

Nonviolence as politics

Excerpts from *Truth Seekers: Voices of Peace and Nonviolence from Gandhi to Pope Francis*, edited David Cortright (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), pp. 219-224.

Pope Francis distinguished himself by his courageous stands on behalf of the exploited and oppressed. He also displayed extraordinary humility, choosing to live in a modest guesthouse rather than the Apostolic Palace and washing the feet of impoverished immigrants after terrorist attacks in Brussels. He earned worldwide respect as a progressive innovator dedicated to interfaith dialogue, support for the poor, and promotion of justice and peace. In his first encyclical, *Gaudium Evangelii* (Joy of the Gospel) Pope Francis emphasized the connection between social equality and peace:

Until exclusion and inequality in society and between peoples are reversed, it will be impossible to eliminate violence. ... When a society ... is willing to leave a part of itself on the fringes, no political programs or resources spent on law enforcement or surveillance systems can indefinitely guarantee tranquility. This is not the case simply because inequality provokes a violent reaction from those excluded from the system, but because the socioeconomic system is unjust at its root.¹

Francis expanded upon these same themes in *Laudato Si*, which directly links environmental sustainability with ending poverty and exploitation of the poor. He writes in words no doubt inspired by Leonardo Boff: “Today ... we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor* (emphasis in the original).”

In his annual World Day of Peace message for 2017, Francis broke new ground in the depth of the church’s commitment to nonviolence and peace.²

Excerpts of the text of the message are presented below.

On this occasion, I would like to reflect on *nonviolence* as a style of politics for peace. I ask God to help all of us to cultivate nonviolence in our most personal thoughts and values. May charity and nonviolence govern how we treat each other as individuals, within society and in international life. When victims of violence are able to resist the temptation to retaliate, they become the most credible promoters of nonviolent peacemaking. In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms. ...

Jesus himself lived in violent times. Yet he taught that the true battlefield, where violence and peace meet, is the human heart: for “it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come” (Mt 7:21). But Christ’s message in this regard offers a radically positive approach. He unfailingly preached God’s unconditional love, which welcomes and forgives. He taught his disciples to love their enemies (cf. Mt 5:44) and to turn the other cheek (cf. Mt 5:39). When he stopped her accusers from stoning the woman caught in adultery (cf. Jn 8:1-11), and when, on the night before he died, he told Peter to put away his sword (cf. Mt 26:52), Jesus marked out the path of nonviolence. He walked that path to the very end, to the cross, whereby he became our peace and put an end to hostility (cf. Eph 2:14-16). Whoever accepts the Good News of Jesus is able to acknowledge the violence within and be healed by God’s mercy, becoming in turn an instrument of reconciliation. In the words of Saint Francis of Assisi: “As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that you have greater peace in your hearts”.

To be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence. As my predecessor Benedict XVI observed, that teaching “is realistic because it takes into account that in the world there is *too much* violence, *too much* injustice, and therefore that this situation cannot be overcome except by countering it with *more* love, with *more* goodness. This ‘*more*’ comes from God”. He went on to stress that: “For Christians, nonviolence is not merely tactical behavior but a person’s way of being, the attitude of one who is *so convinced of God’s love and power* that he or she is not afraid to tackle evil with the weapons of love and truth alone. Love of one’s enemy constitutes the nucleus of the ‘Christian revolution.’” The Gospel command to *love your enemies* (cf. Lk 6:27) “is rightly considered the *magna carta* of Christian nonviolence. It does not consist in succumbing to evil... but in responding to evil with good (cf. Rom 12:17-21) and thereby breaking the chain of injustice”....

More powerful than violence

Nonviolence is sometimes taken to mean surrender, lack of involvement and passivity, but this is not the case. ... The decisive and consistent practice of nonviolence has produced impressive results. The achievements of Mahatma Gandhi and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan in the liberation of India, and of Dr Martin Luther King Jr in combating racial discrimination will never be forgotten. Women in particular are often leaders of nonviolence, as for example, was Leymah Gbowee and the thousands of Liberian women, who organized pray-ins and nonviolent

protest that resulted in high-level peace talks to end the second civil war in Liberia.

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Such efforts on behalf of the victims of injustice and violence are not the legacy of the Catholic Church alone, but are typical of many religious traditions, for which “compassion and nonviolence are essential elements pointing to the way of life”. I emphatically reaffirm that “no religion is terrorist”. Violence profanes the name of God. Let us never tire of repeating: “The name of God cannot be used to justify violence. Peace alone is holy. Peace alone is holy, not war!”

¹ The Vatican, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium of the Holy Father Francis*, Rome, 2013, par. 59.

² Ken Butigan, “Pope calls for nonviolence in 2017 World Day of Peace message: U.S. religious leaders respond,” Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, December 12, 2016, <http://www.bridgefolk.net/2016/12/12/pope-calls-for-nonviolence-in-2017-world-day-of-peace-message/>