

# A Spirituality of the Cross: A Call to Nonviolence and Peace

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The crucified Christ forces us to rethink everything, but perhaps especially our convictions about the kind of power that ultimately rules the world. Christ's cross may be the most overwhelming and consoling proof of God's love, as St. Paul of the Cross eloquently testified. But it is also the great scandal at the heart of Christianity because the passion and death of Jesus reveals that God rules the world not by threats, intimidation, and violence, but through patient, suffering love. The revolution that Jesus called the reign of God begins at the foot of the cross, and the cross makes the startling claim that the God of the universe finds power not in violence and vindictiveness, not in animosity and bloodshed, but in forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace. To share in the charism of St. Paul of the Cross is to promise to keep the memory of the passion alive in our hearts. And in a society increasingly ruled by fear, there may be no more important way to remember the passion of Jesus than by imitating a God who in the crucified Christ does not meet evil with more evil, but overcomes it in love. We embody the message of the cross when we commit ourselves to the risky gospel virtues of nonviolence and peace, and realize that such a commitment is not an option in the Christian life but is, in light of the cross, the very heart of what it means to be a disciple.

We are *given* the peace of Christ in order *to be* the peace of Christ in our world today. But the peace that flows from the crucified Christ is strikingly different from our customary understandings of peace. We often think of peace as little more than the absence of conflict. Or we equate peace with the fragile tranquility that results when we agree to tolerate most anything or simply leave one another alone. Christ's peace, however, is defined not by the absence of conflict, but by the presence of a people committed to embodying the reconciling love of God in the world. To embrace the peace of Christ is to take up a way of life in which people build one another up, support and care for one another, seek the best for each other, challenge and correct and forgive one another, are patient with each other, and speak the truth to one another in love. Peace was Jesus' gift to his disciples (John 14:27) and the first Christians were told that Christ's peace was to reign in their hearts (Col. 3:15). But the peace of Christ is not so much a state of interior consolation, but a summons to imitate a God who makes all things new through a messiah who responds to violence not by increasing it, but by suffering it.

The gospels are full of surprises, but perhaps nothing is more surprising in the story of Jesus than the Good Friday message that God's rule comes not by the sword but by the cross. Jesus' kingdom truly "does not belong to this world" (John 18:36) because unlike most political and social orders, the "politics" of God is founded on love, justice, forgiveness, and peace. In fact, the renunciation of violence and the summons to peace are the very heart of the moral teaching of Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus declares peacemakers to be the true children of God (Matt. 5:9). He instructs his followers to surpass the traditional law of retaliation with the command to offer no

resistance to evil, and upends their thinking on love by forbidding them from following the seemingly sensible way of dealing with one's enemies. In the logic of the cross, they are to respond to enemies not with vindictiveness but with love. Violence and vindictiveness, strategies that seem so at home in the world, have no place in the new social order that is the reign of God.

To people schooled in the ordinary politics of the world, the renunciation of violence can sound not only hopelessly utopian, but also recklessly irresponsible. Given the real dangers that threaten the world today, can a commitment to nonviolence and peace be sustained? God may choose to make peace with the world through suffering love, but in a world where threats abound and every peace is fragile, can we risk the logic of the cross? Nonetheless, does not the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus call us to a faith that believes there is something more powerful and effective than violence? Does not Jesus' cross challenge us to put our confidence not in the necessity of threat and intimidation, but in the power of suffering and reconciling love? As long as the necessity of violence and retaliation is assumed, nothing really changes. If the world must be governed by the rule of violence and not by the rule of Christ's peace, then the paschal message that love is stronger than death is a lie, not the world's salvation. In the logic of the cross, renouncing violence and following the path of peace is not foolishness, but key to the world's re-creation because it commits us *now* (not in some idealized future) to refreshingly new possibilities for human existence.

But these more hopeful possibilities have to be *seen* in order to be believed. If nonviolence and peace are to be viewed as real possibilities for our world today, there must be communities whose members pledge to witness and to practice the "upside down" ways of a crucified God. This can be one way of understanding the vocation of a Passionist in today's world, and what a traditional Passionist practice such as contemplation of the passion might entail. If we truly contemplate the crucified Christ, where does it lead us? In a culture of fear, what does it ask of us and who does it call us to be?

At the very least, contemplating the passion, sufferings, and death of Jesus teaches us that we cannot be Christ's peace in the world without cultivating in ourselves and in our communities virtues such as gentleness, humility, and patience. Gentleness is necessary for living the peace of Christ because gentleness subdues anger, lessens bitterness, and restrains our often relentless desire for revenge. With gentleness we are not so quick to retaliate or to get even. Similarly, humility is necessary for living the peace of Christ because humility trains us not only to look for the good in others, but also to yield to others instead of insisting that our thoughts and ways must always prevail. And Christ's peace is impossible apart from patience because patience teaches us to bear with one another—even to suffer and endure one another—in our mutual shortcomings and imperfections. With patience, instead of letting anger and frustration rule us and ultimately divide us, we bear with one another in love, persevere together, and forgive one another, just as God, in the crucified Christ, was patient with us, persevered with us, and forgave us.

## Catholic Social Teaching on Nonviolence and Peace

### 1. Non-Violence and Peace:

*In the words of our Holy Father, we need a "moral about face." The whole world must summon the moral courage and technical means to say "no" to nuclear conflict; "no" to weapons of mass destruction; "no" to an arms race which robs the poor and the vulnerable; and "no" to the moral danger of a nuclear age which places before humankind indefensible choices of constant terror or surrender. Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith. We are called to be peacemakers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus. The content and context of our peacemaking is set, not by some political agenda or ideological program, but by the teaching of his Church.*

The Challenge of Peace, #333

### 2. War in Iraq:

*Achieving the universal common good cannot be imposed by force. It must be set up with the consent of all nations. If its work is to be effective, it must operate with fairness, absolute impartiality, and with dedication to the common good of all peoples. The forcible imposition by the more powerful nations of a universal authority of this kind would inevitably arouse fears of its being used as an instrument to serve the interests of the few or to take the side of a single nation, and thus the influence and effectiveness of its activity would be undermined.*

Pacem In Terris, #138

### 3. Genocide:

*The international community as a whole has the moral obligation to intervene on behalf of those groups whose very survival is threatened or whose basic human rights are seriously violated. As members of an international community, States cannot remain indifferent; on the contrary, if all other available means should prove*

*ineffective, it is “legitimate and even obligatory to take concrete measures to disarm the aggressor”.*

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, #506