



*Affirming the vision and practice of active nonviolence  
at the heart of the Catholic Church.*

*A project of Pax Christi International*

## Nonviolent resistance

Jesus initiated a campaign of nonviolent resistance when he read from the prophet Isaiah in a synagogue announcing a year of jubilee. His healing of the bent woman (Luke 13) and the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1-6) in synagogues were concrete actions of that proclamation, reclaiming the Sabbath from laws that burdened the most vulnerable. Jesus' direct nonviolent intervention purifying the temple confronted the powerful temple leaders with their injustice. Jesus' teaching, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, charted a third path of nonviolent intervention, a way to resist oppression without violence. In turning the right cheek, for example, one refuses to be backhanded on the left cheek while not striking back.<sup>1</sup>

### **Strategic, powerful, and transformative**

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described nonviolent resistance as “a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love.” Nonviolent resistance (also known as civil resistance) is the practice of strategic mobilization to shift power and transform conflict. It is a type of force that can better illuminate the human dignity of all actors, consistent with the teaching of Jesus as well as other major religious traditions. Nonviolent resistance includes a wide-variety of tactics, most effectively used within an organized campaign toward a specific goal.

Nonviolent resistance sees power not as monolithic, but identifies sources of power on which oppressive groups and governments rely. Gene Sharp, founder of the Albert Einstein Institute advancing nonviolence, identified the pillars or sources of power: authority, human resources, skills and knowledge, intangible factors, material resources, sanctions. Nonviolent resistance works to control, challenge, and diminish the opponents' pillars of power creating a shift in power and advancing specific goals for justice, peace and transformation.<sup>2</sup>

Gene Sharp also identified 198 methods of nonviolent action which can be used in nonviolent campaigns and employed by many participants within each campaign. One characteristic of nonviolent campaigns is that the entire community can and often does participate. People of all ages, educational levels, classes are involved in some way. One well-known example was the nonviolent campaign to end segregation in the U.S. south: some people were involved in the “sit-ins” going to jail while many more were involved in pickets and boycotts of businesses, prayer services, fasts, fundraising for lawyers and fines, providing transportation during bus boycotts, etc. This wide participation weakened the human and material resources on which the system of segregation depended. In military and violent campaigns, relatively small segments of the population participate in actions. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. understood that successful nonviolent

<sup>1</sup> See Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, 2003. <http://cpt.org/files/BN%20-%20Jesus%20Third%20Way.pdf>;  
Dr. Terry Rynne, “Contemporary scriptural exegesis ethics on Jesus' nonviolence.” [https://nonviolencejustpeacedotnet.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/contemporary\\_scriptural\\_exegesis\\_ethics\\_on\\_jesus\\_nonviolence.pdf](https://nonviolencejustpeacedotnet.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/contemporary_scriptural_exegesis_ethics_on_jesus_nonviolence.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aeinstein.org/nonviolentaction/what-is-nonviolent-action/>

movements comprised both constructive programs especially for the marginalized and vulnerable, and obstructive programs which interfere with or prevent injustice.

Methods of nonviolent resistance can be categorized several ways:

- **Education and protest** such as public and media statements, marches, petitions, vigils, music concerts, letters to the editor.
- **Noncooperation** such as social, political or economic boycotts, strikes, suspending social activities, withholding support, reluctant or slow compliance.
- **Nonviolent intervention** such as hunger strikes, sit-ins, street theatre, obstruction, occupation, civil disobedience to unjust laws.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, following Gandhi, identified six principles for nonviolence:

1. Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people.
2. Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding.
3. Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not people.
4. Nonviolence holds that suffering educates and reforms.
5. Nonviolence chooses love instead of hate.
6. Nonviolence believes that the universe is on the side of justice.<sup>3</sup>

*Key principles of Catholic Social Teaching* express similar assumptions: dignity of the human person, call to family, community and participation, rights and responsibilities, preferential care for and with people who are poor, dignity of work and the rights of workers, solidarity, care for God's creation, and peacemaking. The trajectory of Catholic Social Teaching and especially statements from contemporary Popes, suggest increasing emphasis on nonviolent resistance.<sup>4</sup>

## Impact

A recent study by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan finds that between 1900 and 2006, campaigns of nonviolent resistance were more than twice as effective as their violent counterparts. Attracting impressive support from citizens who withdraw their support from regimes, these campaigns have produced remarkable results, even in the contexts of Iran, the Palestinian Territories, the Philippines, and Burma. They also found that successful nonviolent resistance movements usher in more durable and internally peaceful democracies, less likely to regress into civil war.<sup>5</sup> History demonstrates that nonviolent resistance can be used for a variety of causes and issues and across many different cultures and location.<sup>6</sup> It has also worked against ruthless adversaries, such as Milosevic, Suharto, Pinochet, Marcos, etc., because it does not depend on their conversion to diminish their sources of power.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <http://thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Cahill, "Official Catholic Social Thought on Gospel Nonviolence," [https://nonviolencejustpeacedotnet.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/official\\_cst\\_on\\_gospel\\_nonviolence.pdf](https://nonviolencejustpeacedotnet.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/official_cst_on_gospel_nonviolence.pdf); See World Day of Peace Resources: <https://nonviolencejustpeacedotnet.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/recent-pope-quotes-on-peacemaking.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, Columbia University Press, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Global Nonviolent Action Database: <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/>

<sup>7</sup> M. Stephan, "Advancing just peace through strategic nonviolent action," [https://nonviolencejustpeacedotnet.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/advancing\\_just\\_peace\\_through\\_strategic\\_nonviolent\\_action.pdf](https://nonviolencejustpeacedotnet.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/advancing_just_peace_through_strategic_nonviolent_action.pdf); Documentary on Otpor and Milosevic, *Bringing Down a Dictator*, 2002; also examples of success against the Nazis include the resistance in Denmark, Norway and Rosenstrasse prison.