

A Theological Foundation for Rejecting the Possession and Use of Nuclear Weapons: The Universal Ethic of Nonviolence Rooted in the Life and Mission of Jesus

We are called to confront the existential threat that nuclear weapons pose to humanity by clearly and wholeheartedly embracing the universal ethic of nonviolence—rejecting violence and killing, returning good for evil, healing divisions, responding to the cry of the poor, loving enemies and putting sacrificial love into action for a just, peaceful and reconciled world. Such a paradigm shift is essential if we are ever to counter the profoundly destructive spiritual impact and pervasive menace of nuclear weapons.

Many years ago, Jesuit peacemaker Rev. Richard McSorley, SJ wrote, “The taproot of violence in our society is our intention to use nuclear weapons. Once we have agreed to that, all other evil is minor in comparison.”¹ Consent to the presence of nuclear weapons in our world not only accepts the risk of a nuclear conflagration in the future, but also undermines the ethical foundations for the common good here and now.

To retain nuclear weapons escalates the possibility of their use, which would unleash suffering on an unimaginable scale. “War always does grave harm to the environment and to the cultural riches of peoples, risks which are magnified when one considers nuclear arms and biological weapons.”² Further, the production and testing of nuclear weapons in themselves have enormous environmental consequences and social costs, including the theft of critically needed resources from the poor and the development of complex and authoritarian national security systems to maintain them.

Nonviolence: A Theological Foundation for Nuclear Disarmament

Nonviolence is a paradigm of the fullness of life, a spiritual orientation, a way of life, and a practical method for confronting violence and fostering just peace. We know that “it is truly a formidable undertaking to work for peace by living the practice of nonviolence.”³ Yet, active nonviolence is critical to healing our world. Nonviolence calls us to be persons of integrity who as social beings and members of a global community share in a universal responsibility for the common good.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called nonviolence “the love that does justice.”⁴ Dorothy Day named it “love in action.” Historian Jonathan Schell called it “cooperative power,”⁵ while the nonviolence scholar Stellan Vinthagen called it “a stand against violence without using violence.”⁶ But nonviolence is deeper still. Nonviolence is a radical engagement with the suffering of our world and all the forms of violence which spawn that suffering: our own violence; the violence between persons; the violence a community experiences; the structural violence that excludes and diminishes; the violence nations impose on nations; and the violence inflicted on the earth. Each of these unleashes waves of suffering. Active nonviolence seeks to engage and end this suffering by confronting violence with love and determination.

¹ Rev. Richard McSorley, SJ, “It’s a Sin to Build a Nuclear Weapon,” U.S. Catholic, 1976.

² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* (#57), 2015.

³ Message of the Holy Father to Cardinal Peter K.A. Turkson on the occasion of the Conference on “Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence” Rome, 11-13 April 2016 (6 April 2016).

⁴ Greg Moses, *Revolution of Conscience: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Philosophy of Nonviolence* (The Guilford Press, 1997).

⁵ Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and The Will of the People* (Metropolitan Books, 2003).

⁶ Stellan Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works* (Zed Books, 2015).

In his age rife with structural violence, Jesus proclaimed a nonviolent Reign of God rooted in the unconditional love of God. Jesus called on his disciples to love their enemies (Matthew 5: 44); to offer no violent resistance to one who does evil (Matthew 5: 39); to become peacemakers; to forgive and repent; and to be abundantly merciful (Matthew 5-7). Jesus embodied nonviolence by actively resisting systemic dehumanization, as when he defied the Sabbath laws to heal the man with the withered hand (Mark 3: 1-6); when he confronted the powerful at the Temple and purified it (John 2: 13-22); when he peacefully but persistently challenged the men accusing a woman of adultery (John 8: 1-11); and when, on the night before he died, he commanded Peter to put down his sword (Matthew 26: 52).

In his preaching and his life, Jesus revealed that God calls us to live nonviolently: to make peace with one another; to resist the violence and injustice that threaten or destroy peace; and to foster a Church and world where the fullness of just peace is the birthright of all. As Pope Benedict XVI said:

[Jesus] came with only the strength of love, totally without violence, even to the point of going to the Cross. This is what shows us the true face of God, that violence never comes from God, never helps bring anything good, but is a destructive means and not the path to escape difficulties ... This is Jesus' true message: seek peace with the means of peace and leave violence aside."⁷

Christian nonviolence is a spiritual path rooted in the Gospels and a counter-intuitive strategy for the transformation of the world.

When the disciples James and John asked Jesus if he would like them to command fire to come from heaven and consume a Samaritan village that had not received them, “he turned and rebuked them” (Luke 9:51-54). He is teaching them – and us - that violence and destruction are not the way forward.⁸

Over seventy-five years into the nuclear age, we are called to end the threat, possession and potentially catastrophic fire of nuclear weapons by pursuing a spiritually-grounded nonviolent life: to pray for the grace of nonviolence; to study nonviolence; to train for nonviolence; to practice nonviolence; to spread the vision and methods of nonviolence.; and to foster nonviolent strategies to promote just and sustainable peace.

Pope Francis said, “A culture of nonviolence is not an unattainable dream, but a path that has produced decisive results. The consistent practice of nonviolence has broken barriers, bound wounds, healed nations.”⁹ Nowhere is this transformation more desperately needed than in freeing the world from the terrifying threat of nuclear weapons.

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⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, Good Friday Sermon, the Vatican, 2011

⁸ John Dear, *Walking the Way* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2015).

⁹ Letter from Pope Francis to Cardinal Blase Cupich, April 4, 2017.