

COVID-19: Choosing a future

Pax Christi International, 15 April 2020

“That aftermath has already begun to be revealed as tragic and painful, which is why we must be thinking about it now.” (Pope Francis)¹

The potential for deepening violence

COVID-19 is placing tremendous stress on societies and political systems around the world, generating significant insecurity and creating the potential for deepening structural and systemic violence (including poverty, racism, hunger, extreme inequality, xenophobia, political repression, weakened human rights protections), as well as new or more virulent outbreaks of direct violence (such as domestic violence, militarized policing, gang and drug-related violence, gun violence). Similarly, the crisis is creating openings where violent extremist groups from the left or the right could gain adherents, perpetrate violence and undercut the common good.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women, said that confinement is fostering the tension and strain created by security, health and money worries; and is increasing isolation for women with violent partners. She described the situation as “a perfect storm for controlling, violent behaviour behind closed doors.”²

In several countries, looting of the supermarkets and trucks that transport food has begun.³

Democracy and basic human rights can be undermined by the use of tracking apps to monitor the movements of people who test positive for the corona virus. Palestinian partners⁴ of Pax Christi International are deeply concerned that a prototype of a totalitarian digital regime will be tested in the West Bank and Gaza, where surveillance policies would not be informed by health objectives alone.

At the same time, international networks trafficking in drugs, humans, weapons, minerals, natural resources and wildlife are active in countries struggling to overcome decades of war like Colombia and Afghanistan or deep civil strife like Venezuela and Mexico ... “Organized crime coopts and coerces communities to work in their illicit production operations ... Maybe the lawyers and politicians who collaborate with organized crime can work from home, but there will be no sick leave or unemployment benefits for those who must produce, transport and illicitly sell goods in order to feed their families.”⁵

Meanwhile, government neglect in many of Brazil’s poorest neighborhoods has prompted drug traffickers to join favela activists in imposing coronavirus-related restrictions, including a curfew, amid growing fears over the impact the virus could have on some of Brazil’s poorest citizens.⁶

¹ Austen Ivereigh, “A Time of Great Uncertainty: An Interview with Pope Francis,” *Commonweal*, April 8, 2020:

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/time-great-uncertainty>.

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>

³ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/impact-covid-19-all-down-inequality/>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/toine-van-teeffelen/triple-crisis/10156737277671750/>

⁵ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/impact-covid-19-all-down-inequality/>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/25/brazil-rio-gangs-coronavirus>

And, while there have been some positive responses to the pleas of Pope Francis, the UN Secretary General, other religious leaders and countless faith-based and civil society organizations around the world, there is little likelihood of successful ceasefires or a serious halt to the arms trade (licit or illicit) as a result of the pandemic. “In many ongoing wars economic interests overpower political interests. When little value is attached to life nobody will stop fighting for humanitarian reasons, not even to protect their own health.”⁷

Sustaining or building peace

Catholic social teaching brings to the current context a deep commitment to the inherent dignity of every person and respect for the integrity of creation. The Gospel and Church teaching are clear regarding every dimension of this crisis that is likely to exacerbate the multiple forms of the violence we now see so well, including economic injustice and marginalization, racism, mistreatment of migrants and workers, violations of basic rights to health care and food, political exclusion and repression, exploitation of the natural world or a lack of commitment to solidarity and the common good.

Nonviolence is at the heart of the Gospel and Catholic social teaching. Pope Francis said: “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.”⁸ Now, more than ever, the Church is called to embrace the nonviolence of Jesus - to choose and promote a more effective “third way” that is neither passive in the face of looming threats, nor responding to violence with more violence.

At the core of Christian nonviolence stands the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ blueprint, vision and instruction for mature Christlike discipleship, with its new commandments of nonviolence: “You have heard ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ but I say to you, offer no violent resistance to one who does evil,” (Mt. 5:38-39) and “You have heard it said, ‘Love your countrymen and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons and daughters of your heavenly God who makes the sun rise on the bad and the good and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.” (Mt. 5:43-45)

“We need to mainstream nonviolence in the Church,” Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego, Calif. has said. “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.”⁹

A future that is nonviolent and reflects the values of Catholic social teaching can be built during and following this global crisis if we apply tested strategies of active nonviolence to reshaping our broken world. To do so, we need to cultivate creative moral imaginations that understand nonviolence as a dramatic alternative to “business as usual,” a cross-cutting approach to the multiple violences at the root of human vulnerability to COVID-19. We need to challenge the too-normal patterns of violence against each other and the natural world with powerful, nonviolent love in action.

⁷ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/impact-covid-19-all-down-inequality/>

⁸ Pope Francis, 2017 World Day of Peace on *Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace* (1).

⁹ Statement, “Path of Nonviolence: Toward a Culture of Peace,” symposium, Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, Vatican City, April 4-5, 2019.

Gospel nonviolence is much more than a political strategy; it is a spirituality through which we see and interpret life, a set of virtues and principles for personal and social change.¹⁰ Nonviolence is not passive. It is not only the cessation of killing, although that is a clear starting point. Rather, nonviolence views active peacemaking, persistent reconciliation and steadfast resistance to evil through the lens of love. It speaks truth in a global struggle for integrity, just peace and ecological sustainability. It is transformation and healing of our lives and our world.¹¹

Nonviolence, then, is a constructive process applicable at a personal, interpersonal, and social-structural level. It includes nonviolent resistance and nonviolent action for social change. It also activates everyday techniques and practices, including nonviolent communication, compassionate listening, restorative justice peace circles, peaceful parenting, trauma healing, anti-racism training, and nonviolent community-building. It is a method that can be used to change policies, protect the vulnerable and respond to the crises.

Active nonviolence includes negotiation and conflict transformation; violence interruption and prevention; restorative and distributive justice; “just peace” strategies, such as unarmed civilian protection, accompaniment and civilian-based defense; disarmament; strengthening social cohesion; building and training social movements; and a multitude of peacebuilding approaches.

Common responses around the world to COVID-19 illustrate very important characteristics of and values at the heart of nonviolent action: a deepened sense of our interdependence and interconnectedness; courageous and creative risking of life without killing others (by health care and other essential workers); acknowledging and caring for the most marginalized, including the elderly and lonely, persons who are homeless or impoverished, persons with impaired immune systems or mental and emotional health challenges, persons without legal status, persons in prison.

Catholic nonviolent action

We stand at a crossroads, aware of the danger and opportunity of the COVID-19 pandemic. The coronavirus has thrown into sharp relief the contemporary global culture of violence: its interlocking, unjust systems; the suffering it imposes on billions of people; and its incapacity to respond effectively and comprehensively to the current crisis and other monumental challenges facing the whole earth community.

Responding to the pandemic, both short-term and longer-term, requires a fundamental shift from the “unjust normal” of systemic and structural violence across the globe, from systems that destroy, dehumanize, and diminish, to a culture that seeks the fullness of life for all.

¹⁰ For example, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s six principles of nonviolence: Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people; nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding; nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not people; nonviolence holds that voluntary suffering can educate and transform; nonviolence chooses love instead of hate; and nonviolence believes that the universe is on the side of justice.

¹¹ In his book *Healing Resistance: A Radically Different Response to Harm*, Kazu Haga writes, “When we view nonviolent resistance as part of a process of healing our collective wounds; when we work to cultivate compassion for all beings, including those who perpetuate systems of injustice; when we begin to see that our ultimate goal is not only to change unjust structures but also to change cultures, value systems, and to repair relationships—that is when we begin to enter into the *shugyo* [Japanese term for “practice”] of nonviolence.” (Parallax Press, 2020).

This will not be easy. The growing fragility of entrenched global systems will create enormous turbulence as the existing order, which especially perpetuates systemic and structural violence, seeks to reassert its power and reach.

Global cooperation in a spectrum of nonviolent actions is the only way to address what is already a massive global threat and may worsen in the coming months and years.

The important role that the Church could play in the post-pandemic transition was very evident during a global research project conducted by Pax Christi International's Catholic Nonviolence Initiative in 2017-2018. The initiative gathered, in 15 different countries, case studies from Catholic communities using nonviolent strategies to build sustainable peace.

Jamila Raqib executive director of the Albert Einstein Institution, said, "What came through very clearly is that in each of the cases...the Church and spiritual communities acted as connectors and facilitators in environments where there was a weak civil society because it has been eroded due to conflict, or for other reasons. ... as a global institution with a deep and diverse network, the Church connected local struggles with global movements." ¹²

Mel Duncan, co-founder of Nonviolent Peaceforce, said, "Local churches are well placed to support localised approaches and provide bases for the ongoing reflections required to adapt nonviolent approaches. Churches can also provide the venues for training. And they can play an important role in mobilising the resources for trauma treatment...The case studies illustrated instances where the church played a positive role, but others where the church was an impediment. Without strong papal leadership, churches will continue to play mixed and confused roles. Clergy will have to take militant, Romero-like stances, not only in conflict-affected countries but also in the seats of the empire, following the example of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem." ¹³

¹² Case studies, interviews, and comments from reviewers are drawn from the unpublished ""Nonviolence Is a Crop that Can Feed the Whole World": A Listening Project on Active Nonviolence, Catholic Nonviolence Initiative (Roundtable 5), 2017-2018.

¹³ Ibid