

Christian Nonviolence

Theory and Practice

Tom Cornell

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“To me nonviolence is the all-important problem or virtue to be nourished and studied and cultivated” (Dorothy Day, *Diaries*, Oct. 1968). And Thomas Merton agreed: “You are right going along the lines of satyagraha [Gandhi’s term for nonviolent action; literally the power of truth]. I see no other way....” Merton held nonviolence to be essential. Nonviolent action embodies a moral truth in response to a serious moral crisis by way of protest and acts of resistance, including civil disobedience, that do no harm, conducted in openness and truth with willingness to pay the legal penalties. Nonviolent action may be acts of witness only, but they may also lead to mass mobilization and real change.

U.S. military troops had been engaged in the Vietnam civil war for five years. Fifteen thousand of them had been killed when, on October 27, 1967, Father Philip Berrigan and three accomplices entered the Baltimore Selective Service headquarters carrying a pitcher of blood. They opened the file cabinets containing the records of men eligible for the military draft and poured the blood over the files. The Baltimore Four, as they came to be known, were convicted six months later on felony charges. Days before they were to stand for sentencing, Philip Berrigan, together with his brother (and fellow Catholic priest) Daniel and seven others, raided the Selective Service offices in Catonsville, Maryland, hauled hundreds of draft files out onto an adjacent parking lot and incinerated them using homemade napalm, hardly a plea for leniency.

On hearing of the Berrigans’ action, we at the Catholic Worker house in New York City were astounded by their escalation of tactics. Philip was a dear friend—he had baptized my daughter the year before—and now I admired his daring, wanting to believe that he had enlarged the boundaries of nonviolent action. Not everyone was so enthusiastic. Dorothy Day, the radical pacifist founder of the Catholic Worker, while not criticizing the Berrigans publicly, remarked pointedly: “These acts are not ours.” Property damage, in her view, was not part of the nonviolent arsenal.

The Catonsville Nine, as they were called, received prison sentences of two to six years. The Berrigan brothers and three others refused to surrender and went underground. Dorothy considered this a major breach of nonviolent principles. Consistent with Dorothy’s reservations, the Catholic Worker newspaper remained largely silent about the Catonsville action and the trial that followed, despite widespread coverage in the mainstream media. (An article in June 1968 was the lone exception.) And in the four decades that followed, we published virtually nothing

on the Berrigans and the Plowshares movement that, in 1980, they would help launch. Then we gave over an entire issue to Dan Berrigan on his death.

For the past thirty years or so, Carmen Trotta and I have argued, no, tried to reason together, about Plowshares. Is it genuinely nonviolent? Is it just? Should we encourage, discourage? And, “What would Dorothy say?” These acts may not be ours, but many of the people are, and so many of them so transparently genuine, loving people, not least of them Fr. Dan Berrigan, Greg Boertje-Obed, Michael Walli and Sr. Megan Rice.

The May 2014 issue of *The Catholic Worker* featured an eloquent tribute to the Transform Now Plowshares, by Patrick O’Neil, entitled “Sr. Megan, Mike & Greg, Thanks!” On July 2012, they had broken into the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, which houses the world’s biggest supply of enriched, weapons-grade uranium. Cutting through four perimeter fences, they reached the site’s Protected Area unobserved, and hammered on the uranium storage structure, while pouring human blood they had brought, and hung banners and crime-scene tape. The action garnered international attention, largely because it exposed the vulnerability of nuclear-weapons sites. So we have come to some kind of terms with Plowshares. But what matters is nonviolence itself.

From the Christian point of view, weapons that are intended to kill the innocent may surely be destroyed in justice. Justice may even demand it. But is it nonviolence? Is it disarmament? Disarmament occurs when people lay down their weapons, not when their weapons are taken from them. That only moves belligerents to procure more and better weapons if they can. When activists destroy weapons, do they effect any conversion or change of heart in their opponents? Do they lead any to lay down their arms? Are such actions what we need?

There are practical concerns as well. The secrecy involved in Plowshares activities invites infiltration by spies and agents provocateurs. Openness and truth must be laid aside. Secrecy breeds suspicion within the group and creates a class system of those “in the know,” the “serious,” and those who merely attend to chores or lend moral or financial support. At trial, too often, it has come out that many “in the know” were actually spies.

A nonviolent army has no cannon fodder. Many in the antinuclear movement have literally put their lives on the line, risking being shot when they entered restricted areas. When Sister Megan was asked about these risks in an NPR interview, she answered that she was perfectly at peace with the possibility of being killed. Straight to heaven for her, no sweat! But how about the young security guard who might be obliged to shoot her? What of his mental and spiritual health after that?

The basis of Christian nonviolence is the same premise that underlies all of the Church’s social teaching: that every man, woman, and child is created in the image and likeness of God. Persons are never a means to an end; they are ends in themselves, and thus are not to be violated in any way, either in body, mind, or spirit. Persons are not disconnected individuals in a war of all against all, as in the capitalist model; nor are they to be subsumed into a larger whole, as in the collectivist model. Instead, all are formed in, by, and for community. Thus Pope John XXIII, in his 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, grounded his hope for peace in human rights. But how to establish and protect human rights? Most people throughout history have assumed this is only possible through physical force. An ancient Latin adage goes, *Si vis pacem, para bellum*—if you desire peace, prepare for war. That’s like saying, “If you desire grapes, sow briars.” Christian peacemakers would rather say, *Si vis pacem, para pacem*—if you desire peace, prepare for peace.

Christian discipleship will be judged by the criteria of the Last Judgment: the works of mercy that Jesus describes in Matthew 15. War may be judged by these same criteria, for the works of war are the exact opposite of the works of mercy. Feed the hungry? No, destroy their crops! Give drink to the thirsty? No, poison their wells! Shelter the homeless? No, bomb their village! The weapons of Christian nonviolence include the spiritual works of mercy; again, the works of war are the exact opposite. Instruct the ignorant? No, lie to them! Counsel the doubtful? No, draft them or imprison them! Console the bereaved? Give them more deaths to grieve! Forgive injuries? Not on your life! Make them pay, ten times over!

Authentic nonviolence must be revolutionary because the social, political, economic order we live under violates the human person in fundamental ways—body, mind, and spirit. The present order is more accurately called disorder. It kills and maims the body by war and by withholding the means to life from the poor. It violates human intelligence because it thrives on lies—truth is always war’s first casualty. And it violates the human conscience, which instinctively shrinks in horror from killing our own. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, a West Point psychology professor pioneered the conditioning technique known as killology to overcome our natural aversion to homicide, a prime task of military training. Wars can be fought only by stilling the voice of conscience. By contrast, nonviolence recognizes the humanity of the opponent and appeals to “that of God in everyone,” as the Quakers put it—that which the Creator breathed into our first parents and which we all share, even the boss, the landlord, the racist, the oppressor, the warmonger.

In struggle, the nonviolent activist does not seek victory but reconciliation, the redemption of opponents, never their humiliation much less their annihilation. Therefore, the nonviolent activist always allows the opponent a way to retreat with dignity, an honorable way out of any conflict. The principal weapon of nonviolence is dialogue. Genuine dialogue assumes the good faith of partners and avoids invidious language and ad hominem argument. Dialogue may be suspended at an impasse, but resumption is always a goal. The nonviolent armory includes protest, public dissent, noncooperation, and active resistance, but always with the purpose of re-establishing dialogue. Civil disobedience is the last weapon to be used, not the first, and should be undertaken after careful discernment under spiritual direction.

Christian nonviolence is a way of life, not a tactic. Often adopting nonviolence is part of a conversion process. The nonviolent activist is a man or woman of spiritual discipline, who has peace within, for one cannot give what one does not have. In order to practice Christian nonviolence we have to prepare ourselves through study— nonviolence doesn’t come naturally for most of us. Thomas Merton pointed to the superficiality of much of what he saw coming out of the peace movement of the 1960s. The years since have seen worse. We Christians need to recover what our ancestors in the faith knew about peacemaking. And we need a revolution of the heart. To purify our wills we need to pray. To tame our lusts we need self-control, discipline, and fasting in one way or another. Only then can we come to the study of nonviolence with the realistic hope of putting it into useful practice. One need not be a saint, but the intellectually slothful and the self-serving will not make effective nonviolent practitioners. The way of nonviolence must proceed person by person.

At this point, a reasonable objection confronts the pacifist. Jesus counsels that I turn my own cheek, not my neighbor’s. Do we not have an obligation to protect the innocent? Does it not happen sometimes that the only effective way to protect the innocent is by force, even force of arms? Is it not a crime that cries to heaven that the international community did not intervene to stop the genocide in Rwanda and in Sudan? Refusal to support military force in

defense of the innocent for reasons of conscience does not extricate anyone from this moral dilemma. Advocates of nonviolence have pioneered peaceful ways to resist aggression or home-grown tyranny. Religious groups such as Maryknoll and the Quakers have long prepared for re-entry into conflict areas in Asia. Other groups such as Christian Peacemaker Teams and Voices for Creative Nonviolence have sent trained activists into conflict areas such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel/Palestine, and Central and South America as “accompaniment teams” to document abuses and to train others in the work of resistance and reconciliation.

Another response, suggested by Gandhi, is to build up community, creating “cells of good living” in a violent world. This is what Catholic Worker groups, the Bruderhof, and other intentional communities strive to do in ever increasing numbers. All the same, there is weight to arguments for forceful intervention to protect the innocent. The innocent do need protection, and the world as we know it does need a police force. International police action is different from war. It is a perversion that, in this country, the police are being militarized.

There has to be another way. Imagine solid ranks of Catholic conscientious objectors heeding the call of Pope Paul VI at the United Nations on October 4, 1965: “No more war, war never again!” His message was echoed by Pope John Paul II when he addressed the youth of Ireland at Drogheda in 1979: “On my knees I beg you to turn from the paths of violence and return to the ways of peace.... Violence only delays the day of justice. Violence destroys the work of justice.... Do not follow any leaders who train you in the ways of inflicting death. Love life! Respect life, in yourselves and in others. Give yourselves to the service of life, not the service of death.... Violence is the enemy of justice. Only peace can lead the way to true justice.”

The Catholic Church is becoming, if not a pacifist, then a peace church. In his 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II again pleaded, “No, never again war, which destroys the lives of innocent people, teaches how to kill, throws into upheaval even the lives of those who do the killing and leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred, thus making it all the more difficult to find a just solution of the very problems that provoked the war.” And Pope Benedict XVI: “I would like to call out to the consciences of those who form part of armed groups of any kind. To each and every one, I say: Stop, reflect, and abandon the path of violence!” (Angelus message, Jan. 1, 2010). And more: “It is impossible to interpret Jesus as a violent person. Violence is contrary to the kingdom of God; it is a tool of the Antichrist. Violence never serves humanity, but dehumanizes” (Angelus message, Mar. 11, 2012). Let us hear no more, “Yes, but....”

When war is outlawed, as it must be if humanity is to survive its penchant for self-destruction, our progeny will look back on justifications for war with the shame we do today on justifications for slavery by Christian theologians a mere one hundred and fifty years ago. If Christians are not in the vanguard of the war against war, if that is left to nonbelievers, then we will have deserted the field, cowards indeed, and other generations, if there be any, will have to restore the credibility of the gospel of the Prince of Peace and the integrity of his Church. Disarmament must be a top priority. Most people would agree in principle—popes and presidents included—but there is no will to do it. It’s been over fifty years since we had a broad-based disarmament movement in the United States or the world. Meanwhile the nuclear threat has only become more severe as nuclear weapons capability proliferates.

In the Catholic Church, a grassroots peace movement among the laity has been growing—and not just among the usual suspects in the Catholic Worker, Pax Christi, and Plowshares movements. Academic groups such as the Kroc Institute at the University of Notre Dame are contributing too.

Merton again: “The duty of the Christian in this [present] crisis is to strive with all his power and intelligence, with his faith, his hope in Christ and love for God and man, to do the one task which God has imposed upon us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war” (*The Catholic Worker*, Oct. 1961).

So let us get to work. The first words I ever heard Dorothy Day speak, sixty-four years ago: “There are great things that have to be done, and who will do them but the young?” No cause is more noble or more necessary. I’m old now; it’s your turn, young people. Pray and study, then get out there!

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Tom Cornell is a longtime editor of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper and former co-founder of the Catholic Peace Fellowship. In a slightly different form his essay was published in the December 2017 issue of *The Catholic Worker*. With Jim Forest and Robert Ellsberg, he co-edited *A Penny a Copy*, an anthology of writings from The Catholic Worker.

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