

Peace and non-violence in Catholic social teaching

— An Introduction

The March 2010 Wellington trial of the three Waihopai Ploughshares activists provides an opportunity for reflection and discussion on Christian peacemaking and non-violent action.

The three Catholics made their act of civil disobedience and protest at the Waihopai satellite station in 2008 as individuals. They neither sought permission for, nor endorsement of, their actions from New Zealand's Catholic Bishops or Catholic agencies.

Caritas makes no judgement of the actions or motives in this particular case, but recognises that non-violent direct action is one way in which followers of Christ may choose to promote peace. We acknowledge the range of views among Catholics and within the peace movement on the nature and targeting of the Waihopai action. Catholic social teaching recognises that it is possible for people of goodwill to reach different decisions and positions from reflection on the same moral principles. What is important though is that in reflecting on actions such as the Ploughshares one, people take the opportunity to inform their conscience through learning and reflecting on the Church's teaching. Neither uncritical support, nor uncritical opposition, are appropriate responses on their own.

There are many sources of information for Christian theological reflection on peacemaking and non-violence. What follows here is an introduction to some key messages contained within the formal writings of Catholic social teaching. It is intended as a basis for further discussion and reflection.

Peacemaking in Catholic social teaching

Peace-making is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith.

New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference, 1997

Catechism of the Catholic Church http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM

The Catechism teaches that *peace is not merely the absence of war* (2304) but the outcome of justice and charity. It teaches: *Those who renounce violence and bloodshed and, in order to safeguard human rights, make use of those means of defence available to the weakest, bear witness to evangelical charity* (2306), provided they do not harm the rights and obligations of other members of society.

Work to overcome injustice, and excessive economic and social inequalities, contributes to building peace and avoiding war (2317). Intervention in political structuring and intervention of political life belongs to the lay faithful rather than the pastors of the Church (2442). Social action can take on various forms, so long as it has the common good in view and conforms with the message of the Gospel and the teaching of the Church (2442).

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html

The Compendium is the official summary of Catholic social teaching, produced by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 2004. It provides a guide to the hundreds of Church documents which touch on the subjects of peace and disarmament, particularly in Chapter 11 on *The Promotion of Peace*.

(http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html#CHAPTER%20ELEVEN)

The Compendium says that violence is never a proper response and destroys what it claims to defend. *The contemporary world too needs the witness of unarmed prophets* provided they act without harming the rights and obligations of others (496).

War is a “scourge” *and is never an appropriate way to resolve problems that arise between nations* (497). It is essential to seek out the underlying causes of conflicts, especially structural situations of poverty and injustice: *For this reason, another name for peace is development* (498).

Defence can be justified in response to aggression, which is “intrinsically immoral”. However, a war of self-defence is not the same as seeking to *impose domination on another nation* (500). Those who defend the security and freedom of a country make *an authentic contribution to peace* (502) but are *morally obliged to resist orders that call for perpetrating crimes against the law of nations* (503). Provision should be made for conscientious objectors (503).

The Church calls for *general, balanced and controlled disarmament* and rejects the arms race (508). Disarmament includes *the banning of weapons that inflict excessively traumatic injury or that strike indiscriminately* (510).

The Church condemns terrorism, and says no religion may tolerate or preach terrorism (515). However, the struggle against terrorism must be carried out with respect for human rights, analysis of the reasons behind terrorist attacks (514) and *presupposes the moral duty to help create those conditions that will prevent it from arising or developing* (513).

Promotion of peace is an integral part of the Church’s mission (516). True peace is only made possible through forgiveness and reconciliation (517) and *it is through prayer that the Church engages in the battle for peace* (518).

Messages for the World Day of Peace

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/index_en.htm

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/index.htm

Annual papal messages on the theme of peace have been issued since Pope Paul VI instituted the World Day for Peace on the first day of the year in 1968. These annual statements were described by Pope John Paul II as a “primer” for peace.

An increasing message of the messages is the importance of respect for universal moral norms expressed through the language of human rights and international law (for example, 2004 Message for the World Day of Peace). Pope Benedict described peace as *both gift and task* (2007). The messages explore the relationships between peace and broader concerns for poverty (2009), the environment (2010), intercultural dialogue (2001), the rights of minorities (1989) and the cooperation of the human family (2008).

New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference

New Zealand's Catholic Bishops have commented on a number of issues including peacemaking, military spending, nuclear weapons and landmines. Most of these statements are available in the publication: Catholic Office for Social Justice: ***Church in the World: Statements on social issues 1979-1997 by New Zealand's Catholic Bishops***, 1997.

A key statement of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference is: ***A consistent ethic of life – Te-Kahu-o-te-ora***, 1997 http://catholic.org.nz/statements/9704_consistent.php

This statement outlines the intrinsic connections between the Church's concerns on life issues including abortion, euthanasia, poverty, the arms race and environmental degradation. *Any form of injustice built into national and international structures does violence to fundamental human rights and dignity and is sinful. Such sinfulness needs to be confronted.... Our choices require a shift in emphasis from violence to non-violence away from systems which stunt, shorten or endanger life, toward a life-giving commitment to community and the protection of the common good.*

In other statements, the Bishops have said that peacemaking *is not an optional commitment; it is a requirement of our faith (Working for peace in the Lord's vineyards, 1989)*. This statement called on the lay faithful to *seek practical ways to make the peace and justice which is the fruit of sound political activity, a reality*. Opposition to nuclear weapons was among the earliest of the Bishops' peace statements: *we cannot remain silent while political powers put their faith in armaments by way of ensuring peace. To gamble with the future of our world in this way is madness. (New Zealand Catholic Bishops Speak Out for Peace, Oppose Nuclear Weapons, 1982)*

The New Zealand Bishops' most recent statement on peace was in a pastoral letter to parishes before the outbreak of the Iraq war in 2003: *We have little doubt, that a new war on Iraq would cause renewed suffering and massive loss of life and livelihood. Such a war will further divide countries and peoples and diminish the prospects for peace or for an end to terrorism.*

Other statements by the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference include:

- ***Catholic Bishops Urge Total Ban on Landmines (1995)***
- ***Hiroshima Day (1995) with Anglican Bishops***
- ***Nuclear Testing in the Pacific (1995) with the Bishops of Oceania***
- ***Pacific Peace (1997)***

Other key encyclicals and statements

There are numerous specific statements and messages about peace, but the Church's teaching on peace is not confined to these alone. Major encyclicals naturally touch on this subject as a key "sign of the times" to which our Church is responding.

In *Pacem in Terris* (*Peace on Earth*, 1963), Pope John XXIII said there was no hope of reducing or banning armaments unless disarmament proceeded from inner conviction: *the fundamental principle on which our peace depends must be replaced by another, which declares the true and solid peace of nations consists not in equality of arms but in mutual trust alone. (para 113)*

Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* (*The Progress of Peoples*, 1967) said it was necessary to overcome excessive economic, social and cultural inequalities: *Peace is something built up day after day, in pursuit of an order intended by God.* Picking up on the key messages of Pope Paul's encyclical, Pope John Paul II commented twenty years later in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (*On Social Concerns*, 1987) that if development were indeed "the new name for peace", *war and military preparations are the major enemy of the integral development of peoples.*

In his most recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (*Love in Truth*, 2009) Pope Benedict taught that peace can run the risk of being considered a "technical product" if peacebuilding efforts are not based on values of human life. *One must align oneself, so to speak, with the unsung efforts of so many individuals deeply committed to bringing peoples together and to facilitating development on the basis of love and understanding (para 72).*

Non-violence in Catholic social teaching

Jesus was the most active resister known perhaps to history. His was nonviolence par excellence.

Mahatma Gandhi

There is a long tradition of non-violent resistance to oppression and injustice which has origins deep in the pacifist traditions of Christianity and other religions. Although the best known advocate of bringing about change through non-violence and non-cooperation was Mahatma Gandhi, there is increasing recognition of the non-violent resistance of Te Whiti and the community at Parihaka in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1880s. Other notable examples of non-violent resistance throughout history include the peaceful overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos by the unarmed "People Power" movement in the Philippines in 1986, the United States civil rights movement crystallised by the refusal by Rosa Parks to give up her seat on a bus, and the refusal of Danish people to hand over Jewish citizens to the Nazis in World War II.

Catholic social teaching concerns itself more with values and principles than as a guide to action in specific circumstances. However, in general there is a message that peaceful action is naturally preferred over violent or armed resistance.

Some specific mentions of non-violent resistance in Catholic social teaching include:

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: *The Challenge of Peace: God's promise and our response*, 1983

In a major statement on peace, the United States Bishops recognised in 1983 that moved by the example of Jesus' life and his teaching *some Christians from the earliest days of the Church committed themselves to a non-violent lifestyle (111)*. Early Church leaders such as St Justin and St Cyprian opposed any form of violence, including self-defence, while St Francis of Assisi stipulated that members of his third order were not to take up weapons against anybody (115).

The US Bishops said the vision of Christian non-violence *is not passive about injustice and the defense of the rights of others; it rather affirms and exemplifies what it means to resist injustice through non-violent methods (116)*. They acknowledged the impact the non-violent witness of Gandhi, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King had on the life of the Church in the United States.

They noted that non-violent resistance is not the way of the weak, the cowardly or the impatient. *Non-violent means of resistance to evil deserve much more study and consideration than they have thus far received. There have been significant instances in which people have successfully resisted oppression without recourse to arms (222)*. They suggested that training citizens in peaceable non-compliance and non-cooperation could be considered as a formal response by a government to the threat of an invading force (223).

Messages regarding the non-violence of Gandhi and Martin Luther King

There are numerous references to the non-violent message of Mahatma Gandhi in Vatican documents, including in Papal addresses. Some examples:

- **Pope John Paul II: *Address at Funeral Monument of Raj Ghat dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi, 1986***: *The figure of Mahatma Gandhi and the meaning of his life's work have penetrated the consciousness of humanity... Mahatma Gandhi taught that if all men and women, whatever the differences between them, cling to the truth, with respect for the unique dignity of every human being, a new world order – a civilization of love – can be achieved. And today we hear him still pleading with the world: "Conquer hate by love, untruth by truth, violence by suffering"*.
- **Pope Paul VI: *Address to the Indian people in honour of Gandhi, 1978***: *We believe that our words have special meaning today for the citizens of India, on this thirtieth anniversary of the death of Mahatma Gandhi. We associate ourselves with all of you in rendering solemn honour to this herald of non-violence, to this man of peace. And on this occasion we repeat: "No to violence": to all violence — to everything that wounds, weakens and violates life; to everything that dishonours human dignity. At the same time we reiterate: "Yes to Peace": to the peace that brings happiness to all, for it is based on fearlessness and truth; it is the work of justice and fraternal love.*
- **Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue: *Message on the feast of Diwali, 2008***: Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Indian nation, is respected and held in high regard by people of different generations around the world for his complete dedication to the service of humanity. During the course of his struggle for

freedom, he realized that “an eye for an eye, and soon the whole world is blind”. Throughout his life, he developed among others, the concept of *Ahimsa* (non-violence). He is a model for non-violence and he led by example to the point of laying down his life because of his refusal to engage in violence. Non-violence is not merely a tactical manoeuvre but is the attitude of one who, as the Pope affirmed, “is so convinced of God’s love and power” that he is not afraid to tackle evil with the weapons of love and truth alone. Love of one’s enemy is the revolution of love, a love that does not rely ultimately on human resources but is a gift of God. Non-violence is encouraged by many other religions. Non-violence is central to our beliefs as the way to promote truth, light, mutual respect, freedom and harmony.

- **Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity: *Resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 2008***: It was through the efforts of the churches, particularly the African-American churches and their ecumenical partners, and most especially through the non-violent resistance of the Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, that civil rights for all were enshrined in American law. His deep-rooted conviction that only Christ-like love truly conquers hate and brings about the transformation of society continues to inspire Christians, drawing them together to work for justice.