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In April of 2016, Pax Christi International, along with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, sponsored a conference in Rome on Non-violence and Just Peace. The conference gathered lay and clerical peace activists from all over the world, many from communities suffering from violence. During the conference, Pope Francis sent a message: “Your thoughts on revitalizing the tools of nonviolence, and of active nonviolence in particular, will be a needed and positive contribution.”

The assembly, which featured many stories of individuals and groups giving courageous witness to peace, issued a statement that began: “As Christians committed to a more just and peaceful world we are called to take a clear stand against all forms of violence.” In a brief reading of the signs of the times, the document discerns a “context of normalized and systemic violence” caused by many factors, including militarization, economic injustice and climate change. In response to the “global epidemic of violence” that creates such “tremendous suffering,” peace activists all over the world are using nonviolent approaches to counter “the widespread trauma and fear” so prevalent in our world today. The document then claims that “research, in fact, has confirmed that nonviolent resistance strategies are twice as effective as violent ones.” This suggests that the Church should “invest her 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.”

Recognizing that Jesus is our ”inspiration and model,” the statement has a section recalling his example and his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies, to be peacemakers, to forgive offenders, and to be merciful. Jesus embodied active resistance to “systemic dehumanization”: curing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (Mark 3: 1-6); rescuing the woman taken in adultery (John 8: 1-11); confronting the powerful by purifying the Temple (John 2: 12-22); and telling Peter to put away the sword at his arrest (Matthew 26: 52). Jesus, “the revelation and embodiment of the Nonviolent God,” calls us to develop “the virtue of nonviolent peacemaking.”

The statement noted a movement toward nonviolent approaches in recent papal teachings: John XXIII insisted war is not “a suitable way to restore rights”; Paul VI told the U.N. “no more war”; John Paul II declared “war belongs to the tragic past, to history”; Benedict XVI said “loving the enemy is the nucleus of the Christian revolution”; Francis wrote “the true strength of the Christian is the power of truth and love, which leads to the renunciation of all violence.” The participants all agreed that the Catholic Church should continue this trajectory by shifting away from a Just War theory to a “Just Peace” approach based on Gospel nonviolence.

To move in this direction, the statement made six proposals:

1. Continue developing Catholic social teaching on nonviolence, especially through an encyclical on nonviolence by Pope Francis.
2. Integrate Gospel nonviolence into the life of the Church at all levels.
3. Promote nonviolent practices and strategies.
4. Initiate a global conversation on the vision and strategies of nonviolence and Just Peace.
5. Lift up the prophetic voice of the Church to challenge unjust world powers and to defend nonviolent activists.
6. No longer use or teach just war theory.

It is their last proposal to jettison completely the just war theory that has generated a backlash among theologians in the United States. The just war tradition (it is not really a theory), which goes back to Augustine, sets certain conditions that must be met if the presumption against war and violent force is to be overridden. These conditions for *jus ad bellum* (the right to go to war) include: just cause, usually defense against aggression; competent authority, such as the United Nations or a national government; right intention, which excludes vengeance; proportionality, more good will be achieved than the predictable harm done; and reasonable hope of success. The American bishops and others used these criteria to mount a public argument against the Iraq War. In retrospect, it is clear that a vigorous application of these criteria would have avoided this tragic war, which did not have a just cause, was not a last resort, did more harm than good, and had no reasonable hope of creating a democratic Iraq.

American theologians Tobias Winright and Mark Allman responded to the Rome conference with a strong defense of the just war tradition. After welcoming the statement’s prophetic reminder that all Christians are called to be peacemakers, Winright and his colleague point out that recent popes, while extolling nonviolence, have continued to use just war thinking. Pope John Paul II, for example, had the just war tradition included in the Catholic Catechism as a legitimate Christian position. Responding to the ISIS threat, Pope Francis asserted: “It is licit to stop the unjust aggressor.” In his letter to the Rome conference, Francis quoted the Vatican II Pastoral Constitution: “Governments cannot be denied the right to legitimate defense once every means of peaceful settlement has been exhausted.”

While admitting that the just war tradition has been misused to justify immoral wars, the authors argue that the tradition should not be totally repudiated, but its criteria should be more vigorously applied to condemn unjust wars. They go on to point out positive aspects of the tradition: its *jus in* *bello* (what is right in a war) criteria defends noncombatant immunity, which limits civilian casualties, and proportionality, which forbids the use of weapons of mass destruction. As the tradition has developed, it now includes *jus ante bellum* “a robust and perpetual commitment to proactive and just peacemaking practices” as well as *jus post bellum,* which demands a comprehensive effort to restore a just and peaceful social order after a war, thus helping to prevent future conflicts. The tradition keeps open the possibility of armed intervention in a humanitarian crisis where only force will save large numbers of innocent citizens. Finally, the just war tradition offers criteria for war-crimes trials that accuse combatants of killing innocent non-combatants.

Winright and Allman conclude their article by noting that moral theologians do anchor the just war tradition in Scripture, especially in the command of Jesus to love our neighbor, including our enemies, which may demand the use of force in defense of self or other innocent people.

Moral theologian Lisa Cahill, who participated in the Rome Conference, wrote an insightful response to the article by Allman and Winright which argued that church teaching on war and violence is “paradoxical, if not internally conflicted, because it both condemns and permits armed force.” She believes that honest dialogue must recognize this ambiguity which she suggests is part of the “richness” of the Catholic witness to peace.

Cahill detects this ambiguity in the early history of Christianity. Although Jesus lived and taught nonviolence, by the fourth century Augustine held that war could be justified as an expression of Christian love directed to preserving the social order and achieving temporal peace.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has “leaned heavily toward peacebuilding and away from just war,” but at the same time recent popes have affirmed the use of force for humanitarian purposes, endorsed the “responsibility to protect,” and reaffirmed the right of governments to legitimate defense. Cahill detects an “evident inconsistency” between an absolute condemnation of violence and the acceptance of the limited use of armed force in certain situations. She then suggests that this “paradox may be intentional, salutary, and permanent.” Christ has inaugurated the reign of love and peace, but the world is still marred by sin and evil. In this situation, Christians may accept unjust personal suffering without retaliation, but we have an obligation to resist unjust suffering perpetrated on other innocent persons. She recognizes that the just war tradition provides helpful criteria for determining if armed intervention is the proper response to such suffering.

Cahill then returns to promoting just peace and grassroots peacebuilding as “the distinguishing mark and calling of the global Catholic Church.” Just peace involves “conflict-transforming practices such as direct nonviolent action, diplomatic initiatives, interreligious political organization in civil society, unarmed civilian peacekeeping, public rituals of repentance, and initiatives of reconciliation.” She defends non-violent approaches against those who dismiss them as “utopian, naïve or marginal,” citing social scientists Marie Stephan and Erika Chenoweth, who claim “that nonviolent resistance is twice as successful as armed revolt” (cf *Why Civil Resistance Works*). Admitting that the Church in the United States has not done an adequate job of promoting peace, Cahill calls for a new effort to demonstrate by word and example that “Gospel peacemaking is an integral dimension of discipleship and a powerful form of real-world politics.” She suggests this effort to promote peacebuilding be modelled on the successful effort of Pope Francis to raise consciousness on climate change and to create momentum for political action through his encyclical *Laudato Si,* interreligious prayer, public demonstrations and symbolic actions, all of which helped support the important, if limited, achievements of the Paris Conference. Lisa Cahill concludes her article by inviting us to imagine a similar effort on behalf of world peace.

What are Christians in the United States to make of this intriguing discussion? It seems to me that the Rome Conference did us an important service by bringing to our attention the viewpoint of peace activists around the globe, especially those directly involved in dangerous conflict situations. For many of them, the issue of nonviolent peacemaking is not a theoretical question but a matter of life and death. The statement issued by the conference is not the result of dialogue among various positions within the Church; it is a passionate plea for the Catholic community to take the lead in promoting nonviolent peacemaking, something most Americans need to hear.

The theologians commenting on the peace conference statement help us understand the historical development in the Church on both nonviolent peacemaking and the still expanding just war tradition. For me, one of the most important reasons for retaining the just war tradition is so that Christians can make the case for opposing an unjust war in the public forum. When trying to mobilize public opposition to an unjust war, Christians will be forced to employ just war criteria (for example, there is no realistic hope of success) because an appeal to nonviolent pacifism has no persuasive power with most Americans. In one sense, the Church cannot completely jettison the just war tradition because some Christians who are opposed to militaristic options will inevitably use the most effective arguments available, such as the proportionality criterion which claims the proposed armed intervention will do more harm than good. Today many secular persons instinctively use just war criteria to make decisions about using armed force for humanitarian purposes, which makes the tradition an even more valuable tool for Christians.

When it comes to the relationship between nonviolent peacemaking and the just war tradition, I suggest we think of it not as paradoxical but as a dialectical relationship, which means that the two approaches interact, enriching and energizing the Christian community. Both are legitimate viable options rooted in the history of the church. Neither one can be excluded by a critical reading of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The peacemaking activists remind all of us of that Jesus followed the path of nonviolence and that all Christians are called to be peacemakers. The just war advocates instruct all of us in the reality of original sin and the ongoing presence of dark forces in our world. They also assist the cause of peace by making it difficult to justify war and by buying time for seeking peaceful solutions. The dialogue within the Church between the two approaches can sharpen our perception of their strengths and weaknesses. Just peace warns just war against simply baptizing national wars out of expediency. Just war insists that just peace deal with complex situations such as humanitarian crises. The remarkable success of active nonviolence in our civil rights movement can remind just war advocates that force is not the only way to deal with injustice and that nonviolence can work. The effort of just war supporters to influence public debate can remind activists that the goal of nonviolent action is to promote justice and peace and not just to experience a “feel good” moment.

The Body of Christ functions as a more effective peace maker by breathing out of both lungs, the just peace and just war traditions. We can promote peacemaking without totally abandoning the just war criteria. The two traditions can interact to provide a more energetic and fruitful witness to peace.

As the Rome Conference advocated, however, the pressing need for the Catholic Church today is to promote nonviolent peacemaking. We need educational programs that include fundamental teachings: God wills justice and peace for the human family; Christ advocates active nonviolence in word and deed; Despite its many failures, the Church has kept alive the tradition of just peace, if often in a very attenuated form; by virtue of baptism, all Christians are called to be peacemakers in our own sphere of influence; the Eucharist nourishes us for our peacemaking vocation; and God’s peace will ultimately prevail over all the dark forces of violence. All our efforts to pass on the tradition of just peace gain credibility by the good example of dedicated peacemakers, well- known figures, such as Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, as well as the unsung peace heroes found in most Christian communities.

Catholic parishes in the United States could be a valuable resource for promoting just peace; providing homilies that periodically recognize and apply the nonviolent teaching of Jesus; including classes on peacemaking in the religious education program; publishing in the bulletin quotes on peacemaking from Pope Francis and other recent popes; encouraging parishioners to participate in peace demonstrations; blessing members of the justice and peace committee at Mass along with liturgical ministers; sponsoring interfaith dialogue on nonviolent peacemaking; and making material on peace available, including the American bishop’s pastoral letter “The Challenge of Peace,” which recognizes the validity of both just peace and just war traditions. We are wise to heed the thrust of the Rome statement: “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.” This effort will actually be more effective if it includes those of us who are convinced that the just war tradition is not an enemy but an energizing ally in the overall peacemaking project.