



Coming from the 2015 Bethlehem Commitment

*Words presented by Martha Inés Romero, Pax Christi International Secretary General, to the Scottish Bishops Symposium on “The role, importance and challenge of Interreligious Dialogue in Catholic peace building, locally, nationally and globally”
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Where we began and where we are now ...

Forged in the broken relationships of a brutal war, Pax Christi began its journey 80 years ago with a vision based on the gospel - *love your enemies* - and rooted in a deep belief that reconciliation was possible. Shaped over the years by people of faith struggling to make peace in the midst of injustice and war, violence and repression, our movement brings to this moment in history a renewed commitment to make real in our lives and in our work for peace the values we claim to hold.

From the beginning, we have accompanied those who are on the margins, and we continue to connect with grassroots communities, listening with care to their stories and learning from their experience about possible, practical routes to enduring peace and, at the same time, developing insights into other pathways to peace.

At a time when poverty, exclusion, hopelessness and a lack of future possibilities pervade the lives of many young people making extremist ideologies attractive, we recognise the legacy of colonialism and systemic injustice, the power of active nonviolence, the importance of diversity and the urgency of inclusion.

At a time when fear is both real and orchestrated, we build bridges to hope, celebrating an abundance of difference among us.

With deep roots in the Catholic tradition and encouraged by the vision and witness of Pope Francis, we claim the richness of Catholic social teaching as we Christians strengthen existing ecumenical and interfaith cooperation.

On this journey, we have learned that just relationships are essential for sustainable peace -that we humans are part of an earth community that must be healthy if we are to survive. We have come to see the interconnections between war and preparations for war, environmental damage, climate change and scarcity of essential resources. We are deepening our understanding of sustainability.

We also have learned that just relationships are essential to just peace – that Catholic hierarchy and local communities, ordained and lay, women and men bring equal gifts to the work for peace, as well as other faiths bring.



While war, preparations for war, the proliferation of arms and violent conflict seem to be omnipresent, we promote nonviolence, nurture community and work for a world where human rights and international law are consistently respected.

Bringing the future into focus ...

From its early days in post-World War II Europe, Pax Christi has become a global movement, a network of member organisations on five continents, each responding to the signs of the times in their own context, contributing to a rich diversity of ways to the peace and reconciliation we all seek.

In the coming years, we will continue to value and learn from the work of each member organisation, as well as of each faith-based organisation and network we work with. In an increasingly interconnected world, where challenges to peace are so often global as well as local, we also will seek ways to deepen our connections and build on the peacebuilding experience in our network to address together some of the most pressing threats and to nourish together some of the greatest possibilities for peace.

The peace we seek is sustainable peace. It is the overall goal of our work for peace, grounded in respect for the integrity of Creation and shaped by a deep exploration of inclusive security that is rooted in justice. Our commitment to sustainable peace is enriched by faith; our understanding is deepened by theological reflection; and our steadfast resolve is strengthened by the spirituality that accompanies our journey. In the coming years, the articulation of Pax Christi's spirituality, peace education and peace politics will become even more important to our movement.

The pathway we seek is defined by the practice of active nonviolence as a powerful alternative to extremist violence and militarisation. While not all our members are pacifist, Pax Christi's constant dialogue about and exploration of the Gospel message of nonviolence keeps this issue alive in our movement. In the coming years we will further develop efforts with the Vatican and religious communities to deepen Catholic thought on active nonviolence and to augment our Pax Christi conversation.

The societies we seek will bring people of faith and people of good will together to reduce the tensions that exist among and within different religious traditions. As it has been in the past, in the coming years we will prioritize our cooperation with Muslim and Jewish peacemakers and with people of other traditions, spiritualities and convictions.

The many faces of violence, the systemic roots of racism and exclusion, and the pathway to reconciliation, the founding focus of Pax Christi, will continue to challenge our movement in the coming years. As Pax Christi national sections and as affiliated member



organisations – when possible, together as an international network – we will maintain our multifaceted work for peace, sustain our work for arms control and disarmament, develop our focus on transitional and ecological justice and underscore the impact of faith and religion on the way to peace.

Pope Francis has continued to repeat with prophetic insistence that no war is just. While people have the right and obligation to defend themselves, the Pope warns that doing so with arms may simply led to more war, which is immoral. In his book, *I Ask You in the Name of God. Ten Prayers for a Future of Hope*, Pope Francis writes, “War must end or (the) world risks nuclear catastrophe,” reiterating that recent events “compel me to add, unambiguously, that there is no occasion in which a war can be considered just.” As reported by Vatican News, Francis concludes the book by asserting that “the choice to follow the path of nonviolence and continued existence lies with us.”

The following reflections, come from some articles / essays by Ken Butigan (with Fr. John Dear) and Rose Berger, members of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative Steering Committee:

A New Awakening to Gospel Nonviolence in the Twentieth Century¹

“At the beginning of World War I, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation was established. As Hildegard Goss-Mayr writes, “It was the first organized and ecumenical expression of Christians who, in following Jesus Christ, are not only saying ‘no’ to the use of violence as a means of conquering injustices and resolving conflicts, but at the same time are rediscovering the creative force of the nonviolence of God. It is found in every continent today, promoting active nonviolence in the heart of the churches when faced with injustices in the world.”

During World War II, Franz Jägerstätter of St. Radegund, Austria was a faithful witness for nonviolence. A Catholic, Jägerstätter was ordered to join the Nazi military in 1943 but refused on the grounds that this would disobey Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. He was arrested, brought to Berlin, tried and beheaded. After the war his action and writings became known and have influenced thousands of people around the world; many who became involved in grassroots movements for peace have cited his witness as a motivation. Jägerstätter was recently beatified by the Catholic Church.

In the United States, Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker movement, a network of houses of hospitality where Catholics welcomed the poor and the homeless to live with them, and where they also publicly denounce and resist war in obedience to the

¹ Fr. John Dear and Ken Butigan, *An Overview of Gospel Nonviolence in the Christian Tradition*, in https://paxchristi.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/our_nonviolence_tradition.pdf



nonviolent Jesus. Day engaged many times in nonviolent civil disobedience for peace and justice.

Thomas Merton, the celebrated Trappist monk and author, influenced millions of people through his writings that included teachings on nonviolence and called for the abolition of war and nuclear weapons.

The example of Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador inspired a new generation of Catholic peacemakers. He was assassinated on March 24, 1980, the day after he preached that Christians were forbidden to kill and that members of the military and death squads should disobey orders to kill, quit their positions and stop the repression in his country.

With the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States during World War II, the threat of global nuclear annihilation became a possibility. With the development of grassroots movements and the widespread legacy of Gandhi, millions of people began to awaken to the teachings and methodologies of nonviolence, helping to build a global movement that succeeded in making possible arms control agreements, the 1962 Partial Test Ban Treaty, and the 1993 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty signed by 183 nations that ended most nuclear testing worldwide.

Just as the global anti-nuclear movement has applied nonviolence to the struggle for a world without weapons of mass destruction, thousands of other movements have been proliferating for more democratic societies, human rights, economic justice, and environmental sustainability over the past half-century using the power and methods of nonviolence for effective change.

The Church, Catholic leadership and Catholic laity have been involved in many of these and other movements for nonviolent change, including in the U.S. Civil Rights movement, in the Solidarity movement in Poland, in the peace communities in Colombia, and in the struggles for justice and social change in South Africa, Liberia, East Timor, and many other contexts. In addition, Catholics and Christians have played pivotal roles in developing innovative approaches to addressing violence, injustice, human rights violations, and war, including restorative justice; forgiveness and reconciliation training; third-party intervention and unarmed civilian protection and accompaniment; nonviolent communication; conflict transformation programming; trauma healing; antiracism training; innumerable initiatives for interfaith dialogue; and a dramatic increase in academic degree programs in peace studies and research on the core values of nonviolent change, including forgiveness, creativity, love, compassion and empathy as well as nonviolent civil resistance, movement-building, and the dynamics and infrastructure for a culture of peace and nonviolence.



The Church and the Move to Nonviolence

The modern foundations of the Roman Catholic Church's turn toward peacemaking and nonviolence began with Saint John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris* that questioned all warfare and opened the door to a church of nonviolence. During the Second Vatican Council, the Church issued an absolute condemnation of weapons of mass destruction and an affirmation that every government should recognize the right of conscientious objection. In its documents and succeeding meetings, the Catholic Church articulated a central commitment to peacemaking rooted in justice that addresses the causes of war.

Dramatic political transitions in places as diverse as the Philippines and Eastern Europe demonstrate the power of nonviolent action, even against dictatorial and totalitarian regimes... Building on the growing recovery of Jesus' nonviolence, recent popes have made statements that point toward a comprehensive embrace of Gospel nonviolence. Pope John Paul II, addressing young people in Lesotho on September 19, 1988, said, "To choose the means of nonviolence is to make a courageous choice in love, a choice which embraces active defense of human rights and a strong commitment to justice and harmonious development."

Pope Benedict XVI, on February 18, 2007, stated, "Nonviolence, for Christians, is not mere tactical behavior but a person's way of being, the attitude of one who is convinced of God's love and power, who is not afraid to confront evil with the weapons of love and truth alone. Loving the enemy is the nucleus of the "Christian revolution." And Pope Francis said on August 18, 2013, "The true strength of the Christian is the power of truth and love, which leads to the renunciation of all violence. Faith and violence are incompatible."

The brutal aggression raining down on the Ukrainian people, but also on the peoples of Myanmar, Yemen, Ethiopia, and many other places, sets before us a stark choice: Will we face a future of accelerating catastrophe—or a once-and-for-all turn toward a global culture of practical, durable, and nonviolent peace? With the grim images of destruction flooding in incessantly from Russia's unspeakable war on Ukraine, it's hard to imagine any new course toward enduring peace.

This is not a new reality. It's as old as civilization itself. But the cataclysmic deadliness of this pattern has grown over the past century with the synergistic acceleration of militarized technology, information systems, and global structural injustice, with the West, including the United States, carrying out abysmal "wars of



choice” as much as the East. We confront a worldwide culture of violence, or what Pope Francis calls a “world war in piecemeal.”

Since the beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis has gradually been removing the justifications for war, most sharply, in *Fratelli Tutti*, where he says, “We can no longer think of war as a solution” and that “we no longer uphold in our own day” Saint Augustine’s concept of just war. In his 2021 book *Peace on Earth: Fraternity is Possible*, he writes, “‘Put your sword back into its sheath.’ The words of Jesus resound clearly today ...In the Gospel of Luke’s version of the story, Jesus tells his disciples, ‘Stop, no more of this!’ Jesus’ sorrowful and strong, ‘No more,’ goes beyond the centuries and reaches us. It is a commandment we cannot avoid. ‘No more’ swords, weapons, violence, war.” In “Fratelli Tutti,” Pope Francis urges people to move beyond “theoretical discussions” of war and look to its victims to truly “grasp the abyss of evil at the heart of war.”

Catholic nonviolence and just peace²

“In September 2024, a new educational institute was launched in Rome, the Pax Christi International Catholic Institute for Nonviolence (CIN). The mission of CIN is to make nonviolence research, resources, and experience more accessible to Pope Francis, the Vatican, and Catholic Church leaders (including those from other faiths), communities, and institutions from around the world to deepen Catholic understanding of, and commitment to, the practice of Gospel nonviolence.

CIN is the fruit of more than a decade of strategic research and resource building by the global Catholic Nonviolence Initiative (CNI), a project of Pax Christi International.

In 2016, the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative partnered with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace for the Catholic Church’s first gathering on Catholic nonviolence and Just Peace. The inaugural convocation affirmed the vision and practice of nonviolence to be at the heart of the Catholic Church.

Pope Francis’s message blessed the endeavor with these words: “Your thoughts on revitalizing the tools of nonviolence, and of active nonviolence in particular, will be a needed and positive contribution.” Since then a steady shift has occurred, prompting US Catholic Cardinal Robert McElroy to state, “We need to mainstream nonviolence in the Church. We need to move it from the margins of Catholic thought to the centre. Nonviolence is a spirituality, a lifestyle, a program of societal action and a universal ethic.”

² Rose Marie Berger, *Recent Roman Catholic Affirmations of Nonviolence*. *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 26.1 (Spring 2025) https://paxchristi.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Vision2025_Berger.pdf



Cardinal McElroy notes that, given Pope Francis’s clear leadership away from providing moral justifications for war, “it is hard not to conclude that the church is abandoning the just war framework and seeking to construct a new moral framework that Just Peace is a Christian school of thought and set of practices for building peace at all stages of acute conflict: before, during, and after.

CNI proposes Just Peace as that emerging framework. Just Peace is a Christian school of thought and set of practices for building peace at all stages of acute conflict: before, during, and after. It draws on three key approaches—principles and moral criteria, practical norms, and virtue ethics—for building a positive peace and constructing a more “widely known paradigm with agreed practices that make peace and prevent war.”

Just Peace principles and moral criteria guide actions that can assist institutional change and provide a framework for judging ethical responsibility. Just Peace’s practical norms provide guidance on constructive actions for peace, can be tested for effectiveness, and point toward a comprehensive just peace pedagogy and skills-based training. Just Peace virtue ethics teaches how to change our hearts. It asks what type of people we are becoming through the virtues we cultivate and shows us how to become people of peace. These three aspects form a head-body-heart approach. Just Peace is not merely the absence of violence but the presence of social, economic, and political conditions that sustain peace and human flourishing and prevent conflicts from turning violent or returning to violence. Just Peace can move Christians beyond war.

Digging deeper in our tradition

Just Peace is rooted in the biblical concept of shalom. Its meaning encompasses definitions such as wholeness, soundness, to be held in a peaceful covenant, and to be restored, healed, and repaid. It describes both domestic tranquillity and neighbourliness among nation-states. It is both a physical state and a spiritual state. It is a quality of right relationship (Malachi 2:6). Rabbinic scholars have taught, “All that is written in the Torah was written for the sake of peace.”

The phrase Christian peacemakers ought to be redundant. For Christians, Jesus is the incarnation of God’s shalom and the manifestation of just peace. Many Christians—by the very nature of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection—prioritize peace with justice and reject violence as a means toward peace, recognizing it as a failure. We are called to be courageous innovators who defend the “least of these”—without benefit of the world’s weapons. The World Council of Churches spent the millennial decade studying how to overcome violence, producing two seminal documents: An Ecumenical Call to Just Peace (declaring the concept and mentality of “just war” to be obsolete), and the Just Peace Companion (offering extensive direction on implementation of just peace theology and practice).



Pope Francis stressed that “faith and violence are incompatible.” Just Peace is an integral expression of Catholic faith and catechism, which can be further developed into a robust and resilient theology, theory, and praxis. If, as the US Catholic bishops wrote, “the content and context of our peace-making is set not by some political agenda or ideological program, but by the teaching of his Church,” then that teaching must be full-bodied, theologically grounded, effective, and adaptable from the local parish to the United Nations. However, the legitimation of war in Catholic social teaching remains, and according to theological ethicist Glen Stassen, “without a widely known paradigm with agreed practices that make peace and prevent (and defuse) war, public debate will remain vague and unclear about the effective alternatives to the drive to war.”

Three streams of Just Peace

There are three broad scholarly streams that feed the river of Just Peace. The first identifies “principles and moral criteria” to guide action and provide a framework for judging ethical responsibility. Maryann Cusimano Love has spent much of her career shaping these criteria and honing their effectiveness in the highest circles of government and the military. In a formulation that is familiar from just war principles, Love has identified seven Just Peace principles that serve as a guide for directing action:

1. Just cause: protecting, defending, and restoring the fundamental dignity of all human life and the common good
2. Right intention: aiming to create a positive peace.
3. Participatory process: respecting human dignity by including societal stakeholders—state and non-state actors as well as previous parties to the conflict
4. Right relationship: creating or restoring just social relationships both vertically and horizontally; strategic systemic change requires that horizontal and vertical relationships move in tandem on an equal basis
5. Reconciliation: a concept of justice that envisions a holistic healing of the wounds of war.
6. Restoration: repair of the material, psychological, and spiritual human infrastructure
7. Sustainability: developing structures that can help peace endure over time

Just Peace principles are applied at all stages of conflict. They are not only for responding to violence or war. From Love’s point of view, peacebuilding tools and other methods of conflict transformation and nonviolence are all tools to implement Just Peace, and her Just Peace criteria guide those practices.

The second stream identifies Just Peace’s “practical norms.” These are just peacemaking practices, available for use before, during, and after conflict, that can be tested for



effectiveness, provide guidance on constructive actions for peace, and point toward a comprehensive Just Peace pedagogy and skills-based training. Over the past thirty years, numerous scholars have contributed to honing a set of ten just peace-making practices.

The late ethicist Glen Stassen at Fuller Theological Seminary in California and theologian Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite at Chicago Theological Seminary have brought significant leadership to this robust set of Just Peace practical norms. Stassen has described just peace-making as “the new paradigm for an ethics of peace and war,” shifting the debate away from limiting war, as just war principles do, to practicing peace.

These Just Peace norms have been used in a variety of settings, such as negotiations on nuclear disarmament, diplomatic intervention seeking to stop the US invasion of Iraq, denominational general conventions choosing to identify as “just peace churches,” interreligious and interfaith collaborative efforts to develop Just Peace in other traditions, and intervention to combat global gender-based violence.

Stassen has argued, “It is necessary to have both (1) an explicitly Christian ethic with a strong scriptural base and (2) a public ethic that appeals to reason, experience, and need, and that cannot place the same emphasis on scripture and prayer that an explicitly Christian ethic can.”

The version of the ten just peace-making practices below reflects both.

Part One: Peace-making Initiatives

1. Support nonviolent direct action (Matt. 5:38–42)
2. Take independent initiatives to reduce threat (Matt. 5:38–42)
3. Use cooperative conflict resolution (Matt. 5:21–26)
4. Acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice and seek repentance and forgiveness (Matt. 7:1–5)

Part Two: Working for Justice

5. Advance democracy, human rights, and religious liberty (Matt. 6:19–34)
6. Foster just and sustainable economic development (Matt. 6:19–34)

Part Three: Fostering Love and Community

7. Work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system (Matt. 5:43ff)



8. Strengthen the United Nations and international efforts for cooperation and human rights (Matt. 5:43ff)

9. Reduce offensive weapons and weapons trade (Matt. 5:38ff)

10. Encourage grassroots peace-making groups and voluntary associations (Matt. 5:1–2, 7:28–29)

Stassen has said that his team was aware that our social context includes a private/public dualism in which Jesus' way and also peace-making gets interpreted as idealistic and individualistic. To counter this distortion, we intentionally focused on ten practices—not ten ideals—and on historical and political-science evidence showing each practice is in fact working to prevent some wars. Furthermore, with the human nature variable in mind, a realistic understanding of human sin argues that these practices need to be institutionalized in policies, international networks, and laws in order to check and balance concentrations of political, economic, and military power.

The third stream is Just Peace virtue ethics. A virtue is a disposition to “do good.” Some virtues come naturally. Others, called “moral virtues,” are acquired through practice, devotion, and community. Virtue ethics teaches how to create morally good cultures that foster morally good people. Eli S. McCarthy is a Catholic theological virtue ethicist. He has elaborated a Just Peace virtue ethic by integrating the Just Peace approaches of Stassen, Thistlethwaite, and Love. Virtue ethics, writes McCarthy, “is focused on the character of persons, but includes concern for both acts and ends or consequences. In virtue ethics, the primary ethical question asked is ‘Who are we (am I) becoming?’ before ‘What is the rule?’ or ‘What are the consequences?’”

McCarthy states that “nonviolent peace-making ought to be assessed as a distinct and central virtue” in and of its own right. If nonviolent peace-making is a key virtue, then other virtues, such as justice and courage, are qualified in a new way and often-overlooked virtues such as “humility, solidarity, hospitality, and mercy” might be better recovered. McCarthy has developed seven practices that flow from and cultivate nonviolent peace-making as a virtue:

1. Celebrating the Eucharist as Christ's nonviolent act of self-sacrifice, with secondary components of prayer, meditation, and fasting.
2. Training and education in nonviolent peace-making and resistance, with a secondary component of forming nonviolent peace-making communities
3. Attention to religious or spiritual factors, especially in public discourse, and learning about religion, particularly in the form of intra-religious or inter-religious dialogue
4. A constructive program with its particular focus on the poor and marginalized



5. Conflict transformation and restorative justice, particularly in the form of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions
6. Unarmed civilian protection, a third-party intervention both in the form of international implementation and local peace teams
7. Civilian-based defence, a nonviolent form of civil defence that engages the broader society against an external threat or in the overthrow of a government

McCarthy has argued that Love's Just Peace criteria and Stassen and Thistlethwaite's just peace-making practical norms have embedded in them a desire for Christians to become better and more just peacemakers. He has added to their work an "orienting virtue ethic" along with the focused question, "What kinds of people are we becoming?"

Catholic conversion to Just Peace

The centuries-old "just-war theory" sought to provide a means of determining when it was morally justifiable to break the commandment "Thou shall not kill," with guidelines regarding whether to go to war (*jus ad bellum*) and how to fight war in an ethical manner (*jus in bello*). Some Catholic scholars have worked to extend just war criteria to include *jus post bellum* to guide restorative practices in a post-war context.

Love asserts that just war tradition, if anything, "tells you only how to limit war. It has nothing to say about how to build peace." She compares the applicability of just war criteria to the decline in the death penalty. "It was once thought necessary to protect people, but now capacity has grown to protect people in other ways than the death penalty," writes Love.

Thistlethwaite writes that Just Peace is not just a change in terminology; instead, it is "a paradigm shift away from the basic assumption behind just war criteria that war is inevitable."

McCarthy argues that even a small shift in language might help delegitimize any link between "justice" and "killing," possibly opening space in Catholic imagination for relinking justice and life, justice and dignity, justice and peace. Although a shift to the language of "limited war" instead of "just war" might better illuminate some "good intentions" in the just war tradition, without the turn to a Just Peace approach—criteria, core practices, core virtues—then we as the Catholic Church continue to legitimate war as a practice as long as it is "limited." Such religious legitimation and more so the practice of war itself already has and will likely continue to obstruct the development of our imagination, will, and practice of Just Peace approaches, and thus, leave us too easily influenced and determined by those in political, economic, and military positions of power.



Catholic Social Teaching provides a rich context in which to build a systemic body of thought and practice of Christian nonviolence. An overarching strategic objective of Just Peace is to develop a systematic analysis of nonviolence to cultivate effective approaches to addressing contemporary challenges in society through nonviolent means. Just Peace can be applied at all stages of conflict, including climate change–related conflict and “resource wars.” Just Peace can be thoroughly integrated with Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’* agenda in a manner that recognizes that violence done to human communities is often accompanied by devastating environmental destruction. An integral ecology contributes to an integral Just Peace.”

Coming back to Fr. John Dear and Ken Butigan³, “Mahatma Gandhi, who read the Sermon on the Mount every day for forty years, concluded that Jesus was the greatest person of nonviolence in history, and that everyone who follows him is called to be a person of nonviolence. Though the Church has supported and engaged in violence for the past seventeen hundred years, many saints and martyrs have affirmed, like Gandhi, that Gospel Nonviolence is the way of Jesus and have kept it alive through the centuries. Rooted in this tradition, the Church in this *kairos* moment—this time of momentous decision—is called to reject violence and justifications for war; to adhere faithfully to the nonviolence of Jesus; and to collaborate with people everywhere to create a thriving culture of nonviolence, justice, and peace.”

Thank you very much!

³ Fr. John Dear and Ken Butigan, *op cit*.