

Nonviolent Lives, Nonviolent Church, Nonviolent World: The Spiritual Journey of Active Nonviolence Today

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Introduction

Good morning. It's an honor to be with all at Pax Christi Michigan and the Metta Peace Teams. St. Paul says "I will show you a more excellent way," by which he means "the way of love." Year in and year out, Pax Christi Michigan has been showing all of us the "more excellent way of love in action"—for racial justice, for environmental healing, for economic equity, for genuine peace, for a Nonviolent Church, for human rights, and for the dignity of all.

Echoing this same longing for the well-being of all—which many of you have devoted years and decades to—Pope Francis in March gave three French activists the following directive:

"Start a revolution, shake things up. The world is deaf; you have to open its ears."

My friends, I invite us today during this wonderful conference to take these words seriously: "Start a revolution, shake things up. The world is deaf; you have to open its ears."

And not a moment too soon.

This week we saw yet another Black man killed. Daunté Wright was shot to death after being pulled over for a minor violation. I was pulled over once because I was ten days late in getting our car's smog check done. I was actually handcuffed and taken to the local police station, where my spouse came to bail me out. While this was a frustrating experience, I'm a white, cis-gender, middle-class male, so I never for a moment thought I was in danger of being shot to death.

"Start a revolution, shake things up. The world is deaf; you have to open its ears."

I teach at DePaul University in Chicago. I was heartened that the school immediately put out a statement. In part it said:

"The death of Daunté Wright in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, at the hands of police is tragic and senseless. No words can express the outrage and grief these continued murders inflict on the Black community. ... The terror that comes from being stopped for driving, walking, living while Black is a reality. Racism is a reality and the violence against the BIPOC community is a deadly byproduct. It must end."

"Start a revolution, Shake things up. The world is deaf; you have to open its ears."

I was even more struck by the words of one of the Catholic priests in Brooklyn Center, whose parish is near where Daunte Wright was killed. Redemptorist Fr. Marcel Okwara of St. Alphonsus Catholic Church, who immigrated from Nigeria, said that Catholics everywhere must stand up against racism and police violence.

Fr. Okwara said, "I don't understand the use of force, right on the spot on someone who is unarmed ... What happened to Daunte is avoidable... They should have let him go and then gone after him much later. And now another young one has been killed."

Fr. Okwara said he was heartened to see young people of all races protesting against racism after George Floyd's death in 2020. He said, "That's what the church should do." "He said he'd like St. Alphonsus to have a day where parishioners gather around the church, hold signs and let the community know who they are and what they stand for. He'd also like to see parishioners calling their officials at all levels to push for change. Okwara said he believes it's time to seriously overhaul the police. He said racism and police brutality need to be an ongoing conversation for Catholics in their churches and communities. "I want all Christians to stand up and be counted," Fr. Okwara said. "I think this is what Jesus would have wanted."

Pope Francis has given us our marching orders. And Fr. Okwara has helped fill them out more concretely.

Hear what he suggests:

- Take nonviolent action at the church.
- Reach out to officials.
- Overhaul the police.
- Have Catholics persistently discussing racism and police violence.
- Stand up.
- Be counted.
- Do what Jesus wants us to do.

This is what the Church should do, Fr. Okwara says.

He offers us a full spectrum of concrete things, weaving together spirituality and politics seamlessly and necessarily. Each of things could contribute to waking up ourselves and others. Maybe they could shake things up. And maybe, just maybe, they could start a revolution.

We remember how a single nonviolence training in the Philippines in the early 1980s under the auspices of the local archbishop was so illuminating that it led to hundreds of trainings across the country, preparing the participants to organize thousands, and hundreds of thousands, and finally millions of people to mobilize powerful nonviolent resistance to a corrupt military dictatorship. Four days after millions flooded into the streets of Manila, the dictator, Ferdinand Marcos was on a plane out of the country.

We remember how people in East Germany in 1989 met in church basements for months, which led to processing through the streets, which led to massive resistance to totalitarian rule, which led to bringing down the Berlin Wall, which led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

We remember a seamstress in Birmingham who had been trained for nonviolent change at the Highlander Center, who sparked a walk for freedom in her city, across the Deep South and the rest of the United States, and eventually around the world.

If enough of us took Fr. Okwara's suggestions of nonviolent witness and civil resistance seriously, just maybe it could spark a revolution.

Five years ago, a handful of us organized a conference in Rome with the Vatican titled, "Nonviolence and Just Peace." It was an invitation for the Church to turn away from its history of justified violence and to

explicitly re-embrace and spread the Gospel nonviolence of Jesus and the universal ethic of nonviolence that the world so desperately needs.

This gathering – with many participants from contexts of acute violence around the world – came to much the same conclusion that Fr. Okwara did this week: our job as Church is to fully take up the nonviolent life – to be a nonviolent Church working for a world free of violence – including the systemic violence of racism, sexism, and all forms of institutionalized violence – and taking steps to becoming a more just and peaceful world.

Pope Francis and Fr. Okwara are inviting us as Church to respond to the violence of our time by stepping out of our comfort zone as the people of God.

So how do we do this? How can we shake things up? How can we open *our* ears to help the world open its ears?

How can we start a revolution?

Revolutionary Nonviolence

In March of last year, as the pandemic was just beginning to gain momentum, I published an article entitled, "Love in the Time of Coronavirus," in which I wrote that "the present world of pain not only presents an emergency requiring an immediate response, it throws in sharp relief the need for dramatic social change."

Then I said, "The greatest social movement in human history is coming" to help make this happen.

Little did I know that, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd two months later, we would see the first stage of that critically-needed movement. This powerful mobilization declaring "Black Lives Matter" has been certified as the largest in the history of the United States. This uprising against racial injustice across the country and around the world was, I believe, the opening act of this historic shift.

There has been a virtual consensus by many that we cannot go back to the "unjust normal" after COVID, though there is a counter-consensus fiercely trying to drive us back to it. To me, this helps explain the January 6 insurrectional violence at the US Capitol.

But how will this change really take place?

How do we start a revolution?

What, in fact, do we mean by "revolution"?

Of course, there is the need to topple the structures and systems that persistently reinforce the disparities that are a matter of life and death. But even this is not enough. Below the structures is a paradigm that feeds the structures of racism, sexism, homophobia and – the structures of all the isms. It is not enough to imagine new structures and policies. We need another paradigm. A paradigm showing us "a more excellent way." We need a shift, like the one we hear about in Second Corinthians (5:17): "The new creation has come--the old has gone, the new is here!"

To explore this question, I would invite us to reflect on our own experience. Are there times when you have experienced a revolution in your own life – a revolution of values? A revolution in thinking? A new direction on the path of your life?

In this time when the world demands a seismic shift, perhaps it is helpful to tap those moments of metamorphosis we ourselves have experienced.

In my own life, I experienced this kind of metamorphosis in two ways.

On the one hand, there was a slow process of change. On the other, there were dramatic and often unexpected leaps.

In my early graduate school years at the Jesuit School of Theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley California, I experienced a slow and steady journey of engaging with Liberation Theology, feminism, spirituality, the growing ecological crisis, and the steady call of the Gospel to justice and peace.

But then there were also unexpected shifts.

At that time I worked at a place called the Center for Ethics and Social Policy. There I started a book project on the consequences of the nuclear arms race, which eventually took me in 1981 to the East Coast to visit a number of universities and think-tanks.

No one I spoke with could envision a world free of atomic weapons. At most, they thought we might be able to cut back on nuclear arms by dramatically increasing conventional ones. Each appointment left me more and more depressed, and finally, when I arrived in New York, I suddenly thought to call Dan Berrigan. I was in need of some pastoral counseling on the matter of nuclear weapons, and who better to see? We had never met, but he graciously welcomed me to his quarters.

For several hours, he shared with me his vision, which essentially boiled down to this: "We live in a culture of death -- and it is up to us to resist it." There was a lifetime of experience behind these words, and I felt the weight of them. At the end of this mesmerizing three-hour conversation, I asked Dan if there was anything I could do for him. After all, he was facing ten years in federal prison for the first Plowshares action he and eight other faith-based activists had done the year before.

He looked me in the eye and simply said: "Don't do anything for me. Just find some people you can pray with and march with."

Ricocheting through my unsuspecting soul, this unadorned command dramatically changed my life.

Berrigan's order eventually led me to discovering at my school a great community of people who were taking Jesus seriously when he told us to "love our enemies" and to "put down the sword." They were not only *studying* Jesus' nonviolence, they were trying to *live it*.

Vision: "I am telling you now so ten years from now you cannot say you did not know."

The Pledge of Resistance. Nevada. And Pace e Bene.

These experiences were revolutionary for me. They thoroughly reoriented my life. They sent me on a new path. And now I see they have provided a tiny glimpse into the much larger revolution that our society and world must undergo.

Nonviolence

Key to this shift for me was encountering the power of active and liberating nonviolence. From my perspective, I came to see it as “the more excellent way,” especially in light of Dr. King’s definition of nonviolence as “the love that does justice.”

Slowly I came to see that the stereotypes of nonviolence –passive, weak, ineffective, utopian, naïve, unpatriotic, marginal, simplistic, and impractical—were not only wrong, they were promoted and taught and ingrained by the domination system so that we would not make use of this powerful force for justice that is neither passive nor violent.

Slowly, I came to see that nonviolence itself is revolutionary. My friend and colleague Jerica Arents, who teaches at DePaul University and is a key organizer with Witness Against Torture, calls it “revolutionary nonviolence.”

By calling nonviolence “revolutionary,” I take this to mean a force for disrupting and transforming systems of oppression to defeat injustice, not people. But I also think of it in terms of a paradigm and worldview even broader and deeper than the paradigm and worldview of violence.

My colleague Phillip Bradley of NonviolenceWorks helps us unpack the spiritual and practical dimensions of nonviolence, revealed by what he calls the “scientific method” worked out by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. but rooted in Jesus and Gandhi. Bradley puts it this way:

Violence is justice for some. It is never justice for all. It achieves justice for some – but not all – by *promoting the lie* and *concealing the truth*. For example, the violence of racism only benefits some, not all, by promoting the lie of White Supremacy (that white people are superior to BIPOC communities) and concealing the truth of the equality of all people.

Nonviolence, on the other hand, is justice for all. It achieves justice-for-all by *revealing the lie* and *promoting the truth*. For example, it reveals the lie that white people are superior to BIPOC communities and it promotes the truth of the equality of all people.

It uses the most powerful language we have at our disposal – our own unarmed bodies – to reveal the lie and to promote the truth. It often involves a process of honest engagement, determined struggle, surfacing the pieces of the truth on all sides, and fostering reconciliation. Nonviolence a thoroughgoing rejection of violence and a steadfast regard for the opponent as a human being. In short, love in action.

Gandhi called nonviolence “as old as the hills.” What he meant by this is that this force has always been with us. We have remembered our violence because it is dramatic and memorable. But we have survived because, moment to moment, year by year, century by century, we have tapped the power of nonviolence. If violence were the default, we would have destroyed ourselves long ago, because violence tends to escalate and spin out of control. What has broken this spiral are the two hands of nonviolence (explain). These two hands incarnate the universal ethic of nonviolence, a paradigm of the fullness of life that is rooted in the ancient term ahimsa and present today in movements working for justice around the globe. The research conducted by Professor Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan has demonstrated that nonviolent civil resistance against formidable opponents, including those with predominant military power, have been twice as successful as violent strategies.ⁱ

Nonviolence, though, is not limited to large-scale social change. It is a transformative process applicable to all dimensions of life. It is the everyday technologies of nonviolence, including nonviolent

communication, compassionate listening, peace circles, peaceful parenting, trauma healing, anti-racism training, and nonviolent community-building for personal and interpersonal transformation.

Taking up active nonviolence in our own life involves:

- Recognizing our own violent tendencies. The word “nonviolence” is mostly composed of the word “violence.”
- Acknowledging that we live in a culture of violence. Violence is systemic -- and this system of violence and domination shapes us: It is a belief system that seeps into our souls and our choices.
- Renouncing violence. Nonviolence calls us to acknowledge our violence and to grapple with it; to grow beyond our belief in violence; to break the cycles of retaliatory violence; to pursue nonviolent options and justice for all with humility, compassion, openness and determination; and to put our nonviolent power and potential into practice in our lives and our world here and now, and going forward.
- Practicing the nonviolent option. Moving from Dominating Behavior to Intimacy.
- Resisting the systems of violence. Explicitly owning our violence.

Gospel Nonviolence

But what does our faith have to say about nonviolence?

In short, nonviolence is the way God wants us to live.

We know this because of how Jesus lived. In his age rife with structural violence and oppression, Jesus proclaimed a nonviolent Reign of God rooted in the unconditional love of God. He called on his disciples to love their enemies (Matthew 5: 44); 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 person 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 risked intervening nonviolently to prevent the execution of a woman accused of adultery (John 8: 1-11); and when, on the night before he died, he commanded Peter to put down his sword (Matthew 26: 52). In vision and deed, Jesus is the revelation and embodiment of the Nonviolent God, a truth especially illuminated in the Cross and Resurrection.

Violence is utterly opposed to the Gospel – and nonviolence is at the heart of the Gospel. Gospel nonviolence is a way of life marked by three foundational dimensions of Jesus’ spirituality: unconditional love in action; rejection of violence; and the healing power of restorative justice.

During its first three centuries, the Church practiced the nonviolence that Jesus taught and lived. “Later, the spirit of Gospel nonviolence was maintained by particular individuals, communities and movements within the Church, even when the institution itself had wavered in its commitment.” There is a historical lineage of those who have lived the costly and joyful nonviolent life—from the apostles and disciples of the first century, to the mothers and fathers of the desert, to Saint Martin of Tours and Saint Maximilian, to Saint Francis and Saint Clare in the thirteenth century, to Dorothy Day, Cesar Chavez and Oscar Romero of our own time.

Too often, though, “the institutional Church has perpetrated or failed to prevent egregious violence, reinforced by a theological, pastoral and ecclesiastical culture that has often permitted and even sanctified violence. Over the past century, however, this tradition of nonviolent Christianity has increasingly re-emerged in Church documents, scripture scholarship, theology, Catholic social teaching and the lived

experience of Catholics around the world who have been consciously living the nonviolent life as a spiritual journey and as a courageous witness for justice, peace and reconciliation.

This growing reassertion of Gospel nonviolence is not an accident. In an era of global direct, cultural, and structural violence – and at a time when the Church itself is grappling with its own violence, including the systemic clergy abuse crisis and its lack of the full embrace of the LGBTQIA communities—it is, I suspect, the Spirit’s grace that is prodding the Church to slowly rediscover Jesus’ nonviolence.

The Church Begins to Turn Toward Gospel Nonviolence

In April 2016, the Vatican hosted the landmark “Nonviolence and Just Peace” conference in Rome, co-sponsored with Pax Christi International, the global Catholic peace movement. For a year a number of us helped organize this assembly, which brought together participants from around the world. Central to the conversation were voices of people living in the midst of acute violence. The conference concluded by issuing *An Appeal to the Catholic Church to Recommit to the Centrality of Gospel Nonviolence*, which made a series of recommendations for integrating nonviolence throughout the Church. As part of this, we respectfully asked Pope Francis to share with the Church and the world an encyclical on nonviolence and peace.

In the wake of this gathering, Pax Christi International launched the global Catholic Nonviolence Initiative to work toward these goals.

In 2017 Pope Francis shared with humanity the World Day of Peace message entitled, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace.”ⁱⁱⁱ In this first ever papal World Day of Peace message on nonviolence Pope Francis proclaimed: “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.”ⁱⁱⁱ This powerful declaration accelerated the growing rediscovery of the centrality of nonviolence to the vision of Jesus and to the life and work of the Church.

To support this growing recommitment to nonviolence, the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative began in 2017 to organize an international research project on the biblical, theological, ethical, pastoral and strategic dimensions of nonviolence. Encouraged by the Vatican, this process involved 120 theologians, scholars, and practitioners from around the world. In April 2019 these findings were shared at the second Vatican consultation on nonviolence in Rome entitled “Path of Nonviolence: Towards a Culture of Peace,” where we joined with participants from across the globe—including scholars and peacebuilders from contexts of extreme violence, as well as cardinals and archbishops.^{iv}

One of the bishops captured the essence of what was shared at this assembly by declaring toward the end, “We need to mainstream nonviolence in the Church. We need to move it from the margins of Catholic thought to the center. Nonviolence is a spirituality, a lifestyle, a program of societal action and a universal ethic.”^v

A papal encyclical on nonviolence and peace would boldly support this process. It could provide the Church and the world with a robust theological, pastoral and strategic framework for the shift from the world’s operating system of violent domination to the paradigm of the fullness of life. It would complement and enrich the key themes of Catholic Social Teaching. It would spur the Church to more eagerly embrace and integrate nonviolence and peace at every level of the universal Church. While we can pass laws against violence, we cannot pass laws mandating nonviolence. Instead, we have to build a culture where the nonviolent option is credible, documented, learned, and activated. In this spirit, let us imagine integrating nonviolence throughout the life of the Church: in its preaching, sacraments, ministries, spirituality, and formation processes in every dioceses, parish, religious order, school,

university, seminary, and ministry. The Catholic Church can become a Nonviolent Church for a more just and peaceful world.

In its teaching function, such an encyclical could foster nonviolence and peace education in the Church and the larger world. This could deepen conversion from violence to nonviolence and also stimulate the spread of training and education in nonviolence and peace. As historical experience and rigorous scholarship has shown, nonviolent strategies are critical to achieving the far-reaching change needed in our time. Pope Francis has applauded and inspired popular movements. This support could be dramatically increased and made even more effective by explicitly advancing the principles, methods and strategies of active nonviolence.

What We Can Do Now

We believe this new footing would make a difference in our lives, our parishes, and our world. It would not happen overnight – it would likely take decades and even generations for the Church to fully take on Jesus’ nonviolence. But it could be a dramatic call to conversion in how we see the world and one another. And not only how we see the world but how we act with one another.

But for this to happen, it would still come down to building this out diocese by diocese and parish by parish. The good news is that we don’t have to wait for an encyclical or for the full roll out. We can start now, even in our own parish.

The local parish is the privileged site for nurturing Jesus’ Way of Gospel Nonviolence. As the setting in which Catholics most often celebrate, learn about, and practice their faith, the parish is the place where this Way of Gospel Nonviolence can be discovered and nourished—liturgically, sacramentally, catechetically, and pastorally.

Many parishes already engage in the way of nonviolent love, especially in organizing particular ministries and in practicing the works of mercy. At the same time, most parishes can go more deeply into Jesus’ Way of Gospel Nonviolence by:

- Regularly engaging in theological and pastoral reflection on the baptismal calling of all Catholics to be peacemakers and to reject all forms of violence
- Explicitly lifting up Gospel nonviolence as a central dimension of the mission of the parish
- Providing resources for building the capacity of the parish and its members to be agents of Gospel nonviolence in their lives, in the church, and in the larger world
- Concretely engaging the violence and injustice in their neighborhoods and cities, including collaborating with other parishes, organizations, and movements in the process of addressing structural violence.

The Parish Checklist

- ___ A parish Gospel Nonviolence Committee to assist the parish in assessing how the parish could become more centered in Jesus’ call to Gospel Nonviolence, including in its:
- ___ Liturgy and preaching
- ___ Sacraments: baptism, reconciliation, holy communion, confirmation, holy orders, marriage, anointing of the sick
- ___ RCIA and ongoing faith formation (study groups, retreats, workshops)
- ___ Clergy, pastoral team, and parish council trained in conflict resolution and restorative justice
- ___ Where applicable, the parish school—students, teachers, administrators, parents

- ___ Ministries
- ___ Work in the larger neighborhood, city, world

Conclusion

As we conclude, let us return to our text from Pope Francis: “Start a revolution, shake things up. The world is deaf; you have to open its ears.”

We take this call seriously not only because these words, I think, are unprecedented – I don’t know of a pope ever having actually said those precise words, espousing revolution, but also because this really is our mandate in this moment, delivered not only by the pope but by billions trapped in sweltering systems of oppression, by the earth careening toward catastrophe, and, I believe, by our God who longs for the fullness of life for all, and who calls us to break the chains of violence and injustice.

We have more power than we think. Let’s link arms and move forward into the unknown – to open the ears and hearts of the world to pursue the “more excellent way” of nonviolent change.

And let’s pray for one another. At the end of his encounter with the three French activists, Pope Francis said, “I have a very difficult job, pray for me. ...And if there are some among you who do not pray, then send me good vibes.”

Let’s all, at least, send good, nonviolent vibes to one another, and to the world! Thank you.

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- ⁱ According to research conducted by Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, which culminated in their 2011 book, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Columbia University Press), nonviolent resistance against formidable opponents, including those with predominant military power, has been twice as successful as armed struggle. They examined 323 violent and nonviolent campaigns against incumbent regimes and foreign military occupations from 1900-2006 and found that the nonviolent campaigns succeeded, in terms of stated political objectives, about 54 percent of the time, compared to 27 percent for violent campaigns.
- ⁱⁱ Message Of His Holiness Pope Francis For The Celebration Of The Fiftieth World Day Of Peace, 1 January 2017, “Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace” http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*
- ^{iv} “Faith leaders, peace practitioners deepen Church’s commitment to nonviolence and peace,” <https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/2019/04/03/path-of-nonviolence-toward-a-culture-of-peace/>
- ^v Bishop Robert McElroy, Statement, “Path of Nonviolence: Toward a Culture of Peace,” symposium, Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, Vatican City, April 4-5, 2019.