



Discipleship of Nonviolence

Reflection

Naming the Culture of Violence

We live in a culture of violence, and we have seen and felt its presence. This culture erodes family life, destroys communities, and tests our faith. It seems we have only to turn on the news, read a newspaper, sit in a traffic jam, wait in line at a checkout counter, or listen to conversations and language as we walk down a street, to verify the presence of violence. It tears apart our social fabric. Its influence is felt on both local and global levels.

When we look closely at our own lives, we can see ways in which we contribute to this culture of violence personally and collectively. It begins with anger, intolerance, impatience, unfair judgments, and aggression. It is reflected in our language, entertainment, driving, competitive attitudes, and how we relate to our environment. Though these attitudes and acts are not identical with abusive behavior or physical attacks, they still create a climate of violence and lack of peace.¹

The Call to Authentic Nonviolence: Imagining a Nonviolent World

As we follow the prophetic tradition of denouncing the sin embodied in violence, we can not only name the culture of violence, but also declare this culture as the clearest sign of our failure as a society.

As Christians, we cannot ignore the moral and human costs of so much violence in our midst. We are called “to infuse a Christian spirit into people’s mental outlook and daily behavior, into the laws and structures” of our neighborhoods, state, nation, world.² We are called to live in ways that transform the structures that block love in our world. We are called to authentic nonviolence, to imagine a peaceable world, and to follow the witness of the nonviolent Jesus in bringing this world into being.³

Perhaps the greatest challenge is the call to examine our lives, our choice of generosity over self-centeredness, of family and community commitment over individuality and ambition.⁴ In our imagining of a peaceable world, we have the example of Jesus, the words of Scripture, the insight of Catholic social teaching, and the witness of all those who, over time and space, have modeled for us the transformative power of nonviolence.

Evolution of Christian Nonviolence

Christian nonviolence begins with the life and witness of Jesus. Jesus called for a love that went beyond family ties and bonds of friendship to reach even those who were enemies.⁵ He manifested forgiveness, pointed out the injustices of his time, and refused to defend himself with force or violence. In doing these things, he made God’s mercy present in a world familiar with violence, injustice and oppression.⁶

Jesus’ example of nonviolence continues to speak to the ages. His approach to peacemaking became a hallmark of the early Christian community. His preaching was reflected and witnessed to in the lives of holy ones such as St. Justin, St. Cyprian, St. Martin of Tours, and St. Francis of Assisi. Closer to our time, Jesus’ witness of nonviolence is given contemporary expression in the words and actions of many people of faith, including Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II, Dorothy Day, and Martin

Luther King, Jr. Peacemaking organizations and collective efforts continue to respond to the culture of violence by creatively working to support a counterculture of nonviolence. The Family Pledge of Nonviolence and Pax Christi's Vow of Nonviolence are powerful examples of this movement. Over and over again, the value of nonviolence has been extolled in Catholic social teaching, which places nonviolence squarely at the heart of following Jesus. As the U.S. Catholic Bishops have recently stated, peacemaking is essential to our mission of proclaiming the gospel and renewing the earth.⁷

The journey into nonviolence, then, is not a once-and-for-all experience, but the work of a lifetime, an ongoing movement of following Jesus. This demands continual conversion in our own lives as we seek to act in ways that are just, forgiving, and filled with the love of God's reign.⁸

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action* (November 1994), p. 8.

² Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio (The Development of Peoples)* (March 26, 1967), 81.

³ Matthew 5:1–12.

⁴ *Confronting a Culture of Violence*, p. 15.

⁵ Luke 6:27–28.

⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* (1983), 45–49.

⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace: A Reflection of the National Conference of Bishops on the Tenth Anniversary of "The Challenge of Peace"* (1993), p. 21.

⁸ *The Challenge of Peace*, 54.