

What if We Win? Nonviolence and the Challenge of Governance
Gerald W. Schlabach, University of St. Thomas (Minnesota, USA)
for Pax Christi International / PCJP conference, April 2016

And what if you win? As I have observed or participated in various social movements over four decades – reformist and revolutionary, violent and nonviolent, Christian and secular – neglect for this question has often been the great lacuna that has tripped them up. Working from the margins and struggling against hopelessness, they often have reason to be cynical about established institutions. For those absorbed in the urgent tasks of resisting unjust powers that be, the task of specifying how they would actually exercise power in order to enact the changes they are calling for often feels like more of a luxury than it is. An oppositional or “prophetic” stance may become so much a part of their identity that it serves as the only psychological home in which they feel comfortable, and the “compromises” they might have to make in order to actually run things all feel like selling out.

So what if our Pax Christi gathering actually wins? In other words, what if we Catholic peace activists actually manage to so alter the theological and conceptual framework by which the magisterium speaks to questions of war, violence, egregious abuse of human rights, social justice and political change that the language and the very category of “just war” is no longer operative in Catholic social teaching? What then? Thanks to the development of Gandhian nonviolence in the 20th century, peace activists rightly point to far more victories overthrowing tyranny than either standard history books admit or popular imagination recognizes. But notice: To “overthrow tyranny” is merely a double negative. While a double negative may equal a positive in pure mathematics, in social affairs a nonviolent revolution overthrowing Marcos in the Philippines or even the Soviet empire in 1989 does not yet offer a positive model of nonviolent governance. We cannot expect to replace the just war tradition in the Roman Catholic Church unless and until we unreservedly embrace the challenge of governing on “the day after.”

Having been formed as a Mennonite in one of the so-called historic peace churches (HPCs), entered into full communion with the Catholic Church in 2004, and been a leader in Mennonite-Catholic ecumenical dialogue, I sometimes hear my fellow Catholic pacifists expressing a kind of peace-church envy. But “beware what you ask for – you might get it.” The experience of HPCs is instructive, particularly as they have moved from more sectarian and apolitical social postures to an engaged social ethnic embracing *active* nonviolence. The centuries-long pattern of church alliances with princes, kings and nation-states that peace-church thinkers term “Constantinianism” is suspect if not anathema to many of them. Historically and even today – perhaps *especially* among peace-and-justice activists – HPC members who work within the state have sometimes been suspect. Yet the more that social-justice advocacy succeeds, the more it invites a counter-invitation to participate first in policymaking and then in governance. And in every human community I know, governing requires some kind of enforcement, coercion, policing, even if it is nonlethal policing. One option for avoiding the dilemma has been principled anarchism, which seems to offer a way to impact the larger society perpetually from the margins, through perpetual prophetic critique and small-scale local alternative patterns of life. But this only defers rather than avoids the challenge. For one must either abandon all hope that anyone else will actually listen or else must anticipate the question, “So will you help us do what you’ve been calling us to do?”

Not all Christian pacifists have avoided this challenge. For about five years in the early 2000s I served on an advisory committee on peace issues for the international program of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), the relief, development and peacebuilding collaborative arm of various Mennonite churches. During that time the committee commissioned a three-year special project. Prompting it in part was the insecurity many felt following the events of September 11, 2001. But the more important prompts were questions that MCC workers and partners around the world had been facing for years in conflict zones and failed states where “order” and “institutionality” and “security” were not necessarily code words for oppressive regimes. Rather, they named dreams of functioning civil society or even *shalom*. The goal, then, was to articulate within the framework of Mennonite thought and pacifist ethics a positive theology of order and governance that might even take back that word “security” from militarists. The resulting

book that I co-edited with Duane Friesen, *At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security and the Wisdom of the Cross* (Herald Press, 2005) would offer many leads and lessons for Catholic peace activists.

Admittedly, what was most controversial about the project among Mennonites was its willingness to consider (even if not yet endorse) a concept I had independently begun to interject into ecumenical conversations between Mennonites and Catholics – that of “just policing.” (See Schlabach et al., *Just Policing, Not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence* [Liturgical Press, 2007], or a shorter introduction with the same main title in *America* magazine [July 7-14, 2003]). Initially as a resource for the historic international dialogue between Mennonite World Conference and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Church Unity from 1998-2003, I had sought to narrow the gap between just-war and pacifist traditions by arguing that “If the best intentions of the just war theorists were operational, they could only allow for just policing, not warfare at all. If Christian pacifists can in any way support, participate, or at least not object to operations with recourse to limited but potentially lethal force, that will only be true for just policing. Just policing -- and *just* just policing.” My goal on the Mennonite side was not to convince them to abandon their historic pacifism, but to press them and other pacifists to fill a major gap in their theory and practice: either define the very limited circumstances in which violence might be justified in demilitarized policing, or better yet, recover and design strategic models for nonlethal and nonviolent policing.

None of this need be so controversial among Catholics, however – even among Catholic pacifists. However much we ought to repent of all the dubious ways in which Catholics from prelate to pew have misaligned their allegiances to emperors, princes and nation-states down through the centuries, we need not have the same allergy toward governance that some HPCs have had. As Pope Francis has affirmed on various occasions, “Politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good.”

In any case, much of the work that our gathering seeks to do and call for has already been done, and in fact gained a high level of endorsement from magisterial authority. The documents to which I refer here deserve far more attention from Catholic social activists and ethicists than they have received. Vetted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the final report of that international dialogue between Mennonites and Catholics in 1998-2003, entitled *Called Together to be Peacemakers*, articulates a shared theological ground concerning peace, justice, and nonviolence that is astoundingly deep and solid. Given that the consensus portions of ecumenical statements are part of the Church’s authoritative teaching, nowhere else has the magisterium so definitively endorsed active nonviolence as normative, to my knowledge. But in an equally remarkable joint statement in 2007 to the World Council of Church’s Decade to Overcome Violence, representatives of the two bodies also followed up by recommending the “just policing” framework as a promising way to pursue an even greater ecumenical consensus. (See <http://www.bridgefolk.net/theology/dialogue> for both documents.)

My point is not that “just policing” is the best way to name the new overarching framework for Catholic social teaching concerning peace and war that our gathering seeks to forge. What I do predict is that attending to the challenge that it represents will be key to the reception of any such framework. Historically, just war thinking and “Constantinianism” have been the downside to a Catholic upside – the embrace of governance and protection of the vulnerable as responses to the legitimate concern for security that seeks to allow “everyone under their vine and fig tree to live at peace and unafraid.” Catholic peace activists will only complete the transformation of Catholic peace theology if we embrace rather than dismiss that challenge. Yes, we must highlight the histories of those double-negative social movements that have demonstrated the power of active nonviolence to resist oppression and overthrow tyranny. But we must do more. Whether our hope is to provide alternatives to every form of violence, or render the exceptional use of lethal violence *truly* exceptional, we must develop active nonviolence as a positive strategy not just for resisting nonviolently but for governing nonviolently.