

The Good News of Peace and Nonviolence:
How nonviolence is essential to a culture of peace
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Introduction

In the past century, Catholic teaching on violence and war has evolved from a singular reliance on the just war tradition to increased emphasis on nonviolent strategies grounded in the Sermon on the Mount as more in harmony with the Gospel and better able to lead to, and sustain, just peace.

This paper highlights the deep relationship between peace and nonviolence, the reasons why nonviolence is key to peace and the ways in which a culture of peace would be strengthened by integrating peace and nonviolence.

In essence, nonviolence brings particular gifts to the quest for peace: it deepens our understanding of the fullness of peace, sharpens our awareness of how peace is achieved, and helps revive the prophetic Gospel meaning of peace as a nonviolent venture.

Nonviolence is a spirituality, a way of life, a method for promoting social and ecological justice, and a universal ethic. It is key to peace because, by its very terminology, by its practices and orientation, nonviolence directly challenges the violence that undermines peace. Nonviolence distinctively contributes to peacebuilding by unambiguously resisting violence; diagnosing and unmasking violence; transforming violence; seeking nonviolent alternatives; and fostering a culture of nonviolent peace. This robust understanding and experience of nonviolence— as a process of engagement and transformation—grounds our hope for peace. Most of all, nonviolence is a path for conversion, for deep personal and societal transformation that can give us the strength and courage to resist violence in all its forms. Nonviolence is increasingly critical to the life of the Church and to the survival of the world.

Signs of the times

Today we discern two critical “signs of the times:” first, the global crisis of violence and, second, the growing spread of active nonviolence.

The world is awash in violence. Normalized and systemic violence threatens the very existence of life on earth, desecrating the immense dignity of the human person and the sacred gifts of creation. This violence is war and poverty; racism and gender violence; hate speech and gun violence; nationalism and xenophobia; the relentless destruction of planet Earth; and the systems of domination and oppression that sustain these and every other form of violence.¹

Violence, though, does not have the final word. Humanity has the capacity to respond to this destructiveness. Today, we see this in a second great sign of our times: the global spread of nonviolence. Active, creative and

¹ As individuals we commit acts of violence and share responsibility for this violence. At the same time our individual acts of violence are part of a much larger culture of violence. We glimpse this larger culture when we grasp the magnitude of systems and phenomena that touch people in every part of our world, as Pope Francis has underscored: “While the last century knew the devastation of two deadly world wars, the threat of nuclear war and a great number of other conflicts, today, sadly, we find ourselves engaged in a horrifying world war fought piecemeal... we know that this ‘piecemeal’ violence, of different kinds and levels, causes great suffering: wars in different countries and continents; terrorism, organized crime, and unforeseen acts of violence; the abuses suffered by migrants and victims of human trafficking; and the devastation of the environment.” (Pope Francis, 2017, World Day of Peace Message, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace.”)

liberating nonviolence is a force for good that is increasingly promoted by the Church and by movements around the world to challenge violence and promote just, sustainable peace.

For those of us who follow in the footsteps of Jesus, this commitment is rooted in *shalom*: the fullness of peace. Nonviolence is at the core of *shalom*, and thus at the core of our longing for peace and a culture of peace.

Called to *Shalom*: The fullness of peace

Peace is a core Christian value. Found in many places in the Gospel and throughout the Christian tradition, peace is rooted in the Hebrew Scripture's *shalom*. Theologian and scripture scholar Ched Myers describes *shalom* as "a state of personal and social well-being that embraces the physical, material, environmental, relational, and psychic dimensions of life."²

Appearing over 200 times in the Hebrew Bible, *shalom* connotes the proper ordering of Yahweh's cosmos.³ Theologian Willard M. Swartley contends that *shalom* requires four characteristics: *chesed* (steadfast love), *emunah* (faithfulness), *tsedaqah* (righteousness), and *mishpat* (justice).⁴

Even more than war itself, "imperial peace" imposed on defeated subjects was the most treacherous usurper of true *shalom*.⁵ Myers writes, "The prophets knew that social and economic violence continued under the pious veneer of a Pax Assyriana or Pax Romana."⁶

Micah insists that true *shalom* is both disarmament and socio-economic sufficiency: "God shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid." (Mic 4:3f)⁷ Isaiah illuminates *shalom* as a cosmic reality in which nature itself celebrates the liberation from imperial domination.⁸

Jesus of Nazareth stands in this prophetic tradition as a practitioner of and advocate for *shalom*.⁹ He confronted the imperial, political and religious realities that undermined the personal and social well-being of *shalom*. He did this by proclaiming the nonviolent and inclusive Reign of God; advocating for justice on behalf of the least; and breaking laws that dehumanized and excluded. The peace he proclaimed and shared was the fullness of life extended to all, which included actively and relentlessly confronting everything that undermined this "new creation." Jesus inaugurated a clear alternative paradigm to the paradigm of violence. The "good news" is that we are called to live in this alternative, nonviolent paradigm.

²Ched Myers, "Jesus and the Prophetic Vision of Shalom," <https://chedmyers.org/2008/09/01/articles-peace-making-jesus-and-prophetic-vision-shalom/> Published in: Leitfaden für ein künftiges Engagement für gerechten lebensförderlichen Frieden—Optionen zur Umgestaltung der Beschlüsse von Friesing und Porto Alegre, edited by Ulrich Duchrow and Martin Gück, Kairos Europa, 2008, 4 pp.

³ Myers, Ibid.

⁴ Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2006).

⁵ Myers, Ibid.

⁶ In Myers: "My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations; they shall not be in the council of My people... Because, in truth, because they have misled My people, saying, 'Peace', when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear whitewash on it. (Ez 13:9f)."

⁷ Myers, Ibid.

⁸ Myers: "Isaiah in particular portrays the scope of shalom as cosmic, embracing not only the nations but nature as well. His 'lion and lamb' scenario is renowned (Is 11:6), but just as extraordinary is his vision of the forests celebrating the demise of empire: "When the LORD has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon: "How the oppressor has ceased! How his insolence has ceased! ... The whole earth is at rest and quiet; they break forth into singing. The cypresses exult over you, the cedars of Lebanon, saying, 'Since you were laid low, no one comes to cut us down'." (Is 14:4,7f)

⁹ Myer, Ibid.

At the core of Jesus' mission was the way of *shalom*: powerful and active nonviolence. Jesus revealed the fullness of peace, not through violence or passivity, but through innumerable actions and teachings that were themselves consistent with peace – creative, thought-provoking, and deeply nonviolent. Through his words and deeds, Jesus sharply clarified that the essential ingredients of *shalom* — steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and justice – are dimensions of this nonviolent way to the fullness of peace.

Communicating the fullness of peace

Peace in this rich sense is at the heart of Jesus' invitation to the Church and the world. To proclaim fully this peace and to promote effectively cultures of peace, it is critical to communicate the depth of *shalom* because "peace" is so often misunderstood. Shaped by cultural and historical developments over the past two millennia, some conventional conceptions of peace do not fully convey the vision and depth of *shalom*. These include: "peace" as an abstract ideal; "peace" as the absence of conflict; "peace" as a state of mind ("tranquility," "peace of mind"), and "peace" established by violence.

Peace, as illuminated by teachings, stories and practices in the Gospel is not merely a general ideal, an inner state, a lack of conflict, the cessation of hostilities or the result of violence. Jesus' *shalom* is not only a utopian dream or a privatized inner quality. Rather, the peace that Jesus lived and taught was the breaking down of "the dividing wall of enmity" (Eph. 2:13, 14) and the hard work of those who would be "sons of and daughters of God" (Matthew 5:9).

Peace is the fullness of life that the deep transformation of conflict can accomplish by addressing the root causes of violence that breed new hostilities. Jesus demonstrated that *shalom* is achieved through nonviolent engagement and resistance, not through violence and domination. He calmly intervened as men threatened a woman accused of adultery (John 8: 1-11); defied a Sabbath law to heal a man with a withered hand (Mark 3: 1-6); confronted the powerful at the Temple and purified it (John 2: 13-22); and commanded Peter to put down his sword in the Garden of Gethsemani (Matthew 26: 52).

Jesus peacefully but dramatically confronted the structures of injustice and violence and advocated unceasingly for the well-being of all. In short, Jesus called us to a peace that includes the way of active nonviolence.

Unfortunately, "peace" also often functions as short-hand for what follows from the "pacification" of enemies: "peace" stemming from defeat and domination. Cardinal Peter Turkson stressed that the peace of the Roman Empire and its many descendants, established and maintained through violence, is not the peace of Jesus.¹⁰

Another kind of peace is clearly illuminated by the word itself: "nonviolence," which presents a resoundingly clear stand against violence. The solution is not to abandon the word "peace" but to revive its prophetic Gospel meaning as a nonviolent enterprise by explicitly and inextricably linking "peace" and "nonviolence." thereby making clear that the peace being pursued is being pursued by peaceful means. A "Laudato Si" culture cannot be established or maintained by violence or passivity. It requires active and courageous nonviolence.

From a different perspective, the language of "peace," "peacebuilding" – even "a culture of peace" – alludes to the great goal we are seeking, and even to some of the steps that move us in that direction. However, "nonviolence" and "nonviolent methods" more sharply illustrate both the goal and the way to achieve it. Peace requires what nonviolence explicitly does. The word "nonviolence" unmistakably lifts up, grapples with, and lays bare the reality of violence and the urgent need to challenge and transform it; the word "peace" does not so clearly do so. In fact, "peace" can side-step the transformation of violent social structures and systems, settling instead for an abstract ideal, an inner state, the absence of conflict or the result of dominating violence.

¹⁰ Cardinal Peter Turkson, "Christian Nonviolence and Just Peace," keynote address, University of San Diego (USA), October 7, 2017.

Furthermore, effective peacebuilding often needs and depends on a more comprehensive nonviolent praxis, such as nonviolent resistance, unarmed protection, and civilian-based defense.¹¹ Often, the synergy between nonviolent action and peacebuilding approaches can be used to mobilize communities, address power imbalances and conflict drivers, and support inclusive, participatory peace processes.¹²

Nonviolence is essential to a culture of peace

Nonviolence is a spirituality, a way of life, a method for achieving social and ecological justice, and a universal ethic at the heart of peace.¹³ Nonviolence is broader than pacifism or simply the refusal to do harm. Instead, nonviolence is a courageous way of life that actively challenges violence and all forms of injustice with love. It names a core teaching of Jesus: the thorough rejection of violence combined with the prophetic power of unconditional love.¹⁴

Jesus consistently practiced nonviolence in an extremely violent context, but “nonviolence was not just a response to particular situations in the life of Jesus – it was the whole life of Jesus”¹⁵ Jesus called his disciples to abstain from violence and killing, return good for evil, prophetically stand against injustice, respond to the cry of the poor, foster unity, and put sacrificial love into action. The word “nonviolence” comprehensively captures and integrates these and many other dimensions of what being a Christian means. Like justice, peace, mercy and reconciliation, nonviolence is at the core of our identity as Christians and at the heart of our faith.

The early Church practiced the nonviolence that Jesus taught and lived. Later, the spirit of Gospel nonviolence was maintained by particular individuals, communities and movements within the Church, even when the institution itself had wavered in its commitment. The communion of saints offers us the witness of costly and joyful peace and nonviolence – from the apostles and disciples of the first century, to the mothers and fathers of the desert, to Saint Martin of Tours and Saint Maximilian, to Saint Clare and Saint Francis of Assisi, to Blessed Franz Jägerstätter and Saint Oscar Romero, to the many known and unknown women and men who have sought to imitate the nonviolent life of Jesus.

¹¹ Véronique Dudouet, “Powering to Peace: Integrated Civil Resistance and Peacebuilding Strategies,” International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, April 2017, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/powering-peace-integrated-civil-resistance-peacebuilding-strategies/>.

¹² US Institute of Peace *Synergizing Nonviolent Action and Peacebuilding: An Action Guide*, <https://www.usip.org/programs/synergizing-nonviolent-action-and-peacebuilding>

¹³ 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. See the appendix for developed reflection on each of these.

¹⁴ The word “nonviolence” has a long history in other traditions, but is a relatively new term in Christianity. Increasingly, however, theologians, Church leadership, and Christians in many parts of the world have come to see that this word most effectively characterizes Jesus’s way—a way that combines *both* an unmistakable rejection of violence *and* the power of love and truth in action for justice, peace and integrity of creation. Nonviolence is a paradigm of the fullness of life, which its etymological roots shine light on. Nonviolence is the English translation of the Sanskrit term “ahimsa” (literally “non-violence”). Gandhi drew on this ancient term to convey his powerful, active, and deeply grounded approach. As nonviolence scholar Michael Nagler writes, “In Sanskrit abstract nouns often name a fundamental positive quality indirectly, by negating its opposite. Thus, courage is conveyed by ‘abhaya’, which literally means ‘non-fear’; or we encounter ‘akrodha’, ‘non-anger’, for ‘kindness’, and the Buddha’s ‘avera’, ‘non-hatred’, meaning ‘love’. The reason ancient India’s great thinkers expressed themselves in this apparently oblique way is that phenomena such as love, absolute courage, and compassion are primordial things that cannot be fully expressed in fallible, conditioned human language.... ‘Ahimsa’ is not really a negative term ... ‘Ahimsa’ suggests something profoundly positive, which would not be possible to name directly. ‘Ahimsa’, a kind of double negative, actually stands for something so original that we cannot quite capture it with our weak words.” (Michael Nagler, *The Search for a Nonviolent Future* [Inner Ocean Publishing, 2004]). “Nonviolence” can be further illuminated by reflecting on an analogous word: “non-dualism”. “Non-dualism” means absolute unity. At the same time, it clearly highlights that which undermines this unity: dualism, binaries, the division of reality into opposites. Non-dualism is thus not a negative term. It is a positive word that helps us conceptualize what “unity” means. So, too, with nonviolence. Nonviolence is a kind of double negative that signifies the comprehensiveness of love in action but also clearly names the reality that undermines that fullness: violence.

¹⁵ Cardinal Peter Turkson, “Christian Nonviolence and Just Peace,” keynote address, University of San Diego (USA), October 7, 2017.

Over the past century this tradition of nonviolent Christianity has increasingly re-emerged in Church documents, scripture scholarship, theology, Catholic social teaching and the lived experience of Catholics around the world. Facing the immense violence of our era, the Church is explicitly lifting up this core Gospel value, bringing it more clearly into the heart of the Church, and inviting the Catholic community worldwide to understand and embrace the power of nonviolence.

As the Church has increasingly advanced nonviolence, the larger world is also recognizing the power of nonviolence to confront, disrupt, transform, and heal personal, interpersonal and structural violence. Nonviolence includes diplomacy, unarmed protection of vulnerable populations, traditional practices of reconciliation and healing, restorative justice in schools and prisons, ethical and sustainable business practices and a broad spectrum of other approaches to preventing or interrupting the many expressions of violence. Nonviolence is being used worldwide in struggles for justice and human rights, in building movements responding to the climate crisis, and in creating alternatives to war and social conflict. But it is also transforming individuals, families and communities through the growing proliferation of programs for nonviolence education and training, nonviolent communication, skill-building, trauma healing, peaceful parenting, anti-racism training, peace circles and many other nonviolent approaches. Nonviolence engages violence and injustice, not by retreat, accommodation or more violence, but by the power of love in action.

We seek to live nonviolently because that is the way God calls us to live, no matter the outcome. God's unconditional love grounds, creates and maintains all life, rooted in the infinite goodness that the three Persons of the one God endlessly and inseparably share with one another and with all creation. This eternal communion is the ceaseless mutuality of ontological nonviolence in action, grounded in the foundational relationality of God. The nonviolent life is rooted in the life of God – the God who created the universe, not out of violence, but out of love. Creation is good, as the Book of Genesis tells us, and human beings are made in the image of the God who declares this goodness. Nonviolence is thus at the heart of creation, and points us toward the “new creation,” where all will be reconciled.

At the same time, nonviolent engagement in contexts of enormous violence and injustice throughout the world has revealed the practical power and effectiveness of active nonviolence for ending violence and nurturing the seeds of a culture of peace.¹⁶

Nonviolence is a “cross-cutting” way of responding to the full spectrum of violence and injustice. It is a paradigm of the fullness of life with which we are called to respond to contemporary challenges, from the destruction of the Amazon to political corruption; from the systemic oppression of migrants to the unspeakable suffering caused by human trafficking; from the violence of rampant poverty to the catastrophe of war. Nonviolence is a theological and practical framework that cuts across these and many other forms of violence, including the death penalty and the possession, proliferation and use of nuclear weapons.

Thus, a culture of peace is most authentic when it integrates the vision, principles, formation, strategies and tactics of nonviolence at its heart. This nonviolent core encourages the residents of a culture of peace to acknowledge their own violence; to let go of their belief in violence; to join movements fostering nonviolent change by resisting violence and injustice; and to create societal structures and systems that are inherently nonviolent.

¹⁶ According to research conducted by Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, which culminated in their 2011 book, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Columbia University Press), nonviolent resistance against formidable opponents, including those with predominant military power, has been twice as successful as armed struggle. They examined 323 violent and nonviolent campaigns against incumbent regimes and foreign military occupations from 1900-2006 and found that the nonviolent campaigns succeeded, in terms of stated political objectives, about 54 percent of the time, compared to 27 percent for violent campaigns.

Nonviolence as a spirituality and way of life is at the heart of peace

Christian spirituality is “the lived experience of the faith” and “the personal participation in the paschal mystery: the life, death and resurrection of Christ.”¹⁷ The spirituality of nonviolence is the experience of living the nonviolent life rooted in God’s vision for humanity and to which Jesus calls us: sacrificial love in action resisting violence and injustice, embracing the Cross, and participating in the coming of the nonviolent Reign of God. In short, participating here and now in the paschal mystery of the life, death and resurrection of the nonviolent Jesus.

The spirituality of nonviolence is an incarnated engagement with the suffering of our world and all the forms of violence which spawn that suffering. It confronts this violence—the reality of domination, separation, fear and hatred, often rooted in the trauma and unrelieved pain of the small and wounded ego—with love and determination. “Spirituality...is the life of transformation from violence to nonviolence,” as theologian John Dear stresses.¹⁸ A spirituality that seeks openness to God’s will and peacefulness witnesses to the marks of nonviolence by preferring to bear suffering than to inflict it, placing trust in the persuasive power of the truth that we are all sisters and brothers, and realizing that there is no “winning” in nonviolence, only the victory of reconciliation.

The spirituality of nonviolence is prayer and action mobilizing tenderness, mercy and empathy, even as it relentlessly resists injustice and courageously challenges the destructive power of violence. This commitment to nonviolence is formed of compassion and nourished by the Eucharist, enabling a nonviolent encounter with the disarming power of God.

Nonviolence is a way of life that calls us to confess and atone for our violence; to renounce our belief in violence; to resist all forms of violence; to deepen our capacity for love, mercy, tenderness, courage and nonviolent action; and to follow the path of nonviolence for the transformation and healing of our lives and our world. This often requires courage, creativity, community, mercy and relentless persistence.

Gospel nonviolence is rooted in the words of Jesus: blessed are the meek; blessed are the peacemakers; love your enemies; do good to those who persecute you; put down your sword. Flowing from these, the Christian life means loving inclusively, fostering the well-being of all, living a spirituality purified of violence at its very roots, and facing the consequences of seeking this Beloved Community, including persecution and death.

Through prayer, formation, community-building, pastoral ministry and prophetic engagement, we plumb the spiritual depths of nonviolence. “Nonviolence is the Spirit of God that disarms our hearts,” writes John Dear, “so that we can become God’s instruments for the disarmament of the world. This nonviolent Spirit of God transforms us to transform the world.”¹⁹

Peace and nonviolence are intrinsically interconnected

Peace requires nonviolence. Nonviolence provides a clear lens for confronting a culture of violence and an essential grounding for a culture of peace, disarmament, integral human development and respect for the integrity of creation. Nonviolence can foster a genuine culture of peace by rooting it in a principled stand against violence and in the creativity and transformative power of love. Jesus inaugurated a way of being and a way of life that stood in sharp contrast to the traditional paradigm of violence and injustice: a nonviolent paradigm of the fullness of life, mercy, peace and justice. Concretely, this includes spreading the tools for nonviolent change and engaging in struggles for justice at every level of the Church and throughout the world.

¹⁷ Sandra Schneiders, *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, Vol 1. (Crossroad, 1987).

¹⁸ John Dear, *The God of Peace: Toward a Theology of Nonviolence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

¹⁹ John Dear, *The God of Peace: Toward a Theology of Nonviolence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

In addition to being a practical method for confronting violence and fostering justice without using violence, nonviolence is also a universal ethic that reaches into all dimensions of life in the Church and the world.

The Church can become a global leader and model of nonviolence, helping the world to shift from a paradigm of perpetual violence to a paradigm rooted in active nonviolence applicable to innumerable challenges facing the planet. At the same time, the Church can renew the roots of Gospel nonviolence in its institutional life and mission and in Catholic communities everywhere. Pope Francis has placed special value on the spiritual and practical power of active nonviolence to promote integral human development and cultures of peace, including through the 2017 World Day of Peace message on “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” where he proclaimed: “To be true followers of Jesus today... includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence.”²⁰ In that same document, he declared, “I pledge the assistance of the Church in every effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence.”²¹

As a universal ethic, nonviolence offers the Church a theological, pastoral and strategic foundation for peace and for addressing innumerable forms of violence and injustice. This ethic calls us to live the vision of the well-being of all through the methods of nonviolence, including prophetic witness, noncooperation with injustice, dialogue, transformation, peacebuilding and reconciliation.

If Catholics were formed from the beginning of their lives to understand and appreciate the power of active nonviolence and the connection of nonviolence to the heart of the Gospel—including the real-life implications of “love your enemies”—they would be better prepared to understand and to work for *shalom*. If the Church initiated a conversation on nonviolence in all parishes, dioceses, educational institutions, religious communities, organizations and ministries, with people of other faiths and beyond, the world would be better prepared to respond to the monumental crises of our time with vision and without violence and to build resilient cultures of just and sustainable peace.

²⁰ Pope Francis, 2017 World Day of Peace message, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace.”

²¹ Pope Francis, 2017 World Day of Peace message, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace.”