

An Overview of Gospel Nonviolence in the Christian Tradition

by Fr. John Dear and Ken Butigan

This paper profiles the lineage of Gospel nonviolence from the early Church to today as a resource as we gather to pray and reflect on how we might recover, proclaim, and embody the centrality of Jesus' nonviolence for the healing of the church and the world. In these pages we are reminded that Jesus' nonviolence was once normative for the Church and for all Christians, and that, in our turbulent time of global violence, searing injustice, and catastrophic climate change, we are being invited and challenged to again restore it definitively to the heart of the Church and its mission.

But first, let us say a word about “nonviolence.” This term is not found in the Bible. The word “nonviolence,” while it has a long history in other traditions, 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' 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 clearer way to understand Jesus' vision than even “love” and “peace” by themselves, because we can use these terms but at the same time support violence and war. This is more difficult with nonviolence. The word “nonviolence” illuminates the heart of the Gospel—the proclamation of the Reign of God, a new nonviolent order rooted in God's unconditional love.

The Early Church of Nonviolence

The early church resolutely placed the nonviolence of Jesus at the center of the Church and of individual discipleship. It fully understood that to be a disciple of Jesus meant to be comprehensively nonviolent. The Christian community in Jerusalem refused to participate in the violent insurrection against the Romans (66-70 C.E.) and for 300 years the church resisted service in the Roman military. Christians refused to worship Caesar, who claimed to be God, or to kill for Caesar. The Church prepared its members to face the consequences for following the nonviolent Jesus: persecution and martyrdom. It nourished a culture of spiritually-grounded nonviolence through the corporal works of mercy, through the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation, and through resistance to the culture of violence.

Not a single Christian writing exists before the early fourth century supporting Christian participation in warfare. Only eight epitaphs of Christian soldiers have been found from the first three centuries. We know there were a few because Tertullian, in 197, rebuked Christians who were in the army. Many, he said, in turn converted to the path of the nonviolent Jesus and quit the military. Tertullian said that Jesus' command to love one's enemies was the "principal precept" of Christianity. The pagan author Celsus in 170 condemned Christianity on the grounds that if everyone became Christian, there would be no army. Nonviolence was the hallmark of the early Church.

The witnesses of well-known Christian martyrs were often recorded and recited at community Eucharists as a way to encourage one another in their Gospel nonviolence. Justin Martyr wrote, "We who were filled with war and mutual slaughter and all wickedness have each and all throughout the earth changed our instruments of war, our swords into plowshares and our spears into farm tools, and cultivate piety, justice, love of humankind, faith and the hope, which we have from the Father through the Crucified One." He was killed in 165. Many other saints and writers condemned Christian participation in killing, such as Tatian, Athenagoras, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Minucius, Felix, and Lactantius.

Perhaps the most celebrated Christian in the first one thousand years of the Church was St. Maximilian. In 295, this twenty-one-year-old son of a Roman veteran refused conscription into the Roman army and was beheaded. At his trial he said, "I cannot serve. I cannot do evil. I will not be a soldier of this world. I am a soldier of Christ." His testimony was read as part of the mass for centuries after his death.

This steadfast conviction and faithfulness, in many cases embodied to the point of death, was founded in a clear grasp of Jesus's nonviolence. Not only did it understand his nonviolence, it sought to emulate it in its many dimensions, as the following brief summary illuminates.

With courage and fidelity the early Church sought to follow the Nonviolent Jesus who was the beloved son of God and who proclaimed, in the Sermon on the Mount, that all peacemakers are sons and daughters of God; who in the desert rejected the temptation of violence and violent power, including the temptation to become a violent messiah; who proclaimed and actualized the nonviolent Reign of God by healing the sick and disabled, by expelling the demons of violence, by feeding the hungry and by liberating the oppressed; who defied Sabbath laws when they oppressed human beings (Mark 3: 1-6) and nonviolently challenging lethal patriarchy (John 8: 1-

11); and who called his followers to love their enemies, to forgive, to be compassionate, and to offer no violent resistance to one who does evil.

The early Church emulated the Nonviolent Jesus, who sent the twelve apostles and the 72 disciples on a mission of peace and nonviolence into a culture of violence, “as lambs sent among wolves”: who himself went on a mission of peace and nonviolence by going to Jerusalem, not as a military general but as a new king of nonviolence, “a just savior is he, meek, and riding on an ass...He shall banish the war chariot from Ephraim, and the war horse from Jerusalem...and he shall proclaim peace to the nations” (Zechariah 9:9-10); and who nonviolently challenged the Temple system that threatened the economic and political privilege of the religious authorities, who then took steps to put him to death.

The early church strove to follow in the footsteps of the nonviolent Jesus who, the night before his death, initiated a new covenant of nonviolence by taking the bread and the cup and saying, “My body broken for you, my blood shed for you” and thus swept away the old covenant of justified and sacred violence that demands that we “break the bodies of others; shed the blood of others”; who told Peter to put down his sword in the Garden of Gethsemani; who underwent arrest, trial, condemnation, torture and execution with perfect nonviolence; who, standing before Pilate, contrasted the violent kingdom of this world with the nonviolent Kingdom of God that practices nonviolence; who broke the chains of death and violence when he rose from the dead; who displayed, not revenge or retaliation, but nonviolence when he appeared to his disciples; and who sent his disciples to fulfill his mission of building peace and nonviolence.

The early Church, in its spiritual formation, evangelization, ecclesial self-understanding, sacramental life, and prophetic witness sought to faithfully live these facets of the life and ministry of the Nonviolent Jesus. (For a more comprehensive treatment of Jesus’ nonviolence, see Terrence Rynne’s resource paper, “An Overview of Contemporary Scriptural Exegesis and Ethics on Jesus’ Nonviolence.”)

Constantine’s Rejection of Jesus’ Nonviolence—and the Turn Toward Christian Killing and Justified Warfare

The Christian community’s programmatic, disciplined and theological nonviolence began to be compromised after Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 C.E. He baptized his troops and established Christianity as the official religion of the Empire. Masses of people flocked into the church, which until then had been a small, grassroots network of underground communities of nonviolence. Constantine announced that

Christians could now serve in the Roman military and kill Rome's enemies. In doing so, he dispensed with the Sermon on the Mount and the commandment to love one's enemies, and turned to the pagan Cicero to justify Christian violence, sowing the seeds for the so-called "Just War theory." By the early fifth century, only Christians could serve in the Roman army. St. Augustine then wrote that sometimes the best way to love one's enemies is to kill them. Christians began killing others in direct violation of Jesus' teachings and life, and this killing by Christians continues today.

Accommodation with the empire and its violence and wars had a dramatic impact on the church, its theology and the world. Christians began to justify their participation in warfare, and eventually many forms of violence. In a few centuries, Christians were waging holy wars, and eventually massive Crusades led by cardinals and priests which killed hundreds of thousands of people. Christian men burned women at the stake; systematically persecuted Jews; kept millions of people as slaves; blessed conquest; fought in war; ran concentration camps; and built and used nuclear weapons. Today, Christians around the world threaten and wage war against one another.

The Lineage of Gospel Nonviolence Since Constantine

In spite of this history, thousands of faithful Christians over the centuries have strived to follow the path of Gospel nonviolence. They have been a remnant Church, a small movement within the imperial, war-making church. Historians have begun to study and trace this lineage of nonviolence. (The single best study of this tradition is *The Catholic Peace Tradition* by Ronald Musto (Orbis Books, USA, 1986).)

In the centuries after Constantine, pockets of Christian men and women retreated to the deserts to keep the nonviolence of Jesus alive. Later, monasticism developed with monastic communities created for worship and study, service to the local community and the practice of peace and hospitality. (They were by and large nonviolent, though, as they grew, many of them also became involved in warfare and killing.)

Other persons and movements have pursued the path of Gospel nonviolence. Some examples--drawn from Hildegard and Jean Goss-Mayr, "The Gospel and the Struggle for Justice and Peace: Training Seminar," International Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1990--include:

- Saint Martin of Tours (316-397) was an officer in the Roman army before his conversion to Christianity. After his conversion he left the military, at great risk to himself, to place himself at the service of the poorest and to spread the gospel.

- Pope Leo the Great saved the city of Rome in the fifth century by nonviolent dialogue when Attila the Hun invaded Europe.
- Saint Severin, also in the fifth century, mediated between the Germanic tribes who were threatening populations of fortified cities. He successfully asked the inhabitants to enter into dialogue with the enemy, and thus war and destruction were avoided.
- The “Truce of God,” which was an attempt by the Church during the Middle Ages to limit wars.

In the thirteenth century Francis of Assisi was an icon of Gospel nonviolence. He reclaimed the nonviolence of Jesus, pointed Christians back to the Gospel, and almost single-handedly reimagined the Church. As a youth fighting in his local military, he was imprisoned, converted to the nonviolence of Jesus, and quit the military. He formed a community of practitioners of Gospel nonviolence who refused to take up arms. They lived in poverty, served the poor, and greeted everyone with the phrase “Pace e Bene” (“Peace and Goodness!”), often being attacked as a result. But within a few years, their movement began to spread. Thousands joined. At the news of the latest crusade, Francis took bold new action. He crossed contested territory and met with the Sultan Malik al-Kamil, the leader of the enemy, to make peace. Along with Clare of Assisi and her community, Francis and his early community offered a new Christian witness of nonviolence that historians now believe helped end feudal violence. He forbade any follower to own a weapon, support war, or kill others. St. Francis is widely regarded as the greatest, most beloved saint in history but he was first of all a practitioner of the nonviolence of Jesus.

In the centuries after Francis, religious orders and communities focusing on the works of mercy and charity proliferated. Moreover, after the Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformation, small “Peace Churches” blossomed which explicitly espoused the nonviolence of Jesus, including the Anabaptists, Brethren, Mennonites and the Society of Friends. These peace churches advocated nonviolent change and led to the Abolitionists and the eventual global movement to abolish slavery. Their leaders were predominantly Christian who sought to practice the nonviolence of Jesus. Their movements and writings helped inspired new movements, such as the Suffragists, anti-war movements, and the labor movements.

A New Awakening to Gospel Nonviolence in the Twentieth Century

At the beginning of World War I the International Fellowship of Reconciliation was established. As Hildegard Goss-Mayr writes, “It was the first organized and ecumenical expression of Christians who, in following Jesus Christ, are not only saying ‘no’ to the use of violence as a means of conquering injustices and

resolving conflicts, but at the same time are rediscovering the creative force of the nonviolence of God. It is found in every continent today, promoting active nonviolence in the heart of the churches when faced with injustices in the world.”

During World War II, Franz Jägerstätter of St. Radegund, Austria was a faithful witness for nonviolence. A Catholic, Jägerstätter was ordered to join the Nazi military in 1943 but refused on the grounds that this would disobey Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. He was arrested, brought to Berlin, tried and beheaded. After the war his action and writings became known and have influenced thousands of people around the world; many who became involved in grassroots movements for peace have cited his witness as a motivation. Jägerstätter was recently beatified by the Catholic Church.

In the United States, Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker movement, a network of houses of hospitality where Catholics welcomed the poor and the homeless to live with them, and where they also publicly denounce and resist war in obedience to the nonviolent Jesus. Day engaged many times in nonviolent civil disobedience for peace and justice.

Thomas Merton, the celebrated Trappist monk and author, influenced millions of people through his writings that included teachings on nonviolence and called for the abolition of war and nuclear weapons.

The example of Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador inspired a new generation of Catholic peacemakers. He was assassinated on March 24, 1980, the day after he preached that Christians were forbidden to kill and that members of the military and death squads should disobey orders to kill, quit their positions and stop the repression in his country.

With the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States during World War II, the threat of global nuclear annihilation became a possibility. With the development of grassroots movements and the widespread legacy of Gandhi, millions of people began to awaken to the teachings and methodologies of nonviolence, helping to build a global movement that succeeded in making possible arms control agreements, the 1962 Partial Test Ban Treaty, and the 1993 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty signed by 183 nations that ended most nuclear testing worldwide.

Just as the global anti-nuclear movement has applied nonviolence to the struggle for a world without weapons of mass destruction, thousands of other movements have been proliferating for more democratic

societies, human rights, economic justice, and environmental sustainability over the past half-century using the power and methods of nonviolence for effective change.

The Church, Catholic leadership and Catholic laity have been involved in many of these and other movements for nonviolent change, including in the U.S. Civil Rights movement the Solidarity movement in Poland, in the peace communities in Colombia, and in the struggles for justice and social change in South Africa, Liberia, East Timor, and many other contexts.

In addition, Catholics and Christians have played pivotal roles in developing innovative approaches to addressing violence, injustice, human rights violations, and war, including restorative justice (Victim Offender Reconciliation Program; Peace Circles); forgiveness and reconciliation training; third-party intervention and unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment (Witness for Peace, Christian Peacemaker Teams, Nonviolent Peaceforce, Operation Dove); nonviolent communication; conflict transformation programming; trauma healing; antiracism training; innumerable initiatives for interfaith dialogue; and a dramatic increase in academic degree programs in peace studies and research on the core values of nonviolent change, including forgiveness, creativity, love, compassion and empathy as well as nonviolent civil resistance, movement-building, and the dynamics and infrastructure for a culture of peace and nonviolence.

The Church and the Move to Nonviolence

The modern foundations of the Roman Catholic Church's turn toward peacemaking and nonviolence began with Saint John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris* that questioned all warfare and opened the door to a church of nonviolence. During the Second Vatican Council, the Church issued an absolute condemnation of weapons of mass destruction and an affirmation that every government should recognize the right of conscientious objection. In its documents and succeeding meetings, the Catholic Church articulated a central commitment to peacemaking rooted in justice that addresses the causes of war.

In 1983, the US Catholic Bishops pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace*, "proposed a theology of peace, explored the scriptural basis of peacemaking, imagined Jesus as a peacemaker and elevated nonviolence as a real Christian option."

Ten years later, the US Catholic Bishops issued a letter entitled *The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace* in which they wrote: "Although nonviolence has often been regarded as simply a personal option or

vocation, recent history suggests that in some circumstances it can be an effective public undertaking as well. Dramatic political transitions in places as diverse as the Philippines and Eastern Europe demonstrate the power of nonviolent action, even against dictatorial and totalitarian regimes... These nonviolent revolutions challenge us to find ways to take into full account the power of organized, active nonviolence.” (US Bishops' Conference. *The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace* [Washington, DC, 1993], 10-11.)

Building on the growing recovery of Jesus' nonviolence, recent popes have made statements that point toward a comprehensive embrace of Gospel nonviolence. Pope John Paul II, addressing young people in Lesotho on September 19, 1988, said, “To choose the means of nonviolence is to make a courageous choice in love, a choice which embraces active defense of human rights and a strong commitment to justice and harmonious development.” Pope Benedict XVI, on February 18, 2007, stated, “Nonviolence, for Christians, is not mere tactical behavior but a person's way of being, the attitude of one who is convinced of God's love and power, who is not afraid to confront evil with the weapons of love and truth alone. Loving the enemy is the nucleus of the “Christian revolution.” And Pope Francis I said on August 18, 2013, “The true strength of the Christian is the power of truth and love, which leads to the renunciation of all violence. Faith and violence are incompatible.”

The Historic Opportunity to Reclaim the Nonviolence of Jesus and Return the Church to Gospel Nonviolence

Jesus calls us to nonviolence. Though the Church has often betrayed this central Gospel mandate, it can definitively recover its calling and become a Nonviolent Church. By doing so it would harvest and accelerate the 2,000-year tradition of nonviolence for the transformation of the Church and the world.

What might come of such a clear stance?

We can perhaps glimpse this by reflecting on an example where the Church boldly spread the vision and teaching of Gospel nonviolence. There are many cases, but we can do no better than the example of the Church in the Philippines in the 1980s that played a critical role in unleashing nonviolent people power to end a dictatorship.

Under the U.S.-backed regime of Ferdinand Marcos there was much corruption, poverty, widespread human rights violations, and a lack of democracy. Systematic violence by the government was aimed at destroying the opposition, including community-based organizations and movements working for change. There was little hope for social transformation. There was a growing armed struggle led by a group called The New

People's Army. At the same time, however, the Catholic Church in this predominantly Catholic country was casting about for an alternative. Was there an option to passivity on the one hand and violence on the other?

Many people were not too sure. A bishop was quoted at the time as saying, "I used to believe in nonviolence, but Marcos is too cruel; only a bloody revolution will work against him." When he was asked how long such a revolution would take, he said, "Ten years." The 1983 assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino seemed only to confirm the bishop's gloomy assessment.

It was then that the church's leader in the Philippines, Cardinal Jaime Sin, decided to see if an alternative was possible. He put the full weight of the church behind an exploration of Gospel nonviolence and how it could be applied to change the situation in his country. As part of this effort, he took part in a three-day nonviolence training in Manila led by Hildegard and Jean Goss-Mayr of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and sponsored by the Little Sisters of Jesus. It was a life changing event that led to organizing "active nonviolence" trainings for scores of Catholic and Protestant bishops and hundreds of other clergy, women religious and laity. A Philippine chapter of the Fellowship of Reconciliation was established, which organized 40 nonviolence trainings in 30 provinces.

These workshops eventually played a key role in the nationwide mobilization to stop the dictator from stealing the 1986 national election. Cardinal Sin joined with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines in formally calling on the country to engage in "active resistance" and "a nonviolent struggle for justice." They appealed to Filipinos of all religions to follow the teachings of Jesus in the gospel and use peaceful means to address the crisis. Nonviolence trainings — and nonviolent inventiveness on the spot — contributed to the emergence of a widespread nonviolent force, both within the civilian population and key sectors of the military that refused orders rather than attack unarmed civilians organized in disciplined human barricades. Nonviolent activists found themselves in the surprising position of protecting soldiers who defected. Within four days, Ferdinand Marcos boarded a plane bound for Hawaii.

In Manila, over one million unarmed human beings had joined the self-described People Power movement and demonstrated how nonviolent people power can trump tanks and circling bombers. There were many factors to its success, but two of those included a call from the Church to take nonviolent action, and the

role of the Church in organizing nonviolence training, especially for those who helped organize and coordinate the resistance.

This is a highly visible example of the power of Gospel nonviolence and the role that the Church can play in spreading it. The ministry of sharing the Good News of Gospel nonviolence is not limited to such dramatic situations. Jesus' nonviolence is needed in every dimension and context in our lives and our world. Nonetheless, this particular case illustrates the difference such action can make.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi, who read the Sermon on the Mount every day for forty years, concluded that Jesus was the greatest person of nonviolence in history, and that everyone who follows him is called to be a person of nonviolence. Though the Church has supported and engaged in violence for the past seventeen hundred years, many saints and martyrs have affirmed, like Gandhi, that Gospel Nonviolence is the way of Jesus and have kept it alive through the centuries. Rooted in this tradition, the Church in this *kairos* moment—this time of momentous decision—is called to reject violence and justifications for war; to adhere faithfully to the nonviolence of Jesus; and to collaborate with people everywhere to create a thriving culture of nonviolence, justice, and peace.

In this spirit, a bold, new recovery of Jesus' nonviolence by the global Church will have an incalculably powerful impact. An encyclical or major Church document on Nonviolence and Just Peace—confessing our violence as a Church but also harvesting, building on and deepening the lineage of Gospel nonviolence theologically, spiritually, and pastorally—would invite people everywhere to tap the power each of us has to collaborate in rejecting violence and in fostering a more just, peaceful and sustainable world.

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