

Catholic Nonviolent Institute
4th Seminar: The roll of Curch in the Promotion of a nonviolent global change

“Why the Pope is not in Gaza?”

I am and very happy to be and share here, we call it “think out loud”, it's the style we use for nonviolent and peace action and epistemic reflection. The question-problem that made me cross the ocean for speaking few minutes, but for learning a lot from my friends here, is:

what to do as Catholic Church and nonviolent activism for help in some way stopping a genocide in holy land?

That's the reflection I will share. We never work with ideas alone and abstract, so I'll like to share a reflection with some theoretic principles and some very practical action. We'll not speak about books, but of real experiences we have in Mexico. All what I'll say is humble, is little, but it's real, and it's collective. It's not something only of myself. It's things we've been learning in a collective way from grassroots: in faith and action.

For us, the reflection is an action. This that we are doing now, for me, is a nonviolent direct action. Because reflection and the bodies are the first tools we have for struggling and changing reality, and we must learn together how to use them well.

Some see me as a social activist, and others as a theorist, academic, or workshopper. I am both things at once...and I hope something more.

October is always a very special month for the world, and also for us: the 2nd is the anniversary of Gandhi's birth -World Day of Nonviolence- and of the Tlatelolco's Massacre in Mexico: War and Peace, two sides of the same coin and the need for knowledge; the 4th is the anniversary of Francis of Assisi; is also the anniversary of the Maryknoll missionary Donald Hessler, great teacher of life and initiator of nonviolence in Mexico since the 60s, who died in 1995 on the 2nd

(https://www.serpajmx.org/_files/ugd/6e3166_287ad27094dc43578304d74aa4808c60.pdf).

To all of them and to the Holy Spirit I entrust myself now. I have thought of my reflection directed to the Catholic hierarchy here present and through the virtual recording, to the Pope, to the community of Pax Christi and activists for peace and NV in the world, and above all to the innocent victims of this genocide in Gaza, in every side.

Brother Donald Hessler used to say that "God has a great sense of humor," and I believe this is one of those situations, with someone like me sitting here in front of you. For many reasons and contrasts among us.

I feel very excited about the creation of this Catholic Institute for Nonviolence, as well as about the long and hopeful struggle and process of the international Pax Christi network

and other institutions and people of Christian faith. Moreover, the letter with the message that Pope Francis addressed to the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence on September 29, when the institute was inaugurated, is very clear in its "urgent call to adhere to the values of peace and fraternity, to work together to defend the rights of human beings, nonviolence as a style of peace politics, charity, and nonviolence should guide the world in how we treat each other" (on a personal, local, national, and international level).

Also the Pope's message in the World Day of Peace (1 January 2017) was clear: "Nonviolence as a style of politics for peace...may nonviolence become, from the local and everyday level to the world order, the characteristic style of our decisions, our relationships, our actions and of politics in all its actions...(Returning to Mother Teresa, whom he had proclaimed a saint the previous September) its mission is to go out to the victims with generosity and dedication, touching and bandaging the wounded bodies, healing the broken lives. Practiced with determination and coherence, NV has produced impressive results...The Church has committed itself to the development of NV strategies for the promotion of peace...The Catholic Church will accompany every attempt to build peace, also with active and creative NV." Our Pope Francis is still alive. He is, for me, a little miracle in the church for many advanced actions and reflections in many fields, and we must try to do as more as we can with him, learning with him and sharing our learnings with him.

I am a man of faith, Catholic, but ecumenical in the work for peace and nonviolence. In Mexico and Latin America, we have learned a bit about the spirituality, philosophy, and practice of many spiritual and religious traditions, of our indigenous peoples, peasants, and the poorest communities, young atheists... over four decades. Street children; autonomous indigenous-peasant communities defending their territories and culture and building their nonviolent social model of autonomy and good governance; poor women and families occupying urban land; families of the disappeared and murdered persons in México; now university students...and above all, my wife Myriam and my son Joaquín have been my greatest teachers of Christian faith, justice, peace, and nonviolence.

Mexico is far away, a country with much violence, but also with the living hopes of its people and communities, we have no pretension to tell anyone what to do, with humility and without believing we hold any absolute truth. I have accompanied, over the past decade and a half, the families of the murdered and disappeared persons throughout the country (the main national peacebuilders), recently in their National Life and Clandestine Graves Search Brigades, in a nonviolent **action of non-cooperation "without asking permission"** from the state or government, to search for and find their "treasures," as they call their absent loved ones, because authorities didn't want them do that for their complicity in violence and crime.

A national nonviolent campaign by churches and faith communities has been the Peace Mailboxes ("I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life"), where the families place cardboard mailboxes in temples—only they can open them—so that the population can show solidarity through messages of support and encouragement, but also indicating possible

places and maps of clandestine graves or disappearances, all anonymously. This is very important, as it is one of the main sources of leads to search in vast and lawless territories like Mexico.

I don't know how I got here, but I know it's a desire the Holy Spirit (to whom I am very devoted, and I have several proofs of His action in my life and that of those close to me) placed in me a long time ago, to contribute a little grain of sand so that our churches and the message of Jesus Christ, from the perspective of just peace and nonviolence, can regain their essential strength and prophetic witness for today's world. I hope he also gives me now the right words—the desire to communicate these words and experiences with the hierarchy of my Catholic Church, with you bishops, and with the pope, about the importance of the Church regaining its **prophetic** role as a builder of peace and nonviolence, particularly today with this **Genocide in Gaza, in the holy land!** How could our Church not have something transcendent -from evangelical and nonviolent direct action- to do and say in such a serious situation of humanity?. It seems to us that Martin Luther King's phrase was never so relevant: "The choice is no longer between violence and non-violence, now it is non-violence or non-existence".

I know it is also a dream, a utopia (not a chimera), but it is also an urgent challenge in which I deeply believe. Lets try to “think out loud” together some reflections and learnings from our collective experiments in México, about nonviolence, and then apply them to an action we propose at the end.

1-In our small experience of nonviolent reflection and action, we find it's very important always to associate the great and absolute concepts (peace, war, NV, violence...) with a *surname*, to always associate social struggles with a very concrete "principle of reality," not with generic principles: one cannot fight against neoliberalism, against injustice, against gender violence... Specific objectives must be set—in time and space—as Gandhi taught us with that simple symbol, so easy for all the people to understand, but at the same time so powerful to touch the heart of the empire and its dominance: salt. Gaza is that very concrete territory today, where peace must be built from prophetic churches. “Palestine is the key to peace throughout the world”, said Palestinian and Israeli Women for Peace the last October.

2-But also, from the root of Mexican faith we can learn that two basic virtues and characteristics of nonviolence are **humility (humble) and boldness (audacity)**. In the “Nican Mopohua” (Here It Is Told), a Nahuatl text where the indigenous people narrate the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego, she precisely asks him to activate these two big values in the action she “sternly commands” him to carry out towards Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, to have him build a temple for her on the Tepeyac.

3-In turn, Brother Donald used to say: nonviolence is the most violent of violences... but it is not a violence that seeks to destroy the other, the adversary, but one that makes them aware of their injustice or inhumane action and causes them to change, so that together they can build truth, justice, and love that benefit and humanize both parties. Therefore, nonviolence is not passive but, on the contrary, very active and radical because it aims at the root of the conflict. Gandhi recognized this important value of this way of life and

struggle in the phrase: "We have the initiative," something central to nonviolent strategy and action, which we would now like to associate with the reflection on the need that the current world has for a prophetic Church.

4-I believe that nonviolence is at the heart of the Gospel, of the life and words of Jesus. Likewise, churches, and particularly the Catholic Church, are part of what in nonviolence is called the "moral reserve" of a society, which is a very powerful tool for change and social justice in key moments in the history of many countries and peoples of the world. Sometimes, not always, that moral reserve has manifested itself in the streets and in the most significant public spaces of oppressive power to express an "Enough is enough!", a "Stop the inhumanity and injustice!", whether on the part of individuals or masses or groups. It is thanks to these identities, bodies, and social institutions acting in radical nonviolent ways that humanity is not still, in terms of its culture and humanization, in the Stone Age: faith, positive beliefs, **civil disobedience to inhumane orders have been the main drivers of our humanization.**

5-This genocide in Gaza, broadcast live 24 hours a day during more than ONE YEAR!, with not the slightest moral or material justification, and which has nothing to do with claims of "legitimate defense" as argued, it's a brutal action of colonization and extermination. We are facing a situation of the "moral frontier of humanity," where the Catholic Church is undoubtedly urgently called to clearly express publicly, with testimonial bodies that embody great social and moral power, a totally clear "Enough is enough! Stop Genocide in Gaza" to such barbarity, impunity, and inhumanity. Even at the cost of suffering, punishment, or consequences that might exist, because the worst consequence—as Brother Donald taught us in his interpretation of the Final Judgment—is that Jesus, who will present himself there as the "Son of Man," asks us **what we did when someone beside us said I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was disappeared, I was imprisoned, I was alone, and what did you do for me (Mt. 25, 31-46).** Or that the Lord asks us: "Where is your brother Abel?", and we respond like Cain: "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gn. 4, 9-10).

6-Although the government of Israel and the United States, with the very diverse complicity of many European governments, are directly responsible for the Palestinian holocaust, and for completely ignoring the UN and international justice courts, we also know that "genocide is not the action of a few over many (a few crazy, sadistic, and brutal perverts)—it would be impossible to carry out materially, technologically, and morally—as history books and commonplaces in the world childishly teach us, but rather **“it is the action of many over a few”**" (Juan Carlos Marín). It would be impossible, among many other factors, without the consensus-support (direct or not, silent or open) of large majorities of many populations. Therefore, it is not the time to be 'silent' or 'contemplative' in the face of this brutal genocide, whether as Churches or as individual

The question then is, among those "many," where are we? There are many ways to be "accomplices" without being aware of it. Howard Zinn, a northamerican historian said: "Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is that people all over the world have obeyed the dictates of leaders. Millions of people have been

killed because of this obedience. Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world in the face of poverty, hunger, stupidity, war, and cruelty.” In this specific case of genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza, among those "many," there are significant portions of the population of Israel that have not taken civil disobedience to the streets to say "Enough is enough!", "Stop the genocide! Not in Our Name!", and also from the population of the United States and Europe...and the world, we have not come out with enough moral and material determination to tell our governments and institutions of all kinds (educational, scientific, cultural, economic, social....) to stop supporting this genocide in various ways and official agreements.

What does “prophetic church” mean today? It's time for a Nonviolent Strategy-Tactic in the face of genocide in holy land!

In Gaza, next to the Holy Land where Jesus Christ was born, walked, taught, ate, fasted, prayed, loved and confronted the religious and political authorities of His time, there is currently a genocide being conducted by the Zionist government of Israel, with the explicit support, in terms of arms sales, impunity, and legitimization, from the United States and other countries, especially European ones. **Genocide is the most inhumane action of our species**; therefore, we can never normalize it or look the other way. It demands very specific and special actions from nonviolence, with a gradation and proportion equivalent in its radicality and moral, material, and social power. Equivalent refers to civil disobedience and non-cooperation within the history and practice of nonviolence. Prophetic also means "not being lukewarm" (Rev. 3:15-16); it also means applying the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), who bent down and helped the wounded and beaten man on the road, in this case, the Palestinians who are wounded, beaten, massacred, exterminated, starving, sick, mutilated—in their humanity, in their material possessions, in their lands and environment, in their animals and flora, all primarily directed at the children, women, and elderly. Now, this extermination is also targeting the West Bank, Lebanon, and who can foresee where else in this infamous and meticulous plan of nationalist and capitalist war and expansion, which could lead to a regional, global, or even nuclear war.

The prophetic of Church is to apply the gospel in the middle of this genocide: “recover the gift of prophecy with which the church was born”...the prophetic action would include interposing bodies in public and open actions of nonviolence, which oppose the inhuman orders of violence and genocide, standing beside those who are victims of these orders or struggle against them, promoting a “due disobedience to any inhuman order” (Juan C. Marín), as a synonym of nonviolence.

So, what to do?

When faced with genocide, it is not enough to denounce it in words...we must act in the face of the greatest action of inhumanity of our species. There are countless actions in the world for peace: nonviolent encamps and occupiers in the U.S. and European universities, solidarity demonstrations of all kinds, commercial and educational boycotts, some Israeli relatives and citizens fighting for the liberation of hostages ... but they are insufficient, in

terms of the necessary relationship and proportion between the levels of actions in the spirals of war and peace, of genocidal violence and nonviolence. **We need massive actions of the broad civilian population in the streets, of civil disobedience, at least, starting with the populations of Israel and USA...**

Complementing these actions, the question, with all humility and without any negativity or accusation, that has been haunting me at least since last year is:

*whether it would not be "prophetic," totally urgent, and consistent with the gospel and nonviolence, that the Pope (whom I respect), along with leaders of Islam and Judaism (and of other religions), accompanied by us (bishops-clergy-laypeople), would go now **to Gaza first and then to Israel or the border, putting nonviolently their bodies beside the bodies of the Palestinians massacred and the relatives of Israeli hostages?***

I do not mean just a few hours visit, but as they say in Brazil about nonviolence, with "permanent firmness," meaning staying there—perhaps in fasting and prayer?—for a while to pressure the great powers—starting with Israel and Netanyahu with his war team, and also Biden's one—to **Cease fire, allow Humanitarian Aid to enter, and Hostages liberation: the true name of Peace in that place, region and population now.** I am almost certain that as soon as those bodies settle there with enormous global moral and social power, the Israeli government and the governments that support them would stop the bombings, and perhaps a process of consciousness and dialogue different from genocide could begin. I know it is a strong and radical proposal—as evangelical nonviolent peace is—. Believe me, I am formulating it with humility and without any arrogance, and I have this voice deeply ingrained in my heart, like a sword that pierces it.

Surely it could be a matter to thinking it out loud among many others and praying it in discernment, about how to build such experiment in that holy land, together with the families of victims in Gaza and with relatives of the hostages on the Israeli side. On April 12, 2020, the Pope called for a "global Ceasefire" in his Easter message: "In response to the current global epidemic of violence, we feel called to invoke, pray, teach and take decisive action... to promote the Nonviolence of the Gospel." (Pax Christi, "A call to the Catholic Church to commit to the Nonviolence that is central to the Gospel").

Of course, it will be said that the Israeli government will not allow the Pope and other religious leaders, to enter and stay there. As an answer, the gospel passage where they lowered a sick man through the roof, because he never could arrive to touch Jesus, when Jesus was healing comes to mind (Mark 2:3-5). And also the action of the relatives of missing and murdered people in Mexico -the main peace builders in the country - when they decided on their own to look for their loved ones "without asking permission". This is, at times, a key characteristic of the nonviolent action when the adversary is unpunished and violent.

It will also be said that the Pope is elderly (88 in December) and he is ill, although he has just made the longest trip of his pontificate to Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, East Timor and Singapore) in September. All this is true, but there are extreme

situations in human life and for humanity that demand extreme prophetic actions in the name of Jesus, and I believe that this genocide broadcast live 24 hours for more than a year represents a **borderline situation for humanity as a species and God's creation**, and therefore requires that the highest leaders with social and religious power give a deep prophetic witness, which I am sure will somehow touch the hearts and consciences of the perpetrators.

I understand clearly that there are a thousand reasons for Francis not to go to Gaza now, and they are logical, but precisely in individual and institutional life there are moral boundary situations, situations of prophetic witness, where not everything is rational logic.

Believe me, I have really tried to reflect with humility and boldness, without claiming to have any absolute truth or recipe for nonviolent action or strategy, but rather from “real” situations in terms of experiences (“experiments with the truth”: as Gandhi named his Autobiography) of direct public nonviolent actions and Christian faith, where the spirit always *moves and changes something*.

Pietro Ameglio, 25 october 2024, Rome
