

THEOLOGIES OF PEACEBUILDING AND  
NONVIOLENCE – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Theologies of peacebuilding and nonviolence  
Convener: Eli McCarthy, Georgetown University  
Moderator: Leo Guardado, Fordham University  
Presenters: MaryKristel Nwuba, D.D.L., Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Love  
Joshua Snyder, Boston College  
Fidelis Olokunboro, Villanova University

Sr. MaryKristel Nwuba presented “A Comparative Analysis of Nonviolent Communication and Eco-Spirituality,” which explored the synergistic potential of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and eco-spirituality in fostering compassionate ministry for the twenty-first century. Facing environmental degradation, social unrest, and interpersonal conflicts, the need for innovative approaches to ministry is paramount. The presentation positioned NVC, developed by Marshall Rosenberg, as a crucial tool. NVC emphasizes empathy and compassionate dialogue through four components: observation, feelings, needs, and requests. A key element is distinguishing observations from evaluations to prevent conflict escalation; for example, replacing judgmental statements (“You’re always late!”) with objective observations (“I noticed you arrived fifteen minutes late three times this week). By identifying underlying needs and making clear requests, NVC facilitates collaborative problem-solving and mutually beneficial solutions. The presentation suggested that integrating NVC’s emphasis on empathetic communication with the ecological awareness of eco-spirituality can equip ministers to address the complex challenges of our time effectively, promoting healthier relationships and a more sustainable world. The integration of these two frameworks aims to create a more compassionate and effective ministry model.

Joshua Snyder presented a paper titled, “The Role of Nonviolent Education in Peacebuilding.” The presentation demonstrated how the principle of human dignity as well as insights from theologies of liberation ought to inform the formation of liberative curricula of nonviolence. Beginning with a brief consideration of the relationship between peacebuilding, nonviolence, and transitional justice, Snyder highlighted the importance of education for fostering peace. Over the past forty years, the United Nations affirmed the importance of peace education for transitional justice. This approach can be further complemented by a theological understanding of nonviolent peace education. Both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have gestured toward what a pedagogy for peacemakers entails.

Nonviolent peace education rooted in human dignity provides the knowledge and skills to address the causes of violence, challenges systems of oppression and injustice, and empowers individuals to become agents of positive change. Liberation theologies demonstrate the significance of praxis as a proper criterion for education. Praxis-education and education for nonviolent resistance involve learners in the concrete work of peacebuilding. Education is not neutral; it is either for subjugation or liberation. Critical pedagogy links the educational project to the community, questioning and

reflecting on social, cultural, and political events and taking a stand against acts of injustice, discrimination, and violence.

The presentation concluded by analyzing two attempts to develop nonviolent peace education initiatives within the post-conflict contexts of Guatemala and the former Yugoslavia. Snyder demonstrated how public education was weaponized during periods of violence as well as its transformative potential to foster reconciliation. While there was limited success in developing comprehensive nonviolent peace education in the public-school systems, Catholic schools wielded substantial influence in fostering peacebuilding initiatives and mitigating conflict. There was a discernible “Catholic school effect” attributable to the intentional focus on human dignity and praxis-based nonviolent education.

Fidelis A. Olokunboro presented “Unless a Grain of Wheat Falls and Dies: A Theo- Anthropological Approach to Peacebuilding,” which focused on René Girard’s mimetic theory as providing additional insights on the triggers of violence in Africa. Echoing Girard, he argued that someone wants something because the other wants it or has it. As such, humans become imitators of the desire of the other, leading to mimetic rivalry, conflict, and violence in a context of limited resources. Using this perspective, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) becomes a victim and a theater of violence because it possesses desired mineral resources, such as cobalt. DRC’s leaders, its neighboring African countries, and the West rival themselves to own it.

Jesus’ life, ministry, and death expose the lies that undergird mimetic desire, the victimhood of the scapegoat of that desire, and paradoxically, the necessity of the scapegoat to break the cycle of violence. In our contemporary context, Bishop Christophe Munzehirwa’s life and martyrdom were a mimesis of Christ’s example. He was a bishop of the Bukavu diocese amid the context of violence in DRC that typifies the country as a victim of mimetic desire. Like Christ, he submitted himself as a scapegoat. Their example shows that peacebuilding mechanisms demand a discoverer of the lies of violence and a scapegoat. This is a Christocentric and anthropological approach to peacebuilding. But some key questions remain: Must the sacrifice of the scapegoat, which is necessary to break the cycle of violence, be bloody? And if it must, should the victim be human?

After the three presentations, Eli McCarthy offered an overview of what has been accomplished over the past three years of this interest group, alluding to the various presenters and themes addressed, and possible ways of moving forward within CTSA. This included drawing on the value of a just peace moral framework for engaging conflict constructively, breaking cycles of violence, and building sustainable peace. This style of moral reasoning would better integrate peacebuilding and nonviolence. Another constructive move is to lean into a posture of accompaniment, a “walking with” that affirms those who resist injustice or violence, while focusing attention on the practices to break the cycles of violence. Accompaniment also avoids morally justifying violence in order to avoid exacerbating the violence and increasing the harm for all people involved. The primary reflection focused on the [question of active nonviolence and legitimate defense](#) as an area ripe for development. Pointing out Pope Francis’ trajectory to center nonviolence, to argue there is “no just war,” and to no longer even use such language—along with early comments from Pope Leo on

nonviolence—the analysis leaned into “how” one defends and “what” one is defending. The argument offered to better integrate peacebuilding and nonviolence entailed a shift in focus to defend “dignity,” and alter the style of defense we affirm and spotlight, i.e. unarmed civilian protection, strategic nonviolent resistance, and nonviolent civilian-based defense. Highlighting Myanmar Cardinal Bo’s letter to the synod in 2023, two recommendations for advancing the Catechism and Social Compendium were offered.

1) A robust section on Gospel nonviolence and just peace moral reasoning was proposed. This would include a clear call for the church to center/focus on nonviolence and just peace, a broad description of nonviolence, key nonviolent practices to scale-up (e.g., nonviolent communication, unarmed civilian protection, nonviolent strategic resistance, restorative justice), including the meaning, strategies, and impact of nonviolent defense, and the guiding norms of a just peace ethic.

2) Because we are each endowed with sacred, inviolable dignity, the church affirms both the right to life and the right to nonviolent resistance—or somewhat related to what Pope Francis refers to as *ius pacis*, i.e. the “right to settle all conflicts without violence,”<sup>1</sup> which implies our corresponding responsibility to be consistent with and illuminating human dignity. In turn, we need a consistent ethic of dignity. Governments have a responsibility to transform conflict in a sustainable way consistent with just peace and human dignity. As a church we will embody, invest, and advocate for creative, effective nonviolent forms of defense.

The session ended with a lively discussion of the presentations and points of clarification.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, Address: Prayer Meeting for Peace (Rome, October 25, 2022), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/october/documents/20221025-incontro-pace.html>.