



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

A project of Pax Christi International
www.nonviolencejustpeace.org

A Just Peace ethic

Just peace is rooted in the biblical notion of Shalom/Salaam – “justice and peace shall embrace” (Psalm 85:10) – and is further illuminated by both human experience and the growing recognition that peace requires justice-making, but also creative, powerful peacemaking is the way to justice. Jesus modeled this approach of nonviolent love of friends and enemies, while living under foreign military occupation. He also leans us toward justice understood as restorative justice, with a focus on the harm done to relationships and how to heal as well as to transform systems. Thus, this just peace approach is consistent with Gospel nonviolence, and builds on the recent trajectory of Catholic social teaching.

Just peace also builds on the trajectory of contemporary popes’ teaching and statements. In the early 1960s, Pope John XXIII wrote about how war is not a “suitable way to restore rights.”¹ Paul VI linked peace and structural justice and said: “The Church cannot accept violence, especially the force of arms.”² John Paul II said: “Violence is evil, it violates our dignity, it is the enemy of justice,”³ and rejected definitively the idea that justice can be sought through recourse to war; he called us not to follow those who train us in how to kill. Benedict XVI called “love of enemies the nucleus of the Christian revolution” and said it is “impossible to interpret Jesus as violent.”⁴ Pope Francis focuses us on mercy; he says the “true force of the Christian is truth and love, which means rejecting all violence, so faith and violence are incompatible;”⁵ he says “war is the negation of all rights and does grave harm to the environment;”⁶ that “justice never comes from killing;”⁷ he told us “not to bomb or make war on ISIS;”⁸ and the door is always open to dialogue, even with ISIS.

A just peace approach is also being woven together through ecumenical organizations and interfaith collaborations. For example, the World Council of Churches’ called for turning to a just peace approach in [2011](#) and [2013](#), with the book [Interfaith Just Peacemaking](#) published in 2012. A call to a just peace ethic was articulated in the [Appeal to the Catholic Church](#) from the groundbreaking conference in 2016 and developed more in the [2019 workshop](#); both events were co-hosted by Pax Christi International and the Vatican.

We envision a just peace as a way of political cooperation for the common good, respect for the dignity of all persons and the natural world, preventing violence, and the transformation of conflict by nonviolent strategies. Just peace norms operate in three distinct spheres or categories that may overlap in time and space. Strategies and actions chosen must enhance or at least not obstruct these norms, as well as keep means and ends consistent.

- 1) Develop virtues and skills for constructively engaging conflict (*jus in conflictione*)⁹
 - sustaining spiritual disciplines¹⁰

- virtuous habits¹¹
- education and training in key skills¹²
- participatory processes¹³
- form nonviolent peacemaking communities¹⁴

2) Break cycles of destructive conflict and violence (*jus ex bello*)

- reflexivity¹⁵
- re-humanization¹⁶
- conflict transformation¹⁷
- acknowledge responsibility for harm¹⁸
- nonviolent direct action¹⁹
- integral disarmament²⁰

3) Build sustainable peace (*jus ad pacem*)

- relationality and reconciliation²¹
- robust civil society and just governance²²
- ecological justice and sustainability²³
- human dignity and human rights of all²⁴
- economic, gender, and racial justice²⁵

Guiding questions: What ongoing actions and policies could help build sustainable peace? What are the root causes of the conflict? What virtuous or vicious habits are at stake and skillsets needed to transform the conflict? What just peace practices and transforming initiatives could be scaled up to break cycles of violence?

Compared to traditional ethical approaches, a just peace ethic would better form us as peacemakers by enabling us to imagine, develop, and stay committed to nonviolent practices. It also better enables us to transform conflict, get to the root causes, and build sustainable peace by addressing the personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions. This approach is less likely to lead to the structural and cultural violence of being prepared for war as well as a corresponding arms race, whereas both divert needed resources and often exacerbate mistrust. It also helps us better stay out of and break cycles of violence. The just peace ethic will also better enable us to move closer toward outlawing war.²⁶ In turn, the just peace ethic is more likely to prevent, limit, and defuse an ongoing war. Further, and perhaps most importantly, however, the just peace ethic will better enable the illumination of Christ in our world and draw people to loving relationship with Christ and his Church.

A growing collection of examples drawing on a just peace ethic for specific issues and conflicts include Syria, ISIS, Iran, South Sudan, El Salvador, Democratic Republic of Congo, COVID-19, racial justice, environmental justice, nuclear weapons, and armed drones, etc.²⁷

¹ Pope John XXIII, *Peace on Earth*, 1963; par. 127.

² Pope Paul VI, *On Evangelization in the Modern World* (1975) 37.

³ Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, *Compendium of Social Doctrine*, 496.

⁴ Pope Benedict, *Midday Angelus*, Feb. 18, 2007

⁵ Pope Francis, *Angelus*, Aug. 19, 2013.

6 Pope Francis, speech at UN, Sept 25, 2015.

7 Pope Francis, Catholic News Agency, Mar. 20, 2015.

8 Pope Francis quoted in Francis Rocca, “Pope Francis: I Would Visit Iraq to Help Stop the Violence,” in *Catholic Herald*, Aug. 19, 2014.

9 Latin terms coined by Gerald Schlabach, University of St. Thomas, U.S.

10 Such as contemplation, discernment, repentance, forgiveness, prayer, especially a Eucharistic prayer that explicitly names Jesus’ love of enemies and rejection of violence.

11 Virtue of active nonviolence (or nonviolent peacemaking) realizes the goods of conciliatory love that draws enemies toward friendship, and the truth of our ultimate unity and equal dignity. Related virtues include mercy, compassion, empathy, humility, hospitality, solidarity, courage, and justice.

12 Such as nonviolent communication, civil resistance, social analysis of root causes, and gender, racial, intersectional, and needs-based analysis.

13 Participation refers here to decision-making and action chosen must be participatory and inclusive of as many key stakeholders as possible, especially women, young adult leaders, and marginalized groups.

14 Includes institutions and cultures.

15 Keeping the means consistent with the ends.

16 Through language, image creation, and narratives.

17 To draw adversaries toward partnership and address root causes, such as dialogue, trauma-healing, meeting the human needs of all actors and independent initiatives to build trust.

18 Such as lament, restorative justice and “dangerous memory.”

19 Particularly includes practices of civil resistance, unarmed civilian protection, nonviolent civilian-based defense. These include tactics like credible messengers, evacuation, peace zones, and sanctuary.

20 By “integral disarmament,” Pope Francis uses this to refer to the need for a preceding or simultaneous reduction of “weapons” or disarming of the heart to enable a fuller reduction of concrete weapons.

21 Relationality and reconciliation refer to actions that invite, create, strengthen and heal relationships in ever-wider (horizontal) and deeper (vertical) directions across/within social groups; such as inter-religious dialogue and cooperation, or truth and reconciliation commissions.

22 Re-distribution of political power and the practice of advocacy.

23 This would call us to action that contributes to the long-term well-being of people, non-human animals, and the environment, i.e. an integral ecology.

24 Human dignity calls for action that is consistent with and improves appreciation for the equal dignity of all people, including adversaries by ensuring human rights and cultivating empathy for all actors.

25 With a focus on the marginalized and vulnerable.

26 Pope Paul VI, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” 1965, par. 81.

27 See [samples here](#) and see case studies in “*Just Peace Ethic Primer: Building Sustainable Peace and Breaking Cycles of Violence*,” (2020).