How can the Church maintain its prophecy in a world riven by such levels of violence, war, genocide, impunity and inhumanity? Nonviolent action in Gaza from the Pope, and religious and lay leaders of the world[1]

For Leo XIV, whose words have challenged us to do more regarding nonviolence… the rest is up to the Spirit, who blows where, when, and how He wills.

I'd like to recast the title of this discussion so that, instead of a paradigm change "within the Church", it should read "reaching out from the Church". At first, I was in doubt whether to attend this Conference –not because of the meeting itself, which I consider extremely valuable, as well as the creation and encouragement by the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence, with which I have been since its beginnings, and which I have always admired and supported—but because I couldn't figure out a clear space in which to plan actions capable of facing the challenge as a prophetic Church and humanity at risk of extinction, both from nuclear threats or a Third World War. As Pope Leo XIV said: "In the present and dramatic situation of a fragmented Third World War, as Pope Francis reiterated several times, I call upon the leaders of the world, insisting on the ever-present appeal: Never another war!" (11-5-26).

But, on reflection and with the help of others, I realized it could be an excellent opportunity to learn and share, as well as to conceive "real", collective nonviolent acts in the short term, which might allow us to confront some of the most pressing acts of violence against Humanity, the Christian faith and the philosophy of peace which threaten us today. Specifically, I am referring to what I consider the principal world-

[1] Paper presented at the Conference "Disarmed and Disarming Peace: The Emerging Paradigm Shift of the (Roman) Catholic Church *vis a vis* Evangelical Nonviolence", as part of the Chapter "Moving Nonviolence towards the Heart of the Catholic Church", 10-9-26 , Catholic Institute for Nonviolence, Rome, Vatican City.

encompassing inhuman menace, for several reasons: the genocide (the most inhuman act our species is capable of) in Gaza, and the ethnic cleansing and militarized occupation of the West Bank. It is antichristian and against nonviolence to simply stand by, watching in 'contemplation', shock and silence as this genocide develops, even hiding behind the excuse of postmodern fatalism, totally contrary to our religious and nonviolent hopes and faith.

The name of the Conference mentions the concepts of "unarmed" and "disarming peace". In all our workshops, courses and conferences, we start from the fact that there is no greater "defenselessness", and "disarmament", than not relying on a "reality principle" with empirical highlights, in which we attempt to reflect upon and enact the concepts involved. It is this central "epistemic premise" --point of departure-- upon which we wish to base our reflection and proposed action; not upon the abstract and absolute principles of our Christian faith and nonviolent credo –although I believe in many of them and encourage them—which we won't take us very far in stopping the present day processes of inhumanity, which bring us together here today in this precise and unique moment in history.

Thus, a great moral disarmament would be to not make a life of actions from all the many words of Pope Leo, but to become concretely involved with those who suffer most, from a position of nonviolent peace and a steadfast rejection of war. I come only to share modestly some personal and collective questions and reflections from Mexico and Latin America –in the hope that they will reply to some spiritual impulse, which could supplement other important ideas presented in this Conference and, perhaps, with the contributions of all of us, generate some sort of "intellectual, epistemic and/or moral rupture" in the form of a collective challenge.

To what extent has nonviolence been effective in checking such high levels of inhumanity in the present day?

In my view, the world and humanity have reached a high risk "moral and material frontier" such as we have never beheld before, due to the nuclear

risk and the accumulated power of communication media and the major corporations, against a background of normalization of illegality, impunity and dehumanization, along with some kind of survival and slow return to the fundamental values and historical gains of peoples in terms of human rights and peace. I believe that the Pope, in his latest encyclical ("*Magnifica Humanitas"*) is warning us –not only from the point of view of AI—against this risk of dehumanization and loss of the sense which defines us as human beings.

Against this background, the nonviolence espoused by peoples, churches, educational institutions and numerous social organizations, collectives and socially involved individuals acquires an enormous historical and prophetic responsibility, not in the sense of a "predictive view towards the future", but rather "a radical action in the present". This responsibility lies principally in the field of ACTION, rather than in that of principles or words: it attempts to exhort while setting an example in the face of corrupt and inhuman powers! I don't think this is a messianic or catastrophist vision, but simply the reflection of a social activist and academic historian with decades of experience who, to a certain extent, feels ashamed –both of himself and of a considerable part of humanity in the face of the tepidity reaction which God "vomits" (*Revelation 3, 15-19)* and the social ignorance we have accumulated concerning these overwhelming processes of violence, war and genocide (not equal phenomena). Although, of course, I recognize, and feel greatly encouraged, by the deep involvement of Pax Christi and all of you.

In view of all this, at least, this is my view, I feel that nonviolence –or we, as nonviolent activists—at this historic moment has lost ground in terms of its capacity to face these challenges. The genocide in Gaza and the ethnic cleansing in the West Bank –as well as many other actions of brutal violence in other parts of the world, among which we could mention the totally illegal and unpunished bombardments of Caribbean fishing boats—have seriously tested the efficacy of nonviolence in the face of such extremes of brutality and genocide, both in terms of prevention and opposition to their peaks of violence. The question emerges, therefore, as to whether it is necessary to supplement this attitude with other forms of community

activity in terms of defense and solidarity, as is being practiced in our communities en Mexico and Latin America. It is a very grave problem, which requires serious debate, in the light of history and the experience of communities: Which is the “reality principle” for the defense of humanity at this historic occasion, particularly in certain territories where the untrammeled violence is extremely high? Clearly, there is not only one answer.

Of course, I entertain no doubts concerning the power of nonviolence and the truths present in the teachings of Jesus, as well as those of many other figures and peoples in the history of our species. All of us who are here, together, are involved, struggle, share, enlighten and are enlightened, learn and educate, drawing on the experiences of many fine social movements and collectives dedicated to nonviolent action and reflection in our countries and continents. In the case of Mexico, the principal social identities with which we work, learn, and which lead the processes of construction of nonviolent peace, are the relatives who search for missing persons, the rural and urban indigenous communities who defend their natural and cultural resources, and the collectives of feminists and young people –especially university students—who have united against gender-generated violence and abuse of power.

However, it is perfectly clear to me that neither I nor others have done enough, and we have normalized excessively this war-related genocidal brutality on a world scale, probably because we lack the necessary knowledge (which is not the same as simple information). The level and proportion of these nonviolent actions, undertaken to check these inhuman situations, has been far below the level of the violent actions. I believe that, if we do not seriously face this fact, we will not be totally honest in our search for a nonviolent Christian truth, congruent with our own bodies and lives. It is not a feeling of guilt, but rather the confirmation of social objective facts. Judging from history, and from our humble Mexican and Latin American experience, I feel that –to face down such inhuman acts—it is necessary to conceive, build and CARRY OUT nonviolent massive actions of noncooperation and civil disobedience, representing a necessary

proportion and correlation between the spiral of nonviolence and the spiral of war which we are facing.

The Pope and religious leaders: Should we progress from evangelical words and gestures towards the prophetic nonviolent action of "interposing our bodies" in Gaza?

During recent months I have been reading the exemplary statements of the Pope concerning a just, Christian and nonviolent peace, as well as his many symbolic gestures (the photo of the Lebanese Muslim child he greeted, carried with him, and who was later murdered; the migrants in Sicily; the Iranian ambassador he honored in the Vatican; his meetings with other Oriental churches). I also value greatly the clarity and courage with which he has spoken out against Trump, Netanyahu and their ministers... and all their doctrines of non-accountability and their "just wars..." And also in favor of "the nonviolence which Jesus taught as the true power over evil". (6-4-26). Leo XIV has insisted upon the rejection of so-called "just wars" in his most recent encyclical. Among many other passages, he has stated, on 14-3-26: "War is not holy; only peace is holy, because it is the will of God"; and on 29-3-26 he added: "God, Jesus, king of peace who rejects war, whom nobody can use to justify a war". He has been the principal social actor on the world stage with the necessary moral power to raise his voice in this way against "a handful of tyrants who are destroying the world" (Cameroun, 16-4-26).

I felt profoundly identified with all this, and I humbly believe that the following step he might take is –together with many other religious figures (principally Islamic, Jewish, Christian), but also social, lay and pacifist leaders worldwide—always adhering strictly to the Gospel and nonviolence, move on from symbolic words and gestures to embrace very concrete and prophetic nonviolent actions. I also dare imagine –or dream— that Leo XIV has all the determination and moral and material power at his disposal to do so.

The title of the document issued by Pax Christi International and Kairos II – *From Reflection to Concrete Action*—is highly significant and is clearly in this line of thought, in the sense of building actions that directly confront such extreme violence. For this reason, we wish—humbly—to propose an action of this nature and logic, to be discussed collectively:

> *That the Pope and religious leaders should interpose (not simply place) their bodies –together with our own and many others—in sites where violence and genocide are more intense and inhuman. When we proposed, referring to Pope Francis in our paper (Why is the Pope not in Gaza?),* right here, on October 25, 2024, (https://www.academia.edu/125601846/Pax_*Christi*_Espa%C3%B1ol_*Seminario_Vaticano_Papa_en_Gaza_final*), *going to Gaza and/or the West Bank (The Holy Land! Where Jesus walked, ate, slept, spoke, cured, loved...), we envisioned the Pope, along with leaders of other religious persuasions, travelling to Gaza NOW to pray and fast, listen and accompany the Palestinian victims and the Israeli hostages, also bearing food and medicines... And staying there all the necessary time (at least three days: from the cross to the resurrection) until some sort of "Stop the genocide" were declared, and the access of humanitarian aid were allowed.*

With great –hopefully prophetic—clarity, during a Buddhist festivity, Leo XIV sent a message under the title: "Buddhists and Christians for a Disarmed and Disarming Peace", in which he stated that "we are invited to become craftsmen of peace. Not as passive observers, but as courageous witnesses capable of achieving encounters, healing wounds and re-establishing trust... We must avoid becoming accomplices with our silence or our fear". And, as he also said when addressing the National Assembly of Pax Christi-U.S.: "Among the many challenges presented before us in the present-day world... efforts to promote nonviolence are all the more necessary" (26-7-25). May we take Leo's words seriously and make them come alive with equally clear and prophetic actions.

It would also be an action which could prevent any future need the Church might have to beg forgiveness for not having done enough to prevent this genocide in the Holy Lands, as this Pope has just done in his first encyclical, in which he laments the very tardy reaction of the Church when confronted with slavery: “In the name of the Church, I very sincerely beg forgiveness” (25-5-26).

In the culture of nonviolence it would be called an act of non-cooperation, of “permanent firmness”, a prophetic act undertaken as churches and peoples of God, and in solidarity with victims; it would also be a nonviolent act of “due disobedience to de-humanizing orders” (J.C.Marín). We have claimed for years that this genocide might conceivably be stopped by massive acts of civil disobedience on the part of the Israeli population inside Israel, blocking all forms of government, roads, the homes of political leaders, etc., thus paralyzing the country, without “leaving the field” until Netanyahu and his henchmen resign, or go to jail, and the genocide in Gaza, as well as the brutal and illegal occupation of the West Bank by Israeli colonists, cease.

This is the new turning point, the new challenge, both spiritual and material, which I consider critical for nonviolence, particularly from the point of view of churches. Of course, we are all aware of the difficulties involved, but –as we have said on more than one occasion—humility and boldness are two of the fundamental traits of nonviolence (father Donald Hessler). Just as important as a virtue of nonviolence which we have learned from Mexican Mothers in search of Loved Ones: the conviction that some actions must be undertaken “without asking for permission” (This point is hugely complex, both from the point of view of social values and overall strategy). As I said before, I believe that this Pope might be really close to engaging in this type of prophetic noncooperation acts, although –naturally—it is very difficult to transmit all this to him and the members of his inner circle. But we must continue trying and hoping.

Otherwise, we could continue repeating the same acts of resistance –sometimes in routine or repetitive fashion—which may be valuable and necessary but, in the meantime, inhumanity and violence will be advancing ever more rapidly. We consider this moment, which is both spiritual and

tragic, in view of genocidal war affecting world social order, to be "different" to other previous instances: more dangerous and a more urgent challenge to nonviolent actions. There can be no doubt that many people we are not aware of are carrying out acts of non-cooperation and civil disobedience in different parts of the world, but we wish to suggest that we require much more direct action from the moral reserve of the world, and that churches are part of this –as long as they act. Otherwise, they become complicit with the inhumanity. For this reason, we assert that the present is a crucial moment in our history as humans and as Christians: A moment in which we must say "enough!" and launch radical (direct from the origins) prophetic actions rooted in our best nonviolent traditions. The moral reserve may comprise great masses in the public space, or bodies whose social identities concentrate great "social power", as is the case of the Pope and other religious leaders. However, it is important that they should decide to "use their power", and not merely "be aware of it without using it".

Prudence is a very ancient value, many times publicly admired by members of the Church but, in moments of exacerbated inhumanity, it can become complicit; it can acquire the form of cooperation with the unfolding inhumanity. From the point of view of nonviolence, we believe that the commanding value should be, as we stated, humble boldness. As, for example, the attitude exhibited by Saint Francis of Assisi when he visited the Holy Lands during the Fifth Crusade, and met sultan Al Malik al Kamil –in theory, a religious enemy—in Egypt, in 1219, something unheard of in those days, but which established points of departure for dialogue and peace between religions. There we have a great case of coexisting audacity and humility, of nonviolence which led to a fair and dignified peace. It seems like a fitting example for the present day, so badly in need of –among many other things—a prophetic church.

Redefining a "Nonviolent, Just and Dignified Peace", from Assisi and stop a possible nuclear war?

Finally, we would like to share a reflection on another proposed nonviolent action, which does not substitute in any way the urgency of what has been observed previously, equally necessary, but which approaches the issue from a very different angle, much closer to the subject matter of this Conference, and in line with the tradition of the Papacies of the last few decades.

Humanity needs to recover, rebuild, rescue and reflect, hear and live a perspective or definition of a different peace for the world, against a backdrop dominated by that dangerous association between "war, security and peace", which leaders like Trump, Netanyahu and the great world powers repeat daily in the coopted media, and which too many people believe, naïvely and immaturely.

A considerable part of this massive acceptance of the belief in "armed peace" stems from the broad "normalization" process which media and politicians have planted in the world, and with which we have cooperated sometimes with our silences in many venues, starting with classrooms where, for example, "we proceed with our classes as if the genocide in Gaza didn't exist". The worldwide rallying cry for solidarity with the Palestinian people is "Don't stop talking about Palestine", and that should be the great challenge for all of us here[2].

With all this in mind, I suggest that churches could convene a great spiritual and religious world gathering for peace, in Assisi –as previous popes have done, together with the Dalai Lama—or in any other similarly spiritual place according to any tradition, to re-define –according to clear and specific contents—the legal and institutional conception and practice of nonviolent peace and human rights in the world. And follow up with a great worldwide campaign of information and discussion in the greatest number possible of communities, groups and individuals, including, if possible, the construction of international social media and networks with the broadest possible

[2] A modest example of this could be that, in 2024, we organized – based on these principles—a bilingual exhibition on zoom, during four months, among Muslim students at the Al Quds University in the West Bank, and ours at UNAM, under the title "Enough! Stop Genocide in Gaza" (https://www.serpajmx.org/grid-c1kw0).

coverage. This would be a nonviolent act of noncooperation, following in the steps of Gandhi, who centered the greater part of his life and efforts on making the masses reflect –in their own tongues—on the acts, spirituality and principles of peace and nonviolence.

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