

Nonviolence and Just Peace Conference
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Reflection Paper

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1. Context of war and genocide encouraging me to seek nonviolent responses

By 1983 the countries of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam had endured decades of war. The Vietnamese War had ended in 1975 with the withdrawal of American troops but hostilities continued between Vietnam and the genocidal *Khmer Rouge* regime in Cambodia. In 1979 the Vietnamese army drove the *Khmer Rouge* from Cambodia and occupied the country. Into this turmoil thirteen Catholic development agencies from Europe and North America under the auspices of *CIDSE* (Cooperation for Development and Solidarity) inserted themselves by creating the *Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam (CLV) Program*. I served as director of this unique program. A shared prophetic vision, inspired by Vatican II, was a defining feature at the start of the CLV Program.

I vividly remember on June 15th 1996 the staff of our Field Office in Phnom Penh organized a solidarity event in front of the Buddhist temple in Kampot. I was deeply moved by the large number of Buddhist monks waving flags with the words 'dhamma' (peace) and 'yietra' (non-violence) and banners that read: "*The suffering of Cambodia has been deep. From this suffering comes great compassion*" and "*Great compassion makes a peaceful heart. A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person*". Such religious partnership not only supported the struggles of the poor, it also challenging the local, national and international authorities! I grasped that our efforts and actions could be part of a common worldwide strategy to unite the peoples of this region with our Western societies and in doing so learn to strategize beyond our cultural and religious differences and become more deeply united.

Inter-religious dialogue – deepened through intra-religious dialogue - i.e. endeavoring to join the deep personal experience of our religious partners - was and remains a challenging endeavor to seek nonviolent responses.

2. Strengths and opportunities created by active nonviolence

With caution I would say that peacemaking requires a plunge into the depths of life – where 'oneness' reigns. I have experienced vividly that if we penetrate deep peace, nothing fundamentally separates one human being from another, or any human being from other living creatures. *Oneness* is the driving force of compassion, reconciliation and healing. Contemplation and action are One. The experience of the One is also what inspires and unites many religions and ancestral traditions. I learned that worldwide interreligious cooperation for peace is possible on this deep ground.

However, for me personally the primary source of our spirituality for nonviolence is Jesus Christ and the multitude of people inspired by Him. Active nonviolence is

the 'weapon' of the powerless and the little ones. The most important contribution here is mental force. The contribution of everybody, women, men, old and young people, sick and healthy is required. Every one of them can help in his or her own way. Here great imagination is highly needed in order to find accurate initiatives in the constant changing situation, because active nonviolence aims at the liberation of the oppressed and the oppressor, the weak and the powerful.

3. Energy needed towards deeper and wider practice of nonviolence within the Catholic community

A civilisation of peace and nonviolence cannot come out of the blue. The education and the formation of young and old, in parishes and local groups, is a permanent task. When educating young or adult people, practical programs are needed in the field of solidarity and the construction of peace. Also media, agriculture, industry, economy, finance, health-care, environment-care must be part of constructive programs. Of course, we cannot do everything. Each local group or community chooses few constructive initiatives that are visible and can be achieved.

Furthermore, we need a well-articulated ethical-theological reflection on two prominent violence related issues : [1] the coming-up of climate civil wars, i.e. are 'resource wars' our future and how do we react in the light of the encyclical *Laudato Si'*; and [2] what is an effective common interreligious vision regarding 'just war'? 'Just war'-thinking is in evolution and must progress from a mere theory towards a methodology of prudent pacifism, I believe.

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