

Reflections for Nonviolence Seminar, Sr. Teresa Hougnon, mm

1. Can you name a context/contexts of conflict, violence or war that has prompted your determination to seek nonviolent responses?

The first conflict that prompted my determination to seek nonviolent responses was an internal conflict in myself. As a cadet at the US military academy, my inner self was in conflict with everything I was being trained in and taught. The psychology and indoctrination made me feel subhuman, as the simulation of combat was all about dehumanizing the enemy. My Catholic upbringing and catechism had taught me that everyone is a child of God. My personal faith, which was internal and private for me then, was in conflict with how I was being trained to be a soldier. In my third year of the academy, I began reading the writings of Mahatmas Gandhi. It was more in line with my Catholic faith than was the Code of Conduct or the oath I swore to uphold the Constitution. But I was not mature enough to make a different choice for myself at the time, so I stayed in school and graduated to become a Second Lieutenant in the US Army. I served for 3 years in the regular Army, during peacetime. The violence I witnessed around me and experienced as an individual in those three years was perpetrated by fellow soldiers and the institution on our own military personnel. Through the Grace of God and the inspiration of the movie "The Mission" I was able to make a new choice and leave active duty earlier than I had planned. In the movie, Jeremy Irons plays a Jesuit, serving the Guarani people in the Amazon Forest. As the Portuguese invaded the area to dominate the indigenous people, the Jesuit said this to a fellow Jesuit, "If might is right, then love has no place in the world. It may be so, it may be so. But I don't have the strength to live in a world like that." Finally, I heard words that spoke directly to my inner self that had been in conflict with everything the military was about.

The second context of violence that encouraged my determination to seek nonviolent responses was during the UN brokered referendum on independence in Timor Leste. I witnessed the campaign and voting process in August 1999 as a new missionary in the country. The Fretelin (the political party) and the Falentil (the military) had maintained a strong resistance to the Indonesian invasion for 24 years. At their inaugural campaign event of the CNRT (National Coalition for Resistance in Timor Leste) on August 17, 1999, the leaders announced that the people would vote for independence, go home and wait. They would not raise arms to the Indonesian military or local militia, even if attacked. They were committed to a nonviolent response as a nation. They were ready to die for the free future of their children. On the day of the vote, Aug 30th, the reading at daily mass was Luke Ch 4:16-30.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." (vs 18)

"When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up and drove him out of the town, and led him to the edge of the hill on which Nazareth is built, so that they might throw him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way." (vs. 28-30)

The Timorese were threatened, intimidated, and maimed and some killed, yet they "passed through the midst" of the Indonesian military and won their independence. In twenty one days, about 3,000 Timorese were killed, 250,000 Timorese were kidnapped and taken as "refugees" to

Indonesia, and 90% of the houses and the infrastructure was destroyed, before the international community came to their aid and chased the Indonesian military out of the country. The Timorese had responded nonviolently and won their independence.

The third and current context that supports my resolve to seek nonviolent responses is here in Kenya. Kenya has 46 different ethnic groups that form the nation. Since 1992, when multi-party politics were introduced, the people have experienced cyclic violence every election year. The grass roots citizens have been used each election to create chaos and conflict in support of their ethnic "leaders." For eight years, the Maryknoll Sisters Peace Team and Kenyan facilitators have brought together Kenyans of different ethnic backgrounds, victims and perpetrators alike, to have conversations with each other. By each individual sharing their own life experience and listening to others, they come to know one another as human beings, not as the "enemy" or the "other." Building on these relationships, communities come together, transcend the diversity, and create sustainable networks for peace. I have witnessed individuals transform their lives, heal their wounds, and choose nonviolent responses.

2. What are the strengths and opportunities created by active nonviolence in the face of violence and war?

The strength of the nonviolent response in Timor Leste was that it brought international attention and response to the situation. It also reduced the loss of life for the Timorese. Had they fought back, surely many more would have died. When they returned to their burnt out homes and schools, they were independent, poor and joyful.

The biggest opportunity I see created by active nonviolence in the face of violence is the space for transformation. Something new can emerge that brings new life, new relationships. In 2010, we met with residents in Molo, Kenya, one of the areas that suffered the most violence in post election violence of 2007/08. Many were still seeking revenge, carrying heavy anger, or suffering from deep psychological wounds. They came because many had participated in previous programs of reconciliation, healing, and humanitarian aid projects. It had become routine. But they found themselves in a small group of fourteen people, sitting across from "them," the "other." We begin with 5 minutes of silence. Silence was new for most of them, it was uncomfortable but a sign that something different was about to happen. Each person was invited to share briefly from their life experience, many spoke of their loss, their anger, their despair. Because each person spoke for 5 minutes or less, they had to listen to the others share their story. They were hearing something for the first time, the other's pain and loss. The conversation continues openly, people share more, people ask each other for clarification, for information, for understanding. They begin to sense the human story, the story we are all a part of. One woman said that when she heard the others express their anger, she also was able to express hers, and it was not longer trapped in her heart.

Those who came to the conversation to seek revenge began building relationships. Those who found healing could now move beyond the cycle of violence they had been caught up in. Those who had harmed others or taken property could now ask for forgiveness and compensate the other openly and willingly. That community has now established a community wide network for peace and sustainability so that they can prevent the cycle of violence from returning during the next election.

In 2014, one of the young men in Molo travelled with the Maryknoll Sisters to Tana Delta, where we were meeting with the communities who had experience violent conflict in 2012. In Tana Delta, there was a young man still caught up the rage of revenge, but he was participating in conversations with us. When the person from Molo heard the young man talk of his anger and desire for revenge, he was able to share his own story of losing his father and seeking revenge. Then he shared how he had learned that the revenge was killing his family, he had lost more relatives, and he had chosen not to fight anymore, to build relationships. The young man from Tana Delta listened and then spent more time in conversation with the man from Molo. They shared with each other their experiences, their hopes and dreams, and the young man was able to let go of some of his anger. He continues to heal and he remains in contact, in relationship with his friend from Molo. He has not sought revenge.

3. Where and how do you feel we need to invest energy in moving towards a deeper and wider practice of nonviolence within the Catholic community?

In my experience, I have found that the wisdom and impulse for nonviolent solutions is in the people who are most affected by the violence. If we as the Catholic community want a deeper and wider practice of nonviolence, we need to listen more deeply to the voice of those most affected, the marginalized, the “voiceless.” Everyone has a voice and a contribution to make to building a sustainable peaceful society. The movement towards deeper and wider practice of nonviolence needs to come from the people, each of us participating in the conversation. We as the Catholic community have the capacity to create the space for each person to express their contribution. As practitioners and missionaries, we can create the space for that voice to be expressed by being witness to it, hearing it, acknowledging it, and encouraging that voice to thrive. We must not speak over that voice with “expertise” or “authority.” I think of the many times in the gospel, when people reached out or called to Jesus for healing. His response was never, “I have healed you,” but “your faith has healed you,” or “because of your faith you are healed.” The solutions are within each one of us. God has given us each insights and understanding, and a will to live nonviolently. We only need the space to voice it and be heard, to make our contribution.