

Making Active Nonviolence Our way of Life in the Church and the World



A 5 session discussion guide Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, *a project of Pax Christi International*



- **Cultivating Nonviolence** – *Introduction* with reflection on questions
- **Seeing Violence in our World Today** – *See* with reflection on questions
- **Discerning and Judging** based on the Good News of Jesus – *Judge* with reflection on questions
- **Acting with a force more powerful than violence** – *Judge and Act* with reflection on questions
- **Invitation to take up “active nonviolence”** – *Act* with reflection on questions

How to use

This resource has been produced primarily as a tool to reflect on nonviolence and secondly as means of gathering information. You might take a theme a week – holding a gathering of around one hour.

Tool: The readings that set the scene, reminding us of the invitation of Pope Francis to shape a Church made of “artisans of peace ” are taken from the 2017 World Peace Day message, *Nonviolence a Style of Politics for Peace*.

Information gathering: Pax Christi International and CNI would appreciate it if you could share responses to the questions/discussion outcomes with them. Where possible try to capture the name and location of the group using the questions and the number of people who took part. How many men/women/young people?

Way forward: Organise the reflection with groups from your community, institution or parish. Some examples of participants are youth groups, social action groups, women’s and men’s ministries, sports teams, prayer groups, etc. Make copies available to the group.

Action: How might your group plan for the

Catholic Nonviolence days of action : Following the Nonviolent Jesus *21 September – 2 October 2020*

Choose resources and activities that suit the time and needs of your community. There are lots of ideas available here to help you get started.

(<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1clGxHYMvrOyC0De7VtJ53WE7kq6HbNA9a52-XrQAMFQ/edit>)

Arrange a celebration on 2 October. At the celebration, invite your group/community to pray and reflect on the Vow of Nonviolence in communion with others around the world, many of whom renew this vow annually on 2 October. How might it change you / your community if you were to act out of it? (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NMv8on9IRESfalNQDyVsOHRVKonwNrfx/edit>)

Session I. Cultivating Nonviolence

"I wish peace to every man, woman and child, and I pray that the image and likeness of God in each person will enable us to acknowledge one another as sacred gifts endowed with immense dignity. Especially in situations of conflict, let us respect this, our "deepest dignity" and make active nonviolence our way of life." (*World Day of Peace, 2017, 1*)

"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." (*WDP 2017, 1*)

Questions

1. Have you ever heard of nonviolence? What do you associate with that word?
2. What are some positive responses to the call for gospel nonviolence you can identify in your community, in your local Church, in the Church as the Family of God?
3. How is gospel nonviolence integrated as a core value in your family's life? your living ecclesial community? your parish? or your diocese?

Session II. Seeing Violence in Our World Today

"Today, sadly, we find ourselves engaged in a horrifying *world war fought piecemeal*. It is not easy to know if our world is presently more or less violent than in the past, or to know whether modern means of communications and greater mobility have made us more aware of violence, or, on the other hand, increasingly inured to it.

In any case, we know that this "piecemeal" violence, of different kinds and levels, causes great suffering: wars in different countries and continents; terrorism, organized crime and unforeseen acts of violence; the abuses suffered by migrants and victims of human trafficking; and the devastation of the environment. Where does this lead? Can violence achieve any goal of lasting value? Or does it merely lead to retaliation and a cycle of deadly conflicts that benefit only a few "warlords"?

Violence is not the cure for our broken world. Countering violence with violence leads at best to forced migrations and enormous suffering, because vast amounts of resources are diverted to military ends and away from the everyday needs of young people, families experiencing hardship, the elderly, the infirm and the great majority of people in our world. At worst, it can lead to the death, physical and spiritual, of many people, if not of all." (*WDP 2017, 2*)

Questions:

1. What violence do you see in everyday life--in families, community, neighborhood, or diocese at different levels? Your country? International relationships?
2. Where is your community impacted by the violence of hunger and poverty?
3. What are the impacts of the ecological violence around you?

Session III. Discerning and Judging Based on the Good News of Jesus

“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” (Mk 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. (WDP 2017, 3)

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”.^[4] He went on to stress that: “For Christians, nonviolence is not merely tactical behaviour 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’”.^[5] 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”.^[6] (WDP 2017, 3)

5. If violence has its source in the human heart, then it is fundamental that nonviolence be practised before all else within families. This is part of that joy of love which I described ... in my Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, in the wake of two years of reflection by the Church on marriage and the family. The family is the indispensable crucible in which spouses, parents and children, brothers and sisters, learn to communicate and to show generous concern for one another, and in which frictions and even conflicts have to be resolved not by force but by dialogue, respect, concern for the good of the other, mercy and forgiveness.^[16] From within families, the joy of love spills out into the world and radiates to the whole of society. ^[17] An ethics of fraternity and peaceful coexistence between individuals and among peoples cannot be based on the logic of fear, violence and closed-mindedness, but on responsibility, respect and sincere dialogue. (WDP 2017, 5)

The politics of nonviolence have to begin in the home and then spread to the entire human family. “Saint Therese of Lisieux invites us to practice the little way of love, not to miss out on a kind word, a smile or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship. An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures that break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness”.^[19] (WDP 2017, 5)

Questions:

1. What are some key lessons from the gospel that can enrich one's commitment to nonviolence?
2. How can faith in Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace and what we know of Jesus' life and witness, help us to promote gospel nonviolence in the Church and in the society?

Session IV. Acting with a force more powerful than violence

4. Nonviolence is sometimes taken to mean surrender, lack of involvement and passivity, but this is not the case. When Mother Teresa received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, she clearly stated her own message of active nonviolence: “We in our family don't need bombs and guns, to destroy to bring peace – just get together, love one another... And we will be able to overcome all the evil that is in the world”.^[7] For the force of arms is deceptive. “While weapons traffickers do their work, there are poor peacemakers who give their lives to help one person, then another and another and another”; for such peacemakers, Mother Teresa is “a symbol, an icon of our times”.^[8] (WDP 2017, 4)

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.

Nor can we forget the eventful decade that ended with the fall of Communist regimes in Europe. The Christian communities made their own contribution by their insistent prayer and courageous action. Particularly influential were the ministry and teaching of Saint John Paul II. Reflecting on the events of 1989 in his 1991 Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, my predecessor highlighted the fact that momentous change in the lives of people, nations and states had come about “by means of peaceful protest, using only the weapons of truth and justice”.^[10] This peaceful political transition was made possible in part “by the non-violent commitment of people who, while always refusing to yield to the force of power, succeeded time after time in finding effective ways of bearing witness to the truth”. Pope John Paul went on to say: “May people learn to fight for justice without violence, renouncing class struggle in their internal disputes and war in international ones”.^[11]

The Church has been involved in nonviolent peacebuilding strategies in many countries, engaging even the most violent parties in efforts to build a just and lasting peace.

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”.^[12] I emphatically reaffirm that “no religion is terrorist”.^[13] Violence profanes the name of God.^[14] 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!”^[15] (WDP 2017, 4)

Questions:

1. How do we all respond (as bishops, priests, consecrated persons, laypersons and ecclesial formation institutions) to the call to gospel nonviolence?
2. What are you doing in your community to promote gospel nonviolence as a way of living in love with all creation?

Part V. Pope Francis’ invitation to take up “active nonviolence”

6. Peacebuilding through active nonviolence is the natural and necessary complement to the Church’s continuing efforts to limit the use of force by the application of moral norms; she does so by her participation in the work of international institutions and through the competent contribution made by so many Christians to the drafting of legislation at all levels. Jesus himself offers a “manual” for this strategy of peacemaking in the Sermon on the Mount. The eight Beatitudes (cf. *Mt* 5:3-10) provide a portrait of the person we could describe as blessed, good and authentic. Blessed are the meek, Jesus tells us, the merciful and the peacemakers, those who are pure in heart, and those who hunger and thirst for justice.

This is also a programme and a challenge for political and religious leaders, the heads of international institutions, and business and media executives: to apply the Beatitudes in the exercise of their respective responsibilities. It is a challenge to build up society, communities and businesses by acting as peacemakers. It is to 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”.^[20] 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.^[21] 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”.^[22]

I pledge the assistance of the Church in every effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence. (WDP 2017, 6)

Questions:

1. Pope Francis invites us to “active nonviolence.” Have you ever heard of Pope Francis’ call to nonviolence? Has this invitation been shared in your community or local church?
2. Are there any initiatives for disseminating it and making it better known? What are they?
3. What else could be done to motivate more “active nonviolence” in response to Pope Francis’ call?

Prayers and Peace

1. Mary is the Queen of Peace. At the birth of her Son, the angels gave glory to God and wished peace on earth to men and women of good will (cf. *Luke 2:14*). Let us pray for her guidance.

“All of us want peace. Many people build it day by day through small gestures and acts; many of them are suffering, yet patiently persevere in their efforts to be peacemakers”.^[24] May we dedicate ourselves prayerfully and actively to banishing violence from our hearts, words and deeds, and to becoming nonviolent people and to building nonviolent communities that care for our common home. “Nothing is impossible if we turn to God in prayer. Everyone can be an artisan of peace”.^[25]

2. Give me a heart of poverty,
able to love and open up and give myself to others
Give me a heart of patience,
able to love and live in hope.
Give me a heart of justice,
able to love and measure myself by the standard of justice.
Give me a heart of mercifulness,
able to love and understand and forgive others.
Give me a heart of sensitivity,
able to love and weep without being discouraged
Give me a heart of strength,
able to love and be faithful unto death.
Give me a heart touched by the Gospel,
able to love

(Adapted from WCC prayer – full prayer on Pax Christi E&W prayer card)

3. How I wish that all men and
women of good will would look at
the Cross if only for a moment!
There, we can see God's reply:
violence is not answered
with violence,
death is not answered with the
language of death
In the silence of the cross,
The uproars of weapons ceases
And the language of reconciliation,
Forgiveness, dialogue and peace is spoken

Pope Francis

Pour out on us the power of your love,
that we may protect life and beauty.
Fill us with peace, that we may live
As brothers and sisters, harming no one...
Bring healing to our lives
that we may protect the world and
not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty
not pollution and destruction.
Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain
at the expense of the poor and the earth.
Encourage us, we pray, our struggle for justice, love and peace

(Adapted from Laudato Si, Pope Francis, 2015)

Send responses or summary reports – individual or group based – to the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, a project of Pax Christi International at nonviolence@paxchristi.net.

Thank you!