

witness to,” he writes. “God wastes nothing, not even our mistakes” (2). Mistakes and all, his has been a powerful life, rendered here in compelling stories that should enthrall and inspire any reader.

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CATHOLIC NONVIOLENCE INITIATIVE, *Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace in the Church and the World* edited by Rose Marie Berger, Ken Butigan, Judy Coode and Marie Dennis (Brussels: Pax Christi International, 2020), pp. 322. ISBN: 978-178456-716-3 (paper) \$29.45.

This book is the work of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, a project of Pax Christi International. In 2016 Pax Christi, along with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (now part of the Vatican’s Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development), co-sponsored an international conference on the topic “Nonviolence and Just Peace.” The Catholic Nonviolence Initiative was created to continue to explore these themes and in 2017 began a multi-year process of discussion, discernment and research, drawing especially on the testimonies of those working for peace and justice in contexts of violence around the world. This book is a result of that collaborative process. Over 120 contributors to the book are listed. There was also a follow-up event entitled “The Path of Nonviolence: Towards a Culture of Peace” that took place in 2019 at which much of the material presented in this book was shared.

In explaining the rationale for the book, two “signs of the times” are highlighted. One is the global crisis of violence that the world is currently experiencing. The other is the spread of active, powerful and successful nonviolent action, which in numerous cases has even been able to overthrow military dictatorships and other repressive regimes. The goal of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative is to move the Catholic Church as a whole towards a deeper principled embrace of nonviolence and a commitment to integrate nonviolence into Church formation and education at every level, building upon the strong critiques of war and support for nonviolent action by recent popes. As Robert McElroy, bishop of San Diego, states: “We need to mainstream nonviolence in the Church. We need to move it from the margins of Catholic thought to the center. Nonviolence is a spirituality, a lifestyle, a program of societal action and a universal ethic” (10).

In Part I of the book, entitled “Returning to Nonviolence,” testimonies are shared from Catholics working nonviolently on behalf of social justice around the world. Among the voices highlighted is that of Fr. Emmanuel Katongole of Uganda, who emphasizes the theological core of Catholic nonviolence: “Nonviolence is a calling, not simply because it ‘works’ but

because it is the way of God. That is the way God creates, governs and redeems the universe” (17). Another testimony shared is that of Sr. Nazik Matty of Iraq, who challenges the notion of a just war: “Please tell the world that there is not such thing as a just war. I say this as a daughter of war. We can’t respond to violence with more violence. . . . It’s like a dragon with seven heads. You cut one and two others come up” (18). Seven brief case studies are also shared in this portion of the book. The case studies focus on Catholic peacebuilding efforts amidst recent crises in Kenya, Croatia, Colombia, the Philippines, Syria/Lebanon, the Central African Republic and Mexico.

Part II of the book, “Foundations of Nonviolence,” begins with discussion of Catholic social teaching, with particular attention to Pope Francis’ 2017 World Day of Peace message entitled “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace.” In this message, the most extensive reflection to date on nonviolence in papal teaching, Francis states: “I ask God to help all of us to cultivate nonviolence in our most personal thoughts and values. . . . In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms” (75). Francis emphasizes the centrality of nonviolence to authentic Christian faith. “To be true followers of Jesus today,” Francis states, “includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence” (86).

Teachings concerning nonviolence and sharp criticisms of war by Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, along with additional statements by Pope Francis, are also highlighted. Among these are Pope Benedict’s assertion that violence “is contrary to the Kingdom of God. . . . Violence never serves man, but dehumanizes him”; his condemnation of the war in Iraq (which was also condemned by Pope John Paul II); and his expression of grave doubt as to “whether it is still licit to admit the very existence of a just war” (81). Attention is also given to other rejections of violence in papal teaching, such as Pope Francis’ declaration that the death penalty is “inadmissible” and his condemnation of not only the use but also the very possession of nuclear weapons (88).

While recent popes have issued forceful condemnations of all war (and no pope since the mid-twentieth century has justified any contemporary war), the popes have also stressed the importance of taking multilateral action under the auspices of an international authority such as the United Nations in order to prevent genocide or other massive human rights abuses. The popes have spoken of this as an obligation to “disarm the aggressor.” How this is to be done, however, remains somewhat ambiguous in the papal statements, including the question of whether some type of armed

intervention (conceptualized more as a police action than as war) could be justified. Pope Francis, for example, states: “I can only say that it is licit to stop the unjust aggressor. I underscore the verb ‘stop’; I don’t say bomb, make war – stop him. The means by which he may be stopped should be evaluated” (84).

In the second section of Part II, the focus is on the biblical foundations of nonviolence. Attention is given to both the Hebrew Bible – with particular attention to the story of Cain and Abel, Abraham’s non-sacrifice of Isaac and the suffering servant motif – and the New Testament, with particular attention to the Sermon on the Mount, as well as to Jesus’ own examples of nonviolent resistance such as his breaking of Sabbath rules, his provocative action in the Temple and his prevention of the execution of a woman charged with adultery.

The third section of Part II explores the theological underpinnings and implications of nonviolence in more depth, including attention to christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology and other areas within Christian theology. With regard to ecclesiology, it is stressed that while the church should be a “countersign” to the flawed values of the world, too often it has been a countersign to the values of the Gospel. The authors highlight a history of church support for slavery, torture, the death penalty, forced conversions, the Crusades and other wars, lack of attention to violence against women, etc., as well as the scandal of sexual abuse by clergy. Yet a history of faithful Christian witnesses to nonviolence also exists, including the nonviolent example of the early church, St. Francis, the various peace churches such as the Quakers and the inspiring modern witness of people such as Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero and others.

Part III, “The Practice and Power of Nonviolence,” highlights some of the many examples of successful nonviolent action around the world, including the successes of Gandhi and Abdul Ghaffar Khan (a Muslim leader and founder of the world’s first “nonviolent army”) against British colonialism, Denmark’s nonviolent resistance to the Nazis, the ending of repressive regimes through mass nonviolent action in countries such as Poland, Chile and South Africa, and numerous other cases. Attention is given to the work of Gene Sharp, the world’s premier historian and theorist of nonviolent action. The authors emphasize the importance that Sharp placed upon strategy, tactics, training, etc., and highlight the profound impact of Sharp’s work in social struggles around the world. (There is an excellent documentary concerning Sharp entitled “How to Start a Revolution: Meet the Most Important Man You’ve Never Heard Of”). Attention is also given to the research of political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, whose seminal book *Why Civil Resistance*

Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict explores every attempt at violent and nonviolent revolution over the past century. Chenoweth and Stephan find that nonviolent revolution succeeded twice as often as violent revolution and was much more likely to lead to more authentic democracy in its aftermath.¹

In Part IV, “Embracing Nonviolence,” the need is emphasized for a new moral framework concerning violence/nonviolence in Catholic theology. In particular, the suggestion is made that the traditional focus on just war theory should be replaced by a focus on nonviolence and “just peace.” A just peace approach emphasizes the active building of peace and the need for training in skills such as nonviolent resistance, nonviolent communication, conflict resolution, restorative justice, trauma healing, unarmed civilian protection (drawing upon the successful nonviolent accompaniment projects of organizations such as Nonviolent Peaceforce, Peace Brigades International and Christian Peacemaker Teams) and numerous other strategies for peacemaking/peacebuilding and the defense of human rights.

Suggestions are made for integrating nonviolence more deeply at every level of church life, including a revision of the catechism to more clearly reflect recent papal statements that condemn all modern wars and embrace nonviolent action, a reframing of the sacraments to more clearly express the nonviolent values embedded within them, deeper attention to nonviolence and social justice in preaching, the promotion of vows of nonviolence, formation in nonviolence at all levels of Catholic education from preschool to university, as well as in parishes, and practical training in the various peacemaking/peacebuilding skills highlighted above.

The book concludes with a series of three appendices. One is the consensus statement that emerged from the 2016 “Nonviolence and Just Peace” gathering: “An Appeal to the Catholic Church to Recommit to the Centrality of Gospel Nonviolence.” It is a sign-on statement and signatures are still being accepted through the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative website (<https://nonviolencejustpeace.net>). The second appendix is a statement that emerged from the 2019 follow-up meeting. It is entitled “Nonviolence Nurtures Hope, Can Renew the Church.” The third appendix describes “Ten Elements of Nonviolence.” A quote from the “Nonviolence Nurtures Hope” statement sums up the overall message of the book well:

Nonviolence is at the heart of the Gospel. It is the calling of the Church. It is not passive or naïve. It is a way of faith and action. It is

1. See Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

an effective alternative. It is a constructive force to protect all people and our common home. It includes a broad spectrum of approaches and activities. It is the core of a new moral framework. It is essential to integral human development and at the heart of a culture of peace. It is at the core of the witness and action of Jesus and many who have come after him. . . . In a violent world, nonviolence nurtures hope. Actively embracing the way of nonviolence can renew the Church and invite the entire world to discover the powerful hope of creative nonviolent solutions to the monumental challenges of our time. (319)

Overall, this is a book with a crucial message and many important insights. I strongly recommend it. At the same time, I believe that there are several ways that this book could have been even further enhanced and ways that its use in educational programs in schools or parishes can be made even more effective.

With regard to enhancements, providing an even deeper and fuller sense of the profound critiques of war contained in recent papal statements would have been valuable. While the book highlights a few important short quotations from each recent pope, some of the more powerful and longer passages, particularly from Popes John Paul II and Francis, are not included. Interested readers can find many of those quotes in my article “Pope Francis, Nonviolence, and Catholic Teaching on War,” freely available online in the journal *Expositions*.²

Another enhancement would have been to include a more nuanced discussion of the issue of violence in the Bible. “We can state categorically that the God of the Bible does not use violence,” the authors assert (111). Yet of course the God portrayed in the Bible commands genocide in various passages concerning the conquest of the “promised land” and directly carries out genocide in others, such as the story of Noah and the flood! A deeper and clearer grappling with how to constructively deal with such problematic texts and a brief exploration of biblical interpretation more generally would have strengthened the text. Insightful exploration of these topics can be found in works such as Eric Seibert’s *The Violence of Scripture*³ and Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer’s *Jesus against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus*.⁴

2. See John Sniegocki, “Pope Francis, Nonviolence, and Catholic Teaching on War,” *Expositions: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 13.2 (2019) 152-73; available at: <https://expositions.journals.villanova.edu/index.php/expositions/article/view/2491/2440>.

3. Eric Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament’s Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

4. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Jesus against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001).

Deeper discussion of the spirituality of nonviolence would also have further enhanced the text, including reflection on the relationship between inner peace and outward work for peace and justice. Description of specific types of spiritual practices that many have found to be useful in enabling sustained commitment to such work amidst the many deep challenges and frustrations of our world would have been a valuable addition. Insights from the work of Thomas Merton, among others, could of course be an important resource here.⁵

Attention to the implications of nonviolence for some of our most basic daily decisions, such as what we eat, would also have been valuable. Many central figures in the history of nonviolent action, such as Gandhi, Thich Nhat Hanh, Cesar Chavez, Sarah and Angelina Grimke and many others have understood vegetarianism to be an integral part of a commitment to nonviolent living. While the main text of the book ends with a sentence calling for “healing our planet and honoring the infinite worth of every being” (306), the impacts of our dietary choices on the planet and on the suffering of billions of other beings are not explicitly discussed.⁶

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, with regard to the effective use of this book in educational efforts, pairing it with more in-depth exploration of successful nonviolent struggles would be especially important. While containing many highly valuable ideas and suggestions, this book is limited in its ability to really bring the power of nonviolent action alive

5. Merton’s principal reflections on nonviolence have been gathered into collections such as Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) and Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), though Merton’s insights on this topic can be found throughout his writings. For commentary see John Dear, *Thomas Merton, Peacemaker: Meditations on Merton, Peacemaking, and the Spiritual Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015) and Jim Forest, *The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton’s Advice to Peacemakers* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016). Other helpful works on the spirituality of nonviolence include John Dear, *Living Peace: A Spirituality of Contemplation and Action* (New York: Doubleday, 2001); Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in Without Going Crazy* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012); Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2005).

6. For good discussions of nonviolence, animals and food ethics, see Tripp York and Andy Alexis-Baker, eds., *A Faith Embracing All Creatures: Addressing Commonly Asked Question about Christian Care for Animals* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012); Stephen Kaufman and Nathan Braun, *Good News for All Creation: Vegetarianism as Christian Stewardship* (New York: Lantern Books, 2002); Sally Kneidel and Sara Kate Kneidel, *Veggie Revolution: Smart Choices for a Healthy Body and a Healthy Planet* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2005); Carol J. Adams, *The Inner Art of Vegetarianism: Spiritual Practices for Body and Soul* (New York: Lantern Books, 2000). Also see the resources available at the website of the Christian Vegetarian Association: <https://christianveg.org/>.

on its own. Yet many excellent resources exist which can do this, such as the “A Force More Powerful” video series and companion book of the same title, the documentaries “Bringing Down a Dictator” and “Pray the Devil Back to Hell,” Ron Sider’s book *Nonviolent Action: What Christian Ethics Demands But Most Christians Have Never Really Tried* and others.⁷ Using some of these complementary resources can help to more clearly show that the suggestions made in this text are not naïve wishes (as some readers may assume), but rather have deep roots in lived reality.

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7. The video series “A Force More Powerful” includes six 25-minute segments highlighting nonviolent struggles around the world. These include exploration of the role of nonviolent action in ending communism in Poland, the apartheid regime in South Africa, and the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, along with segments on Gandhi, the civil rights movement in the United States, and Denmark’s effective nonviolent resistance to the Nazis. All of the videos are freely available for online viewing at: <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/force-powerful-english>. “Bringing Down a Dictator” explores a student-led movement that ended the Milosevic dictatorship in Serbia. “Pray the Devil Back to Hell” explores a nonviolent movement of women in Liberia who helped to end a civil war and elect the first female president of an African nation. Also see Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000) and Ronald Sider, *Nonviolent Action: What Christian Ethics Demands But Most Christians Have Never Really Tried* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2015). Both of these books provide in-depth narratives concerning many successful and deeply inspiring examples of nonviolent action.