

**A “Franciscan” kairos moment:
Diaconal communities as catalysts of nonviolent transformation
By Deacon Nate Bacon**

Personal background

The beginnings of my conversion to the poor, and my convictions regarding nonviolence, took place in the late 80s in the Mission District of San Francisco, California where I worked at a homeless shelter for Central American refugees. Night after night I would hear heart-wrenching stories of death squads, terror, torture, disappearances, massacres, and the struggle for survival. Those conversations turned my theology and politics upside-down, especially as I learned how the US financed such atrocities in the name of keeping the world safe for democracy. These fresh convictions led me to dedicate my life to service with InnerChange, an ecumenical missionary order among the marginalized. InnerChange began all Evangelical, including me, until I muddied the waters by joining the Catholic Church. Thankfully I was not kicked out, and thus we have lived out a beautiful parable of unity ever since.

In 1992, my wife Jenny and I began ministering among Central American gang-members who were the children of uprooted refugees. A combination of rootlessness, marginalization, and child abuse drove these young people to the streets: violence begetting violence. Along with a committed community of missionaries and volunteers, we became family for many of the homies, and were deeply transformed by those relationships.

Over time, as we accompanied these young people in all aspects of their lives, the structural injustices that chained them to the streets became increasingly frustrating. An epiphany came when our parish joined the faith-based community organizing network “PICO”. Suddenly gang-members discovered a different kind of power, a pathway rooted in love (rather than violence), and respect that came from their commitment to the community. As a result of their leadership, local parks were transformed, sports programs were initiated for at-risk youth, and small schools were established.

A pinnacle moment came at a public action we called “Avenues of Hope”. In front of 1300 people and 7 television crews, a gang-member friend, named Javier, delivered a riveting testimony to the Mayor of San Francisco, state senators, and other officials, including the Speaker of the House of Representatives (3rd in rank in our national government). He concluded his testimony by looking every politician in the eye, and saying, “We need YOU to help us stop the bullets”. How beautiful to literally see “the poor raised up from the ash heap and seated among the princes of the people”! As a result, 5 million dollars of city money was invested in jobs for young people coming out of jail. This reduced recidivism by an incredible 75%. Love and organizing overcame violence.

The Guatemalan Context

Guatemala has been our home for the past 7 years: a fabulously beautiful and culturally diverse country where violence has sadly become part of the landscape. A US sponsored coup in 1954 led to a 36-year civil war leaving 200,000 dead, and over 400 villages decimated. Even

after the 1996 peace accords, violence continues in the streets, and Guatemala consistently makes the top ten list for homicides. In part, this stems from gang members (deported from the US) who found few options for survival, and fertile ground for initiating gangs.

Crime is certainly not limited to the streets. In April 2015, a major financial scandal was exposed in Guatemala involving the highest levels of government. Eight young people called for a demonstration on social media, hoping to attract 100 disgruntled citizens. I was meeting that day with a group of representatives of “JPIC” (Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation) of the Franciscan Family from all over Central America. The invitation came to us in the morning, and we decided to join in the protest. In the end, *15,000 people* showed up from all walks of life, sick and tired of endless government corruption. The visibility of the Franciscan habits in our small group, and the large white flags we bore, brought jubilant chants and tears of gratitude for the public and recognizable presence of the Church. It was deeply moving. Even the newspapers remarked that: “The most emotional moment was when a group of Franciscans joined in the demonstration.”

It was the beginning of a sustained nonviolent protest over the course of several months, which would ultimately result in the unprecedented resignation, arrest and jailing of both Vice president and President, and a radical upset in the general elections. A kairos moment, in which the presence of Franciscans has been an ongoing critical factor. A Guatemalan spring?

The “Francis Factor”

“The magisterium of symbols” is a powerful influence in the mind of the Church and the world. The fact that Cardinal Bergoglio not only chose the name Francis, but has lived out Franciscan values, has captivated the imagination of the masses. This totally unexpected “Pope Francis factor” is changing the face of the Church, lending voice to previously muted causes such as ecology and the care of “our common home”. Indeed, the title and content of “Laudato Si” evoke not only the memory, but the very spirit of the poverello of Assisi.

St. Francis, like no other saint in history, exhibits a rare combination of extravagant love for the poor, and all of creation. He is also a hero of nonviolence. The stories of the wolf of Gubbio, and the encounter with the Sultan demonstrate his ability to humanize the “enemy” and transform situations of conflict into situations of hope. The happy spiritual convergence of the 13th century saint and the Pope who bears his name may well be indicators of what many are calling a “Franciscan era”. If multi-form violence (particularly against the poor and the environment) threatens our very existence, then the call to Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation, so splendidly manifest in the life of St. Francis, invites us to contemplate and imitate this living symbol of transformative solidarity.

Francis the Deacon

St. Francis was a Deacon who lived the life of connection with the poor to which deacons are called. The connective tissue in repairing the universe (tikkun olam) is fashioned through mutually transformative relationships between the non-marginalized and marginalized, such as St. Francis’ iconic embrace of the leper.

The rending of our social fabric today is akin to a leprous disconnect of our common nervous system, in which the “globalization of indifference” is proliferated by the dividing walls we construct, rooted in rivalry, racism, and fear. The diaconal call is to a re-stitching of that fabric through direct “encounter” and true friendship with the excluded, in keeping with the example of Jesus and St. Francis, and the call of Pope Francis to the peripheries.

Prophetic Diaconal communities

Those communities of women and men, lay, religious, and clergy, whose charism directs them to such encounters could be considered “diaconal” communities. These can and should play an important lead role in being the “ears, eyes, and heart” of the marginalized to the Church and the international community. This bridge role is crucial in helping to break down the ‘dividing walls of hostility’ and forge a new and creative peace through active nonviolence. This role is not limited to traditional religious congregations, and in fact is well served by faith-based community organizing efforts in which a uniting community can recognize its own dignity and power and speak prophetically to the powers that be.

Just an hour from Guatemala City, a local community, led by women and indigenous peoples, has persevered for four years in blocking the entrance to a gold mine, calling themselves the “Peaceful Resistance Movement of La Puya”. Franciscans and other religious congregations have befriended and accompanied them from the outset, and Pax Christi helped train the leaders in nonviolence. Despite multiple attempts to violently uproot this movement, they will not be moved. They stand as a diaconal, prophetic witness to the values of justice and life, as opposed to the forces of greed and death. Such communities inspire and point the way for others.

Catalyzing transformation

How could the son of a wealthy 13th century merchant, who gathers rocks and fraternizes with outcasts gain a following of over 5,000 in just a few years? How does a woman who cares for dying ‘untouchables’ on the streets of Calcutta win a Nobel Peace Prize? Why do Guatemalans shed tears of gratitude when Franciscans join a political protest? Or when Franciscans accompany a nonviolent protest at the entrance of a gold mine?

Against the darkness of our times, the Light of Christ shines brightly in these examples. They operate at a symbolic and catalytic level far beyond their proportions. They invite us to foster and multiply diaconal communities that bear the Franciscan spirit, and to link them more closely together in the bonds of fraternal love. For a fragmented humanity and a groaning creation they serve as sign and instrument of radical reconciliation and transfiguration. A kairos moment indeed!