

Personal Reflection for Nonviolence and Just Peace:
Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence Conference

I was in Palestine when the call came to embrace nonviolence in a concrete way. It was 2012 and I was teaching English in the city of Nablus. The staff of Project Hope, where I volunteered, encouraged us to use our days off to travel and learn about the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Another volunteer and I went one weekend to help clear Palestinian roads that the Israeli military had blocked. We worked together with Palestinians, Israelis, and other internationals, using shovels and buckets to move dirt and rocks to make the roads passable again. Earlier in the week, the Israeli military had blocked the roads, then was given orders from the Israeli High Court to remove the dirt barriers. The military had started the process, we were continuing it, but while we worked, Israeli forces arrived, demanded that we stop, and used a bulldozer to re-block the roads they had just the day before begun to clear. Though I had heard such stories before, this was my personal introduction to the insanity of the Israeli occupation. My education continued when I went to the city of Hebron and witnessed Israel use massive military might against nonviolent protestors, journalists, and standers-by during a demonstration demanding Palestinian access to Shuhada Street, which used to be the main commercial center of Hebron and is now closed to anyone but Israeli settlers and soldiers (at the time, internationals were still allowed to walk there).

Before my time in Palestine, I participated 14 times in the vigil at the gates of Fort Benning, GA, where we remembered people killed by graduates of the School of the Americas/WHINSEC and we called for the closure of the training school. Throughout my life, I have met peace activists, human rights defenders, and accompaniers. Before Palestine, with each encounter, I thought, “I’d like to do that someday.” In Palestine, the “someday” became “now.”

This new call led me to Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT). I completed a CPT delegation to Iraqi Kurdistan. I went through an intensive month-long training where we studied the biblical roots of nonviolence, and practiced nonviolent communication, undoing oppressions, self-care, and team life, among other things. At the end of training, each of us wrote a statement of conviction, in which we committed ourselves to practicing nonviolence and asked that, were something to happen to us, no violence be used to rescue us or retaliate for harm done to us. Writing and signing the document was a dive into waters I had only dipped my toe in before. I am still swimming in the shallow end, but hope to continue swimming towards the depths.

In practicing nonviolence, I am learning that a gentle word may disarm an aggressor, that sometimes no words are needed and that strategic physical presence can separate forces drawn to each other in conflict. I am learning to look into the eyes of Israeli soldiers and silently wish them well, so that I remember our common kinship as children of God. I am trying “to go beyond the surface of the conflict and to see others in their deepest dignity” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 228): Israeli soldiers and settlers, Palestinians acting violently, my teammates and myself when we are not at our best. I am learning to condemn actions rather than people and to “call people

in” rather than “call people out” (a lesson I learned through the local Standing Up for Racial Justice group) when I am talking about controversial subjects.

On a larger scale, I see the power – both within the movements and rippling out into the world – of weekly demonstrations in Israel and Palestine against Israel’s military occupation and of the international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. I see the power in groups like the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the Immokalee Workers movement for more just wages for tomato pickers; these movements seek to undo structures of oppression, whose violence comes in both obvious and more insidious ways. I see the power in these movements and yet, too often, it is through alternative news sources that I learn about courageous people standing up for themselves or standing in solidarity with others.

As a former teacher, I wonder what would happen if we taught our children about peacemakers and peacemaking as something more than occasional side notes. I wonder what would happen if, instead of lauding military might when we teach students about world conflicts, we highlighted successful nonviolent actions and movements, like the Danish response to Hitler’s orders to arrest and deport Danish Jews or the actions of Le Chambon, France during World War II? What would happen if we taught them about the nonviolent movements that led to women’s suffrage in the U.S., the downfall of numerous Communist dictatorships and regimes, the end of Apartheid South Africa? What would happen if more students participated in activities like John Hunter’s World Peace Game?

What would happen if more churches affirmed both the dignity of all parishioners and their ability – both individual and collective – to bring our world closer to the Reign of God? What would happen if more churches committed to formation and education that promoted dialogue and encouraged both personal and institutional practices of nonviolence?

What would happen?

It is my firm belief that “a deeper and wider practice of nonviolence within the Catholic community” must begin with a deeper and wider education. Our Catholic institutions must offer rich and ongoing spiritual formation that invites and prepares Catholics to explore their unique call to discipleship. We must offer multiple and diverse ways to explore the compelling history of nonviolent movements and practitioners, as well as safe spaces to explore what our own creative nonviolence could look like. We must offer more opportunities for Catholics to step out of comfort and into practices of nonviolence. We must offer a deep and accessible well of spiritual, emotional, physical, and financial support for those who are called to put their minds, hearts, and bodies on the line in the pursuit of a more just and peaceful world.

My own formation, education, practice, and support have happened both within and outside of Catholic institutions. I hope that as I continue to swim towards the depths of nonviolence, I will be able, as a Catholic, as an educator, and as a practicing peacemaker, to invite others to swim with me.