

COVID-19: Fostering a nonviolent shift to authentic, inclusive security

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COVID-19 and false security

COVID-19 has upended communities around the world, threatening livelihoods and lives, forcing a previously unthinkable change in daily routines, helping everyone to recognize the fragility of life and exposing the deep injustice and violence that leave too many people, communities and countries vastly more vulnerable than others. The impact of the pandemic is being universally felt as it crosses political, geographic, economic, social, religious and cultural boundaries, powerfully illustrating the reality of global interdependence and calling into question our basic assumptions about security.

The virus, which is overwhelming health care systems in wealthy countries, presents a tremendous threat to life in places where health systems have been ravaged by war; where 70.8 million people¹ uprooted by violent conflict, poverty or climate disruption, try to survive in extremely crowded conditions; and where life-saving resources like clean water, soap and medicine are in short supply.^{2 3} In many cases, COVID-19's impact will be felt disproportionately by women, who often form the majority of displaced populations.

COVID-19 is also likely to disrupt the work of UN peacekeepers and curb peacemaking efforts, as travel restrictions impact international mediation efforts and regional organizations suspend diplomatic initiatives in areas ranging from the South Caucasus to West Africa to Venezuela and Afghanistan.⁴ The interruption of supply chains also will compound already significant humanitarian challenges, as medical supplies and other essentials are unable to reach people in conflict-affected countries.⁵

UN High Representative on Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu: "The pandemic arrived as our frameworks to prevent catastrophic confrontation are crumbling. Countries are building faster and more accurate nuclear arms, developing new weapon technologies with unpredictable implications and pouring more resources into militaries than at any point in decades. In the 75-year history of the United Nations, the folly of seeking security in vast destructive arsenals has never been clearer. Nor has the need to finally put the brakes on this deadly addiction."⁶

Leading scientists are clear that the Covid-19 outbreak is a warning and that far more deadly diseases still exist in wildlife, where 75 percent of all emerging infectious diseases originate.⁷ To prevent further outbreaks, both global warming and the destruction of the natural world for farming, mining and housing have to end, as both drive wildlife into contact with people.⁸ But war, preparations for war and other military activities also have a tremendous negative impact on the physical environment.⁹ Military activities are

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

² International Committee of the Red Cross <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/covid-19-urgent-action-needed-counter-major-threat-life-conflict-zones>

³ Jesuit Refugee Service <https://jrs.net/en/news/jrs-stands-with-refugees-and-migrants-in-the-midst-of-covid-19/>

⁴ International Crisis Group <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/sb4-covid-19-and-conflict-seven-trends-watch>

⁵ What's In Blue: Insights on the Work of the UN Security Council 21 March 2020

<https://www.whatsinblue.org/2020/03/possible-implications-of-covid-19-on-international-peace-and-security.php>

⁶ <https://www.un.org/disarmament/how-the-covid-19-pandemic-is-affecting-the-work-of-disarmament/>

⁷ Taylor LH, Latham SM, Woolhouse ME. Risk Factors for Human Disease Emergence 2001 *Philos Trans R Soc Lond B Biol Sci.* 2001 Jul 29;356(1411):983-9 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11516376>

⁸ Damian Carrington, *The Guardian*

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/25/coronavirus-nature-is-sending-us-a-message-says-un-environment-chief>

⁹ Murtaza Hussain, *The Intercept* September 15, 2019 <https://theintercept.com/2019/09/15/climate-change-us-military-war/>

responsible for multiple forms of environmental destruction, including massive carbon emissions, resource depletion and pollution.¹⁰

COVID-19 is placing great stress on societies and political systems, creating the potential for new outbreaks of violence, increased xenophobic sentiment, famine for communities especially in Sub-Saharan Africa that depend mainly on farming and livestock rearing, cancelled elections, militarized policing, weakened human rights protections and long term repression.¹¹ Similarly, the crisis is creating openings where jihadist groups can launch offensives against weakened or overwhelmed governments in Africa and the Middle East.¹²

The coronavirus pandemic lays bare the structural violence facing our planet and the radical insecurity it creates - the insecurity of systemic poverty, of political upheaval, of useless but dangerous military systems and the armed conflicts they breed, of the growing climate crisis. Nationalism, unilateralism and militarism undercut the cooperation necessary for addressing disease, including COVID-19, ebola and deadly viruses yet to emerge, as well as climate change, hunger and poverty, resource depletion, human trafficking, corruption, illicit trade in drugs and weapons, terrorism and other real threats that transcend national boundaries.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unmasking the global reality of counterfeit security. Protestant Theologian Walter Bruggeman said it well: "We see that our immense power is unable to fend off a threat that is for the moment beyond our explanation. We see that our great wealth is not able to assure us of security."¹³

A nonviolent shift to inclusive human security

Although one response to the pandemic is for countries to isolate themselves for protection or in response to xenophobia or nationalism, an opposite response could be to enhance solidarity and transnational cooperation, believing that global cooperation in a spectrum of nonviolent actions is the only way to address such a massive global threat.

We may be awakening to the possibility of a long term global shift to a world of inclusive human security and respect for nature. The COVID-19 pandemic is pointing to our deepest calling as a human family: to nurture a world of mercy, compassion, justice and care for one another rooted in the universal ethic of nonviolence.¹⁴ True, inclusive security relies on a culture of interconnectedness and hope.

Over the past half century the Catholic Church has taken steps to re-affirm the foundational ethic of nonviolence in papal and episcopal statements, in an expanding body of theological research and biblical exegesis, and in the experience and commitment of Catholic individuals and communities throughout the world. In this spirit, Pope Francis has underscored nonviolence as a core value of the Church in many public statements and, most significantly, in his 2017 World Day of Peace message entitled, "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace."

The seeds of nonviolence are being planted in this dire time—by the courageous actions of countless health professionals; by people, organizations and governments providing aid for those plunged into financial

¹⁰ International Peace Bureau, *The Military's Impact on the Environment: A Neglected Aspect of the Sustainable Development Debate* (2002) <http://www.ipb.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/briefing-paper.pdf>

¹¹ PAX <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/stay-informed/news/corona-crisis-increased-danger-for-social-leaders-in-colombia>

¹² International Crisis Group <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/sb4-covid-19-and-conflict-seven-trends-watch>

¹³ <https://churchanew.org/blog/2020/04/01/brueggemann>

¹⁴ Bishop Robert McElroy: "We need to mainstream nonviolence in the Church. We need to move it from the margins of Catholic thought to the center. Nonviolence is a spirituality, a lifestyle, a program of societal action and a universal ethic." Statement, "Path of Nonviolence: Toward a Culture of Peace," symposium, Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, Vatican City, April 4-5, 2019.

desperation or lacking the basic necessities of food, shelter, clean water, even soap; by the millions who are maintaining a safe physical distance from others; by all who are acting to protect prisoners, the elderly, those in nursing homes and care facilities, refugees and asylum seekers; and by all those responding in any helpful way to the suffering caused by this omnipresent threat. These seeds, if nourished and carefully tended, may give rise to something even more powerful.

The pandemic, with its enormous suffering, may be opening our eyes. The experience of radical physical-distancing has helped us to recognize the centrality of relationships in our lives and the importance of community. Even in cultures where individualism is held as a high value, as the coronavirus isolates us, we are building safe bridges, many of them virtual, to care for each other and those most at risk.

We are seeing “de facto” peace economies develop. In England, for example, arms manufacturers and the auto industry are cooperating with university research departments and the British Health Service to identify and solve problems, to use technology in a different way, to keep workers employed, to offer hope. How can we capture stories like this from around the globe? How can we hold on to these models for the future?

We are seeing a universal call for investment in healthcare and care of the vulnerable - from the richest to the poorest countries. This is supported by a plea for more humanitarian initiatives, for the lifting of sanctions on Iran, Syria, Gaza, Cuba, Venezuela, North Korea – that make an effective humanitarian response impossible in those countries. How can we raise the “healthcare not warfare” message for now and for the future, weaving this into our understanding of human security?

We are seeing a public acknowledgement of authentic human service by doctors, nurses, care workers, shop workers, delivery people, teachers, community workers, artists who are holding societies together, contributing to inclusive human security for our time. How can we affirm and hold on to this appreciation of courageous neighbors rather than suggesting that sacrifice and service are qualities only of military service?

We are seeing a plethora of creative projects emerge. In South Sudan, for example, the #211CHECK collective, a digital community of youth, fights misinformation that could confuse and mislead the public and raises awareness about coronavirus prevention and protection, using the #COVID19SS hashtag.¹⁵

The COVID-19 crisis is urgently calling for a fundamentally new understanding of security that is based on diplomacy, dialogue, reciprocity and a multilateral, collaborative approach to solving very real and critical global problems. A globalization of solidarity rooted in nonviolence will engage diverse nations and peoples in promoting sustainable communities based on economies of “enough” and fostering inclusive human security based on social, economic and ecological justice.

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis highlights the need for new convictions and attitudes: “Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.” (*Laudato Si*, 202)

Spending hundreds of billions of dollars annually on weapons and preparations for war has not given us the tools to address this global pandemic. In fact, military spending steals resources from providing for healthy,

¹⁵ <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/web-features/coronavirus/meet-10-young-people-leading-covid-19-response-their-communities>

resilient communities that can slow the spread of disease and more quickly recover from serious threats like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Authentic security in which the whole earth community can thrive will emerge only from serious attention to meeting basic human needs on a global scale, including in the midst of the pandemic. COVID-19 has demonstrated clearly that well-resourced healthcare systems are essential to protect us from health security threats and that poverty, war and environmental degradation make inclusive security unattainable.

Such a profound shift will require both clear vision and faithful commitment. For followers of Jesus, this shift will be inspired by the Sermon on the Mount. For the whole global community it will be rooted in an emergent paradigm that stands sharply against the paradigm of violence and injustice: the way of active, transformative, faithful and effective nonviolence.

Martin Luther King, Jr. called nonviolence “a universal principle inherent in the moral structure of the universe.” Bishop Robert McElroy describes nonviolence as a “universal ethic.” A *Laudato Si* culture requires active and courageous nonviolence.

Mobilizing nonviolence for authentic “whole Earth” security

In the midst of the enormous suffering and upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global course correction for authentic, inclusive security is urgent. This crisis may very well be a trigger event, “a shocking incident that dramatically reveals a critical social problem to the general public in a new and vivid way.”¹⁶ Historically, “trigger events” have unleashed a deep longing for society-wide transformation, creating opportunities for major shifts in public perceptions and significant structural or systemic change.

Now, although powerful sectors in the dominant culture will try to respond to this crisis by deepening the violence and injustice, equally possible is a dramatic shift to promote nonviolent values and inclusive security for the whole earth community. This adaptation is urgent and, for practical, survival reasons in the context of the current crisis, has already begun. In many places around the world, dialogue, cooperation, reciprocity, courageous compassion, coordination and constructive nonviolent strategies are already operative in pursuit of community-wide well-being. But to adapt at a global level to a more nonviolent world, even out of necessity, will itself depend on the power of active nonviolence -- innumerable, nonviolent steps toward the world envisioned in *Laudato Si*.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a dramatic shift, a nonviolent transformation toward authentic, inclusive security for the whole earth community is possible. Visionary ideas and proposals, global cooperation in a spectrum of nonviolent actions, and practical steps, both personal and political, to enhance solidarity and transnational cooperation may be the only way to address such a massive global threat.

¹⁶ Defined by the late Bill Moyer in his Movement Action Plan.