONVIOLENT PRACTICES AND TACTICS	NONVIOLENCE EDUCATION AND TRAINING	NONVIOLENCE AWARENESS AND VISIBILITY	CULTURE OF NONVIOLENCE
PREVENTING CONFLICT NONVIOLENTLY <i>Meeting needs, solving problems, responding to emergencies</i>	- Nurture relationships, families, communities, workplaces, and societies grounded in nonviolent principles, techniques, and alternatives. - Spread pro-active violence prevention practices and tactics through education, training, public awareness of nonviolent options. - Violence often flows from unmet needs. Support national and local programs, institutions, systems meeting human needs. - The Church can build on its perennial calls for peace and reconciliation by teaching each parish, diocese, educational institution, ministry and organization worldwide to foster formation in Gospel nonviolence, including in conflict prevention. - Promote the Church's vision of integral development (economic, social, political), which is associated with significant reductions in the risk of armed conflict.	Apply and promote nonviolent alternatives, including: - Nonviolent communication and problem-solving; - De-escalation techniques; - Restorative justice peace circles; - Nonviolent relationship-building; - Peaceful parenting; - Anti-racism training; - Gender equity training; and - Creative arts, media. The Church can integrate these and other nonviolent practices throughout the institution.	Integrate nonviolent problem-solving at every level of educational system and throughout society, with a pedagogy: - Fostering just and lasting peace in everyday life, relationships, societies; - Training in principles, methods, and lived-experience of confronting violence nonviolently; Nurturing skill-building for the nonviolent life. The Church can integrate Gospel nonviolence at the core of teaching and formation of Catholic schools, universities, seminaries, and parish life.	Increase public awareness of the power of active nonviolence. Organize public awareness campaigns: - Promoting active nonviolence as a way of life, a strategy for change, a spirituality, and a universal ethic; - Mainstreaming creative alternatives to direct, cultural, and structural violence; - Nurturing constructive solutions; - Learning from people around the world who have organized nonviolent change. The Church is fostering nonviolent lives, nonviolent Church, nonviolent world. An official Church teaching on nonviolence, echoing global efforts, would support these goals.	Fostering a nonviolent culture by: - Addressing root causes of violence; - Institutionalizing violence prevention programs; - Nurturing the nonviolent life in families, work places, communities, networks, movements, institutions, societies. The Church can deepen its calling to be nonviolent community (and sign of nonviolence to the world) by prioritizing violence prevention and nonviolent healing in its preaching, formation, theological reflection, and ministries.
ENGAGING CONFLICT NONVIOLENTLY <i>Resolving conflict, ending violence, fostering peace, justice, reconciliation</i>	Mainstream conflict transformation and restorative justice processes to: - Manage conflict; - Build movement for justice, peace, and sustainability through nonviolent people-power and civil resistance; - Integrate trauma healing throughout society. The Church can contribute to building a culture of nonviolence and conflict management by integrating at every level of the institution a theological and pastoral formation in Gospel nonviolence.	Foster skills and practices to engage conflict nonviolently, including: - Researching, analyzing, and planning for nonviolent change; - Nurturing initiatives to confront and challenge conflict and violence; - Spreading practices to build the capacity of nonviolent campaigns and movements for justice and peace, including dialogue, petitions, rallies, boycotts, strikes, fasting, symbolic action, strategic action, people power, mediation, negotiations, reconciliation. The Church can foster nonviolent efforts everywhere for justice, peace, and reconciliation.	Create foundations for nonviolent initiatives and movements for change via: - Education in the process of analyzing and engaging conflict and violence nonviolently in our lives, societies, world. - Formation as peacemakers equipped to challenge injustice and foster reconciliation using nonviolent approaches. The Church can teach Gospel nonviolence and how it combines rejecting violence with the power of love in action. It can do this through retreats, workshops, classes, preaching, formation, scholarly research and publications.	Spread the power of nonviolent change by: - Promoting evidence-base - effectiveness of nonviolent strategies; - Raising visibility of historical and contemporary examples and patterns of nonviolent conflict resolution; - Building public awareness of power to transform conflict for just and lasting peace. The Church illuminating Jesus' nonviolence and history of Gospel nonviolence in its preaching, teaching and ministries.	Foster a nonviolent culture through: - Organizations, institutions, religious communities integrating, promoting nonviolent strategies; - Building a culture challenging ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized violence and injustice; - Fostering a culture rooted not in violent power ("power-over") but nonviolent power ("power-with"). The Church striving to be a nonviolent community that supports its members to become peacemakers capable of resolving conflict, ending violence, and fostering peace, justice, reconciliation.
TRANSFORMING SYSTEMIC CONFLICT NONVIOLENTLY <i>Resisting structural violence; fostering structural change.</i>	Strategies for systemic change include: - Movements of movements; - Civil resistance; - civilian-based defense; - unarmed civilian protection; - diplomacy; - mediation; - arbitration; - restorative justice; - trauma healing; - creating parallel institutions. The Church can promote and encourage research on, development, and institutionalization of these nonviolent responses to war, climate crisis, and many other types of global violence.	Drawing on hundreds of documented tactics, including: - Protest and persuasion (public statements, lobbying, picketing, vigils, the arts, teach-ins), - Noncooperation (withdrawing support, boycotts, strikes, embargoes) - Nonviolent intervention (sit-ins, civil disobedience, alternative social institutions), - Constructive programs, creating more nonviolent systems. The Church can foster nonviolent efforts everywhere for justice, peace, and reconciliation.	A widespread "nonviolence literacy campaign" will support a global nonviolent shift. This worldwide training process can be rooted in the lessons that change-makers throughout the world have learned from deploying nonviolent strategies and from living the nonviolent life. Building on its history of hosting education, training and formation for nonviolent systemic change, the Church can play a leading role in spreading nonviolence training in the Church and the larger world.	Spreading the power of systemic nonviolent change can include: - Promoting the effectiveness of nonviolent people-power to challenge global systems of violence; - Building public awareness of the power of nonviolent initiatives to dislodge pillars of support for injustice and to create more just and peaceful alternatives. The Church is challenging the "Third World War fought piecemeal" and many unjust and destructive realities, including, wars, nuclear weapons and systems fostering climate crisis.	Nurture the emergence of more nonviolent systems through: Groups, communities, networks, institutions, structures to foster the growth and development of a more nonviolent culture and to nurture a long-term paradigm shift. The Church can be a leader for a global, nonviolent shift. Pope Francis has shown us the way by acknowledging the Church's sins of violence and calling us to a more nonviolent life. Imagine how the Church as a worldwide community could spark this new path to a more nonviolent future.

EXAMPLES OF MANAGING CONFLICT IN A NONVIOLENT WAY

The Church Lives Gospel Nonviolence

Catholic communities around the world have been bringing Jesus' nonviolence alive to manage, transform, and heal a wide range of conflicts. The following diverse examples indicate the breadth of Catholic experience with nonviolence. With few exceptions, these are long-standing or major projects which have been or could be evaluated for effectiveness, long term results and duplicability.

- *South Sudan (systemic change/nonviolent culture)*: People of different ethnicities and religious backgrounds adopted intentional practices to reduce communal violence and to live in harmony and fellowship in Kuron Peace Village.
- *The Philippines (conflict transformation/practices)*: The Bishops-Ulama Conference in Mindanao implemented nonviolent communication strategies and restorative justice practices to foster effective interfaith dialogue for peace in an area of political violence, identity-based armed conflict, ethnic and clan divisions, and rebel violence.

- *Democratic Republic of Congo* (prevention/strategies): 40,000 election observers provided nonviolent unarmed civilian protection and to conduct a backup vote count during the 2019 presidential election.
- *Fiji* (conflict transformation/awareness): The Church helped to scuttle a coup by publicly calling for nonviolent responses across the country.
- *Colombia* (conflict transformation/strategies): International collaboration and unarmed civilian accompaniment helped to sustain and enhance the nonviolent campaign of farmers in Las Pavas who were facing threats of violence from a foreign palm oil corporation.
- *Croatia* (prevention/nonviolent culture): In a post-war context of violent nationalism and xenophobia, communities organized public actions to show unity among those separated by nationalism and to foster conversations across Hrvatska/Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia, enabling communities to learn from one another.
- *Kenya* (conflict transformation/nonviolent culture): Training of pastoralist communities in nonviolent communication and conflict transformation interrupted political manipulation by armed militias and disrupted lethal raids that had become the norm.
- *Syria/Lebanon* (prevention/practices): Operazione Colomba volunteers accompanied Syrian refugees in Lebanon in daily life; worked with refugees to create a peace proposal for Syria and with refugees to open humanitarian corridors throughout Europe.
- *Central Africa Republic* (systemic change/nonviolent culture): Catholic Relief Services (CRS) helped to rebuild social cohesion and implement anti-genocide measures during several years of civil war.
- *United States* (conflict transformation/awareness): Catholic leaders helped organize a nonviolent campaign to challenge the separation of immigrant children from their parents at the US-Mexico border.
- *Mexico* (conflict transformation/awareness): The Movement for Peace and Justice with Dignity (MPJD), a mass nonviolent civil resistance movement, brought together thousands of relatives of the murdered and disappeared in response to killings and disappearances.
- *Ukraine* (conflict transformation/practices): Since the beginning of Russian invasion, there is evidence that where nonviolent resistance has been organized, fewer deaths have taken place.

Case Studies of Applied Nonviolence

In 2017-18, an international virtual roundtable organized by the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative brought together leading academic social scientists and grassroots practitioners, predominantly Catholic, working in pre-conflict, conflict, or post-conflict situations and who approach their work with knowledge and training in nonviolence. They collected stories of nonviolent resistance and peacebuilding toward transformation in contemporary violent conflicts, including in Northern Kenya, Croatia, the United Kingdom, Afghanistan, the United States, Colombia, South Korea, Philippines, Australia, Uganda, Lebanon/Syria, Central African Republic, Palestine, South Sudan, and Mexico. A detailed description of their roundtable process and each of the case studies they explored is available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kPc3N484LilZAu4JfzzRs-dydLj1oV604QodIdS2C1o/edit?usp=sharing>

The Church Embracing Nonviolent Approaches: Formation for Integrating Gospel Nonviolence in the Church

In 2017-18, a second international virtual roundtable organized by the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative brought together six women and ten men from fifteen countries ranging from Pakistan to Guatemala, Zambia to occupied Palestine, to explore the challenges and opportunities of “Integrating Gospel nonviolence at every level of the Church.” Peacebuilders and practitioners of active nonviolence --- clergy, religious and laity, they shared their experience of many successful programs and best practices of nonviolence in the Catholic Church worldwide. Their goal was to understand better how to integrate the spirituality and practices of Gospel nonviolence throughout the life and work of the Church: in its dioceses, parishes, agencies, schools, universities, seminaries, religious orders, voluntary associations, development agencies and ministries throughout the world. They asked: What if 1.3 billion Catholics around the globe learned and embraced the spirituality and practice of active nonviolence --- in their families, their parishes, schools and in the political life of their countries, thus as Pope Francis envisions, “building nonviolent communities that care for our common home?”

“In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms.” (Pope Francis, 2017 World Day of Peace Message)

The roundtable focused on key areas of Church life, gathering promising practices and exemplary organizations and programs of the practice of Gospel nonviolence in nine different areas of Church life. The results of this global dialogue on how Gospel nonviolence and peacebuilding can become more fully integrated into every level of the Catholic Church are available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1r46p1nb8gdf1SrCn7SRescR1MWqceGR0-ianDglHMRg/edit?usp=sharing>.

A few examples for different parts of the Church to consider:

- Establish Gospel nonviolence curricula in seminaries, Catholic universities and Catholic schools
- Assess the violence in your diocese, parish or religious community and explore specific effective nonviolent strategies in response
- Model human dignity, civility, nonviolent communication, and nonviolent resistance in response to dehumanizing behavior, rhetoric, or outright violence
- Promote restorative justice, mediation, arbitration, and trauma healing as tools for conflict transformation in Catholic universities, dioceses, parishes and organisations
- Host parish, diocesan or regional conferences on nonviolent responses to local issues
- Offer trainings in specific nonviolent skills such as active bystander intervention and deescalation, unarmed civilian protection, restorative justice, nonviolent communication, trauma awareness and healing, nonviolent self-defence, etc.in parishes, universities, dioceses, seminaries
- Hold seminars, workshops, and trainings for clergy serving in the dioceses on how to communicate the message of the Gospel on nonviolence

- Integrate Gospel nonviolence catechesis and resources in new or existing peace and justice committees and commissions
- Ensure that Church investments are consistent with a commitment to Gospel nonviolence
- Explore ways in which Gospel nonviolence would support synodality in Church processes
- Advocate for nonviolent strategies in the local, national, and global spheres
- Integrate Gospel nonviolence at every level of the Church — dioceses, parishes, families, religious orders, seminaries, universities, and schools — through education, formation, preaching, pastoral life, and advocacy

NONVIOLENCE AND LEGITIMATE SELF-DEFENSE

Introduction

The Synod Synthesis document, section 15, on “Ecclesial Discernment and Open Questions” referred to the experience of Conversation in the Spirit as creating a “context that enables careful consideration of matters that are controversial within the Church...” , including nonviolence and legitimate self-defence...” The Synthesis continued: “To develop authentic ecclesial discernment in these and other areas, it is necessary to approach these questions in the light of the Word of God and Church teaching, properly informed and reflected upon. In order to avoid repeating vacuous formulas, we need to provide an opportunity for a dialogue involving the human and social sciences, as well as philosophical and theological reflection.”

Since Vatican II, the Catholic Church has become a powerful critic of war and as an advocate for its alternatives. At the same time, researchers of armed conflict have produced a considerable body of scholarship on war and its prevention, especially in light of the catastrophic realities of contemporary warfare. Given the Church’s stance against war, the futility and massive carnage of modern combat, and an emergent, global understanding of the power of nonviolent strategies, the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative welcomes the Synod’s call to grapple with the serious matter of “nonviolence and the legitimacy of self-defense.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church includes the Principle of Self-Defence, which is interpreted as the right to use violence against aggression and life-threatening attacks within certain limits. While continuing to cite this principle—especially in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when even Pope Francis has occasionally cited this right regarding the possible moral acceptability of sending weapons deliveries for defensive purposes--the Holy See has also questioned it in light of its practical applications and implications in real-world situations.¹

¹ Pope Francis said that sending weapons to Ukraine “can be morally acceptable [under certain conditions] and [if so] then we can talk about it.” He doesn’t clearly say it is moral in this context. However, he does elaborate and focus on how it “can be immoral if it is done with the intention of provoking more war or selling weapons or discarding those weapons that are no longer needed.” [Pope: ‘Difficult to dialogue with those who started a war, but it must be done’ - Vatican News](#)

For example, a Vatican News interview of Cardinal Silvano Maria Tomasi, the former Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations in Geneva, reported his conviction that “amid the dramatic global climate with many ongoing conflicts, questions are raised about the right to self-defense, arguing that if two conflicting entities are mutually destructive because of the weapons they use, what remains to be defended?” In short, since violent self-defense can lead to catastrophic death, destruction, and generational trauma, especially in an era when modern weaponry has massive consequences for civilians and combatants alike, is it still “legitimate”?

The Catholic Nonviolence Initiative holds that nonviolence is central to the Gospel and should be central to the teaching and witness of the Church, including on matters related to self-defense in contexts of violence and war. Church teaching over the last century has developed a “systematic, and comprehensive case against war itself,” which should not be obscured by “narrow exceptions in Catholic teaching that may or may not allow military force” for legitimate defence.

When Pope Francis declares that “war is a defeat” and “there is no just war,” he is denouncing the violence of the aggressor, but he is also crying out against violence itself as the great enemy of humanity. His Holiness and other leaders in the Vatican have prophetically urged the world to find a way beyond violence to defend, protect, and save those at risk. This stance is rooted in Gospel nonviolence, but also grounded in the reality of the searing catastrophe of the “Third World War being fought piecemeal,” as the pontiff names the global culture of violence.

It is impossible to examine issues of nonviolence and legitimate self-defense without also doing the same for issues of *violence* and legitimate self-defense. Given the Church’s ongoing prophetic condemnation of war and its terrible costs, it is important to reject any automatic association between armed force and self-defense. Indeed, while militaries around the world do sometimes defend countries against armed invaders, this is actually very rare (and, as detailed below, also has a poor record of success). Globally, it is more common for militaries to threaten rather than defend their country’s populations by overthrowing democratic governments through coups, keeping dictators in power through domestic repression, exploiting enforced labor, and monopolizing resources that could otherwise go to meeting basic human needs.

Furthermore, violent self-defense frequently morphs into offensive military action; fuels cycles of harm, or even retaliatory and escalatory violence; contributes to suffering and trauma; inhibits alternative strategies from being deployed; tends to prevent deeper causes of the conflict from being addressed; and can prevent long-term peacebuilding from taking place. In short, violent self-defense often deepens the crisis that the initial aggression has created and can lead to massive destruction and loss of life.

David Cochran in *The Catholic Case Against War: A Brief Guide* (2024), writes: “Gangs and organized crime thrive in war zones. War drives surges in looting, arson, drug trafficking, assault, rape, torture and mutilation, terrorism and the desecration of holy sites and objects. Enslavement and other forms of coerced and trafficked labor are common,.... So too are detention, restricted movement, and suppression

of liberties such as speech, the press and religious exercise. War creates pervasive fear and collapses social trust. It sets back gross domestic product (GDP) and trade levels by decades, pushes large portions of the population into poverty and diverts money from human needs to militaries and warlords. The technology of modern armed conflict in particular can leave a trail of environmental destruction and toxic pollution for decades. War leaves children without parents, parents without children and spouses, lovers, and friends without each other. It is no wonder that many who survive war, soldiers and civilians, live the rest of their lives with deep physical and emotional wounds—it brings an aftermath of chronic pain, limited mobility, post-traumatic stress disorder, guilt, despair, fear, humiliation, and rage.”²

Pope Francis explains that “Countering violence with violence leads at best to forced migrations and enormous suffering, because vast amounts of resources are diverted to military ends and away from the everyday needs of young people, families experiencing hardship, the elderly, the infirm and the great majority of people in our world. At worst, it can lead to the death, physical and spiritual, of many people, if not of all.” Even more, “war always does grave harm to the environment.”

Society and indeed people's very souls are becoming militarised; even humanitarian issues such as refugees are being redefined as “security” concerns and addressed by militarised means. The categories of the just war tradition seem inadequate at best and enabling of war at worst, even perhaps irrelevant and thus, an alternative approach is increasingly necessary.

For example, many arguments for more weapons to both Israel and Ukraine are based on the belief that the “right to defense” must primarily mean lethal, militarized defense. Yet, the result is hundreds of thousands dead in Ukraine, massive generational trauma, millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, rampant dehumanization and the perpetuation of cycles of violence without an end of the war in sight, now in its third year. After Israel lost around 1200 people to an attack orchestrated by Hamas, in ten months they have killed over 40,000 Palestinians with the vast majority being children, women, elderly and other civilians. The starvation of children and mass atrocities continue.³

But what is the alternative? How can we respond to the threat and actuality of massive violence without armed defense?

“Catholic teaching’s primary answers are ... greater global governance, diplomacy and mediation, international organizations and norms, and addressing the underlying roots of war through economic and political development. But over the last several decades, the Vatican has also increasingly endorsed

² David Cochran, *The Catholic Case Against War: A Brief Guide*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2024.p. 21

³ Lisa Sowle Cahill argues that beginning with the “right of self-defense, even when exercised on behalf of an innocent victim,” shifts the foundation of moral reflection away from the Gospel and its emphasis on virtue (Love of Enemies, 239). Rather than a discipleship of love, the cross, and the call to holiness, moral reflection arises out of self-assertion and/or the limitation of the obligations to include, love, forgive, and serve. This pattern of seeking the limits of our obligations to love was also found in the story of the Good Samaritan with the lawyer’s question to Jesus “who is my neighbor?”. In response, Jesus suggests this isn’t the question, posture or approach to take, but rather to ask “who is being neighbor,” or how to do we practice inclusive love consistent with our shared sacred dignity.

grassroots nonviolent resistance by average citizens as a direct alternative to armed force, considering it both more moral and more effective in protecting peace and security.”⁴

A more adequate and fuller understanding of nonviolence goes beyond pacifism, which is often understood merely as a rule against violence, by challenging us to become better people and societies in engaging conflict. An advocate for the preferential option for nonviolence is not an advocate for a naïve pacifism.

Gospel Nonviolence: Responding to Evil with Good

Pope Francis has pointed to passages in the New Testament which indicate that evil must be met, neither with violence or passivity, but with the force of goodness. We see this when he highlights the Gospel imperative of loving our enemies, which “does not consist in succumbing to evil... but in responding to evil with good (cf. Rom 12:17-21), and therefore breaking the chain of injustice.” (Pope Francis, 2017 World Day of Peace Message, quoting Pope Benedict XVI). Or when he declares: “Faced with too much violence spreading throughout the world, we are called to a *greater* nonviolence, which does not mean passivity, but active promotion of the good.” (Pope Francis, Audience with the Delegation of the "Anti-Defamation League", 09-02-2017.) Or when he writes, “‘Put your sword back into its sheath.’ The words of Jesus resound clearly today ...In the Gospel of Luke’s version of the story, Jesus tells his disciples, ‘Stop, no more of this!’ Jesus’ sorrowful and strong, ‘No more,’ goes beyond the centuries and reaches us. It is a commandment we cannot avoid. ‘No more’ swords, weapons, violence, war.” (Pope Francis, *Peace on Earth: Fraternity is Possible*, 2021.) This declaration in the Garden of Gethsemani was a rejection of violence at the very moment when the question of “self-defense” was starkly raised. Jesus says “no more”—a command which was as much a teaching directed to the subsequent Church as it was to his disciples.

The urgency of Jesus’ “no more” is a key to understanding what Gospel nonviolence is calling us to do in the face of violence, including the violence of massive aggression. We are to resist it with our entire being. This means rejecting the violence of the oppressor, but also rejecting the violence we are tempted to wield in response. But, even more, it means rejecting anything that makes the violence of the oppressor possible. When Jesus tells his disciples to put the sword back in its sheath, he is not only commanding them to avoid bloodshed in that particular life-and-death moment, he is also telling them to no longer support or normalize a weaponized system which makes that sword possible.

The Catholic sacramental imagination can cultivate a deeper understanding of the role and prominence of nonviolence in strategies of defense. For example, as we reflect on the more general need to protect all life, not just some lives, in the context of salvation history, we might more clearly envision healthy protection and defense mechanisms through the lens of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is God’s expression through Jesus of nonviolent love and power, risking and offering life for others without killing. Jesus risks his life to save and protect us from the ultimate death of being disconnected from God and, thus, models for us the ultimate and sustainable protection. When participating in the Eucharist, we are empowered and

⁴ Cochran, p. 37.

called to embody this kind of risking of life for others. This re-presents Jesus's saving work to the world and thus draws us all further into the way of salvation, which is the authentic protection of our lives and the illumination of our sacred dignity. Pope Francis says, "in the silence of the Cross, the uproar of weapons ceases, and the language of reconciliation, forgiveness, dialogue and peace is spoken."⁵ With this focus on risking one's life without killing, Catholics seem invited and challenged to promote the saving of every life as constitutive to any strategy or institutional mechanism focused on protection and defense.

Nonviolent Self-Defence

Although the Catholic Church largely relegated nonviolence to a personal practice after it started to elaborate the principle of justified violence and "just war" beginning in the fourth century, it has gradually turned again to the nonviolence of Jesus theologically and pastorally over the past century. Nonviolence, Pope Francis says, has "broken barriers, bound wounds, healed nations."

Here His Holiness is pointing to the worldwide emergence of a diverse set of nonviolent approaches (from diplomacy to trauma healing, from restorative justice to accompaniment, from civil resistance to movement-building) that can: quell violence without using lethal force; transform conflict; protect individuals and communities; and foster just and peaceful alternatives.

Harvard University Professor Erica Chenoweth, one of many scholars documenting the power of strategic nonviolence, has quantified how nonviolent civil resistance strategies are twice as effective as violent ones from 1900-2006, and three times as effective from 2010-2019. They also found that nonviolent civil resistance is at least ten times more likely to lead to a durable democracy. We are living in a time when nonviolent responses to violence, injustice and oppression are both being increasingly recognized, strengthened and deployed.

Embracing nonviolent strategies does not mean that they will always work. But that is also true of violent strategies. While neither violent nor nonviolent strategies will work one hundred percent of the time, nonviolent strategies increase the possibility of avoiding or minimizing the mutual destruction that violent defense can feed.

Nonviolent strategies have occasionally been improvised even to thwart a military attack and occupation of one nation by another. Their effectiveness then has relied on organized resistance: removing support for the aggressor, not following orders, undermining its authority, and asserting people-power.

⁵ Francis, Vigil of Prayer for Peace (Rome, September 7, 2013), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130907_vegliapace.html; Raniero Cantalamessa, "Eucharist is God's Absolute 'No' to Violence," 3rd Lenten Sermon (Rome, March 11, 2005), https://centerforchristiannonviolence.org/sites/default/files/media/getstarted/Eucharist_Gods_No2Violence_03.pdf; and Pax Christi International, Eucharist of Gospel Nonviolence (n.d.), https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Eucharist-for-Gospel-nonviolence_ENG-V2.pdf. The pontifical household preacher described the Eucharist as "God's absolute 'no' to violence, pronounced on the cross, kept alive through the centuries."

Three Approaches

1. Nonviolent Resistance

In his 2017 World Day of Peace message, Pope Francis lifted up examples of nonviolent resistance that changed the course of history:

The decisive and consistent practice of nonviolence has produced impressive results. The achievements of Mahatma Gandhi and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan in the liberation of India, and of Dr Martin Luther King Jr in combating racial discrimination will never be forgotten. Women in particular are often leaders of nonviolence, as, for example, was Leymah Gbowee and the thousands of Liberian women, who organized pray-ins and nonviolent protest that resulted in high-level peace talks to end the second civil war in Liberia.

Nor can we forget the eventful decade that ended with the fall of Communist regimes in Europe. The Christian communities made their own contribution by their insistent prayer and courageous action. Particularly influential were the ministry and teaching of Saint John Paul II. Reflecting on the events of 1989 in his 1991 Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, my predecessor highlighted the fact that momentous change in the lives of people, nations and states had come about “by means of peaceful protest, using only the weapons of truth and justice”.[10] This peaceful political transition was made possible in part “by the non-violent commitment of people who, while always refusing to yield to the force of power, succeeded time after time in finding effective ways of bearing witness to the truth”. Pope John Paul went on to say: “May people learn to fight for justice without violence...”

Nonviolent resistance combines challenging unjust and violent policies and regimes with unarmed and organized “people power” to create the conditions for a more just and peaceful reality. This strategy will be key to challenging military aggression. Even in cases where governments have responded militarily to foreign invasion or attack, organized nonviolent resistance can play a key role in confronting this aggression. (In the case of the Russian aggression against Ukraine launched in 2022, studies show that active nonviolence has undermined Russian ability to institutionalize occupation; protected civilians, school directors, and local government officials; de-legitimized the Russian narrative of liberation; built community resilience and strengthened local governance.⁶ Conflict analysis also demonstrated that where nonviolent resistance was organized, less repression and fewer deaths in those areas took place.)

As detailed in historian Jonathan Schell’s book, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (2003), organizing nonviolent people power for liberation and human rights has emerged and increased over the past 300 years. This momentum accelerated in the twentieth century with Mohandas Gandhi’s application of principled nonviolence to win Indian independence and with the use of strategic nonviolence by the US Civil Rights Movement. These and other pioneering campaigns have

⁶ Felip Daza, *Ukrainian Nonviolent Civil Resistance in the Face of War* (Barcelona: ICIP and Novact, 2022), https://novact.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ENG_VF.pdf.

inspired countless nonviolent struggles. Some examples include successful pro-democracy movements in Spain and Portugal (1970s), Chile (1980s), Argentina (1980s), Soviet bloc states, including the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, etc. (1989); the thwarted coup in the USSR (1991); South Africa (1980s-1990s); Indonesia (1998); East Timor (2000); Serbia (2000); Georgia (2003); Ukraine (2004); Liberia (2005); Tunisia and Egypt (2011); Sudan (2019). An important example where the Catholic Church played a key role was the People Power movement in the Philippines, which organized hundreds of nonviolence trainings and contributed to the mobilization of the population to defend the 1986 election and the removal of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship. Notably, the Filipinos used the phrase “*alay dangal*” meaning to ‘offer dignity’ in understanding their practice of nonviolent resistance.⁷

2. Civilian Based Defense

This is a more stringent form of nonviolent resistance that conceivably could offer the strongest form of nonviolent self-defence. Historian and nonviolent strategist Gene Sharp’s book, *Civilian Based Defense*, described this subject in this way: “Instead of military weaponry, civilian-based defense applies the power of society itself to deter and defend against internal usurpations and foreign invaders. The weapons are psychological, social, economic and political. They are wielded by the general population and the institutions of the society. The propositions of this book are two: that civilian-based defense policies against internal takeovers and foreign aggression can be developed, and that dictatorships and oppression can be prevented and disintegrated by the capacity to wage powerful nonviolent struggle. Massive noncooperation and defiance would aim to prevent attackers from establishing effective control over the defending society, to deny the attackers their objectives, and to subvert the reliability of the attackers’ administrators and military forces.”

Historian and analyst Maciej Bartkowski describes civilian based defense in this way:

The data show that between 1900 and 2006, ... successful and failed armed resistance lasted on average three times longer than its nonviolent counterparts; always came with a huge human and infrastructural cost for the local population (e.g. Vietnam 1960s); had much lower probability of building democracy afterwards (Algeria 1962); and destroyed or traumatized civil society (e.g. Hungary 1956) whose strength and mobilization are needed for democracy building and its sustainability. In contrast, nonviolent resistance historically can succeed much faster than armed struggle (Nepal 2004); even [partially] failed nonviolent resistance more effectively preserves the fabric of civil society to restart a fight another day (Czechoslovakia 1968) and it has much higher chances of building democracy than successful armed resistance (Poland 1980s vs. Afghanistan 1980s and 2000s).

Successful anti-occupation struggles have always been a whole-of-nation endeavor. Unarmed resistance has greater mobilization potential for a whole society to participate in diverse actions of defiance and noncooperation than armed resistance...

⁷ Alay Dangal, <https://archives.mettacenter.org/definitions/gloss-concepts/alay-dangal/>.

Civilian-based defense is neither an uncommon historical practice nor an alien concept to contemporary national defense strategies. Such resistance was a driving force behind various liberation struggles including: American colonists' resistance against the British; Hungarians' mobilization against the Austrian Habsburg monarchy; Polish civil resistance against partitioning empires, including Tsarist Russia in late 19th century; and pro-independence movements in Egypt, India, Bangladesh, Ghana, Estonia, [Ireland,] among others. Nowadays, efforts are underway to integrate comprehensive nonviolent civilian-based defense in the Baltic states. This is highlighted in the specific recommendations for nonviolent defense strategies put forward by a respected U.S.-based security think tank. And Lithuania has been at the forefront of these implementation efforts when in 2016 the government adopted a new military strategy for "reliable deterrence [that requires preparing citizens for] unarmed civil resistance, [including] fostering their will and resilience to information attacks, as well as ability to engage in a total resistance...of the whole nation". The Lithuanian Ministry of Defense issued two preparedness manuals on the "modes and principles of civil resistance" in its national defense.

The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 is also instructive. The political and military leaders decided not to resist with violence, while a spontaneous civilian, nonviolent resistance erupted. Actions included strikes, refusing supplies to invading troops, cutting airport services, blocking trains, switching radio signals, removing house numbers to protect leaders, and undermining troop loyalty through fraternization. This became a critical defense movement that generated key political concessions, and cultivated the community networks and skills for more complete liberation from the Soviets in the 1980's. What if they were trained in and had prepared for civilian-based defense?

Even the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote about and advocated for more research and education on nonviolent, civilian-based defense, or "organized popular defense," in its 1983 pastoral letter, "The Challenge of Peace."

The more nations or communities lean on violent resistance and mass organized campaigns of violence associated with war, the more likely they are to cultivate habits that correspond less to durable democracies and more to authoritarian politics. Such habits include domination, distrust, bitterness, hatred, corruption, domestic violence, generational trauma, and militarization. By contrast, the more groups lean into the work of supporting mass, organized coalitions of nonviolent resistance, the more likely they are, both in persons and societies, to cultivate habits that correspond to more durable democracies and human flourishing. Such habits include broader participation in politics and society, consensus-making, robust civil society, constructive conflict engagement, restorative justice, empathy, humanization, creativity, and compassion.

3. Unarmed Civilian Protection

Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) is a methodology and set of practices for the direct physical protection of civilians by trained, unarmed civilians before, during, and after violent conflict. Through

direct protection, UCP supports local civilians as they work to protect themselves and their communities and transform violent conflict.

UCP protects civilians from violence through use of a range of methods, including protective accompaniment and protective presence, community-led safety and security initiatives such as early-warning early-response mechanisms, civilians protecting one another through Women and Youth Protection Teams, conflict de-escalation techniques, civilian ceasefire and peace agreement monitoring, the establishment of weapons-free zones –and much more.

How does UCP work? ...A growing body of academic research and program evaluations has found that at its core, UCP is about creating and leveraging relationships with a range of parties to a conflict in order to protect people and reduce violence. In the longer term, UCP uses civilian-led protection strategies to support and strengthen local peace infrastructures. UCP is a protection practice led by civilians, for civilians that prioritizes leadership and decision-making by communities themselves. It is practiced by communities, NGOs, and other civil society organisations.

UCP is practiced in a range of diverse contexts around the world, both through locally-led civilian initiatives, and through formally constituted UCP organisations, including [Nonviolent Peaceforce](#). Such contexts include Ukraine, Iraq, South Sudan, Burundi, Colombia, Honduras, Palestine, the United States, etc. A study by Selkirk College estimates that over 60 formally constituted UCP organisations are currently active around the world. However, this does not account for the vast range of community-level UCP initiatives, of which there are countless examples. For example, in South Sudan alone, there were 67 Women’s Protection Teams (WPTs) active in 2021, with over 2500 women and girls have been trained in the practice in UCP over the last decade. Key partners around the world, including the United Nations are recognizing the importance of UCP as a response to violent conflict. Since 2007, 27 UN and UN-related policies, recommendations, and resolutions have recognized unarmed approaches for the protection of civilians.

Marie Dennis argues that “In a world of highly destructive, extremely expensive weapons, the human and environmental consequences of [large-scale] armed defense cry out for an effective alternative.”⁸ To move in this direction, it might help to emphasize the ‘right to life’ and the human ‘need for safety,’ both of which can open up more creative ways for imagining *how* best to respond to conflict and aggression. This emphasis shifts to a new kind of frame in conflict transformation that encompasses the good of all the parties, and emphasizes our deep interconnectedness or *ubuntu*. Doing so also helps to lift up the practices of nonviolent resistance, nonviolent civilian-based defense, and unarmed civilian protection as viable strategies requiring our focus and investment. Pope Francis explains, “especially in situations of conflict, let us respect this, our ‘deepest dignity,’ and make active nonviolence our way of life.”⁹

⁸ Marie Dennis, “Gospel Nonviolence: The Heart of Catholic Teaching on Peace,” presented at Justice Sown in Peace Conference, Notre Dame University, March 24, 2023, https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/2023/03/28/gospelnonviolence_heartofcatholicteachingonpeace/.

⁹ Pope Francis, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” World Day of Peace Message, Jan. 1, 2017.

Our Process and Goal is a Just Peace

As the institutional Church and the people of God, we are especially called to accompany those who are subject to direct or structural violence and to search with them for effective nonviolent methods of defense, to end the violence, address root causes of the violent conflict, and build a just, sustainable peace.¹⁰ The work of trauma-awareness and healing, restorative justice, reconciliation, and the long-term task of sustaining peace, after all, are intrinsic to the identity of the Church as a "field hospital" and "sacrament of human salvation." These virtues, policies, and practices are the very ones that research on armed conflict shows are associated with dramatic reductions in the instance of warfare. Central to a new moral framework is working to spread, deepen, and institutionalize these virtues, policies, and practices until the Church's vision of a world without war becomes a reality.

Our process and goal is peace that is just, consisting in political cooperation for the common good, respect for the dignity of all persons and the natural world, pre-empting violence before it begins, and the transformation of conflict by nonviolent strategies. The attainment of a just peace has always been the defining goal of the Catholic social vision.

A just peace ethic in many ways recapitulates Catholic social teaching as a whole, while emphasizing active, strategic, nonviolent approaches, which include, but are not limited to, both nonviolent civil resistance and peacebuilding. For instance, this ethic can focus on guiding norms to engage conflict constructively, break cycles of violence, and build a more sustainable peace.¹¹ As such it is inevitably more expansive than either pacifism or the just war tradition, the two major traditions of Christian discernment that have sought to resist and restrict war and violence through many centuries.

An ethic of nonviolence and just peace includes a set of contextually relevant practices for preventing destructive conflict and violence, protecting vulnerable people, and promoting sustainable peace founded on respect for life and nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace and reconciliation.

“... considering the data on nonviolent civil resistance in its entirety, it is clear that while it does not guarantee success, it is nonetheless consistently and significantly more effective than armed force. Catholic teaching is right to emphasize its potential as a direct alternative to warfare. And such alternatives are important.”¹²

In addition to the theological and moral arguments to be made, it is important to stress that nonviolent alternatives to armed force, while not guaranteed to succeed, lead to fewer violent deaths and have a better track record of success compared to warfare.

¹⁰ Eli McCarthy, “Praxis of Accompaniment: A Way of Just Peace Amid the War in Ukraine,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, Sept. 2023.

¹¹ For example, see Eli McCarthy, “Just Peace Ethic: A Summary,” 2023, <https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Just-Peace-Summary.pdf>.

¹² Cochran, p. 59.

We could refocus the evangelizing energy of the Church on nonviolence and just peace in a pastoral manner that listens to the experiences and voices of people on the ground in conflict situations, in multiple cultural and societal conflicts that may understand words and concepts differently, respecting and elevating particularly the unique voices of women and those on the margins, learning from them and creating a conversation which draws from the riches of all these sources.

A key part of building peace is building just political, social, and economic institutions - ones embedding norms of nonviolence, equity, dignity, and participation - at the international, national, and local levels. Cochran reminds us that “Since World War II, the international community has developed a thick network of intergovernmental organizations, treaty-based bodies, and formal diplomatic forums. At the same time, the number of internationally focused nongovernmental organizations, foundations, and grassroots civil society groups has risen dramatically. This decentralized but overlapping web of institutions and actors provides the basis for ongoing transnational negotiation and cooperation on a diverse array of issues.”¹³

Such institutions are able to cultivate interdependence and cooperation, norms against war, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, and sustained diplomacy. Their influence helps build the greater global governance the Church consistently calls for, and they have proven successful in mediating existing armed conflicts and helping administer post-conflict agreements that create an enduring peace. This capacity for greater global governance can also help the international community promote what the Church calls integral development, precisely the kinds of progress toward greater economic and political justice associated with declines in warfare.

This demonstrates the close connection between the Synthesis Report’s two nonviolent themes. There are a host of effective tools that can manage disputes in nonviolent ways and dramatically decrease the frequency of armed conflicts. The Church is a longtime supporter of these tools. What their more widespread use can do is significantly reduce the occasions when leaders of countries think they must act in self-defense; the most effective defense is to head off instances of offense in the first place. Self-defense can remain necessary and legitimate, but making it rare and exceptional can help focus attention on the many effective methods of nonviolence available when it is still needed.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes, “Those who suffer injustice have to defend strenuously their own rights and those of their family, precisely because they must preserve the dignity they have received as a loving gift from God.” Defense is critical – but does defending “strenuously” mean defending violently? Intriguingly, he does not specify violent defense here. Might His Holiness be pointing us to developing, training for, and mobilizing a “legitimate nonviolent defense”?

What is increasingly clear is that there will be no decrease in wars or violent conflicts, which are direct attacks on human dignity and flourishing, unless there is a significant increase in investment in nonviolent alternatives.

¹³ Cochran pp. 73-74

We propose the following adjustments to the Catechism and Compendium of Social Doctrine:

1. A robust section on Gospel Nonviolence and just peace moral reasoning. This would include a clear call for the Church to center/focus on nonviolence and just peace, a broad description of nonviolence, key nonviolent practices to scale-up,¹⁴ including the meaning, strategies, and impact of nonviolent defense, and the guiding norms of a just peace ethic.
2. Because we are each endowed with sacred, inviolable dignity, the Church affirms both the right to life and the right to nonviolent resistance, or what Pope Francis refers to as the “right to settle all conflicts without violence,”¹⁵ which implies our corresponding responsibility to be consistent with and to hold up human dignity. In turn, we need a consistent ethic of dignity. Governments have a responsibility to transform conflict in a sustainable way consistent with just peace and human dignity. As a Church we will embody and advocate for creative, effective nonviolent forms of defense.
3. Defense relying on lethal methods may only be temporally considered if there is a clear, public, and legal commitment, with time-bound benchmarks, to progressive disarmament in similar logic the Church previously argued in regards to nuclear weapons. This builds on and is consistent with the Compendium’s recognition that “*the Church’s social teaching proposes the goal of “general, balanced and controlled disarmament”* [Compendium on Social Doctrine, 508]

Pertinent Quotes:

“I think of nonviolence as a perspective and way of understanding the world, to which theology must look as one of its constitutive elements.”

–Pope Francis, *“Theology of Veritatis Gaudium in the Mediterranean Context”* (2019)

“Violence is not the cure for our broken world ... May charity and nonviolence govern how we treat each other as individuals, within society and in international life ...especially in situations of conflict, let us respect this, our ‘deepest dignity,’ and make active nonviolence our way of life. ...To be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing His teaching about nonviolence. ...I pledge the assistance of the Church in every effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence.”

–Pope Francis, *2017 World Day of Peace Message*

¹⁴ Such as nonviolent communication, active bystander intervention and de-escalation, restorative justice circles, trauma-healing, unarmed civilian protection, nonviolent resistance, and nonviolent civilian-based defense.

¹⁵ Pope Francis appeals to the *jus pacis*, i.e. the “right to settle all conflicts without violence,” in “Pope at Spirit of Assisi: God’s name cannot bless terror or violence,” Vatican News, Oct. 25, 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-10/pope-religious-leaders-demand-peace-at-spirit-of-assisi-event2.html>.

“...the consistent practice of nonviolence has broken barriers, bound wounds, healed nations.”

—Pope Francis, *letter to Cardinal Blase Cupich* (2017)

“The Reverend Martin Luther King, a source of inspiration for his calls for peace, expressed it clearly in the last speech he gave before his assassination: ‘It is no longer a question of choosing between violence and nonviolence, but between nonviolence and non-existence.’ The choice is up to us.”

—Pope Francis, *I Ask You in the Name of God: Ten Prayers for a Future of Hope* (2023).

“This would be our own contribution to the revolution of tenderness, a spiritual and nonviolent revolution...”

—Pope Francis, *Message for the Second World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly* (2022)

“In the dialogue between indigenous knowledge and science, we need to keep clearly in mind that this entire patrimony of knowledge should be employed as a means of overcoming conflicts in a nonviolent manner...”

--Pope Francis, March 14, 2024

“I grew up under the brutal dictatorship of Idi Amin. After my high school seminary education, I decided to join the ‘liberation war’ to fight Idi Amin. It was only by God’s grace that I was saved from this lie of liberation through violence. The ‘liberation war’ ended, but then the liberators soon became dictators and we needed another ‘liberation war’ to get rid of the ‘liberators’. This is a story that is repeated all over Africa. It is a lie. Violence does not end violence – it only creates endless cycles of violence. Nonviolence is a calling, not simply because it ‘works’ but because it is the way of God. That is the way that God creates, governs and redeems the universe. As Munzihirwa reminded the people of Bukavu before he was assassinated, every Christian is invited to ‘enter’ the way of Christ—‘God’s self-sacrificing love.’ Or as Kataliko, his successor, reminded the Christians about the logic of Gospel, ‘the only response to evil (violence) is an excess of love.’”— Fr. Emmanuel Katongole, Uganda

“Nonviolence is the solution to the protracted conflicts which have resulted in the loss of meaning to the preciousness of life and subjected many people to live in dehumanising conditions. However, many people working for peace do not have a deeper knowledge of the practice of nonviolence. The Catholic Church is connected with people all over the world. Therefore, the Church can be a good channel of active nonviolence. Jesus is an icon of nonviolence. If active nonviolence is taught at all levels, then it will become a language that can overcome the violence experienced in many parts of the world.”—Ms. Elizabeth Kanini Kimau, Kenya

“War is the mother of ignorance, isolation, and poverty. Please tell the world there is no such thing as a just war. I say this as a daughter of war. We can’t respond to violence with worse violence...It’s like a dragon with seven heads. You cut one and two others come up. ... We women don’t speak a lot about violence and nonviolence in Iraq but we try to create an environment of nonviolence.”—Sr. Nazik Matty, Iraq

“In my Catholic country, our nuns and priests joined the guerrillas because of the just war paradigm. The Catholic paramilitaries pray to the Virgin before slaughtering people because of the just war paradigm ... We faced radical opposition when we were working in the Magdalena region for 14 years. Our purpose was to accompany the regional communities in a programme of development and peace in the middle of the conflict. I am certain that because of the generosity of my companions, women and men, and due to the way they devoted themselves to protect life and dignity in extreme difficulties, the Magdalena process became a reference [point] in the construction of structural peace.”—Fr. Francisco De Roux, Colombia

“We need a clear message from the Church—from the pope to the grassroots—that the Church stands for nonviolence. We want an encyclical ... The weapon of the Church is love. The Church is a mother and has a strong weapon: Love for everybody. In South Sudan, the Church has been with all the people but never ever advocated for weapons. ...The Church has to be a place where there are no guns, and no fear. Whenever I am asked to turn over my weapons [at a checkpoint], I say: ‘My Lord has already come and taken them all away.’”—Bishop Paride Taban, South Sudan

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APPENDIX

A comprehensive approach to “managing conflict in a nonviolent way” thus includes:

**Preventing Violence Nonviolently:
Meeting needs, solving problems, responding to emergencies**

Nonviolent Strategies and Options. Nurture relationships, families, communities, workplaces, and societies grounded in nonviolent principles, techniques, and alternatives. Spread pro-active violence prevention practices and tactics through education, training, public awareness of nonviolent options. Violence often flows from unmet needs. Support national and local programs, institutions, systems meeting human needs. *The Church can build on its perennial calls for peace and reconciliation by teaching each parish, diocese, educational institution, ministry and organization worldwide to foster formation in Gospel nonviolence, including in conflict prevention.*

Nonviolent Practices and Tactics. Apply and promote nonviolent alternatives, including: Nonviolent communication and problem-solving; De-escalation techniques; Restorative justice peace circles; Nonviolent relationship-building; Peaceful parenting; Anti-racism training; Gender equity training; and Creative arts, media. *The Church can integrate these and other nonviolent practices throughout the institution.*

Nonviolence Education and Training. Integrate nonviolent problem-solving at every level of educational system and throughout society: Fostering just and lasting peace in everyday life, relationships, societies; Training in principles, methods, and lived-experience of confronting violence nonviolently; Nurturing skill-building for the nonviolent life. *The Church can integrate Gospel nonviolence at the core of teaching and formation of Catholic schools, universities, seminaries, and parish life.*

Nonviolence Awareness and Visibility. Increase public awareness of the power of active nonviolence. Organize public awareness campaigns: Promoting active nonviolence as a way of life, a strategy for change, a spirituality, and a universal ethic; Mainstreaming creative alternatives to direct, cultural, and structural violence; Nurturing constructive solutions; Learning from people around the world who have organized nonviolent change. *The Church is fostering nonviolent lives, nonviolent Church, nonviolent world. An official Church teaching on nonviolence, echoing global efforts, would support these goals.*

Culture of Nonviolence. Fostering a nonviolent culture by: Addressing root causes of violence; Institutionalizing violence prevention programs; Nurturing the nonviolent life in families, work places, communities, networks, movements, institutions, societies. *The Church can deepen its calling to be nonviolent community (and sign of nonviolence to the world) by prioritizing violence prevention and nonviolent healing in its preaching, formation, theological reflection, and ministries.*

Engaging Conflict Nonviolently:
Transforming conflict, ending violence, fostering peace, justice, reconciliation

Nonviolent Strategies and Options. Mainstream conflict transformation and restorative justice processes to: Manage conflict; Build movement for justice, peace, and sustainability through nonviolent people-power and civil resistance; Integrate trauma healing throughout society. *The Church can contribute to building a culture of nonviolence and conflict management by integrating at every level of the institution a theological and pastoral formation in Gospel nonviolence.*

Nonviolent Practices and Tactics. Foster skills and practices to engage conflict nonviolently, including: Researching, analyzing, and planning for nonviolent change; Nurturing initiatives to confront and challenge conflict and violence; Spreading practices to build the capacity of nonviolent campaigns and movements for justice and peace, including dialogue, petitions, rallies, boycotts, strikes, fasting, symbolic action, strategic action, people power, mediation, negotiations, reconciliation. *The Church can foster nonviolent efforts everywhere for justice, peace, and reconciliation.*

Nonviolence Education and Training. Create foundations for nonviolent initiatives and movements for change via: Education in the process of analyzing and engaging conflict and violence nonviolently in our lives, societies, world. Formation as peacemakers equipped to challenge injustice and foster reconciliation using nonviolent approaches. *The Church can teach Gospel nonviolence and how it combines rejecting violence with the power of love in action. It can do this through retreats, workshops, classes, preaching, formation, scholarly research and publications.*

Nonviolence Awareness and Visibility. Spread the power of nonviolent change by: Demonstrating evidence-base effectiveness of nonviolent strategies; Raising visibility of historical and contemporary examples and patterns of nonviolent conflict resolution; Building public awareness of power to transform conflict for just and lasting peace. *The Church illuminating Jesus' nonviolence and history of Gospel nonviolence in its preaching, teaching and ministries.*

Culture of Nonviolence. Foster a nonviolent culture through: Organizations, institutions, religious communities integrating, promoting nonviolent strategies; Building a culture challenging ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized violence and injustice; Fostering a culture rooted not in violent power ("power-over") but nonviolent power ("power-with"). *The Church striving to be a nonviolent community that supports its members to become peacemakers capable of resolving conflict, ending violence, and fostering peace, justice, reconciliation.*

Transforming Systemic Conflict Nonviolently:

Resisting Structural Violence; Fostering Structural Change

Nonviolent Strategies and Options. Strategies for systemic change include: Movements of movements; civil resistance; civilian-based defense; unarmed civilian protection; diplomacy, mediation; restorative justice; trauma healing; creating parallel institutions. *The Church can promote and encourage research on, development, and institutionalization of these nonviolent responses to war, climate crisis, and many other types of global violence.*

Nonviolent Practices and Tactics. Drawing on hundreds of documented tactics, including: Protest and persuasion (public statements, lobbying, picketing, vigils, the arts, teach-ins); Noncooperation (withdrawing support, boycotts, strikes, embargoes); Nonviolent intervention (sit-ins, civil disobedience, alternative social institutions). Constructive programs (creating or supporting more nonviolent systems). *The Church can foster nonviolent efforts everywhere for justice, peace and reconciliation.*

Nonviolence Education and Training. A widespread “nonviolence literacy campaign” will support a global nonviolent shift. This worldwide training process can be rooted in the lessons that change-makers throughout the world have learned from deploying nonviolent strategies and from living the nonviolent life. *Building on its history of hosting education, training and formation for nonviolent systemic change, the Church can play a leading role in spreading nonviolence training in the Church and the larger world.*

Nonviolence Awareness and Visibility. Spreading the power of systemic nonviolent change can include: Promoting the effectiveness of nonviolent people-power to challenge global systems of violence; Building public awareness of the power of nonviolent initiatives to dislodge *pillars of support* for injustice and to create more just and peaceful alternatives. *The Church is challenging the “Third World War fought piecemeal” and many unjust and destructive realities, including, wars, nuclear weapons and systems fostering the climate crisis.*

Culture Of Nonviolence. Nurture the emergence of more nonviolent systems through: Groups, communities, networks, institutions, structures to foster the growth and development of a more nonviolent culture and to nurture a long-term paradigm shift. *The Church can be a leader for a global, nonviolent shift. Pope Francis has shown us the way by acknowledging the Church’s sins of violence and calling us to a more nonviolent life. Imagine how the Church as a worldwide community could spark this new path to a more nonviolent future.*