

Advancing Just Peace through Strategic Nonviolent Action

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Inequality eventually engenders a violence which recourse to arms cannot and never will be able to resolve. It serves only to offer false hopes to those clamoring for heightened security, even though nowadays we know that weapons and violence, rather than providing solutions, create new and more serious conflicts. Evangelii Gaudium (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Pope Francis, 2013 #60.

All across the globe, from Guatemala to Poland to Venezuela to Palestine, ordinary people are organizing and challenging systems of injustice, inequality, and oppression using weapons of will and active nonviolent means. Their struggles are part of a rich history of nonviolent movements and “people power” that include the Mahatma Gandhi-led fight for self-determination in India, the Polish Solidarity movement against communist dictatorship, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, the peaceful ouster of dictator Augusto Pinochet in Chile, and recent nonviolent movements for human rights and dignity in Tunisia, Guatemala, Brazil, and elsewhere.

The Technique of Nonviolent Action

In each of these cases, unarmed civilians used nonviolent direct action, or what nonviolent action scholar Gene Sharp described as techniques outside of institutionalized behavior for social change that challenges an unjust power dynamic using methods of protest, noncooperation, and intervention without the use or threat of injurious force.¹ The theoretical underpinnings of nonviolent resistance, articulated by Sharp and by earlier scholars including German philosopher Hannah Arendt, holds that power is fluid and ultimately grounded in the consent and cooperation of ordinary people, who can decide to restrict or withhold that support. Sharp identified six key sources of political power, which are present to varying degrees in any society:

¹ Gene Sharp, *Social Power and Political Freedom*, Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1978.

authority, human resources, material resources, skills and knowledge, intangible factors, and sanctions.² Ultimately, these sources of power are grounded in organizations and institutions, made up of people, known as “pillars of support”. When large numbers of people from various pillars of support (bureaucracies, trade and labor unions, state media, educational institutions, religious institutions, security forces, etc.) use various nonviolent tactics to withhold consent and cooperation from regimes or other power-holders in an organized fashion, this can shift power from the oppressor to the oppressed without bombs or bullets.

Sharp identified 198 methods of nonviolent action that included peaceful marches, vigils, social and consumer boycotts, stay-aways, sit-ins, street theatre, humor, and the creation of parallel structures and institution (included in what Gandhi referred to as the “constructive program”, which focused on social uplift for the poor and marginalized).³ The rise of social media technologies, including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram has expanded the universe of tactics even further, while offering new avenues for communication, mobilization, and peer learning across borders. Successful

² G. Sharp, *How Nonviolent Struggle Works*, Albert Einstein Institute, 2013. 1. **Authority:** Defined by Jacques Maritain “. . . the right to command and direct, to be heard or obeyed by others.” Authority is voluntarily accepted by the people and therefore is present without the imposition of sanctions. **Human resources:** the number of persons who obey them, cooperate with them, or provide them with special assistance, as well as by the proportion of such persons in the general population, and the extent and forms of their organizations; **Skills and knowledge:** the skills, knowledge and abilities of such persons, and the relation of their skills, knowledge, and abilities to the rulers’ needs; **Intangible factors:** Psychological and ideological factors, such as habits and attitudes toward obedience and submission, and the presence or absence of a common faith, ideology, or sense of mission; **Material resources:** The degree to which the rulers control property, natural resources, financial resources, the economic system, communication and transportation, etc., helps to determine the limits of their power; **Sanctions:** the type and extent of sanctions or punishments at the rulers’ disposal, both for use against their own subjects and in conflicts with other rulers. Accessed at: <http://www.aeinstein.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/How-Nonviolent-Struggle-Works.pdf>.

³ G. Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action: Part 2 - The Methods of Nonviolent Action*, Boston: Extending Horizons Books, 1973.

movements have integrated both on and offline forms of mobilization, organization, and direct action – online activism is never a substitute for nuts and bolts offline organizing.

Nonviolent struggle draws on courage, strategic planning, and, for many people involved in nonviolent resistance - spiritual discipline and motivation. In many of the most iconic historical nonviolent movements, from the Catholic Worker movement, to the U.S. Civil Rights movement, to the “people power” struggle for democracy the Philippines, to the struggles against dictatorship in Poland, Argentina and Chile, Catholic and Christian faith communities and institutions played pivotal roles in exposing injustices, encouraging global solidarity, providing organizational strength, and offering spiritual nourishment for activists and nonviolent change agents.⁴

Despite these successes, deep economic disparities, institutionalized racism and discrimination, protracted intra-state wars, and the rise of extremist groups continue to wreak havoc on lives and livelihoods around the world. The civil war in Syria, which began as a nonviolent uprising against the Bashar al Assad dictatorship in 2011, has now claimed over 250,000 lives. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has used brutal tactics to take over territory in an attempt to create an Islamist totalitarian state. In Uganda, which boasts the largest per capita youth population in Africa, the thirty-year autocracy of Yoweri Museveni was recently extended another five years after elections in February marred by fraud, violence, and intimidation. In the United States, structural

⁴ See, for example, Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*, St. Martin's Press: 2000; Stephen Zunes, Sarah Beth Asher, and Lester Kurtz (eds), *Nonviolent Social Movements: A Geographical Perspective*, Blackwell: 1999; Maciej Bartkowski (ed), *Rediscovering Nonviolent History: Civil Resistance in Liberation Struggles*, Lynne Rienner: 2013.

injustices and police violence continue to adversely target African Americans, while politicians mobilize fear, xenophobia, and hatred as part of a strategy to take power.

Nonviolent Resistance is More Effective than Violence

Despite the prevalence of these and other injustices around the world, there is reason for great hope. Catholic teachings focus on the need to avoid war and prevent violent conflict by peaceful means.⁵ Fortunately, empirical data reveal that there is a force more powerful than violence to achieve social justice, which Pope Paul VI called the basis of peace.⁶ According to research that I conducted with Erica Chenoweth from the University of Denver, which culminated in our 2011 book, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, nonviolent resistance against formidable opponents, including those with predominant military power, has been twice as successful as armed struggle. We examined 323 violent and nonviolent campaigns against incumbent regimes and foreign military occupations from 1900-2006 and found that the nonviolent campaigns succeeded, in terms of stated political objectives, about 54% of the time, compared to 27% for violent campaigns.⁷

In addition, our study concluded that nonviolent campaigns are associated with both democratic and peaceful societies. Armed rebel victories almost never produce democratic societies (less than 4% resulted in democracy); worse, they are often followed by relapses into civil war. The data clearly show that the *means* by which

⁵ "Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching," U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005. Accessed at: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching.cfm>.

⁶ *Populorum Progressio*, "On the Development of Peoples", Pope Paul VI, 1967 #76.

⁷ Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, Columbia University Press, 2011.

peoples challenge injustices and oppression strongly influence the character of the societies that follow. For a Catholic faith community that places a premium on the avoidance of war and the protection of human life as the moral foundation of society, these are significant findings.

Why has nonviolent civil resistance proven to be so much more successful than violence? In a nutshell: it's all about participation. We found that the average nonviolent campaign attracts *eleven times* the level of participants compared to armed campaigns. The physical, moral, informational, and commitment barriers to participation in nonviolent campaigns are much lower compared to violent campaigns, which means that young and old people, men and women, rich and poor, disabled and able-bodied, peasants and professionals can all participate in nonviolent activism. The range of nonviolent tactics is vast, facilitating participation: Sharp's list of nonviolent methods has greatly expanded with the rise of social media and new tactics invented by creative nonviolent resisters around the world. When large numbers of people from diverse societal groups engage in acts of protest, noncooperation, and nonviolent defiance, their actions create social, political, economic, and moral pressure for change. When violence is used against disciplined nonviolent protestors, the chances that the violence will backfire against the perpetrator, causing them to lose legitimacy and power, is much greater than when violence is used against armed resisters.⁸

Strategy, Religion, and Resistance

⁸ Brian Martin. [*Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire*](#). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield: 2007.

Although nonviolent movements contain elements of spontaneity and artistry, the chance of success increases significantly if participants adhere to basic principles of strategy. Those include achieving unity around achievable goals and nonviolent methods, building capacity to maintain nonviolent discipline, focusing on expanding the diversity of participation, and innovating tactically. The strategic dimensions of nonviolent resistance were first articulated by Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler in *Strategic Principles of Nonviolent Action* and by Robert Helvey in *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*.⁹ In *Why Civil Resistance Works*, Erica Chenoweth and I, building on writings by sociologist Brian Martin and others, discussed why state violence targeting nonviolent movements (versus armed resisters) is more likely to backfire against the perpetrator, leading to greater support for the movement. We highlighted the strategic importance of innovating tactically and alternating between methods of concentration (e.g. street demonstrations, sit-ins) and methods of dispersion (e.g. consumer boycotts, go-slow actions) to reinforce movement resilience and effectiveness.¹⁰

The techniques-based approach to nonviolent action described by Sharp, Ackerman and others focuses on the pragmatic, utilitarian use of nonviolent action, which is detached from religious or ideological underpinnings. This approach is distinguished from “principled nonviolence,” whose adherents reject violence on any grounds and are

⁹ Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler, *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*, Praeger: 1994; Robert L. Helvey, *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*. Boston: Albert Einstein Institution, 2004 (Accessed at: <http://www.aeinstein.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/OSNC.pdf>.) A condensed version of strategic principles of nonviolent action is Peter Ackerman and Hardy Merriman, a “The Checklist to End Tyranny” in Maria J. Stephan and Mathew Burrows (eds), *Is Authoritarianism Staging a Comeback?* Atlantic Council, 2014. (Accessed at: http://hardymerriman.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/A_Checklist_for_Ending_Tyranny.pdf)

¹⁰ Chenoweth and Stephan, *ibid*.

typically pacifists. An advantage of the technique-based approach is that it does not create a barrier to participation for those who are not pacifists (i.e. most people around the world). It is possible to convince those living under profound oppression, who might otherwise take up arms or who have taken up arms, that there is a more effective way to challenge injustice – without having to first convince them that violence is always wrong. Well-known Quaker pacifist and nonviolence trainer and practitioner, George Lakey, famously said that “most people who participate in nonviolent campaigns aren’t pacifists, and most pacifists don’t participate in nonviolent campaigns.”¹¹ On the other hand, there is tremendous value in the principled nonviolence approach which provides moral, religious, and philosophical anchors to remaining nonviolent when the going gets tough (as it often does) and the temptation to use violence is high. And “nonviolence” offers a long-term vision for societies, and the world writ large that is built on nonviolent communications, peaceful co-existence and reconciliation.

In practice, the line is not so stark between the principled and pragmatic nonviolence traditions.¹² Spiritual belief and religious organizations and institutions have often played critical roles in nonviolent movements. Mahatma Gandhi himself, a brilliant strategist, devised a nonviolent resistance strategy against British colonialism that was clearly inspired by faith. He referred to Jesus as nonviolence “par excellence”.¹³ On the most practical level, it is extremely difficult for a nonviolent movement challenging entrenched and long-standing injustices to maintain morale and to sustain active participation over an extended period of time. Activists burn out. Sustained resistance becomes

¹¹ George Lakey, *Powerful Peacemaking: A Strategy for a Living Revolution*, New Society Publishers: 1987.

¹² Eli S. McCarthy, *Becoming Nonviolent Peacemakers: A Virtue Ethic for Catholic Social Teaching and U.S. Policy*, Wipf and Stock Pickwick Publishers: 2012.

¹³ M. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 62, May 20, 1936.

burdensome. In such circumstances, activists and movement leaders need to be able to draw on resources that will inspire, encourage, and nourish. Their strength and resilience depend on it.

Faith communities and institutions can provide that sense of community solidarity, spiritual nourishment, and the cultivation of virtuous habits. It is difficult to imagine the U.S. Civil Rights movement sustaining its vibrancy and effectiveness without the spiritual and organizational power provided by the black churches. The iconic images of the Filipino nuns, rosaries in hand and kneeling in prayer in front of dictator Ferdinand Marcos' soldiers, together with declarations by Cardinal Jaime Sin imploring justice over *Radio Veritas*, helped galvanize the popular nonviolent struggle for a democratic Philippines in 1986. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa drew on faith-based beliefs grounded in justice and reconciliation in his insistence that the struggle for a free South Africa be nonviolent, and that forgiveness be the guiding principle of the post-apartheid state. In East Timor, which gained independence in 2002 following a brutal Indonesian military occupation, Catholic priests and religious sisters from around the country spoke out against the atrocities committed by Indonesian forces and provided protection and material support to those youth and others who were fighting nonviolently for self-determination.

In Liberia, a country that endured years of brutal civil war between armed rebel groups and the Charles Taylor government, a group of church-going women came together and organized a remarkable nonviolent direct action campaign that pressured the warring parties to sign a peace agreement in 2003. Peace vigils, sex strikes, and social

pressure were a few of their tactics.¹⁴ In Guatemala, a broad-based coalition involving peasants, students, lawyers, and religious leaders used boycotts, strikes, and protests to challenge entrenched government corruption, forcing a kleptocratic president to step down without violence in 2015. This was a remarkable achievement for a country that had endured over three decades of civil war.¹⁵ The NETWORK “nuns on the bus” (NOTB) movement in the United States, founded by Sr. Simone Campbell, has used cross-country bus rides since 2012 to stand with ordinary people and provide a creative and hopeful outlet for Catholics (and all Americans) committed to economic justice, immigration reform, equality, and civic engagement.¹⁶

Catholic Teachings and Solidarity with Nonviolent Activists

Contemporary Catholic teachings on nonviolence have been animated in documents including “Pacem in Terris” from the Second Vatican Council, World Day of Peace messages by Popes, and the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ pastoral letters, “The Challenge of Peace” and “The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace.”¹⁷ The Church’s social justice teachings focus on the inherent dignity of the human person, the importance of participation in society, of rights and responsibilities, on the primacy of the poor and the vulnerable, the dignity of work and the right of workers, on the importance of global solidarity and care for God’s creation. Faithful citizenship, understood in the context of

¹⁴ See “Liberian Women Act to End Civil War,” *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, 2010. Accessed at: <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/liberian-women-act-end-civil-war-2003>; *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, Dir. Gini Reticker. Fork Films LLC, 2008.

¹⁵ Azam Ahmed and Elisabeth Malkin, “Otto Pérez Molina of Guatemala Is Jailed Hours After Resigning Presidency,” *New York Times*, September 3, 2015. Accessed at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/04/world/americas/otto-perez-molina-guatemalan-president-resigns-amid-scandal.html>.

¹⁶ Sister Simone Campbell, *A Nun on the Bus: How All of Us Can Create Hope, Change, and Community*. HarperOne, 2014.

¹⁷ *Pacem in Terris*, Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Establishing University Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty, April 11, 1963. Accessed at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

Catholic teachings, includes engaging in nonviolent action to advance the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable and oppressed, including those whose basic rights to life and work are violated by unjust systems of power.

The Church's social justice mission would be further strengthened through an explicit commitment to supporting those who struggle for basic human rights and dignity using active nonviolent means. Although there are sometimes tensions between perspectives that advocate "peace" and those that advocate "justice", in reality these camps ought to be bridged, as the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace signifies.¹⁸ There is nothing inherently contradictory in using tactics that nonviolently disrupt the status quo and those that embrace dialogue, mutual understanding, and reconciliation. In his famous 1963 "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. responded to criticisms that the sometimes disruptive tactics of the U.S. civil rights movement were "unwise and untimely" and that he should be seeking dialogue instead:

*'Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?' You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.*¹⁹

In conflicts where power is uneven and discrimination is institutionalized, those power dynamics need to shift in order for negotiation and lasting peace to have a chance.

Violent extremist groups like ISIS recruit disaffected youth and others by claiming that

¹⁸ Maria J. Stephan, "The Peacebuilder's Field Guide to Protest Movements," *Foreign Policy*, January 22, 2016. (Accessed at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/22/the-peacebuilders-field-guide-to-protest-movements/>.)

¹⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", April 16, 1963. Accessed at: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>.

only violence will allow them to resist injustice and exclusion. That narrative needs to be fiercely challenged. There are remarkable examples of nonviolent resistance being used against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.²⁰ In Kenya, militants from the extremist group Al Shabab boarded a passenger bus in 2014 and demanded that the Christians and Muslims be separated into separate groups - a tactic that had been used prior to mass killings of Christians. The Muslim passengers, mostly women, refused to be separated. They insisted that the militants should shoot everyone or leave, and they put hijabs on the heads of the Christian women. Amazingly, the militants left and nobody was killed.²¹ Fortunately, powerful alternatives to violence exist and the Church can play a powerful role in spreading the message of how effective and faithful nonviolent struggle really is.

Conclusion

Through its teachings, advocacy, and support for peacebuilding and social justice endeavors globally, the Catholic Church shepherds manifold moral and material resources to promote a world without violence. Committing to supporting those around the world engaged in nonviolent resistance to advance rights, peace, and dignity - doctrinally, through Catholic teaching, education and formation, through the policy-influencing arms of the Church, and through field-based programs, is a concrete and powerful way to counter violence globally. Increasing solidarity and material support to those nonviolent change agents around the world is a specific way to reduce the huge

²⁰ Maria J. Stephan, "Resisting ISIS," *Sojourners*, April 2015. (Accessed at: <https://sojo.net/magazine/april-2015/resisting-isis>.) See also, M. Stephan, "Civil Resistance vs. ISIS," *Journal of Resistance Studies*, Vol 1, Number 2, 2015.

²¹ "Kenyan Muslims Shield Christians in Mandera Bus Attack," *BBC*, December 21, 2015. (Accessed at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35151967>.)

loss of life that inevitably follows when people take up arms or governments drop bombs.

Fortunately, there is an ever-expanding library of resources – books, films, nonviolent action training manuals, online courses – and a growing number of capacity-building organizations around the world that specialize in helping conflict-affected communities organize nonviolently for change. The U.S. Institute of Peace, Rhize, the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, Nonviolent Peaceforce, the American Friends Services Committee, Operation Dove, and Christian Peacemakers Teams are only a few such organizations. Together with remarkably active and effective organizations like Pax Christi, Mercy Corps, Caritas International, and Catholic Relief Services, expanding and deepening partnerships and synergies focused on improving knowledge and skills related to strategic nonviolent action could help prevent and mitigate violent conflict around the world. At a policy level, combining a principled denunciation of war with firm support for those nonviolently resisting injustices – and embracing the peaceful warriors on the front lines of nonviolent change – would be a profound step in realizing Pope Francis' vision of a world in which conflicts are transformed without violence.