

[Opinion](#)
[Guest Voices](#)



In this April 11, 2019 file photo, Pope Francis kneels at the feet of South Sudan President Salva Kiir at the conclusion of a two-day retreat for the African nation's political leaders, at the Vatican. This event was referenced at an international conference on nonviolence and the teaching of Pope Francis, held Dec. 5-7 in Rome.

(CNS/Vatican Media via Reuters)



by Terrence Rynne

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Seventy-five people from all over the world came together last week in Rome from Dec. 5-7 to ignite a peaceful revolution.

They were participants in [a dramatic conference](#) sponsored by the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, a project of Pax Christi International, and the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Commission of the international unions of superiors of women's and men's religious orders. It was called "Pope Francis, Nonviolence and the Fullness of *Pacem in Terris*." Its goal was to understand through the sharing of stories the practical power of nonviolence to help heal our world.

Most of the participants had been suffering from violence for much of their lives — war, revolution, trafficking, oppression by dictators, devastation of their lands. Each had a story to tell about their use of nonviolent action to confront and overcome the violence assailing them.

The range of countries of origin was breathtaking: Kenya, Mexico, Romania, Guatemala, Nigeria, Bolivia, Japan, the Philippines, Congo, Indonesia, Cameroon, Brazil, Lebanon, Palestine, Uganda, the United States and Sri Lanka. In the course of two and a half days we heard exhilarating stories and realized that it is indeed a worldwide church.

Among the stories:

- Fr. Nandana Manatunga of the Human Rights Office in Sri Lanka described the recent nonviolent campaign by the united Buddhist, Muslim and Christian communities that ousted from power the three tyrannical Rajapaksa brothers who were, respectively, the president, vice president and head of the armed

forces.

- Franciscan Br. Rodrigo Peret reviewed his 30 years of work with Brazilian Amazon Indigenous people, accompanying them in their struggles for agrarian reform after centuries of being robbed of their lands.
- Sr. Maudilia López, of the Pastoral Defensoras de la Madre in Guatemala, presented her work as the leader of a women's group fighting the earth polluting practices of the Canadian mining company, Goldcorp.
- Zoughbi Zoughbi, Director of the Wi'am (Agape) Conflict Transformation Center in Bethlehem, West Bank, gave us a glimpse of his work building a nonviolent peace team in Bethlehem.

These and other stories of successful nonviolence were part of the reason that this conference prompts a revolution. The other reason was the clear kinship between participants and Pope Francis on how to deepen and spread the church's commitment to nonviolence.



Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, bishop president of Pax Christi USA, speaks at a meeting in Rome Dec. 6. The topic was "Pope Francis, Nonviolence and the Fullness of *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth)." (CNS/Courtesy of Pax Christi International/Martin Pilgram)

For example, Bishop John Stowe, bishop president of Pax Christi in the United States, explained [in a talk](#) how this Jesuit pope brought with him a strong Franciscan spirituality —one that focused on the poor, the marginal, and the sacredness of our common home. He brought with him the spirit of CELAM, the Latin American bishops' conference that also zeroed in on following Jesus, on a preferential option for the poor. Francis has led us in the practice of nonviolence as priest, bishop and pope.

Rose Berger, of Sojourners magazine, presented a series of 27 striking photographs of Francis practicing nonviolence. A sampling: a picture of Pope Francis in a warm embrace of two children who had grown up in a garbage dump in the Philippines, with the saying "these children are the treasures of the Church." Another picture, from 2017, depicted the pope with Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar presenting to her [his statement](#), "[Nonviolence, A Style of Politics for Peace](#)," reminding her of her duty to the minority groups of her country.

Another image showed Francis bending down to [kiss the feet](#) of the leaders of South Sudan, as they began a retreat in the Vatican designed to end the fighting there. Berger called these pictures of actions of the pope "sacraments of nonviolence" — visible signs that give grace.

What then of the ongoing request to the pope to write an encyclical on Gospel nonviolence?

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The responses at this conference were many and enthusiastic in favor. If the church wants to invite the faithful to enter the fight against the many forms of violence affecting the world, the church should teach and embody the most effective way to fight violence — *with overwhelming nonviolence*. The only way to defeat hate is with love. Nonviolence is love in action in the context of conflict. Nonviolence is tough love, hard-edged, imaginative love that substitutes for and can defeat violence.

Currently there is little training in the church for nonviolence. The church is a long way from understanding, let alone practicing effective nonviolent action. Many still confuse it with pacifism or think of it as passive or unrealistic. They have not studied the amazing case studies of effective nonviolence. They do not know the exacting research that shows nonviolent campaigns have been twice as effective as violent campaigns.

Priests for the most part do not get it. Few sermons are preached on it. Seminarians are not taught it. I personally visited two seminaries in my area, for example, offering to teach a course on peace studies/nonviolence. I have taught hundreds of Marquette University students for over a dozen years and know how enthusiastically they embrace the power and potential of nonviolent action once they are exposed to it. They understand that their whole culture is steeped in a belief in violence and that history has been taught to them as a history of wars.

[Rome meeting focuses on grassroots efforts to promote nonviolence](#)

Each seminary refused, saying their curriculum is tightly defined by the bishops. Not even a lecture. How can the church practice the ways to peace if their priests and seminarians do not understand the mighty levers of power contained in nonviolence — noncooperation, civil disobedience, boycotts, restorative justice practices, unarmed accompaniment and conflict resolution? How can they follow the nonviolent Jesus if they have not been introduced to him in action?

One African priest at the conference lamented the fact that nonviolence is not taught in Catholic schools around the world. No one has invited them to do so. I did not get to tell him about Peace Works, a conflict resolution program for all school levels, developed by the Center for Peacemaking at Marquette University, that has been refined and tested with great results over the last dozen years and is now available on the internet.



Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, celebrates Mass with participants at an international conference on nonviolence and the teaching of Pope Francis, Dec. 7 in Rome. Among the concelebrants are: at far left, Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky; Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego, California, to the left of Czerny; and Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, far right. (CNS/Courtesy of Pax Christi International/Martin Pilgram)

A formal teaching from the pope would unleash a powerful chain reaction in the church. Some would say it would be better if the commitment to nonviolence came into the church from the grassroots rather than from a pronouncement on high. Those attending this conference *are* the grassroots and they are saying it would help them *greatly* if the pope issued an authoritative endorsement in the form of an encyclical.

Just as the 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si'*", on Care for Our Common Home" has stirred many to climate change action, so probably would an encyclical on nonviolence move the church on all levels to embrace nonviolence as our Jesus-inspired way of confronting violence and oppression.

Our deliberations were enriched by the participation of some impressive bishops. Santa Fe Archbishop John Wester summarized for us his pathfinding pastoral letter on nuclear disarmament and San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy sat intently taking in the impressive stories of nonviolent action — an important lesson of leadership.

The peaceful revolution continues to unfold.

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