

Turning away from centuries of ‘just war’ theory

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Pope Francis’ message today for the 50th World Day of Peace, “**Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,**” posits that violence will not quell violence.

That message is for everyone, not just Catholics.

The year 2017 also will see the 50th anniversary of the speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at Riverside Church, the “Beyond Vietnam” speech, in which he condemned the “triplets” of racism, militarism and materialism. Pope Francis praises Dr. King’s use of creative nonviolence in the face of racial injustice, and he, too, is connecting those three issues.

Many of these ideas were developed at the “Nonviolence and Just Peace” conference held in Rome last April. Nobel Peace laureate Mairead Maguire spoke of the conference as a turning point in history.

The Catholic Church’s reliance on “just war” theory, articulated by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and in use for centuries, is shifting.

Documents indicate that in the first centuries of Christianity, Jesus’ followers heeded his words, “Those who live by the sword die by the sword” (Mt 26:52), and they refused to kill. What the pope lays out is closer to that earlier, radical message. “Nonviolence and Just Peace” is now a global initiative reaffirming the centrality of active nonviolence to the vision and message of Jesus, to the life of Christianity, and to the lifetime task of healing and reconciliation.

The pope gives examples to emulate: Gandhi, of course, but also the Muslim Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. “Women in particular are often leaders of nonviolence, as for example, was Leymah Gbowee and the thousands of Liberian women,” Francis states, noting that she gathered Muslim and Christian women who organized “nonviolent protest that resulted in high-level peace talks to end the second civil war in Liberia.”

I have repeatedly done educational programs with Muslim women. Currently, some of us are planning an open conversation to discuss the pope's message and how it compares with Islamic ideas.

The pope writes, "When Mother Teresa received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, she clearly stated her own message of active nonviolence: 'We in our family don't need bombs and guns, to destroy to bring peace — just get together, love one another. ... And we will be able to overcome all the evil that is in the world.'"

Mother Teresa can sound naive, but perhaps Americans are the naive ones. We have not developed our ability to think clearly and critically, nor our ability to imagine. Do we recognize that by one analysis, the United States has chosen to be at war 223 out of 240 years since 1776, or 93 percent of our history? (washingtonsblog.com/2015/02/america-war-93-time-222-239-years-since-1776.html).

I can think of walking, diving and dancing because I do these. Can I think how it would feel to flip as a gymnast?

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in his farewell address to the nation in 1961, warned that we were losing our ability to think because the economics of the military industrial complex, rather than the values of democracy, were leading us. The pope invites the peoples of the world to think, not to be driven by the structures and greed that Eisenhower and Dr. King deplored.

For a contemporary Catholic leader, Francis sounds almost like the Jewish prophet Isaiah 2,700 years ago, inviting people to "beat swords into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks." Do we recognize that we can transform the instruments of death into instruments that bring a harvest of life? Do you or I want to think? Or continue to be naive?