

PAPER FOR CITATION

Maria J. Stephan Keynote Address: Nonviolent Options and Just Peace¹

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Thank you. I'm honored to be amongst so many great scholars, theologians (including Cardinal Turkson and Bishop McElroy) activists, peacebuilders, policymakers and military officers. Thank you to University of San Diego, the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, and the Harpst Center for Catholic Thought and Culture for organizing this conference on Just War Just Peace in Dialogue – I can't think of a better topic for a civil-military conversation. I would like to applaud the members the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative – there are many in this room - for helping to bolster the Church's thought leadership and practical investment in alternatives to war and violence. Special thanks to Cardinal Turkson for presiding over last April's Rome conference on Nonviolence and Just Peace, and for being such a tireless proponent of human rights, dignity, and a world without violence.

Tonight I will focus on the power and potential of nonviolent options to prevent, mitigate, and transform violent conflict and advance sustainable peace. I will offer evidence backing the efficacy of these nonviolent options and offer some practical ways the Catholic Church, along with its governmental, military, inter-faith, and non-governmental allies, can strengthen them.

But first, let me share a couple of stories about what brought me to this work and has kept me inspired and hopeful ever since.

Pope John VI famously said, "If you want peace, work for justice."

I grew up in southern Vermont and my family often attended mass at the Weston Priory, where a hearty group of Benedictine monks live, farm, sing and celebrate the Gospel. Masses take place in a barn overlooking the Green Mountains. The monks welcome everyone - from all faiths, religions, and walks of life - to join in the celebration. The Priory has a great gift shop. After mass I would make a beeline for the books section, which is where I began to collect biographies of Mahatma Gandhi and Dorothy Day, along with books about nonviolent resistance and radical peacemaking. These books introduced me to Oscar Romero, Dolores Huerta, and the Catholic Workers, who became my s/heroes. Somehow my Mom always ended up paying for the books.

After high school I was involved in grassroots restorative justice work. I lived and worked at the [Rutland Dismas House](#), a transitional home for former prisoners and college students. The Dismas motto, "reconciling former prisoners with society and society with former prisoners", is animated by a community support structure for those transitioning from prison. I observed how members of the community – including those who had initially opposed Dismas House being in their back yard - mobilized to provide home-cooked meals to the residents, offered them jobs, and gave them support. Dismas House has been highly successful: my Dad tells me that the recidivism rate for its residents is about 15%, compared to 70% nationally – and at less than 1/3 the cost of incarceration.

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Later I had my first *rendez-vous* with the Jesuits at Boston College, where “service to others” is a campus creed. I studied political science and lived in France and Germany while researching European integration, one of the world’s greatest peacebuilding projects. After starting grad school at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, I attended a Boston film screening of *A Force More Powerful*, a documentary film about 6 highly consequential nonviolent struggles. The film highlighted how unarmed civilians stared down the British empire in India, confronted Nazis in Denmark, fought apartheid in South Africa, removed dictators in Chile and Poland, and dismantled Jim Crow in the US using strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, sit-ins, and other forms of nonviolent direct action.

The film was inspiring. I decided to focus my PhD research on the strategic dimensions of nonviolent resistance in self-determination movements. The International Security Studies departments at Fletcher and the Harvard Belfer Center were my strongest backers. Meanwhile, West Point and the Army, Navy, and Air Force war colleges invited me to come talk about civil resistance as a form of nonviolent power and a functional alternative to violence. I attended the Summer Workshop on the Analysis of Military Operations and Strategies (aka “war camp”) and was that “interesting” person talking about people power.

In 2006 while working at the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, I met Erica Chenoweth – a fellow political scientist and quantitative guru - at a conference in Colorado. She was skeptical about the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance. So were a lot of people, who insisted that nonviolent resistance could “work” but only under certain favorable conditions. In tough contexts, like violent dictatorships, the prevailing wisdom was that violence stood a better chance. Erica and I decided to test these assumptions, by systematically comparing the effectiveness of violent and nonviolent resistance. For the next couple of years we collected data on all known major violent and nonviolent campaigns from 1900-2006. These were campaigns challenging incumbent regimes and vying for territorial self-determination.

During this book-writing time I was in Kabul, Afghanistan with the State Department, at the peak period of insurgency. Occasionally, on nights and Sundays while chapter editing in my hootch, a “duck and cover” siren, signaling incoming rockets or mortar, would interrupt the effort.

After collecting data on 323 major violent and nonviolent campaigns, each with at least 1000 observed participants, we arrived at a surprising conclusion. The nonviolent campaigns were twice as successful as armed insurgencies. They achieved their goals 53% of the time compared to 26% for violent campaigns, a percentage that has remained basically the same through 2015. (“Success” was defined as removal of the incumbent regime or territorial independence.) While there has been a slight dip in the overall effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns recently, violent insurgencies have become even less effective.

Why has civil resistance so dramatically out-performed armed struggle? We found that the most important variable determining the outcome was the size and diversity of participation. Nonviolent campaigns attract on average 11 times the level of participants as the average violent campaign. The moral, physical, informational, and commitment barriers to participation are much lower for nonviolent resistance compared to armed struggle. Whereas armed insurgencies often rely on a relatively small group of young, able-bodied men, nonviolent campaigns attract women and men, youth and elderly, able-bodied and disabled, rich and poor.

One reason is that the number and range of tactics available to nonviolent resisters is huge. Gene Sharp catalogued 198 methods of nonviolent action in 1973. That number has vastly expanded as the creative limits of the imagination have expanded. Power is fluid and ultimately flows from the consent and cooperation of ordinary people. When large and diverse groups of people remove their consent and cooperation from an oppressive regime or system of power using tactics like boycotts, strikes, and civil disobedience, no ruler, no matter how brutal, can stay in power. Members of security forces (army and police) are also significantly more likely to defect, or to disobey regime orders to use repression, when confronted with large numbers of nonviolent resisters, compared to armed insurgents. When security forces defect, as they did in the Philippines, Serbia, Ukraine, and Tunisia, this is often a decisive variable.

We found that the chances of success are higher when groups maintain nonviolent discipline in the face of repression, when they creatively alternate between methods of concentration (like sit-ins and demonstrations) and methods of dispersion (like consumer boycotts and stay-aways) and when they invest in decentralized leadership.

Nonviolent campaigns also contribute to more democratic and peaceful societies. Less than 4% of armed rebel victories result in a country becoming democratic within five years. A Congolese bishop reinforced that point to me recently. He counted off the number of insurgent leaders in his country and across the continent who had led successful armed struggles, then became even more tyrannical than their predecessors. On the other hand, the skills associated with nonviolent organizing, negotiating differences, building coalitions, and collective action reinforce democratic norms and behaviors. And they tend to produce more peaceful societies.

Nonviolent civil resistance, then, is a functional alternative to violence with both short and longer-term positive effects. It is a particularly powerful nonviolent channel for marginalized or oppressed people to challenge systems of power – whether they are exploitative corporations, dictatorships, or institutionalized racism – and build more inclusive, just societies.

Pope Francis, in his 2017 World Day of Peace address, a monumental document, noted that *“momentous change in the lives of people, nations and states had come about ‘by means of peaceful protest, using only the weapons of truth and justice.’”*

The Church has played a pivotal role in some of the most significant nonviolent struggles in history. Many will recall the iconic image of the Filipino religious sisters, confronting military forces and a kleptocratic Marcos dictatorship in prayerful resistance during the 1986 “people power” revolution. Across the Philippines priests and nuns, in partnership with the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, trained their communities in nonviolence and nonviolent action. Cardinal Jamie Sin attended one of these workshops. He later joined the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines in calling for a “nonviolent struggle for justice”, using *Radio Veritas* to amplify the message. This preparation, combined with an election-monitoring mission led by local religious leaders, paved the way to Marcos’ nonviolent ouster. Today, Filipino religious leaders, facing another violent dictator, are once again engaged in nonviolent activism.

During the Polish Solidarity movement in the 1980s, Pope John Paul II, with local priests and nuns, famously stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the worker-led movement that challenged Communist tyranny with nonviolent resistance. Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was martyred for showing solidarity with campesinos and other victims of junta brutality. In the US,

feisty religious women have taken to the buses and streets to give voice to the poor and undocumented; they have animated *Laudato Si* through direct action to protect the environment.

I am often asked: what about cases of genocide, ethnic cleansing, or violent extremism? What about protecting innocent people? What are the nonviolent options in these cases?

First, I don't come at this topic from a pacifist perspective. I'm the first to admit that nonviolent action has not always worked. At the same time, there is little evidence to suggest that armed resistance would have done any better in places where nonviolent resistance failed. Military interventions on humanitarian grounds, as in cases like Rwanda or the protection of Yazidis in Iraq, may save lives in certain cases. But, practically speaking, mustering the political will to support military intervention on R2P grounds has become so difficult that it is strategically imperative to develop alternatives.

The second point is that most mass atrocities historically have occurred in the context of armed struggles and civil wars. Very rarely are large numbers of unarmed civilians killed while engaged in mass nonviolent campaigns. New [research](#) by Erica Chenoweth and Evan Perkoski found that nonviolent resistance can even *decrease* the likelihood of mass atrocities. Not surprisingly, armed movements with foreign support are much more likely to elicit mass killings.

It is also worth mentioning that while the WWII ultimately brought the end to the Nazi regime, civil resistance and nonviolent noncooperation saved thousands of lives. Jacques Semelin, in his book, *Unarmed Against Hitler*, chronicles a number of these examples, including the case of German Aryan women who protected their Jewish husbands from concentration camps through sustained protests outside the SS headquarters in Berlin.

Nonviolent protests and other forms of collective action have won tactical concessions from extremist groups like ISIS in Iraq and Syria and al Shabaab in East Africa. For example, women's-led protests outside an ISIS headquarters in Raqqa, Syria, led to the release of political activists in 2014. Two years ago in northeastern Kenya, fighters from the al-Shabaab terrorist group ambushed a bus filled with women. The fighters demanded that the Muslim and Christian women separate, a tactic they'd used in the past before slaughtering the Christians. The Muslim women refused to separate, and shielded the Christian women. They said "you will kill us all or leave us alone." Their collective stubbornness worked – the al Shabaab fighters left without anyone on the bus being killed.

Oliver Kaplan recently released a book, [Resisting War: How Civilians Protect Themselves](#), which analyzes how unarmed civilians have influenced the behaviors of state and non-state armed groups in civil war contexts. He examines cases in Colombia, with extensions to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and the Philippines. The study shows how unarmed civilians self-organized and created autonomous, resilient institutions. They carved out peace zones, prevented extra-judicial killings, and deterred violence targeting civilians.

These findings have important implications for the Church and other external actors seeking to prevent mass atrocities. They suggest that supporting local self-organizing and collective action in the midst of violent conflict can help save lives.

There are other ways to deter violence and human rights abuses in conflict zones. Unarmed civilian protection, which is the use of unarmed civilians to do 'peacekeeping', has had

demonstrable successes. Nonviolent Peaceforce, Christian Peacemakers Teams, Peace Brigades International and Operation Dove have led civilian peacekeeping missions in South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Guatemala, the Philippines, Indonesia, Israel-Palestine, and elsewhere. [Evaluations](#) of unarmed civilian protection reveal that this activity has saved lives, changed the behavior of armed groups, and made local peace and human rights work more possible.

The UN High Level Independent Panel on UN Peace Operations [stated](#): “unarmed strategies must be at the forefront of UN efforts to protect civilians.” Strategically it makes sense for major military powers, including the United States, to invest in UCP programs as an effective and less costly form of peacekeeping.

Of course, it goes without saying that if you want to prevent mass atrocities, you prevent war. Prevention demands investment, and right now the levels of US and global investment in violence prevention are infinitesimally small compared to the sums dedicated to war fighting. Practically, prevention means supporting inclusive and participatory economic and political processes (recall that institutionalized discrimination against Iraqi Sunnis contributed to the rise and spread of ISIS). It means fostering dialogue and trust between communities and police (justice and security dialogues have done just that in Nepal and Burkina Faso). It means using diplomatic, military, and trade levers to challenge crackdowns on civic space and human rights violations (security force abuses in northern Nigeria fueled the rise of Boko Haram).

In the area of violence prevention our U.S. military colleagues can make particularly valuable contributions. When military leaders, who have been strong proponents of USIP’s work, demand greater investment in non-military solutions, when they point out the gross under-resourcing of diplomacy and development – when compared to military hardware and train-and-equip programs – it makes a difference. Military advocacy on Capitol Hill and in the private sector for massively increased investment in violence prevention and peacebuilding is a concrete way to advance just peace around the world.

Relatedly, enlightened military leadership understands that corrupt, undisciplined, rights-violating security forces are unreliable partners. Their practices fuel insurgencies and violent extremism. There is a smart guide written by Admiral Dennis Blair, called *Military Engagement: How Armed Forces Can Support Democratic Transitions Worldwide*. It instructs on how military relationships and security partnerships can incentivize democratic norms and behaviors and deter security force crackdowns on peaceful opposition. I hope that this guide might one day be fully integrated in military education and training in the US and around the world.

So far I’ve focused a great deal on civil resistance and nonviolent collective action. But we know that this is one set of tools in a much broader nonviolent arsenal. Transforming violent conflict and dissolving its root causes requires a combination of people power and peacebuilding. That means linking nonviolent resistance, which intentionally escalates conflict, and traditional peacebuilding tools like negotiation, dialogue, and mediation, which de-escalate it.

The theory here is that in conflicts marked by great power asymmetries, where groups are intentionally marginalized or excluded from political processes, power needs to shift and an unjust status quo disrupted before conflict resolution become possible. Another words, nonviolent action is often necessary to “ripen” the situation for resolution. As Martin Luther King, Jr. so eloquently wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail in 1963:

"You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to so dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored."

The Polish Solidarity movement combined Gdansk shipyard strikes with formal roundtable negotiations. The Liberian civil war came to end because the government and rebels were pressured – in part by a women’s-led sex strike – to reach a settlement. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Nepal was reached when popular nonviolent resistance shifted the power dynamics and incentivized meaningful peace talks. Veronique Dudouet highlights these and other examples in an excellent [report](#), “Powering to Peace: Integrated Civil Resistance and Peacebuilding Strategies”. Anthony Wanis-St. John and Noah Rosen focus on the importance of negotiation in nonviolent resistance in a recently published USIP [Peaceworks report](#).

Using and sequencing these dialogical and direct action techniques is both an art and a science. USIP is currently developing a practical guide, called “Synergizing Nonviolent Action and Peacebuilding” (SNAP), which is intended to inform field-based trainings on how, practically, these nonviolent approaches can be used together. We hope that this action guide might be helpful for organizations like Pax Christi, Mercy Corps, Caritas International, Catholic Relief Services, and members of the Alliance for Peacebuilding whose work is grounded in conflict-affected communities.

So we know that nonviolent resistance is important in negotiating a sustainable and just peace. This aligns with the fact that, historically, the most durable peace processes and national dialogues have been inclusive and participatory. Desiree Nilsson’s [study](#) of all peace agreements reached in the post-Cold War period found that the involvement of civil society reduced the risk of failure by 64%. Peace accords that include civil society actors – including religious groups, women’s groups, and human rights organizations - are more likely to see peace prevail. The Colombia peace process, which culminated in a landmark peace accord last year, featured the active involvement of victim’s groups, women’s groups, and other civic actors. Other [research](#) has found that the presence of skilled negotiators and facilitators at the local level contributed to the success of national dialogue processes. [Training](#) mattered.

Women’s participation merits special focus. [Multiple studies](#) have found that women’s inclusion in peace processes correlates significantly with their success - Northern Ireland and Liberia are classic examples. Women bring unique identities, perspectives, and a sense of urgency to peace processes. While women often need to fight for a place at the table, it stands to reason that unlocking the leadership potential of women at all levels of an organization or institution, including the Catholic Church, would strengthen its ability to forge peace.

Another nonviolent tool, mediation, has helped resolve some of the most intractable violent conflicts, including the civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala, Mozambique, Northern Ireland, and Colombia. The Catholic Church, often in partnership with other faith groups, has often been a key mediator. We know the critical role that the Vatican and Pope Francis played in mediating an end to Colombia’s civil war. The Catholic Lay Community of Sant’Egidio played a vital role in ending the devastating Mozambique civil war (1975-1990). Sant’Egidio, a Rome-based organization with some serious mediation skills and a biblical commitment to service, compassion, and peace, developed strong relationships with the two conflict parties, the ruling Frelimo party and

RENAMO rebels. It brought them together in Rome for meetings over 2 years that culminated in the signing of the Rome General Peace Accords in 1992.

In northern Uganda, which has endured nearly 3 decades of civil war between the government and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Archbishop John Baptist Odama of Gulu and his Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace initiative, an inter-faith conflict transformation organization, has won the trust of all sides, allowing him to carve out spaces for peace. Odama, who I was honored to meet in Rome, has facilitated years of dialogue between government and LRA forces. He famously says, *"As long as there is an opportunity for peace talks, I shall pursue it."* While a comprehensive peace settlement in Uganda remains elusive, and the government is currently cracking down hard against nonviolent civic groups, perhaps one day, religiously mediated dialogue combined with citizen-led collective action will achieve a breakthrough.

Similarly, in South Sudan, where post-independence civil war and dictatorship have created a terrible humanitarian crisis, the inter-denominational South Sudan Council of Churches, one of the strongest civil society groups in the young country, has issued an Action Plan for Peace (APP) focused on dialogue and reconciliation. There is also a budding youth-led nonviolent movement in the country, called Ana Taban ("I am tired") that is using the arts to build bridges, call out abuses on all sides, and mobilize people for peace. Hopefully the wisdom of the elders and youth energy will creatively combine to bring sustained peace to South Sudan.

A core tenet of just peacemaking is addressing and overcoming legacies of gross human rights violations and other historical injustices. Faith groups have historically contributed in significant ways to transitional justice and reconciliation. There are multiple models of truth-telling and reconciliation. In Guatemala, the Catholic Church, under the leadership of Bishop Juan Gerardi, helped initiate, organize, and execute the successful national truth commission, the Recovery of Historical Memory Project, in the mid-1990s. In Chile, the Catholic Church advocated for the country's Commission on Truth and Reconciliation following Pinochet's removal from power in 1990 – a core component of that country's transition to democracy. The Chilean commission helped inspire the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission shepherded by Archbishop Tutu.

Getting Practical

The effectiveness of all these nonviolent techniques – including civil resistance, dialogue, mediation, negotiation, unarmed civilian protection, trauma healing, and transitional justice – are grounded in the skills and legitimacy of those using them. An important role the Church (and all of us) can play in advancing just peace globally is building strategic and tactical bridges between the techniques of grassroots nonviolent action and peacebuilding and investing in them.

Practically, this can be done via education and training, through the diplomatic and policy-influencing arms of the Church, through inter-religious initiatives and through field-based programming with conflict-affected communities.

- Catholic universities around the world can educate and train youth and communities in the full menu of nonviolent options and their practical, strategic applications; they can support cutting-edge research on conflict analysis and just peace approaches.
- Catholic leadership from the parish level on up can help integrate just peace and conflict transformation teachings into religious trainings, lay formation, homilies and sermons.

- They can draw on research, films, and training materials on nonviolent action (many translated into dozens of languages) developed by USIP, the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, Pace-e-Bene, Rhize, and other organizations.
- The Pontifical Council on Inter-religious Dialogue can continue to promote just peace approaches that draw on all the religious traditions.
- Church leaders can communicate with government officials and security forces to deter violent crackdowns against peaceful activists.
- They can take diplomatic action when state/non-state actors are engaged in systematic human rights abuses, high-level corruption and exclusionary policies that fuel violence, and show solidarity with nonviolent activists and peacebuilders on the front lines.
- The Vatican Secretary of State and Holy See missions in NY and Geneva can use existing initiatives, like the UN Sustaining Peace Resolution and the Sustainable Development Goals, to advance just peace approaches and tools.

Logistically, the Church can also provide safe spaces in places like the DRC, South Sudan, Venezuela, and Cambodia, where activists and peacebuilders can meet, strategize, and plan actions. It can offer small resources and transportation support for those forced to operate in restrictive environments, often with little or no money. It can work with Catholic and other private foundations to support grant-giving that aligns with just peace objectives.

I mentioned the military's role in advocating for greater investment in nonviolent alternatives and peacebuilding. The Church could work with the military to support unarmed peacekeeping pilot initiatives in places like Syria and South Sudan. And encourage it to use military-to-military levers (training, funding, education) to strengthen governance in partner defense institutions, and deter repression and human rights abuses.

At least one national government, Lithuania, has made civilian-based defense, which involves the use of mass civil resistance and noncooperation to deter and repel foreign attacks, a core component of its national defense strategy. Building up the nonviolent resistance and peacebuilding skills and capacities of citizens, in schools and communities, is a great investment in national and international security. Of course, a papal encyclical on nonviolent action and just peace would help focus Church energy and resources on all of these options. Perhaps one day.

I have a special place in my heart for nonviolent organizers and the work they do – Dorothy Day is atop the list. Let me end with her pragmatically hopeful words:

“People say, what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is too much work to do.”

May this conference create ripples that spread in all directions and inform how we all, individually and collectively, civilian and military, doctrinally and practically, can bolster nonviolent options to advance a more just and peaceful world. Thank you.

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