

JustComment

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From Just War to Just Peace

'From Brazil to Africa, to Bangladesh, Burma, China and to the Philippines stretches the large family of humble people - Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, who are discovering this liberating force of nonviolence as they are about to build new societies aimed at justice, participation and peace...'¹

We live in exciting times. Though our world is studded by acts of violence and conflict from the Middle East to West Papua, from the Philippines to parts of Latin America and Sri Lanka to Africa, people remain convinced that the default position of responding to violence with more violence is unviable and ineffective. It is not in accord with being a follower of Jesus, who incarnates the God of Peace.

In April, on the 50th anniversary of Pope John XXIII's release of the encyclical **Peace on Earth (Pacem in terris)**, a ground-breaking and unprecedented conference was held in Rome called **Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence**. Co-hosted by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International, a movement for peace founded in 1945, the conference hosted 85 nonviolence and peacemaking practitioners from around the world.

Many of these people have shown in their own bodies the scars of doing life differently when it comes to violence and war. The move away in the Catholic Church from the just war theory as 'settled teaching' to a more expansive call to proactive peacemaking is not really new. It has been questioned by Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and now Francis. Its rationale was, *'To seek peace, deep peace rooted in justice, shalom – not a mere absence of war, but the fullness of life for all – that is the Christian vocation and way of life. As followers of the One who is Peace, who on the cross overcame the violence of our world and who then called for peace and modelled forgiveness, we are called to help move our broken and violated world toward the full flowering of the New Creation, repeating Jesus' way of active, nonviolent, persistent, risky, creative peacemaking.'*

Conference attendees came with a view that the 'just war' doctrine² needed to be rejected for a 'just peace' paradigm and that Pope Francis write an Encyclical on peace and nonviolence. Pope Francis' powerful statement of welcome and support to the conference began a conversation about Catholic teaching on war and peace which would reject 'just war' and engage in a spirituality and practice of nonviolent peacemaking as lived and taught by Jesus. The 'just war' doctrine was deceptive. It led people to think that because a war was declared as just, that it was actually a good thing. However, even when a just war may have been permissible, it was still an evil. Conference participants envisioned



concrete ways to deepen an understanding of, and commitment to, active nonviolence; find alternative frameworks that engage with and transform conflict by nonviolent ways such as building trust and just peace; encourage and promote a global conversation on nonviolence and respond to violence and injustice with strategies of nonviolent peacemaking and peacebuilding.

Pope Francis began to question this thinking before the conference when he said that 'many powerful people don't want peace because they live off war... Some powerful people make their living with the production of arms... It's the industry of death'. In meetings with the people, especially children, he has focused on peace, how to build it and how to keep it.³

In this he challenged the military-industrial complex – those who make and export armaments as well as exporting poverty.

In his powerful message of support to the conference, Pope Francis alluded to a world war that occurs in instalments: "In order to seek solutions to the unique and terrible 'world war in instalments' which, directly or indirectly, a large part of humankind is presently undergoing..." we need 'true peace' where it is necessary to bring people together concretely so as to reconcile peoples and groups with opposing ideological positions. It is also necessary to work together for what persons, families, peoples and nations feel is their right, namely, to participate on a social, political and economic level in the goods of the modern world.

The Pope encouraged discussion on 'revitalising the tools of non-violence, and of active non-violence in particular...' and that conflict must be faced and not ignored or concealed so as not to remain trapped within a framework of conflict. He went on to remind the conference participants that the greatest obstacle to be removed is the 'wall of indifference' that affects not only our fellow human beings but also the natural environment, with consequences for security and peace.

The conference consisted of people from South Africa, Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan, Palestine, Iraq, Croatia, Philippines, Colombia, Mexico and Australia. Many had paid the price for continuing to engage with the so-called 'enemy'. They had seen colleagues, friends and family members murdered, disappeared, imprisoned or tortured, or themselves suffered these traumas, yet deeply convinced that nonviolence works and is effective. These were the experts that speak more loudly than those who are sceptical of any 'just peace' paradigm that Pope Francis alluded to in his statement. Pope Francis referred to these people who did not ignore the 'formidable undertaking to work for peace by living the practice of non-

violence' despite the milieu of violence they live in by recognising the humanity of the 'other' and maintaining links, building bridges and overcoming fear by pursuing open and sincere, yet difficult practice of dialogue.

The final report of the conference ***An Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-Commit to the Centrality of Gospel Nonviolence*** reminded us all for the need for forgiveness as ***'We confess that the people of God have betrayed this central message of the Gospel many times, participating in wars, persecution, oppression, exploitation, and discrimination.'***

This report went on to say, that *'...the Word of God, the witness of Jesus, should never be used to justify violence, injustice or war.'* It also states that there is no 'just war'. It has been used to endorse rather than prevent or limit war. To suggest that a 'just war' is possible undermines the moral imperative to develop tools and capacities for nonviolent transformation of conflict. The call is to find a new framework and shift to a 'just peace' approach based on Gospel nonviolence. This offers a vision and an ethic that strives to build peace that comes by committing to human dignity and thriving relationships in order to prevent, defuse, and to heal the damage of violent conflict. The belief was that whilst anyone resorts to military force, there will be no attempt to find alternatives that can and do make a difference.

Pax Christi International co-president, Marie Dennis, said, 'As long as we say that dropping bombs will solve the problem we won't find other solutions and I think that's more and more clear to us.' The challenge is to invest creative energy, deep thinking, financial and human resources that could make a difference. The truth is that modern wars have rendered the just war theory obsolete and minimalist. It had a negative focus, emphasising war and

'It (war) is out of date for our world of today... Any war is a destruction. There is no justice in destruction... It is outdated... We should not give now, at this moment, reasons for war. Let us block them and promote relationships of harmony, of brother and sisterhood, rather than going for war.'⁴

not peace. The distinction between just and unjust wars do not account for the massive, indiscriminate violence of modern war. Modern warfare has resulted in casualties among civilians upward of 80% to 90%. These figures alone must determine that just war theory is still not permissible.

The challenge is to ensure that more people know about nonviolence, its techniques and understand that peace is not the absence of conflict or war but a new vision of 'shalom', just peace, where we take care of the earth, stop killing people and rebuild a world where all people have enough food, housing, healthcare, education, employment and respect as persons. This takes imagination and creativity. It takes courage and strength from other for the long haul.... but there is no other way to peace.

'Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start.'

Pope Francis
Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home

The author of this article was the only Australian to attend the conference in Rome. Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website www.erc.org.au



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