

## *From Violence to Nonviolence*

(From *The God of Peace: Toward a Theology of Nonviolence*)

In 1988, I traveled with a delegation of North American Christians to a remote village in El Salvador in response to an invitation to stand in solidarity with the suffering people. We journeyed on rocky roads, over hills, through rivers and into the barren countryside. As we turned the corner into the small, country village, we gasped at the sight of hundreds of Salvadoran soldiers and US military advisers milling about everywhere. A fleet of ten helicopters rested in a nearby field. The villagers greeted us and asked us to stay only for a short while; they feared for their lives from the occupying military forces. But they appreciated our solidarity. They told us that our visit demonstrated to the Salvadoran military that North Americans were watching their every move.

During our visit, one of the mothers handed me her child to hold. At that moment, all the violence of the world suddenly became very clear to me. The child's dirty eyes were glazed over and covered with flies and his stomach was extended beyond belief. As I held that dying, malnourished child, I looked over a few feet away to see Salvadoran soldiers loading all the villagers' sacks of grain onto their trucks and helicopters. These villagers were literally starving, yet the soldiers, who threatened to kill them, were taking the little food they had. This scene summed up in a flash all the violence of our world.

In Washington, D.C., we see the same story. In some parts of town, at the Pentagon, the White House, the Congress, the Department of State and the Department of Energy, the most powerful forces of violence in the history of the world go about their day-to-day business, maintaining the structures of violence and planning the wars of the future. Elsewhere, indeed only a few blocks from the White House, single mothers with hardly any income struggle to raise their

children, while drug wars tear up their neighborhoods leaving a record number of dead bodies strewn about the city's streets.

Two days after that experience in El Salvador, I returned to Washington, D.C., where I work with the poor and the homeless. That afternoon, I was helping to distribute food to the women of our low-income, inner-city neighborhood, when suddenly dozens of local police officers bearing weapons raided the housing development and arrested several young, African-American men for drug dealing. In a flash, it seemed as if I were back in El Salvador. Once again, the poor were under the guns of systemic violence. In Washington, D.C. as in many other places, life for many people means the day to day business of death.

### Levels of Violence

The violence of our world occurs on many levels, from the violence within us, to interpersonal and societal violence, to the global, structural violence of war, nuclear weapons, environmental destruction, hunger, sexism, racism, homelessness, abortion, torture, the death penalty, and the rampant poverty that leaves over one billion people in misery. Though cancer, AIDS, heart disease, natural disasters and accidents of every variety kill people by the millions each year, the deliberate violence of war and systemic injustice kill human beings at an enormous rate like a plague that humanity has inflicted on itself.

The first level of violence includes the over-arching global, structured injustice which institutionalizes the worldwide oppression of poverty, systemically accumulates the world's resources in the hands of a small minority of rich people, and forces the vast majority of humanity to suffer starvation, misery and degradation. In recent decades, the church has called this systemic injustice, "institutionalized, legalized violence, whether in the form of economic exploitation, political domination, or abuse of military might."<sup>(1)</sup> These global systems of economic exploitation

and political and military domination which cause and maintain poverty override all other forms of violence. Although the US has only five percent of the world's population, it consumes nearly sixty percent of the world's resources. Twenty percent of the world's population controls eighty percent of the world's goods. One fifth of humanity lives in desperate poverty, and three-fifths just get by. As Gandhi said, "poverty is the worst form of violence."

Institutionalized economic injustice is only possible because of the worldwide weapons systems and military forces which wage war and threaten the nuclear destruction of the planet in order to protect this unjust arrangement. Francis of Assisi long ago summed up the link between war and greed. "If we want to own possessions," he observed, "we must also have weapons. From this comes all the quarrels and battles that make love impossible. And this," he concluded, "is why we refuse to own anything." The poverty of the third world results from the greed and lifestyle of the first world and the maintenance of the first world's nuclear arsenal. Because the first world elite hords the world's goods, it needs an elaborate and lethal weapons system to protect through violence the goods that it has stolen from the rest of the world. The nuclear arsenal epitomizes the ultimate intent to kill the masses of poor people around the world who might one day demand that their resources and goods be returned to them. The catastrophic violence of the nuclear weapon and the entire nuclear and military arsenal, which can destroy cities in seconds and blow the world up a dozen times over, forms then a close second level of violence.

But as Catholic social teaching has long taught, economic systems and structures which maintain the lifestyle of the first world's wealthy elite already kill the poor of the world. As the Second Vatican Council declared, "The arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which injures the poor to an intolerable degree."<sup>(2)</sup> "The arms race is to be condemned unreservedly," Paul VI wrote. "It is in itself an act of aggression against those who are the victims of

it. It is an act of aggression, which amounts to a crime, for even when they are not used, by their cost alone, armaments kill the poor by causing them to starve."[italics in original](3) In other words, the bomb has already gone off in the world of the poor. Poverty and militarism are inextricably linked.

The world spends nearly a trillion dollars each year on weapons of death. Though we produce enough food to feed adequately more than the current global population, 950,000,000 people are chronically malnourished.(4) 60,000 people, primarily children, die each day from starvation, while the best and brightest minds of the world's governments spend their energies and the world's resources on the business of war. Forty million people worldwide die each year from starvation and preventable diseases.(5) A child dies of hunger and hunger-related causes approximately every two seconds. Some 14,000,000 children die yearly of preventable disease. Meanwhile, 1.5 million children were killed in wars worldwide in the 1980s.(6)

Despite this forced, institutionalized suffering on so many human beings, global expenditures on arms and armies approach one trillion dollars a year--about \$2,000,000 a minute--an amount that could easily reduce worldwide starvation, disease and poverty if it was spent on services for the world's poor.(7) World military expenditures from 1960 to 1990 add up to \$21 trillion (\$21,000,000,000,000) in 1987 US dollars, equivalent in size to the value of all goods and services produced by and for the 5.3 billion people on the earth in the year 1990.(8)

Since 1500, when the history of war began to be recorded, there have been 589 "official" wars and 141,901,000 people have been killed in these wars. In the twentieth century, there have been over four times as many war deaths as in the 400 years preceding.(9) During the 1980s, the number of wars reached an all-time peak and three-fourths of the people killed in them were civilians.(10) The world now has 26,000,000 people in the regular armed forces, another 40,000,000 in military reserves, and 64 national governments under some form of explicit military control.(11)

In the early 1990s, over forty wars were being fought simultaneously around the world.

With the atomic bombings of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and Nagasaki on August 9, 1945, the destruction of the entire human race and the planet itself has become possible. Though changes have occurred since the late 1980s, most notably the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union, the world still maintains, as of 1993, nearly 50,000 nuclear weapons, an explosive force 1,600 times the firepower released in three wars (World War II, the Korean war and the Vietnam war).(12) Six nations possess nuclear capabilities (the United States, Russia, Great Britain, France, China and Israel), and at least three other nations are developing them (South Africa, India and Pakistan). Loaded down with nuclear weapons, 745 ships and submarines continually circle the globe. Since 1945, 1,814 nuclear weapons have been detonated to "test" and thus "improve" their deadly power. The proliferation of nuclear weapons still threatens the world's destruction. Though the Cold War is over, the Clinton administration has declared that "the post cold-war world is decidedly not post-nuclear," and has thus recommitted itself to maintaining the US nuclear arsenal.(13) The Pentagon will spend \$38 billion in 1993 and \$350 billion over the next ten years to prepare for nuclear war.(14)

Under these two levels of violence--global, systemic injustice and the nuclear weapons arsenal--lies a third level of violence, namely repression. In order to keep the masses of poor people around the world from attaining the resources they need to live, governments often rely on repressive military force to harass, intimidate and subdue people. Such government violence (often supported by superpower weapons, money and assistance) targets poor and marginalized peoples whenever they begin to demand their basic human rights to housing, food, clothing, education and medicine. The military forces of the unjust status quo lash out at the weaker, marginalized peoples who constitute the vast majority. Often in such repressive violence, key organizers and prophetic

voices are publicly assassinated, while thousands disappear, are tortured and killed. Examples of repressive violence include the government brutality recently aimed at the suffering masses in El Salvador, South Africa, Palestine, Guatemala and Haiti.

As the violence of repression escalates, it often leads to a fourth level of violence, namely revolutionary violence. History records many cases of revolutionary violence, from the violent revolution of the Palestinian zealots against the Roman imperialism of Jesus' time, to the North American colonial struggle against the British troops in the 1770s, to the Salvadoran FMLN rebel attacks against the US-backed Salvadoran government. While they do not use nuclear weapons, nor do they support the systemic violence of imperialism which kills the poor, violent revolutionaries do kill people, and thus sow seeds for further hostility and violence somewhere in the future. Though this is a fourth level of violence, and not equal to the massive institutionalized violence of systemic injustice or the nuclear weapons system, still revolutionary violence is lethal.

The interpersonal violence which is destroying the inner-cities of the first world and is so characteristic of the entire world comprises a fifth level of violence. This level encompasses the violence of murder and street violence; the violence of armed robbery and rape; and the psychological and physical violence used against children, women, gays and lesbians, and all marginalized peoples. Included in this category of interpersonal violence is the violence of personal assault and violent self-defense. These forms of interpersonal violence often find their roots in the poverty and despair of the first and second levels of violence.

Underneath this interpersonal violence is the personal violence within each human heart. When we examine the roots of human violence, we discover that we all have violence in our hearts and that we all need to be disarmed of the violence within us. Because we live in a world of violence from our street corner to the nuclear arsenal, we have all been trained in violence and inevitably give

in to the darkness of violence.

While violence is deadly in whatever form it takes, these different levels of violence name varying degrees of worldwide violence. The global violence of systemic injustice backed up by the nuclear arsenal which threatens to destroy the planet (the first two levels) overshadow all other levels of violence.

Underlying these interacting levels of violence is a prevailing myth which maintains that violence alone can bring about positive change. The myth of redemptive violence insists that violence is sometimes necessary and justified, that violence redeems a bad situation, that there is such a thing as "good violence." In this myth, violent retaliation is upheld as the only viable response to violence, whether on the interpersonal level or the global level. It insists that "violence is the only thing that works," that violence is necessary to teach our children--or another nation--a lesson. Theologian Walter Wink writes:

Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world. It has been accorded the status of religion, demanding from its devotees an absolute obedience to death. Its followers are not aware, however, that the devotion they pay to violence is a form of religious piety. Violence is so successful as a myth precisely because it does not seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works. It is inevitable, the last, and often, the first resort to conflicts. It is embraced with equal alacrity by people on the left and on the right, by religious liberals as well as religious conservatives. The threat of violence, it is believed, is alone able to deter aggressors. It secured us forty-five years of a balance of terror. We learned to trust the Bomb to grant us peace.(15)

"An eye for an eye" sums up this worldwide philosophy of retaliation. The nonviolence of Jesus and Gandhi, on the other hand, teaches that "an eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind."

Nonviolence maintains that violence only leads to further violence, that violence never ever solves anything. Nonviolence insists that violence does not work.

### The Alternative of Nonviolence

The world's violence has brought humanity to the brink of self-destruction. We cannot continue this madness for long. Either we will kill ourselves in a global holocaust of violence or we will renounce violence in every form on every level and learn to live at peace with one another. "The choice is no longer between violence and nonviolence," Martin Luther King, Jr. declared the night before he was assassinated. "It is nonviolence or nonexistence." (16) Gospel nonviolence offers us the only way out of the global catastrophe of violence.

Gandhi popularized the term "nonviolence," taking it from the Sanskrit word ahimsa ("non-harm"), to express the peaceful, loving means of proclaiming the truth. Nonviolence is a way of active peacemaking that both resists evil without doing evil and insists on truth and justice through love. From Gandhi to King and the movements of peaceful transformation around the world, nonviolence refers to active peacemaking and persistent reconciliation. (17) Nonviolence is the exact opposite of passivity (which the term "pacifism" often connotes). It is the active pursuit of peace and justice that uses peaceful and just means. It is active love and truth working together to transform every level of violence into God's realm of justice and peace. It is the unconditional love of God working within humanity to transform humanity into God's reign of justice and peace, to fulfill the reconciliation already created by God.

Nonviolence is a revolutionary tactic and a political strategy for the transformation of the world, but it is much more than that. It is a way of life, a principle underlying all human life. As a way of life, active nonviolence struggles through peaceful, loving means to promote the truth of God's reign of justice and peace for all. At every step along the way, this struggle refrains from

violence, so that every person is reconciled again to one another, to God and to the earth. The way of nonviolence therefore refuses to hurt others, or kill others or wage war or support the institutionalized violence of poverty and systemic injustice.

Just as the different levels of violence are destroying our world, so too different levels of nonviolence are at work healing our world. Faith teaches us that God's spirit of nonviolence is at work disarming every human heart, healing each person's spirit, and leading us all to an inner peace. From this inner peace, we reach out through the interpersonal nonviolence of love and truth to forgive others, show compassion to others, and live at peace together. Such nonviolence helps us to respond creatively in situations of personal assault so that we do not retaliate with violence but instead seek out a shared humanity and resolve the situation peacefully. From such interpersonal nonviolence, we gather in families, communities, cities, and societies to spread the way of peace and justice and resist systemic violence through love and a commitment to the truth. As we come together in communities of active nonviolence, we help disarm each other and widen the circle of disarmament. As we go forward with public nonviolence, we resist evil through love and truth and promote the disarmament of our cities and nations. From this steadfast nonviolence, national and global movements of nonviolence (such as those led by Gandhi and King) are at work which are disarming and transforming the nations and the world. This range of attitudes and action, from the interior spiritual life of nonviolence to participation in national and international peace and justice work for nonviolent social change comprise a continuum of nonviolence that require participation at every level. As a fundamental principle of life, nonviolence requires consistency. At every level, nonviolence calls us to refrain from violence and to seek love, truth, justice and peace.

Active nonviolence proclaims a public "No" to systemic injustice, war, and violence as well as a "Yes" to peace, justice and life. In the face of the world's violence, nonviolence stands up with

the power of love and truth and acts to transform every level of the world's violence into God's love, peace and justice. It insists on the immediate cessation of systemic injustice and global violence and paves the way to justice and peace for all.

Nonviolence recognizes that violence takes us down a never-ending spiral into ever-deepening violence. It breaks the cycle of violence simply by refusing to respond in kind with violence. It turns the myth of redemptive violence upside down and opens up the way to reconciliation and justice through forgiveness, love and resistance to evil. Violence only breeds further violence. Nonviolence reverses the cycle of violence by accepting suffering without retaliation in the loving insistence on truth, justice and peace. It injects the God of peace and unconditional love into the spiral of violence, and opens a space for God to reverse the process.

Nonviolence therefore offers a way to fight against injustice and war without using violence. It breaks through the world's violence, turns us to the God who created us to live in peace, and leads us along the steps of reconciliation and justice towards peace. As the force of love and truth that seeks positive social change for the benefit of all life, it resists injustice, refuses cooperation with violence, and looks beyond the systems of death to God's reign of life. Nonviolence requires active cooperation with good and active noncooperation with evil. Nonviolent resistance to evil willingly takes on suffering in order to right wrongs and transform the systems of death into life for all. It discovers the ends already present in the means and insists that only peace leads to peace, that only truth produces truth, and that only the practice of love itself towards every human being transforms and fulfills the human vocation to be a family of love, children of a loving God.

Violence makes us forget or ignore who we are, that we are all equal, all sisters and brothers of one another, all children of a loving God. Once we forget or ignore this fact of reality, we begin to hurt one another, to kill, to wage war, and to take from others. Eventually, we legitimize and systematize our violence. Nonviolence insists, on the other hand, that we are called to recognize the divine in every human being--even those who hurt or kill others or are labeled as enemies or non-human. From this inner journey of the heart, we can create nonviolent structures and cultures that help us to affirm every human being as sister and brother so that we turn from the ways of violence towards justice and peace. Nonviolence, then, is a way of actively remembering every day of our lives, who we are and what we are about, and returning to that core truth whenever we forget. It recalls us to our real identities as daughters and sons of the God of peace, peacemaking sisters and brothers of one another. It means noncooperation with violence, a refusing to forget. It enables us to regain the truth of human reality, that we are all God's children.(18) Activist Wally Nelson defines nonviolence as:

the constant awareness of the dignity and humanity of oneself and others. It seeks truth and justice; it renounces violence both in method and in attitude. It is a courageous acceptance of active love and goodwill as the instrument with which to overcome evil and transform both oneself and others. It is the willingness to undergo suffering rather than inflict it. It excludes retaliation and flight.(19)

### The Nonviolence of Gandhi, Day and King

Three contemporary apostles of nonviolence, Mohandas Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., brought the world's attention to the possibility of nonviolence. Although a Hindu, Gandhi drew inspiration from the nonviolence of Jesus, in particular, from the Sermon on the Mount. By teaching and practicing nonviolence, Gandhi revealed to the world that the teachings and practice of Jesus could be employed, not just by individuals, but by nations as well. Gandhi applied nonviolence to the political realities of poverty and injustice in South Africa and India to lead a nonviolent

revolution from British oppression. In this struggle, Gandhi experienced God as Truth, as the Spirit of nonviolence itself, pushing humanity to speak with love the truth of justice.

"Humanity has to get out of violence only through nonviolence," Gandhi declared. "Hatred can only be overcome only by love. Counter-hatred only increases the surface as well as the depth of hatred."(20) "Nonviolence is the greatest and most active force in the world. One person who can express nonviolence in life exercises a force superior to all the forces of brutality."(21) "The force generated by nonviolence is infinitely greater than the force of all the arms invented by humanity's ingenuity."(22) "Nonviolence and truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin or rather a smooth unstamped metallic disc," Gandhi observed. "Who can say which is the obverse and which the reverse? Nevertheless, nonviolence is the means and truth is the end."(23) "When the practice of nonviolence becomes universal, God will reign on earth as God does in heaven."(24)

Gandhi's teaching challenges Christian theology to return to Jesus' own nonviolence and to articulate what that nonviolence means for us today. Gandhi invites us to root our theology in Jesus' nonviolent struggle for justice, in the God of nonviolence, and in our own active nonviolence.

While Gandhi was practicing nonviolence in India, Dorothy Day was founding the Catholic Worker movement in New York City. She practiced nonviolence among the homeless poor of New York's Lower East side and consistently voiced a strong rejection of war and the nuclear arms race in favor of justice and peace. While opening houses of hospitality that fed and sheltered the homeless, Day insisted that the U.S. stop waging war and developing nuclear weapons of mass destruction. She urged the nation to use its resources to serve the needs of suffering humanity, beginning right here at home. Her reflections, reported monthly in the Catholic Worker newspaper, grew from her day to day experiences of life among the poor, on the picket lines and in jail for

nonviolent resistance to evil. Her theological reflections sprung from a lifelong immersion in the systemic injustice suffered by the poor, a serious analysis of global violence, and regular application of Gospel nonviolence.

"As you come to know the seriousness of our situation--the war, the racism, the poverty in the world--you come to realize it is not going to be changed by words or demonstrations," Day wrote. "It's a question of risking your life. It's a question of living your life in drastically different ways."(25) From this starting point, she applied the nonviolence of Jesus and went forth to serve the poor, walk with the poor, defend the poor, and proclaim the Gospel vision of justice and peace. In this theology of nonviolence, Day wrote that she met Christ in the poor and the enemy. We are called to love Christ present in every human being, especially in the poor and in the enemy, she declared. Such active love, she suggested, is transforming the world. "All my prayer, my own suffering, my reading, my study, would lead me to this conclusion. This is a great and holy force and must be used as the spiritual weapon. Love against hate. Suffering against violence. What is two thousand years in the history of the world? We have scarcely begun to love. We have scarcely begun to know Christ, to see him in others around us."(26)

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Dorothy Day and her friends refused to go indoors during air raid drills which sought to prepare the public for nuclear war. Instead, she sat in a New York City park and went to jail in opposition to the government's preparations for nuclear war. After her release from jail in 1957, she wrote, "It is a gesture, perhaps, but a necessary one. Silence means consent and we cannot consent to the militarization of our country without protest. Since we believe that air raid drills are part of a calculated plan to inspire fear of the enemy, instead of the love which Jesus Christ told us we should feel, we must protest these drills. It is an opportunity to show we mean what we write when we repeat over and over that we are put here on this earth to love God and

our neighbor."(27) After two thousand people joined in the nonviolent protest in 1961, the air raid drills were cancelled. Until her death in 1982, Day continued to say "No" to war and "Yes" to Christ's way of nonviolence.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr. captured the world's attention with his commitment to civil rights and peace through active nonviolence. King taught nonviolence not just as a method for promoting civil rights, but as the spirit that redeems and saves humanity. Thousands of people across the nation and the world learned the lessons of nonviolence from Dr. King. Even more than Gandhi and Day, King articulated a new theology of nonviolence. Through his sermons and published works, King reflected on the wisdom of nonviolence which he learned first hand in struggle for civil rights and peace. Early in his public life, Dr. King wrote:

As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationship. The "turn the other cheek" philosophy and the "love your enemies" philosophy were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict a more realistic approach seemed necessary. But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was. Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. For Gandhi, love was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking for so many months. The intellectual and moral satisfaction that I failed to gain from the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, the revolutionary methods of Marx and Lenin,

the social-contracts theory of Hobbes, the "back to nature" optimism of Rousseau, and the superman philosophy of Nietzsche, I found in the nonviolent resistance philosophy of Gandhi. I came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.(28)

"When the protest began," King wrote later on, "my mind was driven back to the Sermon on the Mount, with its sublime teachings on love, and the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance. As the days unfolded, I came to see the power of nonviolence more and more. Living through the actual experience of the protest, nonviolence became more than a method to which I gave intellectual assent; it became a commitment to a way of life. Many of the things that I had not cleared up intellectually concerning nonviolence," King concluded, "were now solved in the sphere of practical action."(29)

When he received the 1963 Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, King once again upheld the way of nonviolence:

Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time--the need for people to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression....Nonviolence is not sterile passivity but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later, all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace.... If this is to be achieved, people must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation for such a method is love.(30)

For Dr. King, nonviolence held the only way out of the downward spiral of violence and death. It offered a divine way into a new world of justice and peace.

In his book Stride Toward Freedom, King outlined six principles of Christian nonviolence

which shaped his life and message.(31) First, nonviolence offers a way of life for courageous people. It means active resistance to evil through peaceful, loving methods, which always seek to persuade one's opponent of the righteousness and justice of one's cause. Dr. King described "the method" as "passive physically, but strongly active spiritually. It is no passive nonresistance to evil; it is active nonviolent resistance to evil."(32)

Second, nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding. It endeavors to make apparent the underlying unity and reconciliation that already exist in humanity, a unity forever sealed in the blood of Jesus, as St. Paul writes. Nonviolence uncovers and builds up the beloved community of humanity. As the way of God, it redeems and reconciles, and leads us to the nonviolent reign of God on earth.

Third, nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not people. Nonviolence looks on evil doers as themselves victims, rather than as evil people. The nonviolent resister seeks to defeat evil, not the people who do the evil. It recognizes that every human being sins, that every human being does evil, that every human being commits violence. Active nonviolence seeks to halt evil and to heal the human family. It transforms injustice into justice, war into peace, and death into life.

Fourth, nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform. In the nonviolent struggle for justice, one accepts suffering but never inflicts it on others. Nonviolence struggles actively for justice and peace. Instead of inflicting violence and death on others, however, it accepts suffering without retaliation. In the nonviolent way of life, we refrain from violence, no more how just the cause, King insisted. One never inflicts violence on others or ever advocates it, but if necessary, one suffers it with a redemptive love that seeks to open the eyes of one's opponent to the truth of justice and peace. Thus, nonviolence accepts the consequences of its actions. "Unearned suffering," King repeated everywhere he went, "is redemptive." It has the power to convert one's

opponent when reason fails. Redemptive suffering love which insists on justice and peace is the doorway to conversion and transformation.

Fifth, nonviolence chooses love instead of hate. It resists violence of the spirit as well as the body. This love flows spontaneously, unselfishly, creatively, sacrificially and unconditionally. Given the world's violence, active nonviolent love risks a return of hostility. Such active love never ceases to forgive but continues to insist on the beloved community of humanity. Nonviolence recognizes that all life is interrelated, that all is one. Love for the enemy, King explained, stands then at the center of the way of nonviolence. "Along the way of life," King wrote, "someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives."<sup>(33)</sup> "Love, agape, is the only cement that can hold the broken community together. When I am commanded to love, I am commanded to restore community, to resist injustice, and to meet the needs of my brothers and sisters."<sup>(34)</sup>

Sixth, the nonviolent way of life flows from a deep belief that the universe stands on the side of justice, King wrote. The practitioner of nonviolence knows that God reigns, that God is nonviolent, that God's reign is a reign of nonviolence, and that God's way of nonviolence will eventually transform everyone into God's reign of justice and peace. The universe itself bends toward justice, he proclaimed. The deepest meaning in life, then, is to side with God in God's nonviolent transformation of the world into a reign of justice and peace.

Like Gandhi and Day, King's theology emerges from the nonviolent struggle for justice and peace. It springs from the poor and oppressed in their peaceful search for liberation and truth. Like Gandhi and Day, King learned that nonviolence is not just a tactic but a way of life, a way of living in God's reign here and now in a world of violence. Most importantly, King realized, the practice of nonviolence is teaching us that Jesus practiced nonviolence, that God is a God of nonviolence, and

that we are called to be nonviolent, not just because it works, but because it reflects the very nature of God.(35) By articulating a theology of nonviolence, we may learn then what it means to be human in these days of violence and what it means to live in God's reign of nonviolent love.

### Toward a Theology of Nonviolence

Theology simply refers to discourse about God. If our theology is to be credible, intelligible, and real in this world of systemic violence, it will necessarily have to address and grapple with that violence. From the perspective of the world's violence, theology refers to God's relationship with a violent world, God's transformation of that violence, and our participation in God's transforming nonviolence. In a world of violence, theology reflects on God's nonviolent transformation of the world. Our theology will seek to pinpoint God's response and way out of the violence, and enter into that struggle, which is finally God's transforming nonviolence.

In light of the world's violence, a theology of nonviolence speaks of the God of peace and God's alternative of nonviolence. As Gandhi, Day, and King have demonstrated, theological reflection on active nonviolence flows from the life and practice of active nonviolence as one struggles for justice and peace in the world. Gandhi, Day and King highlight this way of supporting God's activity in the world. They point to a new way of doing theology and inspire this new theology of nonviolence. Their theology of nonviolence not only proclaims nonviolence but practices nonviolence for the transformation of the world. To do this theology of nonviolence, we need to participate in the nonviolent struggle for justice and peace.

A systematic theology of Christian nonviolence requires that our theological reflection occur in the action of nonviolent love and peacemaking. A theology of nonviolence reflects on the active life of Christian nonviolence in a world of violence. Indeed, this new theology of nonviolence will be itself a form of our active nonviolence. Our theological reflections will emerge from the thick of

our public Christian peacemaking activity in the world and its violence. Since this theology is rooted in the living witness and daily practice of Gospel nonviolence, it becomes a theology that can literally make peace in a world of war. A theology of nonviolence is necessarily a process of practicing nonviolence. This theology practices what it preaches. It articulates a theology of justice and peace that seeks justice and makes peace in the process. It articulates our experience of making peace and seeking justice and so contributes to the spread of peace and justice among humanity. Our theology of nonviolence, rooted in our active peacemaking, will help us discover God as the source of our peace. It examines our discipleship to the nonviolent Jesus and our relationship to a nonviolent God who is transforming us all.

A theology of nonviolence studies the world's violence and injustice from God's perspective of nonviolence and reflects on and joins in God's active transformation of the world into God's reign of peace and justice. In our theology, we shall apply the insights of Gandhi, Day and King to Christianity, its scripture, tradition, faith life and praxis. We shall relate the perspective of nonviolence to traditional theology and the violence of the world. This theology evolves from the traditional theologies of Christian history, but flows most explicitly from the liberation theology that has developed in recent decades in Latin America, Africa and Asia. A theology of nonviolence includes both feminist and liberation theologies to address the entire systems of violence, oppression and death that plague humanity. It builds on the foundations of theology, scripture, tradition and the insights of active nonviolence to help us understand who God is, what it means to be human, what it means to be a Christian, and how we can more faithfully serve humanity in its struggle for justice and peace. Just as liberation theology relates the liberating struggle from oppression to the traditional Christian theology of human salvation, so too a theology of nonviolence relates the nonviolent transformation of the world's violence into justice and peace with the traditional Christian

theology of human salvation. The historical effort of active nonviolence to transform systemic violence into a world of peace and justice is at the heart of God's salvation of humanity. A theology of nonviolence concludes that the human practice of nonviolence will be a crucial factor in God's transformation of the world's violence. Nonviolence is the way God is saving us from our global, self-destruction violence. Active nonviolence is seen now as a critical element in human salvation because God is now recognized as a God of nonviolence who calls humanity to become a people of nonviolence. This theology of nonviolence looks critically at the world's deadly violence with the new insight of Christ's peacemaking alternative to help ourselves, our church, and our world transform our violence through the grace of God into God's nonviolent reign of justice and peace. Using the perspective of nonviolence articulated by Gandhi, Day and King, we approach theology systematically, over and over again, with the eyes of nonviolence and learn to see new insights into God, ourselves, our world and what it means to be human.

Along the way, a theology of nonviolence will question any and every theology or ideology that supports violence in any form at every level, to get at the heart of God's nonviolent love and how that love calls us to live at peace with one another today. In our theology of nonviolence, we shall reflect on every level of violence which is destroying our world in light of the nonviolent Jesus and then apply these insights to the area of theology under review. This interaction between the world's violence, Jesus' Gospel nonviolence, and our theological questions will develop into a theology of nonviolence. Throughout, we will use a hermeneutic of nonviolence towards the scriptures. We will question everything we have been taught about God, theology and the world, in light of our self-destructive violence and the new possibility that God is a God of nonviolence. This interplay will lead us to an entirely new theology, a new way of understanding God, Christ, the church, human life, the world, and what the future of humanity might be. By applying the standard

of nonviolence to the traditional areas of theology, we will reassess our understanding of God and human salvation. In the end, this new theology of nonviolence may contribute to God's transformation of the world of violence into a world of peace with justice.

This theology of nonviolence holds that nonviolence is at the core of the Gospel, the heart of Christianity, and the essence of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Most people, however, especially most Christians, do not understand Gospel nonviolence. Therefore, given the urgency of the day and the power of theology to support peace and justice, a theology of nonviolence needs to be articulated so that people of faith may come to a deeper understanding of who God is, how God responds to the world's violence, how God is transforming the world, and how humanity is called to become a people of nonviolence.

## Notes

- (1) Thomas Gumbleton, "Peacemaking as a Way of Life," in John Coleman (Ed.) One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought. (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1991), 310.
- (2) Gaudium et Spes, Vatican II, No. 80, 1965.
- (3) "Vatican Statement on Disarmament," 1975.
- (4) Ruth Leger Sivard. World Military and Social Expenditures: 1991. (Washington, D.C.: World Priorities, 1991), 5.
- (5) The 1991 figure of daily deaths worldwide due to starvation is from Oxfam Relief Agency. The annual figure is from Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, War Against the Poor (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 10.
- (6) Sivard, World Military and Social Expenditures: 1991, 9; See The State of the World's Children--1993, UNICEF Report, (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 50.
- (7) Tom Cordaro. A Shoot Shall Rise Up: Building an Alternative to the New World Order. (Erie, PA: Pax Christi USA, 1992), 7.
- (8) *Ibid.*, 11.
- (9) *Ibid.*, 20.
- (10) *Ibid.*, 7.
- (11) *Ibid.*, 11.
- (12) *Ibid.*, 16.
- (13) See Michael Wines, "Aspin Orders Pentagon Overhaul of Strategy on Nuclear Weapons," New York Times, October 30, 1993, A8.
- (14) The Defense Monitor, Vol. XXII, No. 1, 1993, (Published by the Center for Defense Information, 1500 Mass. Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C., 20005.)
- (15) Walter Wink. Engaging the Powers. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 26, 13.
- (16) James Washington. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 280.
- (17) See Elizabeth McAlister's foreword in John Dear, Our God Is Nonviolent, (Pilgrim Press, 1990), xiv.
- (18) For further reading on the question of violence, see my books, Disarming the Heart (Paulist Press, 1987), 13-29; and Our God Is Nonviolent, 1-25.
- (19) From a talk by Wally Nelson at the Catholic Worker, New York City, Spring, 1986.
- (20) Thomas Merton. (Ed.) Gandhi on Nonviolence. (New York: New Directions, 1965), 32.
- (21) *Ibid.*, 44.
- (22) Richard Attenborough. (Ed.) The Words of Gandhi. (NY: Newmarket Press, 1982), 55.
- (23) *Ibid.*, 47.
- (24) Merton, Gandhi on Nonviolence, 25.
- (25) Arthur Laffin and Anne Montgomery. (Eds.) Swords Into Plowshares. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 20.
- (26) William Miller, "Dorothy Day, 1897-1980: 'All Was Grace,' America, (Dec. 13, 1980): 385.
- (27) Jim Forest, Love is the Measure. (NY: Paulist Press, 1986), 137.
- (28) Martin Luther King, Jr.. Stride Toward Freedom. (NY: Harper and Row, 1958), 78-79.
- (29) *Ibid.*, 83.
- (30) James Washington. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., 224-225.

- (31) King, Stride Toward Freedom, 83-88.
- (32) *Ibid.*, 84.
- (33) *Ibid.*, 85.
- (34) *Ibid.*, 88.
- (35) Wink, Engaging the Powers, 217.