

Recent Roman Catholic affirmations of nonviolence

Rose Marie Berger

Catholic nonviolence and just peace

Without much fanfare in September 2024, a new educational institute was launched in Rome, the 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, 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, a Catholic peace movement based in Brussels with more than 120 member organizations worldwide.

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.¹ 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."² 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

1 For more on the history of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative and the process leading to the launch of the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence, see Marie Dennis, ed., *Choosing Peace: The Catholic Church Returns to Gospel Nonviolence* (Orbis, 2018); Rose Marie Berger, Ken Butigan, Judy Coode, and Marie Dennis, eds., *Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace in the Church and the World* (Pax Christi International, 2020).

2 "Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson on the Occasion of the Conference on 'Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence' [Rome, 11-13 April 2016]," https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160406_messaggio-non-violenza-pace-giusta.html.

to the center. Nonviolence is a spirituality, a lifestyle, a program of societal action and a universal ethic.”³

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

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construct a new moral framework that has not yet emerged.”⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.⁶ Just Peace can move Christians beyond war.

3 Bishop Robert McElroy, “Path of Nonviolence: Toward a Culture of Peace,” Symposium, Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (Vatican City, 4-5 April 2019).

4 Joshua J. McElwee, “Catholic activists praise pope’s move away from just war theory,” *National Catholic Reporter*, Oct. 12, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/catholic-pacifists-praise-popes-move-away-just-war-theory>.

5 Glen H. Stassen, “Just-Peacemaking Theory,” *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jacqueline Lapsley, Rebekah Miles, Allen Verhey (Baker Academic, 2011), 443.

6 Part of this language came from a personal email exchange with David Cortright at Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies (personal email, 3 March 2016).

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 tranquility and neighborliness 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.”⁷

The phrase *Christian peacemakers* ought to be redundant. For Christians, Jesus is the incarnation of God’s shalom and the manifestation

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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)⁸ and the *Just Peace Companion* (offering extensive direction on implementation of just peace theology and practice).⁹

Every Christian is charged with resisting evil, but none are given the right to kill. In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI preached on Luke 6:27 (“Love your enemies”), saying it “is rightly considered the *magna carta* of Christian nonviolence. It does not consist in succumbing to evil, as a false interpretation of ‘turning the other cheek’ claims, but in responding to evil with good and thereby breaking the chain of injustice.”¹⁰

7 See Midrash Tanchuma (Shoftim 18).

8 World Council of Churches, *Ecumenical Call to Just Peace* (Geneva, 2011), http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/files/iepc/resources/ECJustPeace_English.pdf; see paragraph 23.

9 World Council of Churches, *Just Peace Companion* (Geneva, 2012), http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/files/iepc/resources/JustPeaceCompanion_2ndEd.pdf.

10 Pope Benedict XVI, Angelus sermon at St. Peter’s Square, 18 Feb. 2007, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20070218.pdf.

Pope Francis stressed that “faith and violence are incompatible.”¹¹ Just Peace is an integral expression of Catholic faith and catechism,¹² which can be further developed into a robust and resilient theology,¹³ theory, and praxis. If, as the US Catholic bishops wrote, “the content and context of our peacemaking is set not by some political agenda or ideological program, but by the teaching of his Church,”¹⁴ 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,¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶

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,¹⁷ Love has identified seven Just Peace principles that serve as a guide for directing action:

11 Junno Arocho Esteves, “Pope Francis: ‘Faith and Violence are Incompatible’” *Zenit*, 19 Aug. 2013, <https://zenit.org/articles/pope-francis-faith-and-violence-are-incompatible/>.

12 Catechism of the Catholic Church (part 3, sec. 2, chap. 2, art. 5, “Peace,” paragraphs 2302–2306), http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm.

13 See Fernando Enns, “Toward an Ecumenical Theology of Just Peace,” in *Just Peace: Ecumenical, Intercultural, and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Fernando Enns and Annette Mosher (Wipf & Stock, 2013).

14 US National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace* (USCCB, 1983), <http://www.usccb.org/upload/challenge-peace-gods-promise-our-response-1983.pdf>.

15 Catechism of the Catholic Church (part 3, sec. 2, chap. 2, art. 5, “Avoiding War,” paragraphs 2307–2317), http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm.

16 Stassen, “Just-Peacemaking Theory,” 443.

17 For Maryann Cusimano Love’s comparison of just war principles and just peace principles, see “Drones: Ethics and Use,” Catholic Social Ministries Gathering, Catholic University, Washington, DC, 4 Feb. 2014, slide 44, <http://www.usccb.org/about/justice-peace-and-human-development/catholic-social-ministry-gathering/upload/drones-ethics-and-use-2014-02-04.pdf>.

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 time¹⁸

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.

Love’s approach is relationship-centered and participatory. Right relationship requires high levels of participation, bringing in multiple stakeholders. Love’s Just Peace criteria are particularly well suited for use with institutional change. Institutions, writes Love, “are key for new norms to take hold.”¹⁹ Institutions *do* change, she writes, but they “learn by doing.”²⁰ She has used these principles in her work with the United Nations, US Department of Defense, US Department of State, and other large institutions. “The Catholic Church helped create, publicize, and institutionalize just-war norms internationally,” writes Love. She argues that it is an opportune time to do the same with Just Peace norms.

18 Maryann Cusimano Love, “What Kind of Peace Do We Seek? Emerging Norms of Peacebuilding in Key Political Institutions,” in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers (Orbis, 2010), 82.

19 Love, “What Kind of Peace Do We Seek?,” 56.

20 Love, “What Kind of Peace Do We Seek?,” 58.

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



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scholars have contributed to honing a set of ten just peacemaking 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 peacemaking as “the new paradigm for an ethics of peace and war,”²¹ 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,²² denominational general conventions choosing to identify as “just peace churches,”²³ interreligious and interfaith collaborative efforts to develop Just Peace in other traditions,²⁴ and intervention to combat global gender-based violence.²⁵

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.”²⁶ The version of the ten just peacemaking practices below reflects both.²⁷

21 Glen H. Stassen, “Winning the Peace,” *Sojourners*, January 2005, 19.

22 See the Six-Point Plan and Stassen, “Winning the Peace,” 19.

23 Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “A Just Peace Future,” part 1, *United Church News*, 5 June 2011; part 2, *United Church News*, 12 June 2011.

24 See Susan B. Thistlethwaite, ed., *Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

25 See Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Women’s Bodies as Battlefield: Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

26 Glen H. Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 93–94.

27 Stassen, “Just-Peacemaking Theory,” 443.

Part One: Peacemaking 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 peacemaking 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 peacemaking get 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.²⁸

28 Glen H. Stassen, "Transforming Initiatives of Just Peacemaking Based on the Triadic Structure of the Sermon on the Mount," a paper prepared for the Society of Biblical

Thistlethwaite brings extensive research into gendered violence and gendered Just Peace practices.

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?’”²⁹

McCarthy states that “nonviolent peacemaking ought to be assessed as a distinct and central virtue” in and of its own right. If nonviolent peacemaking 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 peacemaking 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 peacemaking and resistance, with a secondary component of forming nonviolent peacemaking 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

Literature, 2006, https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/Stassen_Transforming.pdf.

29 Eli S. McCarthy, “Called to Holiness: Integrating the Virtue of Nonviolent Peacemaking,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 11, no. 1 (winter 2014): 67–92.

6. **Unarmed civilian protection**, a third-party intervention both in the form of international implementation and local peace teams
7. **Civilian-based defense**, a nonviolent form of civil defense that engages the broader society against an external threat or in the overthrow of a government³⁰

McCarthy has argued that Love's Just Peace criteria and Stassen and Thistlethwaite's just peacemaking 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.³¹

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."³² 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.³³

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."³⁴

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,

30 McCarthy "Called to Holiness," 67-92.

31 See Mark J. Allman and Tobias L. Winright, *After the Smoke Clears: The Just War Tradition and Post War Justice* (Orbis, 2010).

32 Maryann Cusimano Love, personal email correspondence with author (2 March 2016).

33 Love, personal email (2 March 2016).

34 Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, personal email correspondence with author (2 March 2016).

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.³⁵

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.

About the author

Rose Marie Berger, senior editor at *Sojourners* magazine (sojo.net), is a founding member of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative. This article is dedicated to friend, colleague, and teacher Duane Shank, a Mennonite conscientious objector to war. Some content is adapted and expanded with permission from work previously published in *Choosing Peace: The Catholic Church Returns to Gospel Nonviolence*, ed. Marie Dennis (Orbis, 2018).

35 Eli S. McCarthy “Summoning the Catholic Church: Turn to Just Peace” (2016), https://www.academia.edu/84903599/Summoning_the_Catholic_Church_Turn_to_Just_Peace_.