

St Francis, Pope Francis, and the Way of Nonviolence and Peace

By Ken Butigan

Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio's decision to take the name "Francis" when he became pope in 2013 was a breathtaking choice.

By assuming St. Francis of Assisi's name—the first pontiff to do so—he instantly signaled his spiritual and practical commitment to the well-being of our fragile planet and its inhabitants, and to embody this commitment in a profoundly pastoral and nonviolent way.

As it became increasingly clear that Bergoglio would be elected during the papal enclave in the Sistine Chapel, Cardinal Cláudio Hummes turned to him and said, "Don't forget the poor." The new pope later remarked, "That struck me... the poor... Immediately I thought of St. Francis of Assisi. Francis was a man of peace, a man of poverty, a man who loved and protected creation."

The pope's namesake vividly symbolizes living the Christian life to the full while at the same time integrating three of the monumental challenges we face today: economic inequality, the climate crisis and perennial war.

Since his installation, Pope Francis has dramatically engaged each of these challenges by tirelessly critiquing the economic order that produces widespread involuntary poverty and a widening gap between the rich and the poor; by promulgating *Laudato Si'*, his ground-breaking encyclical on the environment; and by actively pursuing peace and nonviolence in a world shattered by war and widespread destruction.

Pope Francis declared at St. Peter's Basilica in August 2013 that "the true strength of the Christian is the power of truth and love, which leads to the renunciation of all violence. Faith and violence are incompatible." The pope's countless statements on peace and nonviolence have been backed by nonviolent action, from gestures of unity and solidarity (washing the feet of non-Christians, detained immigrants, and the incarcerated during Holy Thursday services), to making a surprise visit to a refugee camp in Greece—where he arranged to bring three Muslim families to Rome—to a call for global prayer and action to prevent an aerial bombing campaign.

In April 2019, Pope Francis hosted a two-day "spiritual retreat" for the president of South Sudan and the opposition leaders of that country. The previous fall, an historic peace agreement had been signed between them, but the parties had been having difficulty implementing it. There was grave danger that this new country would be plunged again into civil war, a conflict that had already cost nearly 400,000 lives. The encounter at the Vatican was an opportunity for dialogue and renewing the task of working for peace for the 13 million people of South Sudan. At the end of this gathering, Pope Francis pleaded with the leaders to honor the armistice they had signed and to work together as one government. In unscripted remarks, he said, "I beg you as a brother to stay the course of peace. I appeal to you with all my heart: move ahead as one." Then, unexpectedly, he stooped down and, kneeling on the floor, kissed the feet of President Salva Kiir and those of the opposition leaders.^[1] He stunned his guests with this altogether

surprising gesture. “I was shocked, and I trembled when His Holiness the Pope kissed our feet,” the president told the South Sudanese parliament a month later.^[ii] While there have continued to be serious ups-and-downs in South Sudan since then, the following February the parties finally formed a unity government. In this one act, Pope Francis unleashed a creative tension that could not help but break something open, but also play a role in healing something, bringing enemies together, vouching for the process, risking looking foolish, and reaching out with mercy and the hope for reconciliation.

This is one of many nonviolent actions Pope Francis has taken during his papacy. The pope’s countless statements on peace and nonviolence have been backed by nonviolent action, from gestures of unity and solidarity (washing the feet of non-Christians, detained immigrants, and the incarcerated during Holy Thursday services) and making a surprise visit to a refugee camp in Greece—where he arranged to bring three Muslim families to Rome.

It is important to note that public symbolic actions by recent popes go beyond “teaching” in the sense of pronouncements and documents. Symbolic actions and events creatively reach out to those of many faiths, and span divisions that spawn violence. One example is the well-publicized prayer vigil for peace in Syria that Francis held in St. Peter’s Square in September 2013. He was joined by 100,000 peace advocates, even as international leaders debated the possibility of military action. Another example is the prayer of three successive popes — John Paul, Benedict, and Francis — at the Western Wall or “Wailing Wall” in Jerusalem, the remnants of a platform on which the Second Temple was built. Their widely circulated and iconic images represent Christian repentance of suffering caused to the Jews, as well as hope for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The latter message was brought home powerfully (and controversially) by Francis’s additional visit to the “wall of separation” in Bethlehem.

In 2015, he “took the biggest security risk of his papacy to visit a mosque under siege from armed Christian militias in Bangui, the capital of Central African Republic, delivering a message of peace and reconciliation in a show of solidarity. Under heavy UN and Vatican protection, Francis travelled in his open popemobile into the heart of PK5, where 15,000 Muslims are surrounded by Christian militias... [it] was the first time the pope has visited an active war zone.”^[iii]

Since the beginning of his papacy, Francis’ nonviolent actions have been showing the Church and the world what the nonviolent life, embodying the active and nonviolent love of God to resist everything that contributes to our world’s woundedness, brokenness and violence. This has been true, as well, in many documents and statements, such as his 2017 World Day of Peace message (“Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace”), as well as in dramatic advances of Church teaching, including declaring the death penalty inadmissible under any circumstance and condemning the possession, as well as the use of nuclear weapons).

St. Francis of Assisi has inspired Pope Francis to engage the crisis of his time. This Jesuit pope, in turn, has offered all of us a clear example of envisioning and tirelessly working in a Franciscan spirit for a world free from war, poverty, and environmental destruction. During his papacy, Pope Francis has

assiduously taken up the practice of peace and nonviolence, grounded in the Gospel and lived and embodied by St. Francis eight centuries ago.

But this work is not the pope's alone. All Christians, and all people of all faiths everywhere, are called in this precarious time to build a world of peace, justice and healing for all, and to take up the practice of peace and nonviolence toward meeting these long-term but critically important goals.

In this series we explore how St. Francis developed and lived out a comprehensive practice of peace and nonviolence -- and how we, too, can adapt this practice to heal our lives, our relationships, our communities, our societies, and our entire world.

“Practice” is a regular or customary activity. Christian monks engage in contemplative practice; mindfulness meditation is at the heart of many forms of Buddhist practice. In these pages we will reflect on St. Francis's peacemaking not simply as singular or discrete episodes but as facets of a comprehensive, life-long practice: an ongoing commitment to affirm and unleash the active nonviolent power of healing and transformation.

Francis's practice of peace and nonviolence was an engaged, moment-to-moment process of proclaiming and embodying the unconditional love of God.

Through this process he became a channel of that healing and transformative love in the midst of a broken and violent world.

We will chart how this practice slowly emerged – and then lift up its spiritual vision, its guiding principles, and its specific methods by unpacking a series of what we will call Francis's spiritually-grounded “nonviolent actions.”

Francis made peace between Assisi's mayor and bishop, made peace between a city's warring factions, made peace with bandits, made peace with lepers, made peace with his own brothers, made peace overtures with Sultan Malik al- Kamil during the Fifth Crusade, and is even said to have made peace between a hill-town and a ravenous wolf.

In each of these cases Francis did not make peace from afar. He engaged the challenge and opportunity of the moment up close, in a direct and active way.

Using the most powerful means at his disposal—his own unarmed body, his own vulnerable presence, his own spirit of compassion—he entered the arena of conflict with love and determination, and doing so, helps break open the possibility for healing and life.

These moments of often risky encounter and engagement are examples of Francis's nonviolent action. This modern term did not exist in Francis's time—nor, for that matter, did the word “nonviolence.” But now, after a century of familiarity with “nonviolence” and “nonviolent action” in our post-Gandhi world, we will see in this book how both of these terms help unpack the depth and power of Francis's life and mission.

Even more important than terminology is the deeper question of motivation. Where does Francis's drive toward peace and nonviolence come from? And what sustains it over the course of a lifetime?

How does Francis become one of the greatest peacemakers of all time, engaging in powerful nonviolent action for healing and transformation, and inviting those who follow him to do the same?

Reflecting on these questions in light of the sweep of the saint's life, we probe in this book a simple intuition: Francis embarks on a life of peace and nonviolence because he directly experienced the God of Peace and Nonviolence—and he engaged in nonviolent action because he personally experienced the transforming power of God's nonviolent action.

In this series we will trace the journey Francesco di Pietro di Bernardone took to become Saint Francis the Peacemaker, including reflecting on the series of nonviolent actions that were part of his emerging practice of peace and nonviolence, all of which was rooted in Francis's profound encounter with the God of Peace and Nonviolence—an encounter that paradoxically flowed from a keen experience of war and captivity.

Francis, who was born into a culture where conventional religiosity was built into the fabric of society, found his skin-deep spirituality burn away in the profound shock and terror of medieval combat. He lost his joy and he languished under a profound burden of guilt. Rather than being destroyed by this trauma, though, he was gradually transformed. He found himself on a lifelong path of recuperation that staunched his woundedness and that offered others a way of restorative healing.

The path Francis pursued, though, was not primarily a life of psychological wholeness but a radically religious quest, a journey of faithful discipleship, in which his transformation, his new direction, his very salvation hinged on the saving power of God.

The Judeo-Christian tradition holds that God acts in our world, and Francis and his biographers have left us a record of God's active presence and communication in his life.

In addition to the specific accounts we have of these encounters, we can imagine that Francis was shaken from his received understanding of the divine by a series of unexpected shocks that revealed God in a thoroughly new way to him.

The horrifying terror of war and violence ultimately shook him loose from a warrior God—reinforced by the church's teaching and practice of both just war and holy war—and revealed, instead, a God who longs for peace and nonviolence for all beings.

The oppressive guilt flowing from war and violence ultimately shook him loose from the unsatisfiable God of retribution and revealed, instead, a God of unconditional love who forgives without ceasing.

The division at the heart of war and violence ultimately shook him loose from a partisan God and revealed, instead, a God who cherishes and sustains every being.

While Francis likely meditated on these revelations in the silence of the caves above Assisi, they generally came to him, not in detached contemplation, but in the immediacy of battle, sickness, the deterioration of broken-down churches, and the stark suffering of lepers. Each of these experiences revealed for him a God whose power is compassion and mercy, not destruction and revenge.

Francis's journey was illuminated by a succession of insights and decisions to set off in a dramatically new direction.

But he likely experienced these steps of transformation less as the result of his own will and more as an astonished response to the great acts of God—of God's plucking him from the chaos of war; of God's planting a gnawing dissatisfaction in his soul; of God's slowly healing this dissatisfaction; of God's turning Francis definitively from war; of God's presence in the encounter with unnamed leper on a country road; of God's message from the cross in the crumbling church of San Damiano.

God's nonviolent actions— saving, healing, transforming, and deepening the light and spirit of love rather than fear, hate and greed—prepared Francis, in turn, to do likewise.

In enacting peace and nonviolence for the rest of his life, Francis not only spread healing and transformation in many contexts, he re-claimed and revitalized the peace and nonviolence of Jesus for the church and the world.

Shifting from the cultural Christianity in which he had been raised, Francis came to ground his life and work in the depths of Jesus's vision and mission.

Jesus is the revelation of the God of Peace and Nonviolence, the God who longs for the well-being of all, and Francis resolved to imitate him.

He took Jesus's life and example seriously enough to actually try to live as he did. Regarded by some as "the first real Christian in a thousand years" and even somewhat scandalously as an *alter Christus*—"another Christ"—Francis centered his new life on Jesus's words and actions.

As he reported in his *Testament* written shortly before his death, his way was a life lived "according to the form of the Holy Gospel." This simple commitment led Francis to embody many aspects of Jesus's life, including his living declaration of peace, captured in his command to love our enemies, to offer no violent resistance to one who does evil, to become peacemakers, to forgive and to repent, and to be abundantly merciful. Jesus's last command to Peter in the garden of Gethsemane is "put down your sword" and his first words to his disciples after the Resurrection are "peace be with you."

To live the peace and nonviolence of Jesus—especially lived mostly in the world rather than in a hermitage or a monastery—was a startling development, especially in a society where the church and a succession of popes, understood to be God's vicars on earth, waged one war after another.

Francis's very life was an ongoing experiment in Jesus's practice of peace and nonviolence, which, by means of his actions even more than his words, called on the church of his day to re-commit itself to the centrality of Gospel nonviolence. In so doing, he almost single-handedly reawakened what, before Constantine and the Roman Empire's legalization of Christianity, had been the church's default position: a firm stand against killing and violence.

In this class we will explore Francis's pilgrimage of peacemaking—and explore how we, too, can reclaim and recommit to the peace and nonviolence of Jesus that Francis so relentlessly pursued.

Like Pope Francis, each of us can learn from the “poor one of Assisi” to take bold, nonviolent action for a more just, peaceful and sustainable world in our time of immense crisis and opportunity.

[i] Paul Samasumo, “Fr. Orobator: South Sudan’s leaders renewed and committed to peace,” Vatican News, April 2019:
<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/africa/news/2019-04/fr-orobator-south-sudan-s-leaders-renewed-and-committed-to-pea.htm>

[ii] “Salva Kiir: I trembled when the Pope kissed our feet,” *Vatican News*, May 16, 2019:
<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/africa/news/2019-05/salva-kiir-i-trembled-when-the-pope-kissed-our-feet.html>

[iii] Pope Francis visits besieged mosque in Central African Republic, *The Guardian*, November 30, 2015,
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/30/pope-francis-mosque-central-african-republic>