

An appeal to the Catholic Church to recommit to the centrality of Gospel nonviolence

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, people of God from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Oceania, including lay people, Biblical scholars, theologians, members of religious congregations, priests, and bishops, have come together to deepen our understanding of and commitment to Gospel nonviolence. Many of us live in communities experiencing violence and oppression. All of us are practitioners of justice and peace.

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.

We rejoice in the rich concrete experiences of people engaged in work for peace around the world. We have heard stories of creative and powerful 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 and ten times more likely to build more sustainable collaborative political communities.

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 and Church leadership in effective nonviolent practices. In all of this, Jesus is our inspiration and model.

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 refused to send the children away but instead blessed them (Matthew 19:14); 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).

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 his humble Birth, Cross and Resurrection. He calls us to develop the virtue of nonviolent peacemaking.

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

We believe that there is no “just war”.¹ 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. Even when wars may appear ‘just,’ they inevitably get us mired in dynamics or cycles of trauma and violence.

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”. Rooted in the interconnectedness of God’s creation, nonviolence opens the way and is necessary for an “integral ecology,” as expressed by Pope Francis in *Laudato si’*. Violence undermines this interconnectedness. Nonviolence sustains it.

We propose that the Catholic Church develop and consider shifting to a Just Peace moral framework 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 norms to guide our actions. We recognize that peace requires justice and justice requires peacemaking.

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. 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;
- 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;
- promote nonviolent practices and strategies (e.g., nonviolent resistance, restorative justice, trauma healing, unarmed civilian protection, nonviolent civilian-based defense, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding strategies); and learn from the practices of indigenous and grassroots communities;
- 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;
- no longer present “just war theory” as official Catholic teaching; continue advocating for the abolition of war and nuclear weapons, and an end to trafficking in small arms and light weapons;
- 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 puts 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.

¹ “... the events of the first two decades of this century compel me to add, unambiguously, that there is no occasion in which a war can be considered just. There is never a place for the barbarism of war, especially not when contention acquires one of its most unjust faces: that of so-called ‘preventive wars.’” (Pope Francis in *I Ask You in the Name of God. Ten Prayers for a Future of Hope.*)