

## Signs of the Times: From Just War to Just Peace

*The first Christians followed a Messiah of Peace, who demonstrated nonviolence in his actions and taught that peacemakers revealed their heritage as children of God.*

The early Church understood Jesus' call to redemptive suffering and rejected the concept of redemptive violence, which only destroys. On the cross, Jesus showed his followers "how to hold the pain and let it transform us, rather than pass it on to others around us,"<sup>1</sup> a tenet of nonviolence. But the pacifism of these early Christians was challenged as they became part of the Holy Roman Empire. The Church's Just War doctrine was first proposed by St. Augustine in the 4th century who sought to reconcile nonviolence with empire building. The Just War doctrine was fully developed by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 14th century and was used for centuries.

But in light of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings in WWII and afterwards, the Church has been re-examining this doctrine: civilian deaths and vast devastation have become too commonplace in modern conflicts and warfare. The belief that modern weapons of war and the threat of nuclear mass destruction make all violent conflicts unjust is reflected in Pope St. John Paul II's declaration during the Iraq War that "war is always a defeat for humanity," and that "violence and arms can never resolve the problems of man." He proclaimed that "only peace is the road to follow to construct a more just and united global society."<sup>2</sup> In declaring "May people learn to fight for justice without violence," John Paul was affirming the beliefs of his predecessors Blessed Pope Paul VI, who taught that "peace is the only true direction of human progress," and Pope St. John XXIII, who realized authentic development which supported the human dignity of all members of the human community could only be realized in a peaceful world.<sup>3</sup>



### Just Peace

Pope Francis has continued developing the concept of a just peace in his writings. In his January 2017 World Day of Peace message *Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace*, he makes clear that "violence is not the cure for our broken world. Countering violence with violence leads at best to forced migrations and enormous suffering..."<sup>4</sup> Francis laments because vast amounts of resources are being diverted to military ends and away from human needs, especially of those suffering at the margins; he calls again for disarmament and abolition of nuclear weapons and the rejection of fear as the basis of co-existence.

The Pope further challenges “political and religious leaders, heads of international institutions and business and media executives” to build up society by “active and creative nonviolence”:

*... show mercy by refusing to discard people, harm the environment, or seek to win at any cost. To do so requires “the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process.” To act in this way means to choose solidarity as a way of making history and building friendship in society. Active nonviolence is a way of showing that unity is truly more powerful and more fruitful than conflict. Everything in the world is inter-connected, Certainly differences can cause frictions. But let us face them constructively and non-violently, so that “tensions and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity,” preserving “what is valid and useful on both sides.”<sup>5</sup>*

## 2019 Vatican Meeting

Pope Francis’ 2017 message was prompted in part by a gathering at the Vatican in 2016 to study and promote the teaching of nonviolence. A follow-up Vatican meeting in April of 2019, *The Path of Nonviolence: Towards a Culture of Peace*, again brought together dozens of participants from 21 countries around the globe to deepen the understanding of, and commitment to, active nonviolence; this gathering was cosponsored by Pax Christi International’s Catholic Nonviolence Initiative and the Vatican’s office for Promoting Integral Human Development. Many attending came from communities experiencing violence, such as Honduras, Uganda, Pakistan, and Palestinian areas. The participants discussed the roots of violence and shared positive experiences of nonviolent actions and programs. A just peace ethical framework for Catholic thought on violence, war, and just peace was a central topic. The participants strongly urged the Church “to mainstream non-violence as a spirituality, a lifestyle, a program of societal action, and a universal ethic”; they renewed their call for Pope Francis to devote an entire encyclical to nonviolence.<sup>6</sup>

“We need to be artisans of peace, for building peace that is a craft that demands serenity, creativity, sensitivity and skills.”

Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate*

We are all challenged to end the tragedy of violence and to support the call for a new way forward. “Peace involves work, it is not about staying calm and doing nothing. True peace means working so that everyone has a solution to the problems, to the needs, that they have in their families, in their homeland, in society and in the global community.”<sup>7</sup> To claim our inheritance as children of God, we must become peacemakers and advocates for nonviolent solutions. Christ, who offers us peace, calls us all to walk on the journey to authentic peace on earth.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- In Genesis, God creates a world where humans and the earth are in harmony and peace, the primary Original Goodness. Jesus later declared that peacemakers are blessed and will be called the children of God; what do these images and messages from Scripture tell us about the importance of peacemaking to people of faith?
- Our culture inundates us with images of violence: how does this affect us? How can we balance this barrage of images with images and stories on peacemaking and peacemakers? Why is it important to do so?
- How can we share the positive news on peacemaking as part of the work Pope Francis calls us to? How else can we do our part of the work for peace?

## FAITH IN ACTION

Keep up with the signs of peacemaking and support Paz Christi International:

<https://www.paxchristi.net/>

## PRAYER

God, Creator of the harmony of Original Goodness, guide us to take on the work of peace. Give us hope so that we may claim our inheritance as children of God and be blessed. Grant us the wisdom, the strength and the courage to do this work joyfully, O Prince of Peace. Give us your generous grace so we may become peacemakers and heal the wounds of violence in our homes, our communities, our nation and the world. Amen

By Jane Deren, Ph.D.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*, Franciscan Media: 2008

<sup>2</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/january/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20030113\\_diplo-matic-corps.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20030113_diplo-matic-corps.html)

<sup>3</sup> [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco\\_20161208\\_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Maire Dennis, unpublished text, April 2019

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, Audience with children of the Peace Factory, May 12, 2015