

## A Catholic vision of nonviolence for Africa

*The following talk was given by Bishop Kevin Dowling at the December 2016 Nonviolence in Africa conference, hosted by Pax Christi International and attended by Pax Christi member groups and affiliated organizations and activists from African countries.*

We are gathered here as peacemakers from several countries in Africa. A few weeks ago, a religious sister, Sister Annie, working in Aleppo in Syria where thousands have been killed in that terrible war, said this: “Our world is a gift from God. Part of it is bleeding. Be peacemakers for us and our children.” Sister Annie could have said those same words to us here in Africa: “Our Africa is a gift from God. Part of it is bleeding. Be peacemakers for your people and your children.”

Our whole world – what is happening in the North as well as all our experiences over many years in Africa, including South Africa – our whole world seems to be trapped in a cycle of never-ending violence. There are 49 murders every day in South Africa, and terrible violence and rape against women and girl children.

What is the answer to all these wars and violence? Surely there has to be another way to deal with divisions and conflict between nations without going to war and killing thousands of innocent children and people? There is a great, great need for healing in all our countries which have experienced wars and violence. As part of our Catholic vision for nonviolence for Africa, we as peacemakers and activists need to analyze – with our people and communities and by listening to them – why people and nations opt for violence and war, what are the causes behind violence and wars, and why is there such anger and despair among so many of our people who believe that their situation will not change, and the only way out of it is to opt for violence. Surely at all levels of our societies and countries in Africa we need to promote and consolidate another mindset, another way of thinking based on real values and on a commitment to respectful encounter and dialogue as the first step in conflict resolution? Or have too many of our people in Africa lost hope that there can really be a better future for the victims of war, conflict and the atrocities of militias, for the victims of violence against women and girl children, for the millions of poor people who suffer misery and poverty which is a form of violence, and so on? We must be the ones to restore their hope.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, from the perspective of his context in El Salvador, analyzed violence in our world in this way: “The Church does not approve or justify bloody revolution and cries of hatred. But neither can it condemn them while it sees no attempt to remove the causes that produce that ailment in our society...”<sup>1</sup>... “I will not tire of declaring that if we really want an effective end to violence, we must remove the violence that lies at the root of all violence: structural violence, social injustice, exclusion of citizens from the management of the country, repression. All this is what constitutes the primal cause, from which the rest flows naturally.”<sup>2</sup> And we could add to his list of examples of structural violence.

But Archbishop Romero also affirmed the right of people to insurrection against extreme violence perpetrated against communities and individuals. But he was also very concerned that armed or violent insurrection against those in power could lead to even greater injustices and violence....and therefore he always promoted nonviolent resistance or action.

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<sup>1</sup> Romero, *Homilias*, 12 February, 1978, “Romero, The Violence of Love”, pg. 36-37. The Plough Publishing House, Farmington PA.

<sup>2</sup> Romero, *Homilias*, 23 September, 1979, “Romero, The Violence of Love”, pg. 166. The Plough Publishing House, Farmington PA.

Pope Francis said: “We never tire of repeating that the name of God cannot be used to justify violence. Peace alone, and not war, is holy!” the pope said on September 20 at the closing ceremony of an interreligious peace gathering in Assisi. “I am thinking of the families, whose lives have been shattered; of the children who have known only violence in their lives; of the elderly, forced to leave their homeland. All of them have a great thirst for peace,” he said. “We do not want these tragedies to be forgotten.” Tragedies indeed – here in Africa, and all over the world!

Earlier this year, from 11-13 April, a conference took place in Rome, organized by the Catholic peace movement, Pax Christi International, and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Cardinal Peter Turkson opened the conference with a message from Pope Francis. The theme of the Rome conference was: “Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence.” Cardinal Turkson reflected on how Pope Francis sees the option for war and violence. He said Pope Francis would say: “You don’t stop an aggression by being an aggressor. You don’t stop a conflict by inciting another conflict. You don’t stop a war by starting another war.”

“It doesn’t stop,” said the cardinal. “We’ve seen it all around us. Trying to stop the aggressor in Iraq has not stopped war. Trying to stop the aggressor in Libya has not stopped war. It’s not stopped the war in any place. We do not stop war by starting another war.” Turkson said the participants at the conference promoted “another thinking:” Gospel nonviolence, or “nonviolence as Jesus was nonviolent.”

And symbols, gestures are important. And about five weeks ago a small group of Israeli women began a march to Jerusalem from northern Israel to demand that the Israeli government restart a peace process with the Palestinians. After they reached the Palestinian city of Jericho on the West Bank, the core group of 20 women was joined by more than 3,000 others, including around 1,000 Palestinian women. And, even though the Palestinian women could not proceed beyond the barrier that separates the West Bank from Israel, the Israeli women headed for the prime minister’s residence where they held an emotional rally. The Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee, a 2011 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, addressed the group: “I say to my sisters in Israel, that this is your time to stand up and say no to war and yes to peace. When you stand firm for what you believe, the men with guns are afraid of you.”

Those women witnessed to the call that peace has to be built from within the affected communities everywhere, and peacemaking strategies must, therefore, be varied and adapted to each situation – including here in Africa, which is what we will be talking about in this conference. We are called to build peace from within our communities by promoting all the nonviolent ways to achieve a just peace. But because our call to nonviolence and to be peacemakers is clearly so complex and challenging, a vision – and indeed an inner strength of spirit is needed to inspire and match the scope of that agenda. For us Christians, that vision can be discovered in in the New Testament, particularly through what Jesus proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5: “Blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right; blessed are the gentle, the merciful; blessed are those persecuted in the cause of right” - and so on.

Reflecting on the cultural, economic, political and religious context of Jesus’ time, it seems clear that Jesus’ life was one of nonviolent resistance to the structural evil in his situation. He invited everyone, especially the excluded, into a community. He taught an alternative way to respond to the “enemy,” the way of nonviolence. “Love your enemies. Do good to those who persecute you.” Archbishop Romero commented: “The gospel’s advice to turn the other cheek to an unjust aggressor, far from being passivity and cowardice, is evidence of great moral strength that can leave an aggressor morally

defeated and humiliated. The Christian can fight, but prefers peace to war..... this is the moral force of nonviolence.” (Medellin Documents, Peace, #15)

This is all about a choice, a decision every person, group and organisation can make. The choice, the decision for us is to be peacemakers who work to relieve peoples’ suffering – but always in solidarity and action together with the affected people; we try to change the economic and political structures that bring so much suffering to the vulnerable; we try to remove or transform the underlying causes of violence, conflict and war so that there can be sustainable peace and economic justice, especially for the excluded and the victims of conflict – but, we are committed to do all this without any form of violence. The challenge, therefore, is how to introduce the power of nonviolent responses to our nations and communities, groups and individuals both to, if possible, prevent wars and violence breaking out, or to limit the effects of war and violence when they occur, and to bring healing, hope and new beginnings after wars and violence have ended. For example, there are many examples of how civil society and Church groups have protected vulnerable people from violence through unarmed civil protection.

And after wars and violence have been limited or stopped, we as peacemakers need to be deeply involved in the whole process of “transitional justice” .....for example, documenting the stories and experiences of the victims, working towards Truth and Reconciliation Commissions when these are appropriate, discussing what needs to be done about the perpetrators of violence and war – do we focus on punishment (retributive justice), or restorative justice which promotes the healing and reconciliation of people and communities, including the use of all the cultural methods which we have in Africa, and finally working for economic justice so that the victims, those who have suffered, the poor can have a future of dignity and hope.

This vision and program of active non-violence and just peacemaking must be brought to the heart of every society and community where we are. And our vision must be based on the following values, and our belief that a nation, or a society is peaceful only when it has all of the following:

The rule of law;

Its people enjoy the full range of human rights;

The economy is just;

The people are enabled to grow to their full potential;

They live in harmony with one another;

They have the skills and commitment to solve conflicts without violence.

In the quest for peaceful societies in Africa, this vision, and the task and the challenge for all of us as peacemakers, is truly great. Let us take up this challenge to promote nonviolence with faith – and show how we can solve African challenges in truly African ways.

Thank you.

Bishop Kevin Dowling C.Ss.R.

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