

Catholic Social Teaching and Gospel Nonviolence

(From "THE GOD OF PEACE: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF NONVIOLENCE")

Roman Catholic social teaching on justice and peace dates back over one hundred years. In the past thirty years, this "new" tradition has opened the door to a theology of peace. A simple review of the church's social teachings on justice and peace may shed light on our theology of nonviolence. This new theology can learn from Pacem in Terris, the Second Vatican Council's stand on peace, recent social teachings, the US Catholic bishops' pastoral letter, The Challenge of Peace, and other recent statements on war and violence. With this background, we will be better able to examine how the church is moving beyond the age-old just war theory and back to the roots of Gospel nonviolence.

Pacem in Terris: A Public Cry for Peace

A few months after the world came to the brink of nuclear warfare, during the Cuban missile crisis, John XXIII issued the church's strongest plea for peace. His 1963 Easter tidings broke new ground immediately because it was addressed "to all men and women of goodwill," not just the Christian community. The document took principles of traditional social doctrine, made them universal, and rooted them in the Gospel call for peace. Pacem in Terris suggests that peace is "founded on truth, built according to justice, vivified and integrated by charity, and put into practice in freedom."(#167) It declares that "every human is a person endowed with intelligence and free will, who has universal and inviolable rights and duties."(#9) Because of this foundation in human rights and justice, the peace proclaimed in Pacem in Terris questions all warfare and opens the door to a church of nonviolence:

Justice, right reason and humanity urgently demand that the arms race should cease; that the stockpiles which exist in various countries should be reduced equally and simultaneously; that nuclear arms should be banned, and a general agreement reached for a progressive disarmament... All must realize that there is no hope of putting an end to the building up of armaments...unless everyone sincerely cooperates to banish the fear and anxious expectations of war with which men and women are oppressed.(1)

Pacem in Terris raised the questions of peace and disarmament before the whole world and invited humanity to reexamine its recourse to war. In doing so, it invited a theology of nonviolence consistent with its vision of a peace with justice.

The Peacemaking Vision of "Gaudium et Spes"

Two years after Pacem in Terris, the Second Vatican Council took up the challenge of peace. The day before the Second Vatican Council was to address the threat of nuclear warfare, Pope Paul VI flew to New York City and issued an historic address at the United Nations calling for peace. "No more war! War never again!" he declared on October 4th, 1965, the feast of Francis of Assisi. By speaking to the United Nations, the Pope not only challenged the leaders of the world at the height of the Cold War, he sent a strong message to the Council itself: he was serious about peace, and in particular, about the theme of the new document now up for discussion, Gaudium et Spes. John XXIII's Pacem in Terris laid a momentous foundation for peace and Paul VI wanted that groundwork taken seriously.

Gaudium et Spes, "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," ratified on December 7, 1965, issued a breathtaking new vision for the church. It threw wide open the doors of the church, looked out on the world, affirmed humanity in its "joys and hopes, its griefs and anguishes," and called forth a new vision of love, human community and justice. It dealt with a plethora of topics: truth, conscience, freedom, death, atheism, the common good, the human person, social justice, solidarity, marriage, culture, economics, work, and property. In particular, however, it issued the only condemnation of the Second Vatican Council, a condemnation of nuclear war.

Early on in Gaudium et Spes, Jesus' command to love enemies is restated as a foundational mandate. In its concluding chapter, "The Fostering of Peace and the Establishment of a Community of Nations," the challenge of peace is directly taken up. In its own words, the document "outlined the true and noble nature of peace, condemned the savagery of war, and earnestly exhorted Christians to cooperate with all in securing a peace based on justice and charity."(2)

The introduction to the concluding section on peace in Gaudium et Spes (#77) begins with praise for peacemakers and notes that these are critical times in human history. "In our generation, which has been marked by the persistent and acute hardships and anxiety resulting from the ravages of war and the threat of war, the whole human race faces a moment of supreme crisis in its advance towards maturity," the document declares. Then, peace is defined as "more than the absence of war."

[Peace] cannot be reduced to the maintenance of a balance of power between opposing forces nor does it arise out of despotic dominion, but it is appropriately called the "effect of justice" (Is. 32"17). It is the fruit of that right ordering of things with which the divine founder has invested human society and which must be actualized by humanity thirsting after an ever more perfect reign of justice.... Peace cannot be obtained on earth unless the welfare of humanity is safeguarded and people freely and trustingly share with one another the riches of their minds and their talents. A firm determination to respect the dignity of other peoples along with the deliberate practice of love are absolutely necessary for the achievement of peace. Accordingly, peace is also the fruit of love, for love goes beyond what justice can ensure.(#77-78)

"All Christians are earnestly to speak the truth in love and join with all peace-loving men and women in pleading for peace and trying to bring it about," the document continues. Then, those who act nonviolently in the tradition of Jesus are upheld as examples: "In the same spirit we cannot but express our admiration for all who forgo the use of violence to vindicate their rights and resort to those other means of defense which are available to weaker parties, provided it can be done without harm to the rights and duties of others and of the community."

Only by actively seeking peace and renouncing violence can Christians fulfill Isaiah's vision of people "beating their swords into plowshares," the Council declared:

The savagery of war threatens to lead the combatants to barbarities far surpassing those of former ages.... Any action which deliberately violates the principles [of natural law] and any order which commands such actions is criminal and blind obedience cannot excuse those who carry them out. The most infamous among these actions are those designed for the reasoned and methodical extermination of an entire race, nation, or ethnic minority. These must be condemned as frightful crimes; and we cannot commend too highly the courage of the men and women who openly and fearlessly resist those who issue orders of this kind.(#80)

The Council upheld the right of conscientious objection, addressing the topic for the first time since the practice of conscientious objection was lauded during the age of the martyrs in the first three centuries: "Laws should make humane provision for the case of conscientious objectors who refuse to carry arms, provided they accept some other form of community service." The specifics of war were then analyzed:

It is one thing to wage a war of self-defense; it is quite another to seek to impose domination on another nation. The possession of war potential does not justify the use of force for political or military objectives. Nor does the mere fact that war has unfortunately broken out mean that all is fair between the warring parties.(#80)

The nuclear threat is then discussed in sober terms:

The development of armaments by modern science has immeasurably magnified the horrors and wickedness of war. Warfare conducted with these weapons can inflict immense and indiscriminate havoc which goes far beyond the bounds of legitimate defense. Indeed if the kind of weapons now stocked in the arsenals of the great powers were to be employed to the fullest, the result would be the almost complete reciprocal slaughter of one side by the other, not to speak of the widespread devastation that would follow in the world and the deadly after-effects resulting from the use of such arms. (#80)

With this spectre of nuclear holocaust hanging over our heads, the Council made a modest but profound declaration: "All these factors force us to undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude." Then, The Council issued the only condemnation of the whole Council:

People of this generation should realize that they will have to render an account of their warlike behavior; the destiny of generations to come depends largely on the decisions they make today. With these considerations in mind the Council, endorsing the condemnations of total warfare issued by recent Popes declares: Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and humanity, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation. The arms race is no infallible way of maintaining real peace and the resulting so-called balance of power is no sure and genuine path to achieving it. Rather than eliminate the causes of war, the arms race serves only to aggravate the position. As long as extravagant sums of money are poured into the development of new weapons, it is impossible to devote adequate aid in tackling the misery which prevails at the present day in the world. Instead of eradicating inter-national conflict once and for all, the contagion is spreading to other parts of the world. (#80-81)

"Therefore," the document states in strong language, "we declare once again: the arms race is one of the greatest curses on the human race and the harm it inflicts on the poor is more than can be endured. And there is every reason to fear that if continues it will bring forth those lethal disasters which are already in preparation. Providence urgently demands of us that we free ourselves from the age-old slavery of war. If we refuse to make this effort, there is no knowing where we will be led on the fatal path we have taken." (#81)

The path towards disarmament is outlined:

It is our clear duty to spare no effort in order to work for the moment when all war will be completely outlawed by international agreement.... Since peace must be born of mutual trust between peoples instead of being forced on nations through dread of arms, all must work to put an end to the arms race and make a real beginning of disarmament, not unilaterally indeed but at an equal rate on all sides, on the basis of agreements and backed up by genuine and effective guarantees. (#82)

After encouraging the education of young people about the priority of peace, the Council declared:

Every one of us needs a change of heart; we must set our gaze on the whole world and look to those tasks we can all perform together in order to bring about the betterment of our race. Unless animosity and hatred are put aside, and firm, honest agreements about world peace are concluded, humanity may, in spite of the wonders of modern science, go from the grave crisis of the present day to that dismal hour, when the only peace it will experience will be the dread peace of death. The church, however, living in the midst of these anxieties, even as it makes these statements, has not lost hope. The church intends to propose to our age over and over again, in season and out of season, the apostle's message: "Behold, now is the acceptable time" for a change of heart." (#82)

To establish peace, the Council concludes, injustice must be eliminated because it is the root cause of conflict and violence. "Not a few of these causes [of war] arise out of excessive economic inequalities and out of hesitation to undertake necessary correctives. Some are due to the desire for power and to contempt for other people, and at a deeper level, to envy, distrust, pride and other selfish passions. Humanity cannot put up with such an amount of disorder; the result is that, even when war is absent, the world is constantly beset by strife and violence between people."

Gaudium et Spes concludes by proposing concrete recommendations for international justice, solidarity, dialogue and the community of nations. The task of justice and peace "is all the more urgent now that the greater part of the world is in a state of such poverty that it is as if Christ himself were crying out in the mouths of these poor people to the charity of his disciples. Let us not be guilty of the scandal of having some nations, most of whose citizens bear the name of Christians, enjoying an abundance of riches, while others lack the necessities of life and are tortured by hunger, disease, and all kinds of misery."(#83)

The Second Vatican Council's Stand on Peace

With Gaudium et Spes, the scriptural tradition may not have replaced the later sources of Roman law, natural law, and Aristotelian logic as the basis for the church's action in the world, but it was placed on a par with those sources in such a way as to root all future teachings in the Gospel of peace. Such a new biblical emphasis paved the way for a day in the future when Gospel nonviolence will be fully embraced and the just war theory discarded once and for always.

Six basic areas need to be highlighted regarding the Second Vatican Council's stand on peace. First, it opened the door for Christian nonviolence, yet it did not go far enough. This is the most important factor for any understanding of the Second Vatican Council. Second, and unfortunately, it upheld the just war theory, (instead of dismissing it as impossible to fulfill and fundamentally unChristian, as we shall discuss in the next chapter). Third, it gave too much support to allegiance to one's nation-state, instead of primary allegiance to God. Fourth, it finally declared that conscientious objection is a valid option for Catholics--a major breakthrough. It prepared for the day when the church will uphold nonviolent resistance and conscientious objection to any and every war. Fifth, it began to make the connection between justice for the poor of the world and the questions of war and peace (and the billions of dollars for weapons while millions of people starve and suffer), giving an opening for the liberation theologies of the third world. Finally, it promoted international dialogue and solidarity, essential ingredients if the world is one day to know peace.

After the Council, Jim Douglass summed up the strengths and weaknesses of the document in his book, The Nonviolent Cross:

The Constitution bases its praise of nonviolence on the reconciliation of all men and women through the Cross of Christ, by which Christ slew hatred in his own flesh and poured forth the spirit of love into the hearts of men and women (Eph.2:16; Col.,1:20-22). It is both inspiring and reassuring to see the cross that was raised over Constantine's army, and over the crusades and pogroms of succeeding centuries, being returned finally to its Gospel meaning of reconciliation.(3)

Unfortunately, Douglass continues, the Council allows governments the right to a military defense in the nuclear age. "The question of whether a military rather than a nonviolent defense can long remain 'legitimate' for a modern nation, and will not become instead that total war which 'merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation,' is a question left open by the Council."(4) "Nor does it condemn total-war deterrent," he observed. "It still upholds the nuclear deterrent." Douglass concluded:

What the Council succeeds in doing in effect, by way of any rigorous application of its total-war condemnation to current conditions, is to bring down the curtain on the just-war doctrine. All war in our time has been shown to involve "acts aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities".... Judged by the Council's declaration, modern war itself

is a crime against God and humanity and merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation. If we wish to take the Council seriously in its central declaration, in spite of the Council's own evident hesitancy to face that declaration squarely throughout its statement, we must declare the just war dead. What the Council fails to do in lieu of the death of the just war, or does only slightly and hesitantly, is to reopen that scripturally founded tradition of nonviolence which has remained largely unexplored since the early age of the church but which now has Gandhi's, and King's experiments in truth as proof of its untapped power.(5)

Catholic Social Teaching After Vatican II

After the Second Vatican Council, Catholic social teaching called more and more for the justice that will make peace possible. In Populorum Progressio ("The Development of Peoples," 1967), Paul VI called for economic justice as the basis for peace. He urged the world to overcome the roots of oppression, misery, hunger and poverty. "The superfluous wealth of rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations," he wrote.(#49) "To struggle against injustice is to promote the common good. Peace is not the mere absence of war."(#83)

The Latin American bishops' conference (CELAM) which met in Medellin in 1968 called for "a preferential option for the poor" to combat the structural injustices which plague the third world. "Structural justice is a prerequisite for peace," Medellin declared.(#15) Just as people should not put their hopes in violence, the arms race and domination of the world's poor should be stopped. This solidarity with the poor was upheld in Octogesima Adveniens (Paul VI, 1971), Justice in the World (the Synod of Bishops, 1971), Evangelii Nuntiandi (Paul VI, 1975), and the CELAM conferences at Puebla (1979) and Santo Domingo (1992). In the first example of post-Vatican II episcopal collegiality, the bishops called for action that does justice:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or in other words, of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.(Justice in the World, #36)

In its demand for justice, the bishops called for the end to the arms race. Paul VI then invited a new evangelization which would lead to liberation from oppression and to justice and peace. He clearly rejected violence and called for personal conversion.

In 1979, John Paul II upheld the vision of justice, human rights, and the need to oppose injustice in his encyclical, Redemptor Hominis. In Laborem Exercens (1981), John Paul II suggested that we take responsibility for injustice and encouraged the poor to overcome oppression. In Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (1988), he critiques the "structures of sin," the liberal capitalism of the West, the Marxist collectivism which had made up much of the East, and called for conversion toward international solidarity, the option for the poor, and a new concern for the environment.

The US Bishops' Challenge for Peace

The US Bishops' pastoral letter, The Challenge of Peace, proposed a theology of peace, explored the scriptural basis of peacemaking, imagined Jesus as a peacemaker and elevated nonviolence as a real Christian option. We are "in a new moment," they wrote, because of Hiroshima and the bomb. For the first time in Catholic social teaching, church leaders used the term "nonviolence" to describe the Gospel's way of peacemaking:

In the centuries between the fourth century and our own day, the theme of Christian nonviolence has echoed and re-echoed, sometimes more strongly, sometimes more faintly....The vision of Christian nonviolence is not passive about injustice and the

defense of the rights of others; it rather affirms and exemplifies what it means to resist injustice through nonviolent methods. In the twentieth century, prescinding from the non-Christian witness of a Mahatma Gandhi and its worldwide impact, the nonviolent witness of such figures as Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King has had a profound impact upon the life of the Church in the United States. The witness of numerous Christians who had preceded them over the centuries was affirmed in a remarkable way at the Second Vatican Council. Two of the passages which were included in the final version of the Pastoral Constitution gave particular encouragement for Catholics in all walks of life to assess their attitudes toward war and military service in the light of Christian pacifism [in paragraph 79, referring to conscientious objection, and praise for those who renounced the use of violence.](6)

Though the bishops did not reject nuclear deterrence, they did conclude that "our 'No' to nuclear war must be definitive and decisive."(#138)

We need a "moral about-face." The whole world must summon the moral courage and technical means to say "no" to nuclear conflict; "no" to weapons of mass destruction; "no" to an arms race which robs the poor and the vulnerable; and "no" to the moral danger of a nuclear age which places before humankind indefensible choices of constant terror or surrender. Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of faith. We are called to be peacemakers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus.(#333)

Ten years later, the Bishops released on a statement on the anniversary of their peace pastoral. In The Harvest of Justice Is Sown In Peace, the Bishops write:

Nonviolence implies both a philosophy and a strategy which shuns force and pursues a range of alternative actions (e.g., dialogue, negotiation, protests, strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience and civilian resistance) in order to bring law, policy, government itself or other armed parties in line with the demand of justice. Although nonviolence has often been regarded as simply a personal option or vocation, recent history suggests that in some circumstances it can be an effective public undertaking as well. Dramatic political transitions in places as diverse as the Philippines and Eastern Europe demonstrate the power of nonviolent action, even against dictatorial and totalitarian regimes... These nonviolent revolutions challenge us to find ways to take into full account the power of organized, active nonviolence... As a nation we have an affirmative obligation to promote research and education in nonviolent means of resisting evil. We need to address nonviolent strategies with much greater seriousness in international affairs. In some future conflicts, strikes and people power may be more effective than guns and bullets.(7)

While recognizing "the unprecedented impact of nonviolent methods in recent history," unfortunately, the Bishops continued their support of the just war theory, deterrence and the maintenance of nuclear weapons, instead of taking a strong stand for Jesus' way of nonviolence.

A Time to Renounce War and Embrace Nonviolence

"The arms race is to be condemned unreservedly," the 1976 "Vatican Statement on Disarmament" declared. "It is in itself an act of aggression against those who are the victims of it. It is an act of aggression, which amounts to a crime, for even when they are not used, by their cost alone, armaments kill the poor by causing them to starve."

Though the institutional church has hesitated to take a strong stand for nonviolence, it has begun to address the world's systemic violence and to call for an about-face. One year after becoming Pope, John Paul II journeyed to Ireland and issued a dramatic plea for peace:

Never before in the history of humankind has peace been so much talked about and so ardently desired as in our day... Peace is more and more clearly seen as the only way to justice; peace is itself the work of justice. And yet, again and again, one can see how peace is undermined and destroyed. Why is it then that our convictions do not always match our behavior and our attitudes? Why is it that we do not seem to be able to banish all conflicts from our lives?...Peace cannot be established by violence; peace can never flourish in a climate of terror, intimidation and death. It is Jesus himself who said: "All who take the sword will perish by the sword"(Mt.26:52). This is the word of God and it commands this generation of violent men and women to desist from hatred and violence and to repent. I join my voice today to the voice of Paul VI and my other predecessors, to the voices of your religious leaders, to the voices of all men and women of reason, and I proclaim, with the conviction of my faith in Christ and with an awareness of my mission, that violence is evil, that violence is unacceptable as a solution to problems, that violence is unworthy of humanity. Violence destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings. Violence is a crime against humanity, for it destroys the very fabric of society... To all of you who are listening I say: Do not believe in violence; do not support violence. It is not the Christian way. It is not the way of the Catholic church. Believe in peace and forgiveness and love; for they are of Christ. Communities who stand together in their acceptance of Jesus' supreme message of love, expressed in peace and reconciliation, and in their rejection of all violence, constitute an irresistible force for achieving what many have come to accept as impossible and destined to remain so. To all men and women engaged in violence, I appeal to you, in language of passionate pleading. On my knees I beg you to turn away from the paths of violence and to return to the ways of peace... Violence only delays the day of justice. Violence destroys the work of justice....In the name of God, I beg you: return to Christ, who died so that men and women might live in forgiveness and peace. He is waiting for you, longing for each one of you to come to him so that he may say to each of you: Your sins are forgiven; go in peace... True courage lies in working for peace.(8)

One year later, on February 25, 1981, John Paul II stood before 10,000 people at Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, Japan and told them that "to remember Hiroshima is to abhor nuclear war. To remember Hiroshima," he continued, "is to commit oneself to peace." "War is the work of humanity," he began. "War is destruction of human life. War is death." He continued:

Humanity is not destined to self destruction. Clashes of ideologies, aspirations and needs can and must be settled and resolved by means other than war and violence. Humanity owes it to itself to settle differences and conflicts by peaceful means...Let us not repeat the past, a past of violence and destruction. Let us embark upon the steep and difficult path of peace, the only path that befits human dignity, the only path that leads to the true fulfillment of the human destiny, the only path to a future in which equity, justice and solidarity are realities and not just distant dreams... Let us pledge ourselves to peace through justice; let us take a solemn decision, now, that war will never be tolerated or sought as a means fo resolving differences; let us promise our fellow human beings that we will work untiringly for disarmament and the banishing of all nuclear weapons; let us replace violence and hate with confidence and caring... To everyone I repeat the words of the prophet: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Is. 2:4).(9)

Three decades after the Second Vatican Council spoke for peace, and despite the many Catholics who have come forward and taken a stand for peace, we still have a long way to go to move beyond the nuclear age into true Christian nonviolence. Today, the church's teaching on war and peace lays dormant, as the North American church's silence during the 1991 US war in the Persian Gulf demonstrated. The majority of Catholics in the US supported the US bombing raids over Iraq which left some 200,000 people dead and nearly 300,000 young children sick and injured. No new evaluation of war was evidenced. Three days

before the US began the slaughter of Iraq, John Paul II begged upon humanity to "outlaw war completely and cultivate peace as a supreme good." (9) Nonetheless, in the U.S., the same old patriotic warmaking prevailed. Christ's Gospel was again betrayed.

The church needs more and more to renounce its complicity in the organized murder which is war and which still threatens to destroy the entire human race. We are called to "love our enemies" and to "not return evil for evil." (Mt. 5:38) Christian nonviolence needs to be proclaimed not just an option, but an obligation for every Christian. The time has come for the church to dismiss the just war theory, to embrace Jesus' way of active nonviolence, and to call for its application on the national and international levels.

Notes

(1) Pacem in Terris, #109.

(2) Austin Flannery. Vatican Council II. (Northport, NY: Costello Pub. Co., 1975), "Gaudium et Spes," #77.

(3) James W. Douglass. The Nonviolent Cross. (NY: Macmillan, 1969), 109.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Ibid., 126.

(6) US Bishops' Conference. The Challenge of Peace. (Washington, DC, 1983), 36.

(7) US Bishops' Conference. The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace. (Washington, D.C., 1993), 10-11.

(8) Pope John Paul II, "Near Northern Ireland: A Plea for Peace," Origins, Vol. 9, No. 17; October 11, 1979; 273-274.

(9) Pope John Paul II, "War Is Death," Origins, Vol. 10; No. 39; March 12, 1981; 620.

(10) Pope John Paul II, "War, A Decline for Humanity," Origins, Vol. 20; No. 33; January 24, 1991, 525.