Christian nonviolence is not built on a presumed division but on the basic unity of humans. It is not out for the conversion of the wicked to the ideas of the good, but for the healing and reconciliation of humans with themselves and the human family.

For this very reason, as Gandhi saw, the consistent practice of nonviolence demands a solid metaphysical and religious basis both in being and in God. This comes before subjective good intentions and sincerity . . . for the Christian, the basis of nonviolence is the Gospel message of salvation for all and of the Kingdom of God to which all are summoned.

The great historical event, the coming of the Kingdom, is made clear and is “realized” in proportion as Christians themselves live the life of the Kingdom in the circumstances of their own place and time. The saving grace of God in the Lord Jesus is proclaimed to humans existentially in the love, the openness, the simplicity, the humility and the self sacrifice of Christians. By their example of a truly Christian understanding of the world, expressed in a living and active application of the Christian faith to the human problems of their own time, Christians manifest the love of Christ for humans (John 13:35, 17:21), and by that fact make him visibly present in the world. The religious basis of Christian nonviolence is then faith in Christ the Redeemer and obedience to his demand to love and manifest himself in us by a certain manner of acting in the world and in relation to others.

Note that Christian meekness, which is essential to true nonviolence, has this eschatological quality about it. It refrains from self-assertion and from violent aggression because it sees all things in the light of the great judgment. Hence it does not struggle and fight merely for this or that ephemeral gain. It struggles for the truth and the right which alone will stand in that day when all is to be tried by fire (I Corinthians 3:10-15).

Christian nonviolence and meekness imply a particular understanding of the power of human poverty and powerlessness when they are united with the invisible strength of Christ. The Beatitudes indeed convey a profound existential understanding of the dynamic of the Kingdom of God—a dynamic made clear in the parables of the mustard seed and of the yeast. This is a dynamism of patient and secret growth, in belief that out of the smallest, weakest, and most insignificant seed the greatest tree will come. This is not merely a matter of blind and arbitrary faith. The early history of the Church, the record of the apostles and martyrs remains to testify to this inherent and mysterious dynamism of the ecclesial “event” in the world of history and time. Christian nonviolence is rooted in this consciousness and this faith.
The Christian can renounce the protection of violence and risk being humble, therefore vulnerable, not because s/he trusts in the supposed efficacy of a gentle and persuasive tactic that will disarm hatred and tame cruelty, but because s/he believes that the bidden power of the Gospel is demanding to be manifested in and through their own poor person. Hence, in perfect obedience to the Gospel, the Christian effaces the self and one's own interests and even risks their lives in order to testify not simply to "the truth" in a sweeping, idealistic and purely platoninc sense, but to the truth that is incarnate in a concrete human situation, involving living persons whose rights are denied or whose lives are threatened.

- The realism of nonviolence must be made evident by humility and self-restraint which clearly show frankness and open-mindedness and invite the adversary to serious and reasonable discussion.

- Instead of trying to use the adversary as leverage for one's own effort to realize an ideal, nonviolence seeks only to enter into a dialogue with them in order to attain, together with them, the common good of man. Nonviolence must be realistic and concrete. Like ordinary political action, it is no more than the "art of the possible."

- But precisely the advantage of nonviolence is that it has a more Christian and more humane notion of what is possible. Where the powerful believe that only power is efficacious, the nonviolent resister is persuaded of the superior efficacy of love, openness, peaceful negotiation and above all of truth.

Christian nonviolence, therefore, is convinced that the manner in which the conflict for truth is waged will itself manifest or obscure the truth. To fight for truth by dishonest, violent, inhuman, or unreasonable means would simply betray the truth one is trying to vindicate. The absolute refusal of evil or suspect means is a necessary element in the witness of nonviolence.

As Pope Paul said before the United Nations Assembly in 1965, "Men cannot be brothers if they are not humble. No matter how justified it may appear, pride provokes tensions and struggles for prestige, domination, colonialism and egoism. In a word pride shatters brotherhood." He went on to say that the attempts to establish peace on the basis of violence were in fact a manifestation of human pride. "If you wish to be brothers, let the weapons fall from your hands. You cannot love with offensive weapons in your hands."

Our willingness to take an alternative approach to a problem is crucial. It is the refusal of alternatives—a compulsive state of mind which one might call the "ultimatum complex"—which makes war in order to force the unconditional acceptance of one oversimplified interpretation of reality. This mission of Christian humility in social life is not merely to edify, but to keep minds open to many alternatives. The rigidity of a certain type of Christian thought has seriously impaired this capacity, which nonviolence must recover.

Christian hope and Christian humility are inseparable. The quality of nonviolence is decided largely by the purity of the Christian hope behind it. In its insistence on certain human values, the Second Vatican Council, following Pacem in Terris, displayed a basically optimistic trust in humans themselves. Not that there is not wickedness in the world, but today trust in God cannot be completely divorced from a certain trust in human beings. The Christian knows that there are radically sound possibilities in every human and believes that love and grace always have the power to bring out those possibilities at the most unexpected moments.
Despair is not permitted to the meek, the humble, the afflicted, the ones famished for justice, the merciful, the clean of heart and the peacemakers. All the beatitudes “hope against hope,” “bear everything, believe everything, hope for everything, endure everything” (1 Corinthians 13:7). The beatitudes are simply aspects of love. They refuse to despair of the world and abandon it to a supposedly evil fate which it has brought upon itself. Instead, like Christ himself the Christian takes up the yoke of the Savior, meek and humble of heart. This yoke is the burden of the world’s sin with all its confusions and all its problems. These sins, confusions and problems are our very own. We do not disown them.

The chief difference between nonviolence and violence is that the latter depends entirely on its own calculations. The former depends entirely on God and on His word.

Nonviolence is based on that respect for the human person without which there is no deep and genuine Christianity. It is understandable that the Second Vatican Council, which placed such strong emphasis on the dignity of the human person and the freedom of the individual conscience, should also have strongly approved “those who renounce the use of violence in the vindication of their rights and who resort to methods of defense which are otherwise available to weaker parties too” (Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, #78).

In such a confrontation between conflicting parties, on the level of personality, intelligence and freedom, instead of with massive weapons or with trickery and deceit, a fully human solution becomes possible. Conflict will never be abolished but a new way of solving it can become habitual.

Discussion Questions

How is Christian Nonviolence grounded in the Scriptures?

Why are the virtues of meekness and humility “out of fashion” in contemporary culture?

Why does Merton believe these virtues are essential for Christians?

Why did Pope Paul remind the world “you cannot love with offensive weapons in your hands?”

Merton declares that the quality of nonviolence is decided by the purity of Christian hope behind it. Is it difficult today to have hope for peace? Is it necessary for Christians? How can hope be supported and nourished? How can we create new alternatives and ideas of what is possible for humans in the global community?

Who can you share these words of Thomas Merton with?

How can you use the following peace prayer (see page 4), written by Thomas Merton, to further Christ’s peace in the world?
The following prayer was written by Thomas Merton. Congressman Frank Kowalski (D. Connecticut) read it aloud in the House of Representatives on April 12, 1962 (Wednesday in Holy Week).

Almighty and merciful God, Father of all men, Creator and Ruler of the Universe, Lord of History, whose designs are inscrutable, whose glory is without blemish, whose compassion for the errors of men is inexhaustible, in your will is our peace!

Mercifully hear this prayer which rises to you from the tumult and desperation of a world in which you are forgotten, in which your name is not invoked, your laws are derided and your presence is ignored. Because we do not know you, we have no peace.

From the heart of an eternal silence, you have watched the rise of empires and have seen the smoke of their downfall.

You have seen Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Rome, once powerful, carried away like sand in the wind.

You have witnessed the impious fury of ten thousand fratricidal wars, in which great powers have torn whole continents to shreds in the name of peace and justice.

And now our nation itself stands in imminent danger of a war the like of which has never been seen!

This nation dedicated to freedom, not to power, Has obtained, through freedom, a power it did not desire.

And seeking by that power to defend its freedom, it is enslaved by the processes and policies of power. Must we wage a war we do not desire, a war that can do us no good, and which our very hatred of war forces us to prepare?

A day of ominous decision has now dawned on this free nation. Armed with a titanic weapon, and convinced of our own right, We face a powerful adversary, armed with the same weapon, equally convinced that he is right.

In this moment of destiny, this moment we never foresaw, we cannot afford to fail. Our choice of peace or war may decide our judgment and publish it in an eternal record.

In this fatal moment of choice in which we might begin the patient architecture of peace. We may also take the last step across the rim of chaos. Save us then from our obsessions! Open our eyes, dissipate our confusions, teach us to understand ourselves an our adversary!

Let us never forget that sins against the law of love are punished by loss of faith, And those without faith stop at no crime to achieve their ends! Help us to be masters of the weapons that threaten to master us. Help us to use our science for peace and plenty, not for war and destruction. Show us how to use atomic power to bless our children’s children, not to blight them.

Save us from the compulsion to follow our adversaries in all that we most hate, confirming them in their hatred and suspicion of us. Resolve our inner contradictions, which now grow beyond belief and beyond bearing. They are at once a torment and a blessing: for if you had not left us the light of conscience, we would not have to endure them.

Teach us to be long-suffering in anguish and insecurity.

Teach us to wait and trust. Grant light, grant strength and patience to all who work for peace, To this Congress, our President, our military forces, and our adversaries.

Grant us prudence in proportion to our power, Wisdom in proportion to our science, Humaneness in proportion to our wealth and might. And bless our earnest will to help all races and peoples to travel, in friendship with us, Along the road to justice, liberty and lasting peace: But grant us above all to see that our ways are not necessarily your ways, That we cannot fully penetrate the mystery of your designs And that the very storm of power now raging on this earth Reveals your hidden will and your inscrutable decision. Grant us to see your face in the lightning of this cosmic storm, O God of holiness, merciful to me: Grant us to seek peace where it is truly found!

Amen.