The Church’s Turning Toward Nonviolence

By John Dear, Catholic priest, peace activist, author of “The Nonviolent Life,”

For its first three centuries, Christianity required the practice of active nonviolence as taught by Jesus. The early Christians refused to serve the Roman Empire or kill in its wars, and so they were routinely arrested and killed. All that changed in the year 313 when Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity. He baptized his troops and established Christianity as the official religion of the Empire. Christians could now serve in the Roman military and kill Rome’s enemies. In effect, he threw out the Sermon on the Mount and the commandment to love one’s enemies, and turned to the pagan Cicero to justify Christian violence, sowing the seeds for the so-called “Just War theory.” Over time, justified warfare became the norm, Christians everywhere waged war and every one forgot that Jesus was nonviolent.

For the last 1700 years, as we all know, Christians have waged war, led crusades, burned women at the stake, systematically persecuted Jews and Muslims, kept millions of people as slaves, ran concentration camps, blessed conquest, prayed for successful bombing raids, and built and used nuclear weapons. Throughout Catholic history, Jesus’ teachings of nonviolence were rarely discussed, much less implemented.

Until last week. Eighty of us from 25 nations were invited to the Vatican last week for the first ever conference to discuss formally abandoning the so-called “just war” theory and formally returning the Church to the nonviolence of Jesus. This was the first ever gathering of its kind in history!

For three days, we deliberated at the Vatican about the questions of violence, war, and nonviolence. Catholic peace leaders came from Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, DR Congo, South Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, the Philippines, and Japan. Everyone who attended had submitted a paper ahead of time about their vision of peace and nonviolence as well as their own experience living and practicing nonviolence, often in warzones. We shared our experiences, and reflected on the nonviolence of Jesus, the “just war” theory, and a new “just peace” paradigm. During the last closing hours we discussed and debated a draft of a statement, which was eventually completed, approved and released the following day at a press conference at the Vatican radio.

What is so unusual is that this event was co-sponsored and hosted by the Vatican Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. We were welcomed by the head of the Council, Cardinal Peter Turkson, who was the leader behind Pope Francis’ recent encyclical on the environment. Nine of his staff attended the conference. Turkson opened the conference by reading a long letter of welcome from Pope Francis, and sat
in during the final hours as we debated the wording of the conference statement. He
gave his full support to the conference and the statement, which, in the end, called upon
Pope Francis to write a new encyclical which would formally reject the just war theory
once and for all and return the Church to the nonviolence of Jesus.

This has never happened before. With this event, this statement, and this call, the
Church could change course from the last 1700 years. A new encyclical on nonviolence
could open up a whole new history for Christianity, and return us to the spirit of the early
Church, where no one was allowed to participate in war, prepare for war, or kill another
human being, where everyone had to practice and teach the nonviolence of Jesus.

The statement, called “An Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-Commit to the Centrality
of Gospel Nonviolence,” offers four points: first that Jesus was meticulously nonviolent;
that there is no just war and we should never again invoke the so-called “just war”
theory; that nonviolence as a methodology for positive social change works, whether in
our personal lives, in nations, and internationally, that it can resolve conflict and
peacefully transform any situation; and finally, that the time has come for the Church to
apply nonviolence at every level around the world. (To read the statement, visit
www.paxchristi.net).

I was asked to speak to the group about Jesus and nonviolence. That’s easy, I said:
Nonviolence is the only thing Jesus taught. He did not teach us how to kill or wage war
or make money; he taught us how to be nonviolent. In the Sermon on the Mount, he
says: “Blessed are the peacemakers, they are the sons and daughters of God. You
have heard it said, thou shall not kill; I say to you, do not even get angry: be reconciled.
You have heard it said, an eye for an eye but I say to you, offer no violent resistance to
one who does evil... Love your enemies.” These core teachings forbid all violence,
including participation in the mortal sin of war. Nowhere does he say: but if your
enemies are really bad, and you meet these seven conditions, kill them. There is no just
war theory, there are no exceptions. We are not allowed to kill.

For the nonviolent Jesus, there is no cause however noble for which we support the
taking of a single human life, much less thousands or millions. He calls us to pursue the
endless creativity of nonviolence. What’s even more exciting is that he commands us to
love our enemies because we really are sons and daughters of the God who lets his
sun rise on the good and the bad and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. In other
words, God is nonviolent!

His last words to the church before he died were to the point: “Put down the sword.”
There in the Garden of Gethsemani, where the disciples wanted to kill to protect Jesus
and themselves, feeling justified in their violence, they were ordered to put down the
sword. They realized that Jesus was deadly serious about nonviolence, so they all
abandoned him. He went to his death in perfect nonviolence, and the story goes that he
reappeared to them, remained nonviolent, and told them to carry on his mission of
nonviolence.
“We believe that there is no ‘just war,’” we wrote in our statement. “Too often the ‘just war theory’ has been used to endorse rather than prevent or limit war. Suggesting that a ‘just war’ is possible also undermines the moral imperative to develop tools and capacities for nonviolent transformation of conflict.”

“We call on the Church we love to continue developing Catholic social teaching on nonviolence,” we concluded. In particular, we called upon Pope Francis to write a new encyclical on nonviolence which would abandon the just war theory and require Gospel nonviolence to be taught in every Catholic diocese, parish, school, university, seminary, and religious order in the world. Catholics would be urged to promote nonviolent practices and strategies for the abolition of violence, poverty, war and nuclear weapons, and reach out to the whole human race with the wisdom of nonviolence.

“The time has come for our Church to be a living witness and to invest far greater human and financial resources in promoting a spirituality and practice of active nonviolence and in forming and training our Catholic communities in effective nonviolent practices,” we concluded. “In all of this, Jesus is our inspiration and model.”

If Pope Francis writes such an encyclical, like his environmental encyclical, it would touch not only the world’s one billion Catholics, but all Christians and all people. He could help us better understand how war has become obsolete, how nonviolence offers a far better methodology for conflict resolution, and why the time has come to abolish war and nuclear weapons once and for all. That would be nothing less than one of the great turning points in history.

“I believe we are at an important and hopeful turning point in human history,” Nobel Peace Prize winner Mairead Maguire said after the Rome conference, “a turning from violence to nonviolence, war to peace.” I hope Christians and Church people everywhere will study our statement, urge their local church leaders to teach Gospel nonviolence, and pray for and call for such an encyclical so that we can get Catholics and Christians out of the big business of war and start the world down a new path—toward a new world of peace.

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