

**An appeal to the Catholic Church  
to re-commit to the centrality of Gospel nonviolence  
Statement + questions for personal and group discussion/reflection**

***Before reading the statement, consider these questions: What does the phrase “Gospel nonviolence” mean for you? Who are your heroes of nonviolence? How do you practice nonviolence? How do you connect the Church and nonviolence? How is Jesus nonviolent and what does that mean for your discipleship and for the Church?***

As Christians committed to a more just and peaceful world we are called to take a clear stand for creative and active nonviolence and against all forms of violence. With this conviction, and in recognition of the Jubilee Year of Mercy declared by Pope Francis, people from many countries gathered at the [Nonviolence and Just Peace Conference](#) sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International on April 11-13, 2016 in Rome.

Our assembly, people of God from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Oceania included lay people, theologians, members of religious congregations, priests, and bishops. Many of us live in communities experiencing violence and oppression. All of us are practitioners of justice and peace. We are grateful for the message to our conference from Pope Francis: “Your thoughts on revitalizing the tools of nonviolence, and of active nonviolence in particular, will be a needed and positive contribution”.

***What can you do in response to Pope Francis’s initial request to revitalize “the tools of nonviolence and active nonviolence in particular”?***

**Looking at our world today**

We live in a time of tremendous suffering, widespread trauma and fear linked to militarization, economic injustice, climate change, and a myriad of other specific forms of violence. In this context of normalized and systemic violence, those of us who stand in the Christian tradition are called to recognize the centrality of active nonviolence to the vision and message of Jesus; to the life and practice of the Catholic Church; and to our long-term vocation of healing and reconciling both people and the planet.

***What does the sentence starting, “In this context of normalized and systemic violence ...” mean for you, your local church, and the global church?***

We rejoice in the rich concrete experiences of people engaged in work for peace around the world, many of whose stories we heard during this conference. Participants shared their experiences of courageous negotiations with armed actors in Uganda and Colombia; working to protect the Article 9, the peace clause in the Japanese Constitution; accompaniment in Palestine; and countrywide peace education in the Philippines. They illuminate the creativity and power of nonviolent practices in many different situations of potential or actual violent conflict. Recent academic research, in fact, has confirmed that nonviolent resistance strategies are twice as effective as violent ones.

***Where do you see “the creativity and power of nonviolent practices in many different situations of potential or actual violent conflict” today?***

The time has come for our Church to be a living witness and to invest far greater human and financial resources in promoting a spirituality and practice of active nonviolence and in forming and training our Catholic communities in effective nonviolent practices. In all of this, Jesus is our inspiration and model.

***Do you agree with the statement: “The time has come for our Church to be a living witness and to invest far greater human and financial resources in promoting a spirituality and practice of active nonviolence and in forming and training our Catholic communities in effective nonviolent practices”? How can you help the Church promote nonviolence? How is “Jesus our inspiration and model” for this?***

### **Jesus and nonviolence**

In his own times, rife with structural violence, Jesus proclaimed a new, nonviolent order rooted in the unconditional love of God. Jesus called his disciples to love their enemies (Matthew 5: 44), which includes respecting the image of God in all persons; to offer no violent resistance to one who does evil (Matthew 5: 39); to become peacemakers; to forgive and repent; and to be abundantly merciful (Matthew 5-7). Jesus embodied nonviolence by actively resisting systemic dehumanization, as when he defied the Sabbath laws to heal the man with the withered hand (Mark 3: 1-6); when he confronted the powerful at the Temple and purified it (John 2: 13-22); when he peacefully but determinedly challenged the men accusing a woman of adultery (John 8: 1-11); when on the night before he died he asked Peter to put down his sword (Matthew 26: 52).

***Go through each of these Biblical references and discuss what they mean to you. What is Jesus’ new nonviolent order? How do we “love our enemies”? How do we “offer no violent resistance to one who does evil”? How are you a peacemaker? What does it mean that Jesus “embodied nonviolence” and “actively resisted evil,” for you and for the global church? What does Jesus’ last commandment “Put down the sword,” mean for us today?***

Neither passive nor weak, Jesus’ nonviolence was the power of love in action. In vision and deed, he is the revelation and embodiment of the Nonviolent God, a truth especially illuminated in the Cross and Resurrection. He calls us to develop the virtue of nonviolent peacemaking.

***How is Jesus “the revelation and embodiment of the nonviolent God, a truth especially illuminated in the cross and resurrection”?***

Clearly, the Word of God, the witness of Jesus, should never be used to justify violence, injustice or war. We confess that the people of God have betrayed this central message of the Gospel many times, participating in wars, persecution, oppression, exploitation, and discrimination.

***How has the church, the people of God, “betrayed this central message of the Gospel many times, participating in wars, persecution, oppression, exploitation, and discrimination”? What can we do to undo this global betrayal of Gospel nonviolence, of the nonviolent Jesus?***

We believe that there is no “just war”. Too often the “just war theory” has been used to endorse rather than prevent or limit war. Suggesting that a “just war” is possible also undermines the moral imperative to develop tools and capacities for nonviolent transformation of conflict.

***Since the fourth century, the church has advocated the so-called “just war theory.” With the development of modern weaponry and the failure of warfare, as well as the rediscovery of the nonviolence of Jesus, what do you think of the statement: “We believe that there is no ‘just war’?” If the Church let go of the just war theory today, what would that mean for the Church and the world?***

***What would it mean to place all our security in God and to apply the methodology of Gospel nonviolence to global situations of international conflict?***

***Discuss the statement that the “just war theory” has been used to endorse rather than prevent or limit war and undermines the moral imperative to develop tools and capacities for nonviolent transformation of conflict.***

We need a new framework that is consistent with Gospel nonviolence. A different path is clearly unfolding in recent Catholic social teaching. Pope John XXIII wrote that war is not a suitable way to restore rights; Pope Paul VI linked peace and development, and told the UN “no more war”; Pope John Paul II said that “war belongs to the tragic past, to history”; Pope Benedict XVI said that “loving the enemy is the nucleus of the Christian revolution”; and Pope Francis said “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”. He has also urged the “abolition of war”.

***The Conference declares that “we need a new framework that is consistent with Gospel nonviolence.” Do you agree? What would that new framework look like?***

We propose that the Catholic Church develop and consider shifting to a Just Peace approach based on Gospel nonviolence. A Just Peace approach offers a vision and an ethic to build peace as well as to prevent, defuse, and to heal the damage of violent conflict. This ethic includes a commitment to human dignity and thriving relationships, with specific criteria, virtues, and practices to guide our actions. We recognize that peace requires justice and justice requires peacemaking.

***Discuss the ground-breaking proposal of the conference, that the church “develop and consider shifting to a Just Peace approach based on Gospel nonviolence,” with “a vision and an ethic to build peace as well as to prevent, defuse, and to heal the damage of violent conflict.”***

### **Living Gospel nonviolence and Just Peace**

In that spirit we commit ourselves to furthering Catholic understanding and practice of active nonviolence on the road to just peace.

***How can you commit yourself to “furthering Catholic understanding and practice of active nonviolence on the road to just peace”? What would that look like? How can we help all Catholics to practice Gospel nonviolence?***

As would-be disciples of Jesus, challenged and inspired by stories of hope and courage in these days, we call on the Church we love to:

- continue developing Catholic social teaching on nonviolence. In particular, we call on Pope Francis to share with the world an encyclical on nonviolence and Just Peace;

***What would you like Pope Francis to state in a global encyclical on nonviolence and Just Peace?***

- integrate Gospel nonviolence explicitly into the life, including the sacramental life, and work of the Church through dioceses, parishes, agencies, schools, universities, seminaries, religious orders, voluntary associations, and others;

***How can you help with this integration?***

- promote nonviolent practices and strategies (e.g., nonviolent resistance, restorative justice, trauma

healing, unarmed civilian protection, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding strategies);

***How do we do this? How can you help? What would your nation and the world look like with a new understanding of nonviolence and nonviolent conflict transformation?***

- initiate a global conversation on nonviolence within the Church, with people of other faiths, and with the larger world to respond to the monumental crises of our time with the vision and strategies of nonviolence and Just Peace;

***How can we encourage this conversation?***

- no longer use or teach “just war theory”; continue advocating for the abolition of war and nuclear weapons;

***Theologians and scholars have debated the usefulness of the just war theory for decades. Some believe it remains useful to limit or prevent war and to moderate the brutal effects of war.***

***Participants in the Rome conference believe the “just war theory” is an obstacle to the creative imagination, the financial and intellectual investment that will help the world move beyond perpetual violence and war. What would happen if the Church took the focus in Catholic theology off the “just war theory” and invested heavily in developing Catholic understanding of active nonviolence? Would that help the Church and the world develop more effective nonviolent practices for protecting vulnerable communities, avoiding violent conflict, transforming structures/systems of violence and promoting cultures of peace?***

- lift up the prophetic voice of the church to challenge unjust world powers and to support and defend those nonviolent activists whose work for peace and justice put their lives at risk.

***Who are these prophetic voices of Gospel nonviolence? How can you listen to them and help others listen to them? How can you become a prophetic voice for Gospel nonviolence? What is the message that the God of peace and nonviolence is saying to the world of war and violence? How can you “support and defend those nonviolent activists whose work for peace and justice put their lives at risk”?***

In every age, the Holy Spirit graces the Church with the wisdom to respond to the challenges of its time. In response to what is a global epidemic of violence, which Pope Francis has labeled a “world war in installments”, we are being called to invoke, pray over, teach and take decisive action. With our communities and organizations, we look forward to continue collaborating with the Holy See and the global Church to advance Gospel nonviolence.

***What can you do to fulfill this mandate? What concrete action can you take in your life to move farther away from violence and to advance Gospel nonviolence? How can you help your local church and the global church to fulfill this holy mandate?***

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