



Notre Dame Lecture Nonviolence: Central to Catholic Teaching on Peace

Today is the anniversary of the assassination in El Salvador of Archbishop Oscar Romero. In so many ways Romero's life and witness offer remarkable insight into the excruciatingly difficult challenge that we are facing today - the challenge of interpreting Jesus' words and witness - from the Beatitudes to the Cross in these times.

How do we as followers of Jesus respond to gun violence in our own U.S. communities, wars in Ukraine, Yemen, the DRC and South Sudan; violence against migrants and against nonviolent demonstrators in Iran and Myanmar and Russia; human trafficking; racism; destruction and exploitation of our common home and on and on?

Last month, in Palestine I saw the devastating consequences of occupation, the violence of an apartheid system - children killed and imprisoned, recently demolished houses, a massive Wall separating families from their land and from each other, children from their schools, people from their olive trees. Despite the dehumanizing brutality, however, the people stay. They call their steadfastness "sumud," a powerful expression of nonviolent resistance.

Two weeks ago, in South Sudan I saw the results of a bloody civil war following a bloody civil war - unrelenting multidimensional violence - war and military violence, extortion, corruption, torture, disappearances, gang violence, domestic violence, cultural violence, gender violence, the dehumanizing violence of deep poverty, all strangling a people who fought to be free but who have yet to taste peace. But I also witnessed there the prophetic stance against violence and injustice of South Sudan's Christian leaders and their powerful commitment to Gospel nonviolence.

At Pax Christi International meetings in Europe this winter I saw devastating consequences of the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine and heard the anguish of a peace movement mortally wounded after 78 years of building an international infrastructure for peace and human rights. But I also know that people in Ukraine and Germany and Poland and Austria and beyond are hungry for alternatives to war and are acting with courage and creativity to support effective nonviolent forms of resistance to the Russian invasion.

Given the reality we humans face on a daily basis, are the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount simply impossible to follow?

Many believe that the war of aggression against Ukraine is challenging the very idea that Gospel nonviolence could ever become a widely applicable ethic, but I believe precisely the opposite. Jesus proclaimed a new, nonviolent way of life that was rooted in radical inclusion, the beloved community, mercy and the unconditional love of God -- and he did so in the context of a brutal Roman occupation. He was so completely engaged in transforming unjust structures and interrupting violence (even the violence of his "defender," Peter on the night before he died), that

Jesus was hung on a cross as a dangerous threat to those in power. We will retell that story in dramatic liturgies in the coming two weeks. As we walk the Way of the Cross with the condemned Jesus, what will we learn that can help clarify a way forward now?

The war in Ukraine is not only a catastrophe in itself, it already has begun to fuel a new arms race and to recenter the insane and morally bankrupt strategy of nuclear deterrence. At a time when the world urgently needs to address climate change, to meet the needs of the most marginalized and impoverished communities, and to abolish the systemic violence of racism and exclusion, the Ukraine war is taking us in a calamitous direction.

While international law and our own moral tradition provide sovereign nations with the right to self-defense, in a world of highly destructive, extremely expensive weapons, the human and environmental consequences of armed self-defense cry out for an effective alternative.

For the sake of present and future generations we have to replace the logic of violence in which we are mired with a new logic of nonviolence. Otherwise, we will be perpetually trapped exactly where we are right now, convinced that self-defense is only and always armed, that only weapons and military might can interrupt violence and protect threatened communities. The question is not whether to defend against a brutal military invasion, but how, especially how to imagine and build a new paradigm where nonviolent options are increasingly viable and effective.

Nonviolence has been a hallmark of Pope Francis' response to war and violent conflict, whether in Ukraine, the DR Congo, South Sudan, Syria or elsewhere in what he calls a third world war fought piecemeal. In *Fratelli Tutti* and in scores of statements about the war in Ukraine, Pope Francis has repeatedly placed nonviolence as the lens through which to evaluate any crisis. He has clearly condemned Russia's aggression, repeatedly expressed his solidarity with the suffering of the Ukrainian people, and tried to facilitate a path to peace that would prevent an expanded and prolonged war and even more unimaginable violence.

The Catholic Church needs – and I believe is moving toward – a new moral framework, not a revision of the just war tradition. This new moral framework will move nonviolence to the center of Catholic teaching, even as it precisely negotiates an ethical response to the complex expressions of violence encountered in any crisis. The realization of a new paradigm based on nonviolence is even more necessary than it was a year ago – and more difficult.

Given the ongoing carnage in Ukraine, the potentially catastrophic consequences, and our collective inability to imagine a way out of the war, I deeply believe that Pope Francis' repeated assertion that "there is no such thing as a just war" rings true.

Thomas Merton once said, "The task of the Christian is at least to make the thought of peace once again seriously possible." (Peace in the Post Christian Era p. 7.) That, I believe *is* the vocation of the Church, and exactly what Pope Francis is trying to do -- a huge challenge, not only in Ukraine, but also in the United States, in Syria, in South Sudan and in uncounted other contexts!

Pax Christi is convinced that in the long run, nonviolence is the only way to make the thought of sustained peace seriously possible, the only way to follow Merton's plea - and we are finding more and more people on every continent and in the institutional Catholic Church who are open to that possibility. Although Cardinal McElroy three weeks ago here at Notre Dame agreed that, given the dire circumstances, "the moral claim" for military action in defense of Ukraine is compelling, he also

repeatedly said that comprehensive nonviolence must stand as the central point of reference for the Church on armed conflict.

Nonviolence is not the same as pacifism. It is a spirituality, a way of life, an ethic that is potentially universal, and a proven, often-effective approach to preventing or interrupting violence, to protecting vulnerable people and the planet, to promoting just peace.

Nonviolence is not passive. It does not retreat from conflict. It actively engages and transforms conflict for the common good. It is a courageous force for mercy and reconciliation. I believe that nonviolence is essential to the logic, the paradigm toward which humanity has to shift if we and the beautiful planet that we call home are going to survive

Nonviolence is also not magic. It is not always – or not yet – up to the monumental task of stopping a brutal military onslaught. At the same time, nonviolence is woefully underfunded – especially in comparison to the world’s – the United States’ investment in weapons, in military training and in other preparations for war. Nonviolence education and spiritual formation are almost never included in Catholic elementary schools or Catholic high schools or across disciplines beyond peace studies in Catholic universities. With some important exceptions (such as research into the impact of trauma-healing and the great work that has been done around effective Catholic peacebuilding), rigorous research into the impact of particular nonviolent strategies in different contexts is only beginning to come “into its own.”

El Salvador in the late 1970s presented a challenge like that in Ukraine - of extreme violence being perpetrated against the civilian population and the Church. Priests (Rutilio Grande, SJ, Alfonso Navarro, Ernesto Barrera, Octavio Ortiz, Rafael Palacios, Alirio Napoleon Macias) were assassinated and scores of pastoral agents were killed or disappeared. Security forces fired into nonviolent demonstrations and viciously attacked local communities suspected of supporting the guerrilla forces. Tortured bodies were found in garbage dumps, on the beach, floating down rivers.

Throughout, Archbishop Romero repeatedly rejected violence -- institutionalized violence, the repressive violence of the state, seditious or terrorist violence and any form of violence that was likely to provoke further violence. He walked a very fine line, acknowledging the possibility of legitimate insurrection, a legitimate revolution, but warning about the danger of creating new injustices, a new disaster, more violence. And he clearly held out the then unthinkable possibility of forgiveness, of loving the enemy (including the army, the death squads, the U.S. government that was sending \$3 million a day to fund the repression)!

Romero said, *“Let us be firm in defending our rights, but with great love in our hearts, because to defend our rights in this way we are also seeking the conversion of sinners. This is the vengeance of the Christian. I repeat what I have said so often, addressing by radio those who perhaps have caused so many injustices and acts of violence, those who have brought tears to so many homes, those who have stained themselves with the blood of so many murders, those who have hands soiled with torture, those who have calloused their consciences, who are unmoved to see under their boots a person abused, suffering, perhaps ready to die. To all of them I say: No matter your crimes. They are ugly and horrible ... But God calls you and forgives you.”*

Many years ago, Barbara Deming described well the two hands of nonviolence: one hand that stops and prevents injustice and repression; the other that reaches out to the perpetrator as a human being: “Love your enemies,” Jesus said. Archbishop Romero did.

On February 22, almost a year after the invasion of Ukraine, Pope Francis said, "The toll of dead, wounded, refugees and displaced persons, destruction, economic and social damage speaks for itself. Can the Lord forgive so many crimes and so much violence? He is the God of peace. Let us remain close to the tormented Ukrainian people, who continue to suffer. And let us ask ourselves: has everything possible been done to stop the war? I appeal to those in authority over nations to make a concrete commitment to end the conflict, to achieve a cease-fire and to start peace negotiations. The one [the victory] built on rubble will never be a real victory!"

A New Way of Being

Despite the overwhelming signs to the contrary, however, I believe that we are on the threshold of a new way of being, a new paradigm, a new logic for life and that embracing Gospel nonviolence at the center of Catholic life and teaching will help us move in that direction. Nonviolence is, but is not only, about war and peace, not only about pulling back from the brink of human and ecological devastation. It is also about building right relationships between humans and with the earth, the natural world.

In a recent issue of *The Tablet*, Tomas Halik, a professor at Charles University in Prague, remembered Teilhard de Chardin as one of the first prophets of globalization, who believed that humankind would eventually turn toward "a single force that unites without destroying," the force of love as understood in the Gospel. Halik believes that this decisive moment is happening right now and that the turn of Christianity towards synodality, the transformation of the Church into a dynamic community of pilgrims, can have an impact on the destiny of the whole human family.

Nonviolence is a powerful force that unites without destroying, an essential dimension of the beloved community – what Emmanuel Katongole calls "a spirituality that reflects the very nature of God." It rejects violence in all its forms: yes, war and physical violence, but also structural and systemic violence, gender and racial violence, cultural, ecological, economic, spiritual and psychological violence.

This new nonviolent paradigm is based on a completely different understanding of our place as humans in the whole Earth community, latecomers as we are to the spectacular cosmic reality that we are just now beginning to see. It helps us to understand that diversity and relationality are imbedded in the cosmos and essential to survival on this planet.

Ilia Delio talks about "the new person" emerging in evolution, who is embracing pluralities of gender, race and religion; who is called into a "new type of consciousness where things are first seen together and then as distinct within this togetherness." (98). She affirms that we are being rewired for belonging to the cosmic whole. We are more and more aware that we are one earth community; we have a planetary consciousness and "are beginning to see that systems in nature do not work on principles of competition and struggle but on cooperation and sympathy."

Michael Nagler, founder of the Metta Center for Nonviolence, talks about "the new story" that is replacing the "old story" told by the dominant white culture about scarcity, competition and violence. He insists that violence is not the nature of humans - that love, faith, trust and the desire for community, peace and well-being are central to our identity and that nonviolence is a creative power, a pervasive energy, a fundamental principle that we can develop and deploy in human interactions. "Violence, he says, "is a tendency that pulls us back, away from the recognition of unity; nonviolence pulls us forward, toward that recognition ... We human beings ... can play an active role in our own evolution and consequently that of our species. The discovery of our capacity

for nonviolence, connected as it is with higher consciousness or love, is a key to this development ...Nonviolence is not only at home in the new story, it *is* the new story.”

That is the nature of the nonviolence that the Church is learning to embrace. It is a new way of thinking that could guide the world, including in times of crisis, toward just peace rather than justified war; toward respect and inclusion rather than exploitation. It is also a very old way of thinking that so often characterizes the worldview of Indigenous people.

Those of you who have read Robin Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* might know what I mean. A sample: “Cultures of gratitude must also be cultures of reciprocity. Each person, human or no, is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship. Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them. If an animal gives its life to feed me, I am in turn bound to support its life. If I receive a stream’s gift of pure water, then I am responsible for returning a gift in kind. An integral part of a human’s education is to know those duties and how to perform them.”

Our commitment should be to a nonviolence that imitates Jesus’ way of life, but that is also challenged and shaped by the history and contemporary experience of those on the receiving end of war and racism and neglect and planetary destruction. It is not just *not violent* but is powerful and actively engaged in preventing or interrupting the violence that is imbedded in our society and in so many others, by the way we relate to each other, by the way too many in our society who have been and still are bruised, broken, killed by “the system” and by the way we humans treat the earth.

The nonviolence moving to the center of Catholic teaching on war and peace is a more accurate, expanded, evidence-based and comprehensive approach to nonviolence capable of mobilizing a wide spectrum of tools for change, from nonviolent diplomacy to trauma-informed healing, restorative justice to nonviolent civilian protection and civil resistance to nonviolent communication.

And it is a nonviolence that energetically promotes just peace, the new story, the beloved community, the New Creation.

I see this shift happening everywhere. I know thousands of people, whole communities around the world who are giving their lives to making the new story real. I see it in brilliant work to root out systemic racism; to end the death penalty and mass incarceration; to redress centuries of oppression against Indigenous communities; to break habits of exploitation that are destroying the earth; to learn and promote restorative justice practices; to welcome migrants and refugees; to rid the world of nuclear weapons; to fundamentally rework U.S. budget priorities; to celebrate diversity and promote unwavering inclusion and respect for the rights of all people no matter how they identify, believing that radical inclusion is the foundational message of the Sermon on the Mount.

I see it in efforts (including my own) to be respectful and deeply inclusive in our use of language, including pronouns (I use “she, her, hers”); in growing awareness of where our feet are planted. In Washington DC where I live, we acknowledge with gratitude and deep respect to elders both past and present that we occupy the traditional land of the Anacostans, the Piscataway and the Pamunkey people. Here in South Bend, we gather in the traditional homelands of other Native peoples.

I see the new story of nonviolence in Pope Francis’ vision, creativity and commitment to the cry of the earth and the cry of those forced to live on the margins of our world. As he looks around the

world – recently at the DR Congo and South Sudan – he is clearly horrified, pleading again and again for the paradigm shift so desperately needed away from the direct violence of war and militarization; the cultural violence of indifference and domination; and the structural violence of racism, economic injustice, ecological destruction and more.

I see the new story of nonviolence in countless communities around the world, most recently in the extremely challenging context of South Sudan, where the heads of all the Christian Churches two weeks ago made a strong commitment to practice and to promote nonviolence. They said, *the Church of Christ in South Sudan ... recommits itself to Gospel nonviolence. It rejects any form of violence and commits itself to a prophetic stance against violence and injustice. This is not a passive approach, not simply submitting to or colluding with violence, but it is active and prophetic in responding to all forms of violence, amongst individuals, families, clans, tribes, and political and military factions, and including systemic violence embedded in our cultural, societal, and political life.*

The South Sudan Council of Churches General Secretary, James Oyet, introduced the powerful SSCC statement, saying “His Holiness Pope Francis has revealed the sacrament of nonviolence. Here [in South Sudan] the symbol becomes substance as we embody visible acts of nonviolence. Let it be our Church institutions who teach, preach and heal through the sacrament of nonviolence for the salvation of Mother Earth and all her Children.” Beautiful. The sacrament of nonviolence. The symbol becomes substance.

I see a shift also is the intense process of discernment now underway to imagine and promote effective nonviolent ways to end the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine – as difficult as that is to imagine - and to heal the wounds of that brutal war. I see it in courageous, remarkable nonviolence in action across Ukraine, where many Ukrainians are already demonstrating clearly and with great courage that nonviolent defense can be effective and could be much more readily available with significant investment in resources, training, and research.

We know that, even in Ukraine, unarmed civilian resistance has: 1) hindered institutionalization of the Russian occupation; 2) protected many civilians; 3) undermined the Russian narrative; 4) built community resilience; 5) strengthened local governance, and 6) built social cohesion. Farmers refused to sell grain to Russian soldiers; fire departments refused to work under a Russian mandate; resisters protected local administration officials and school directors; created an alternative government; and engaged Russian civil society with anti-war messaging.

The potential role of well-organized, strategic, nonviolent action should not be underestimated either during war or during the post war transition. Hopefully, Ukraine will help the world learn important lessons about how nonviolent strategies might work – even in desperate situations. Strategic nonviolence and peace building are very effective partners.

Six years ago in his 2017 World Day of Peace message, Pope Francis said, “to be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing His teaching about nonviolence. ...I pledge the assistance of the Church in every effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence.”

Pax Christi’s Catholic Nonviolence Initiative is doing all that we can to take Pope Francis up on his offer, urging the Church to promote the necessary shift from an ethic of violence and war to an ethic of nonviolence -- through our efforts toward the Holy See; bishops and episcopal conferences, Catholic universities, religious communities, diocesan and parish programs, and Church diplomatic efforts. We are still hoping for a magisterial teaching, an encyclical, on nonviolence because we

believe that an official Catholic document would provide the basis for a much deeper Catholic understanding of and commitment to Gospel nonviolence over the coming years.

We do see a leaning toward nonviolence in Catholic social thought. – less inclination to dismiss nonviolence as naïve, unrealistic and a more serious effort to imagine a shift from the logic of violence to the logic of nonviolence. That movement is being enhanced by the synodal process, which is participatory, collegial, grounded in and energized by the creative spirit of God, affirming the nonviolent impulses of listening, dialogue, and working through differences. From this perspective, the current Synod can be understood as *a global, nonviolent practice to foster a more nonviolent Church and world*. Clearly, to reclaim the centrality of Gospel nonviolence in Catholic life and teaching will also require a deep transformation of the internal life of the Catholic Church. I believe that transformation is underway.

Either we will continue to live our way into the new story of right relationships and commit to developing and scaling up diverse, powerful nonviolent tools to provide protection and genuine security - to address root causes of conflict before it reaches such catastrophic proportions or we will remain stuck in the old story that violence and war are inevitable.

Pope Francis is responding to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a follower of Jesus, taking the Sermon on the Mount seriously. In the midst of this crisis he is shifting our gaze from a focus on justifying methods of war to ways of ending it.

An astoundingly widespread interest in nonviolence as an orientation and a universal ethic is beginning to come into focus. The Catholic Nonviolence Initiative believes that a full integration of nonviolence into Catholic social teaching (wrapping around and supporting our deep commitment to Catholic peacebuilding) could enable the institutional Catholic Church to be a transformational force, moving a broken world toward the just peace for which we all yearn.

One year ago today, Pope Francis said: “The real answer is not more weapons, more sanctions, more political-military alliances, but a different approach, a different way to govern the world “...
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And in Fratelli Tutti: “What is important is to create processes of encounter, processes that build a people that can accept differences. Let us arm our children with the weapons of dialogue! Let us teach them to fight the good fight of the culture of encounter!” (Fratelli Tutti 217)

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