

PRE-CONFERENCE REFLECTION PAPER

Can you name a context/contexts of conflict, violence or war that prompted your determination to seek nonviolent responses?

Nuclear weapons, the United Farm Workers struggle, the assassinations of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the four US church women by US supported militaries in Central America, and the economic and racial injustice experienced by my inner-city neighbors were connected in a web of violence and oppression. In that context I took Pax Christi's vow of nonviolence before a nonviolent direct action at the Nevada test site. The vow of nonviolence draws on the depth of the nonviolent teaching of Jesus and challenges me to a way of life that transforms violence on many levels. A short time later, my monastic profession as a Benedictine sister of Erie, PA, was a particular expression of that commitment to gospel nonviolence. The corporate commitment of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie is to be a prophetic witness and healing presence for peace by working for sustainability and justice, especially for women and children.

In 1993, as National Coordinator of Pax Christi USA, when a military coup ousted President Aristide of Haiti, our Haitian partners requested a nonviolent intervention. After gathering a steering committee of eight national and international peace organizations, we were able to offer a short-term (nine-month) presence for six different locations in rural Haiti. Named "Cry for Justice," it provided international accompaniment during a time of incredible oppression, provided some protection—life-saving in some instances—and opened some space for creative and nonviolent resistance by the Haitian people. It also changed the lives of all who participated. It was a learning experience and quite challenging for the organizations on the steering committee.

Currently, I live in inner-city Erie, in a small Catholic Worker community joining other Benedictines on a block being reclaimed from decay, despair and violence with a poetry park, neighborhood garden and afterschool space for children.

As president of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue internationally (DIM-MID), I have participated in Buddhist-Catholic dialogues and Islamic-Catholic dialogues as well as Tent of Abraham retreats that bring interfaith action and respect to situations where religions are hijacked in support of violence.

As retreat leader with a focus on retreats on nonviolence and women's spirituality, I encounter the depth of internalized oppression experienced by women in the Roman Catholic Church. Prayer and ritual based in the example and teaching of Jesus are empowering and transform the silence and paralysis of oppressed people.

All of these experiences have confirmed and deepened my own commitment to the nonviolence of Jesus.

What are the strengths and opportunities created by active nonviolence in the face of violence and war?

They are legion: grace, empowerment, a life of meaning, hope, solidarity—even global solidarity, a sense of community where each member participates in some way. Because nonviolence is based on the inherent sacredness, dignity and potential of each human being, it enables all members to find and respect their own experience and their own voice as well as to listen to and respect the voice and experience of others.

Nonviolence creates a path beyond the sexism, racism and clericalism in our church—all part of a system of oppression which has plagued our church since Constantine.

Nonviolence creates space that allows grace to work because it breaks the habitual and immediate reaction of violence when a threat is perceived. Nonviolence unleashes creativity and opens possibilities that were not evident through the lens of the violence cycle. Active nonviolence is contagious and spreads to our stance in all of creation: believing in the inherent dignity and sacredness of all creation.

Where and how do you feel we need to invest energy in moving towards a deeper and wider practice of nonviolence within the Catholic community?

The teaching, reflection and preaching on gospel nonviolence is needed at all levels, including seminaries. In order to reach the general Catholic population as well as spiritual seekers everywhere, a spirituality of nonviolence is foundational. Sharing the stories of the saints, the nonviolent elders and mentors and guides in our long history will capture the imagination of people of all ages. Stories of the nonviolent movements around the globe need to be told and shared. Their stories connect with ours and draw out our own experiences where fear and hatred were overcome by compassion and love.

Along with sharing the stories, rituals and liturgies draw people into prayer experiences that help them move beyond fear to grow in compassion. Often our liturgies and hymns focus on our individual sinfulness and personal salvation. Liturgical experiences that move us to nonviolence need to be developed, fostered and spread. Retreats can help individuals and communities address and heal from violence in all forms and explore gospel nonviolence. These also need to be developed and fostered.

Popular pieties have supported nonviolent movements globally: rosary marches, processions, fasts, anointing and blessing of protestors, washing the feet of refugees and prisoners, even Eucharistic liturgies in places of violence. Our Lady of Guadalupe led every United Farm Worker march. The nonviolent revolution in the Philippines was especially strong with visible Catholic symbols.

It is also important to examine and reject our church's pact with violence. Horrible violence has been blessed and sometimes enabled by the ignorance, greed and hatred with us all and in the church institution. Catholic chaplains, employed by the military, are one example; ROTC on Catholic campuses another. A sharp turn from the just war theory and from support of war and violence is needed.

Nonviolence is learned primarily by practice. Nonviolence training offered at the parish level or regions could be a basic foundation for other action. Catholic participation in nonviolent campaigns and even in an interfaith peace force would counter the long history of visible participation in war and violence.

The global climate crisis creates an opportunity for the global church to act nonviolently together that could unleash amazing creativity. Imagine a coordinated and sustained campaign with the universal Catholic church praying and acting together nonviolently to protect the planet. It would embed nonviolence in the Catholic psyche at a deep level.