

NONVIOLENCE:

At the Core of the Gospel and the Heart of the Church



Catholic
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What is nonviolence? As the world grapples with the anguish of violence and war, the Church turns increasingly to the nonviolent way of Jesus to guide, transform, and reconcile the human family. This brief offers a reflection on nonviolence and its centrality to the life of the Gospel, the mission of the Church, and the transformation of the world.

INTRODUCTION

Nonviolence is at the heart of the Gospel. During its first three centuries, the Church practiced the nonviolence Jesus taught and lived. It was central to being a Christian, even when facing persecution. Later, the spirit of Jesus' nonviolence was maintained by particular individuals, communities, and traditions throughout the history of the Church.

Over the past century, Gospel nonviolence has begun to re-emerge in official Church documents, scripture scholarship, theology, and the lived experience of people of faith and conscience around the world. In the midst of catastrophic violence, the Church has gradually been reawakening to the nonviolent alternative to which God calls all humanity. While people and nations driven by fear, hatred, greed, and presumed powerlessness are reacting to war, destruction, and searing injustice with violence, the Church is slowly rediscovering a more faithful and effective way forward: the transformative nonviolence of Jesus.

Nonviolence is a spirituality; a way of life; a dynamic integral to dignity, reconciliation, and just peace; and a spectrum of methods and strategies for constructive personal, cultural, and systemic change that combines the rejection of violence with the power of universal love in action.

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus heralds the God of unconditional love Who calls all humanity to the nonviolent life: repenting from violence; loving neighbors and enemies alike; resolving conflicts humanely; approaching one another with humility and care; and living the Good News of forgiveness and reconciliation. Nonviolence is at the heart of the Catholic faith and an indispensable foundation for social justice, just peace, integral human development, the common good, and care for our common home, all of which are central to Catholic social teaching.

In his first moments as pontiff, Pope Leo emphasized that nonviolence is at the core of the Gospel. After blessing the entire world with the phrase Jesus shared with his disciples after his resurrection—"Peace be to you all"—Pope Leo broke open its meaning by proclaiming that Christ's peace is "unarmed and disarming, humble and persevering."

**"The power with which Christ rose is entirely nonviolent."
*Pope Leo XIV, Urbi et Orbi Easter Message (2026)***

"Pope Leo's messages and way of operating are teaching us how to build a new world order of nonviolence out of the ashes of the current world disorder."

Austen Ivereigh, Pope Francis Biographer (2026)

"In the face of the logic of polarization, armament, and violence, active nonviolence must be the response of Christian communities to the conflicts and injustices of the world. This response, far from being a passive or resigned attitude, constitutes an active, creative, and comprehensive way of dealing with conflicts. Active nonviolence involves resisting evil without reproducing its logic, defending human dignity without destroying the adversary, and transforming unjust structures through truth, justice, solidarity, and love."

The General Commission for Justice and Peace in Spain (2026)

The peace of Christ is not achieved by conquest or domination. It is, instead, a gift from the God Who calls us to abandon deeply ingrained patterns of violence; to break the cycle of revenge, retaliation, and escalation; to put down our sword; and to heal divisions. Pope Leo's inaugural message illuminated how the very dynamics of nonviolence are at the core of God's hope for humanity.

The Church is also renewing its commitment to nonviolence as a faithful response to the catastrophic violence of our age. In a 2023 book, Pope Francis posed the problem this way, quoting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "It is no longer a question of choosing between violence and nonviolence, but between nonviolence and non-existence." To which His Holiness added: "The choice is up to us."

Here Pope Francis sharpened for the Church and the world the stark alternatives confronting us at this perilous crossroads, illustrating that we can no longer rely on violence to solve the intractable problems we face, that we are summoned at this moment in history to undergo a historic shift from a paradigm of destruction and trauma to a paradigm of nonviolent solutions. Pope Leo also has responded to "a world in flames" by tirelessly denouncing violence and war, which he has called "a moral failure," and by emphasizing the need to respond to the global culture of violence with faithful nonviolent ways going forward.

Even though the leadership of the Church is increasingly recognizing the importance of nonviolence to the Gospel and the mission of the Church, most Catholics worldwide have not been taught that nonviolence is at the core of our identity as Christians. If nonviolence were integrated at every level of the Church—through formation, preaching, education, the life of the parish and its innumerable forms of ministry—it would transform the lives of Catholics everywhere, deepen the nonviolent mission of the Church, and have a far-reaching impact on the world, toward organizing hope.

I. CONFRONTING THE PERCEPTION OF NONVIOLENCE

Exploring nonviolence requires confronting an enormous challenge that has persisted in the Church for centuries: the perception that nonviolence is only an eschatological ideal unable to deal effectively and justly with real-world violence. For the past 100 years, however, this presupposition has been increasingly challenged on three intersecting fronts:

- First, scripture scholars and theologians, inspired by Vatican II's call to "return to sources," have conducted extensive exegesis and theological reflection on the theme of nonviolence in the New Testament. After decades of work, the consensus of modern scriptural and theological research is that Jesus proclaimed and lived nonviolence. In his teaching and life, Jesus made clear that Gospel nonviolence is not only a vision of future unity but a way to faithfully confront violence, heal brokenness, and build a more just and lasting peace in the here and now. Active nonviolence is at the heart of the Gospel and thus at the heart of the mission of the Church.
- Second, while we are called by God to live nonviolently no matter the consequences, we are discovering that nonviolence is more likely to overcome oppression and injustice than either violence or passivity. Scholars and researchers in the social sciences have rigorously undertaken groundbreaking research on nonviolence, concluding that nonviolent strategies are more effective than violent ones. These findings have fostered a new academic discipline studying strategic and pragmatic nonviolence, which has quantified the effectiveness of nonviolent methods for constructive social change and, at the same time, for personal, interpersonal, and structural transformation.
- Third, nonviolence is not passive. It does not avoid conflict, accommodate injustice, appease violence, or use violence to attack. Nonviolence is a positive way of engaging conflict, a process of building capacity to interrupt, prevent, and end violence to protect people and the earth. Nonviolence actively resists violence, struggles against injustice, contests war, transforms conflict, works for just and lasting peace, and strives for restorative justice and reconciliation. In the Gospels, Jesus challenged injustice nonviolently. In our own time,

nonviolence has been an active and powerful force for justice and peace.

- Fourth, hundreds of thousands of practitioners around the world, including innumerable Catholic change-agents, are using these strategies to achieve justice, human rights, environmental healing, and peacebuilding in a deep commitment to the spirituality of nonviolence in difficult contexts and at different levels of violence.

In short, nonviolence is at the core of the Gospel; nonviolence is a proven effective method for change; and nonviolence is transforming unjust and violent realities around the world. Nonviolence offers a profoundly faithful way to confront, challenge, and transform violence, injustice and war.

II. THE NONVIOLENCE OF JESUS

Facing our global crisis, the Church has begun to re-embrace Jesus' nonviolence. "Christian nonviolence is based on the teachings and life of Jesus portrayed through his meticulous nonviolence in the four Gospels of the New Testament. It is at the heart of the kerygma and its vision, teaching, and way of life proclaimed by Jesus," theologian Fr. John Dear writes. "At the core of a theology of Christian nonviolence stands the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' blueprint, vision and instruction for mature Christlike discipleship, with its new commandments of nonviolence: 'You have heard "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" but I say to you, offer no violent resistance to one who does evil' (Mt. 5:38-39) and 'You have heard it said, "Love your countrymen and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons and daughters of your heavenly God who makes his sun rise on the bad and the good and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust"' (Mt. 5:43-45)." As Sr. Angie O'Gorman wrote, love of enemies is a powerful force "by which Jesus meant wanting wholeness and well-being and life for those who may be broken and sick and deadly. It was meant to be the cornerstone of an entirely new process of disarming evil; one which would decrease evil instead of feeding it as violence does."

Jesus marked out the path of nonviolence when he intervened to stop men from stoning a woman accused of adultery (Jn. 8:1-11), when he defied the Sabbath laws to heal a man with a withered hand (Mk. 3:1-6), when he refused to destroy the Samaritans who had rebuffed his disciples (Lk. 9:54), when he confronted the powerful at the Temple and purified it (Jn. 2:13-22) and when, on the night before he died, he told Peter to put away his sword (Mt. 26:52). In word and deed, Jesus is the revelation and embodiment of the Nonviolent God, a truth illuminated definitively in the Cross and Resurrection, which exposed the reality of violence and revealed the power of nonviolence. Violence is utterly opposed to the Gospel; nonviolence is at the core of it.

III. THE THEOLOGY OF GOSPEL NONVIOLENCE

“Nonviolence is not simply a subtopic in the field of ethics or a tactic in the politics of peace, Nonviolence is a hermeneutical lens which brings all the traditional topics of theology into a new focus for our age of global violence. It is a way of describing the essential mystery of God as revealed and embodied in Jesus Christ and about God’s active transformation of humanity into God’s nonviolent reign of peace and justice,” writes John Dear. “A systematic theology of Christian nonviolence centers theological reflection within the context of nonviolent love and peacemaking. There are five theological aspects of Jesus’ nonviolence in the Gospels: Jesus, the incarnation of nonviolence; Jesus, the prophet of nonviolence; Jesus, the teacher of nonviolence; Jesus, the model of nonviolence; and Jesus, the sign of nonviolence.” In this Kairos moment, the Church is called to recover the doctrine of Gospel nonviolence, moving it from the margins of the Church to its center.

IV. THE VOICE OF THE CHURCH

In 2007 Pope Benedict XVI declared, “This Sunday’s Gospel has one of the most typical, yet most difficult, teachings of Jesus: Love your enemies (Lk. 6:27). Jesus delivered this address in Galilee, at the beginning of his public ministry: It was something of a ‘manifesto’ presented to everyone, which Christ asked his disciples to accept, thus proposing to them in radical terms a model for their lives... This page of the Gospel is rightly considered the ‘magna carta’ of Christian nonviolence; it does not consist in surrendering to evil—as claims a false interpretation of ‘turn the other cheek’ (Lk. 6:29)—but in responding to evil with good (Rom. 12:17-21) and thus breaking the chain of injustice. It is thus understood that nonviolence, for Christians, is not mere tactical behavior but a person’s way of being, the attitude of one who is convinced of God’s love and power, who is not afraid to confront evil with the weapons of love and truth alone. Loving the enemy is the nucleus of the ‘Christian revolution.’”

Pope Benedict’s message is one of a growing number of Church statements affirming the centrality of nonviolence to the life of the Church. Since Vatican II, the popes, other Catholic leaders, Catholic organizations, and members of the Catholic Church around the world have made the nonviolent transformation of conflict a moral and practical priority through teachings, action, and work to end violence and build peace. All the documents of the Catholic Church relating to peace and war from Saint Pope John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris* (1963) to the Council document on *The Church in the Modern World* (1965) to the US bishops’ letters *The Challenge of Peace* (1983) and *The Harvest of Justice* (1993), have given progressively more space to nonviolence.

This space was dramatically widened with Pope Francis’ World Day of Peace message, *Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace* (2017). This groundbreaking document went beyond previous papal statements to lay out a robust and substantive theological and

pastoral articulation of nonviolence. Here Pope Francis underscored that Jesus taught and modeled nonviolence. He emphasized the importance of this reality writing: “To be true followers of Jesus today...includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence.” Toward the end of this text, His Holiness committed the Church to translating this resolve into action: “I pledge the assistance of the Church in every effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence.”

Following the publication of this landmark message, Pope Francis regularly proclaimed the importance of nonviolence. For example, in a letter to Cardinal Blase Cupich, he wrote, “The consistent practice of nonviolence has broken barriers, bound wounds, and healed nations,” and to a group of theologians: “I think of nonviolence as a perspective and way of understanding the world, to which theology must look as one of its constitutive elements.” His Holiness also promulgated the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, which, although it does not use the term “nonviolence,” is thoroughly imbued with its spirit, including rejecting a concept of “just war” which, the encyclical asserts, “we no longer uphold in our own day.”

V. POPE LEO AND NONVIOLENCE

Framing the peace of Christ as “unarmed and disarming,” Pope Leo has underscored the spirit of Jesus’ nonviolence almost daily in his many cries for peace and explicitly in a range of statements: The next generation needs “witnesses of a different, nonviolent lifestyle”; we are in need of “the most credible protagonists of nonviolent processes of peacebuilding.”; “I hope...that every diocese may promote pathways of education in nonviolence, mediation initiatives in local conflicts, and welcoming projects that transform fear of the other into an opportunity for encounter.” “In the midst of the many challenges facing our world at this time, including widespread armed conflict, division among peoples, and the challenges of forced migration, efforts to promote nonviolence are all the more necessary.” Regarding the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, Pope Leo said, “...we are working, let’s say, on soft diplomacy, always inviting, encouraging the pursuit of nonviolence through dialogue and seeking solutions because these problems cannot be solved by war.” His Holiness also has said, “nonviolence can destroy the abuse of power”; and “let us educate ourselves in nonviolence, let us learn the art of reconciliation.” During Holy Week 2026, Pope Leo proclaimed many facets of the message of Gospel nonviolence, including when he urged the world to lay down its weapons, renounce indifference to the suffering of others, and take up the nonviolent path based on a love which “creates and generates,” “forgives and redeems.” In his Easter message, the pope emphasized that Jesus showed nonviolence is true power over evil.

VI. RENEWING THE CHURCH

Emphasizing Jesus’ nonviolence as a core tenet of the Gospel and at the heart of the mission of the Church could sharpen for

Catholics everywhere their understanding of Jesus as the nonviolent Son of God. It could reveal for hundreds of millions of the faithful the nonviolence at the very heart of God, at the heart of Christ's earthly ministry, and at the heart of the Paschal Mystery of the Cross and Resurrection. It could designate "violence" as a comprehensive, systemic, and interlocking threat to humanity and to our common home, just as we have come to see the existential threats of the "climate crisis" and "nuclear weapons." It could call on the People of God to reject, resist, and repent of violence.

Pope Leo has called for every community worldwide to become a "house of peace." A global communion of "houses of peace" could foster tangible spaces globally where the People of God can be grounded in Jesus' nonviolence through prayer, liturgy, formation, education, communication, and nonviolent witness. Every parish, diocese, religious community, seminary, school, and university can become a nonviolent community to evangelize and embody the nonviolent power of the Gospel.

VII. TRANSFORMING THE WORLD

In this time of global crisis, the Church is becoming a global leader and unparalleled moral voice for nonviolence. It is offering to a world mired in violence a clear vision of the nonviolent alternative and a call to foster a worldwide nonviolent shift. It is inviting all Catholics, all Christians, all people of all faiths and traditions everywhere, and all human beings everywhere to walk together toward a nonviolent future and a world at peace. It is continuing to make its "Good Offices" available for advancing peace, social justice, care for creation, and the common good.

As the Church more clearly rediscovers and embraces the doctrine of Gospel nonviolence, it will build its capacity—and the capacity of the entirety of the People of God—to spread the facets of the nonviolent life, including:

- *Prevention* (averting conflict before it begins by meeting needs, solving problems, responding to emergencies).
- *Conflict transformation* (addressing conflict and violence when it arises by nonviolent interventions and by engaging in effective nonviolent struggle to end violence and to foster just and peaceful resolutions).
- *Systemic and structural change* (challenging the roots of conflict, including structural sin and violence, unjust systems and war; fostering policies, institutions, and systems for the well-being of all; nurturing nonviolent institutions, a nonviolent culture and a paradigm shift toward a more nonviolent future and world; and promoting creative alternatives to war, including civilian-based defense, unarmed civilian protection, and organized civil resistance).

The Catholic Church is uniquely positioned to call the world to this nonviolent future. Its roots in Gospel nonviolence, its tradition of

nonviolent saints, and its global community can contribute to this critically needed call. As the General Commission for Justice and Peace, Spain wrote: "Active nonviolence is a path to personal, cultural, social, and political transformation, to strengthen the defense of human rights in the face of all forms of violence, exclusion, or injustice, to promote a culture of peace that places the dignity of each person and care for our common home at the center, and to weave networks between Christian communities, social movements, and organizations committed to the practice of active nonviolence. In this moment of crisis and opportunity, the Church can awaken consciences, nurture hope, and actively build peace. The nonviolence that emanates from the Gospel is a transformative force capable of opening new paths amid the violence of the world."

This text draws on the writings of Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis, Pope Leo XIV, John Dear, Angie O'Gorman, Marie Dennis, Ken Butigan, Nicolas Paz, Terrence Rynne, and the concluding document from the "Human Rights, Peace, and Nonviolence Conference" organized by the General Commission for Justice and Peace, Spain in 2026.

PAX CHRISTI INTERNATIONAL'S CATHOLIC NONVIOLENCE INITIATIVE AND CATHOLIC INSTITUTE FOR NONVIOLENCE

The Catholic Nonviolence Initiative (CNI) is a global movement promoting active nonviolence as a core Gospel principle and essential to the life and mission of the Church. CNI is a project of Pax Christi International, a worldwide Catholic network of over 100 organizations across six continents working for peace, justice, and reconciliation. For 80 years, Pax Christi members around the world—including many living in contexts of violence, injustice, and war—have fostered a deep commitment to active nonviolence.

In September 2024 in Rome, CNI launched the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence, whose mission is to make nonviolence research, publications, resources, and experience more accessible to Catholic Church leaders, communities, and institutions. Its three research sections include: Gospel Nonviolence (how nonviolence is central to the life of the Church); Nonviolent Practices and Strategic Power (how nonviolence works); and Contextual Experiences of Nonviolence (examples from around the world, especially the existential peripheries, of nonviolence in action). Pope Francis blessed this venture with a message of support at its launch.

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From Just War to “Unarmed and Disarming Peace”: The Gospel Nonviolence Response

As the Consistory [reflects on](#) “how the Church can reaffirm today the overcoming of the theory of the ‘just war,’ too often invoked to justify any war,” [*Magnifica Humanitas* 192], and “what practical paths might help peoples and Christian communities preserve and build peace,” we respectfully offer the following reflections.

Overcoming the Just War Theory

In its final report, Synodal Study Group 9 said, “Since war can no longer be confined to military targets but overflows into civilian life, taking on new forms (hybrid, asymmetrical, etc.), the recourse to frameworks used in the past for legitimate defence – and even more so for ‘just war’ – appears increasingly inadequate.”

For centuries, “just war” theory served an important role in Catholic moral teaching by seeking to limit violence and protect human dignity. Yet contemporary warfare has profoundly altered the conditions under which these criteria were developed. Nuclear weapons, drones, cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence, and hybrid conflicts blur the distinction between combatants and civilians, while generating immense human suffering, mass displacement, environmental destruction, and the constant risk of escalation and even human annihilation.

Even on the rare occasions when a violent conflict appears to satisfy the criterion of *just cause*, the remaining criteria are often unmet, including legitimate authority, right intention, proportionality, reasonable chance of success, public declaration, respect for international law, discrimination between combatants and non-combatants, and accountability for war crimes. They are frequently ignored or rendered ineffective in practice and are, in fact, outside of the real scope, intention, and even cultural framework of most of today’s armed conflicts. Success is typically measured without reference to ethical, human, or transcendent values and allusions to the “just war” theory are little more than rhetorical tools used to validate forms of destruction that could never meet criteria for legitimate self defense.

The “just war” theory is grounded in the widespread assumption that effective defense is always militarized. Yet empirical evidence is lacking that war achieves sustainable peace or that military force accomplishes political goals beyond military ones, even though this is the main *a priori* bias of current international decisions on war and peace.

“Far more effective and capable tools” (*Magnifica Humanitas* 192)

The Church has long maintained “the right to self-defense in the strictest sense.” At the same time, recent research demonstrates that many nonviolent practices are effective for prevention of, protection from, and resistance to violence. Examples include nonviolent civil resistance, unarmed peacekeeping, unarmed civilian protection, mediation, trauma healing, restorative justice, civilian-based defence, international law, war-crimes accountability, humanitarian corridors, sanctuary for refugees, public protest, truth-telling, economic pressure, and interreligious dialogue.

Education about, research on, and investment in a spectrum of nonviolent practices at humanity’s disposal have become increasingly urgent. The Catholic Church can play a crucial role in fostering the paradigm shift needed to address current global challenges by overcoming the “just war” theory and reaffirming the centrality of Gospel nonviolence and just peace. (See the recent [National Catholic Reporter](#) editorial on just war.)

Gospel Nonviolence

The Gospel offers the roots for this paradigm shift, presenting the vision of nonviolence centered on the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. As Pope Leo indicates in the [2026 World Day of Peace message](#), the Gospels themselves acknowledge that this path was difficult even for the disciples, yet it remained the path Jesus asked them to follow [“to the end.”](#) In his Urbi et Orbi message on Easter, the Holy Father stressed, “The power with which Christ rose is entirely nonviolent.”

Catholic theologians, pastors, and church leaders around the world are calling for Gospel nonviolence to move from the margins to the center of Catholic teaching on war and peace. The XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops affirmed the need for “more reflection and formation in order that we can manage conflicts in a nonviolent way.” (See [Managing Conflict in a Nonviolent Way and Nonviolence and Legitimate Self-Defense](#))

Current research and practice demonstrate that active nonviolence is not passive resignation but an effective and realistic strategy for addressing violent conflict at every level of society, including situations where the protection of human dignity requires organized resistance. Synodal Study Group 9, for example, received testimonies from practitioners of active nonviolence and recognized “the fruitfulness of practices such as these, lived out in multiple scenarios.”

By recentring Gospel nonviolence at the core of Catholic Social Thought, the Church can offer a credible, hopeful, and prophetic witness. Jesus did not teach his followers how to wage a just war; he taught them how to love their enemies, forgive without limits, and become peacemakers.

In a world scarred by war, violence, and division, Gospel nonviolence offers a powerful witness to Christ’s message of love, mercy, reconciliation, and just peace.

At the service of the Church, Pax Christi International’s Catholic Institute for Nonviolence exists to make nonviolence research, publications, resources, and experience more accessible to Catholic church leaders, communities, and institutions. It was launched in 2024, with the blessing of Pope Francis. Contact: institute@paxchristi.net.

