

Catholic Nonviolence Initiative and Catholic Institute for Nonviolence

Select Documents

Synod Study Group Highlights Active Nonviolence as Key Area for Church Discernment

As the Church discerns the path forward, CNI continues advancing the practice of Gospel nonviolence

May 8, 2026

(Rome, May 8, 2026). The General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops has released the “Final Report of Study Group No. 9,” identifying active nonviolence as a significant “emerging issue” for the life and mission of the Church, and referencing the contribution of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative (CNI), a program of Pax Christi International.

The report, part of the broader Synod on Synodality process, proposes new theological and pastoral methodologies for addressing complex questions facing the Church today. Rather than framing such topics as “controversial,” the Synod calls for a shift toward “emerging issues” discerned through listening, dialogue, and shared experience.

Within this framework, active nonviolence is presented as a critical area for ecclesial reflection, especially in light of escalating global conflicts and evolving forms of warfare. The report notes that traditional frameworks such as “just war” are increasingly inadequate in today’s context, where violence extends beyond battlefields into civilian life and is shaped by new technologies and geopolitical complexity. Importantly, the Synod Study Group identifies nonviolence as “crucial” both for its theological relevance to the life of Jesus and for its grounding in decades of practical experience across a global network of organizations.

The report states: “This theme appears in several places within the documents approved by the Synod in 2023 and 2024 and was evoked by Pope Leo XIV from his very first greeting following his election. In wishing the peace of the Risen Christ to the crowd gathered in St. Peter’s Square, he described it as ‘disarmed and disarming’ – an expression that aligns with the logic of nonviolence, further reaffirmed and developed in his message for the World Day of Peace that took place on 1 January 2026” (27).

From Theory to Witness

Rather than offering definitive doctrinal conclusions, the report emphasizes real-world testimony and lived experience as the starting point for discernment. It highlights examples of nonviolent movements—such as the Serbian OTPOR (“Resistance”) movement—that demonstrate how disciplined, strategic nonviolence can lead to meaningful political and social transformation without recourse to violence. OTPOR played a key role in the nonviolent resistance that contributed to the fall of Slobodan Milošević’s regime.

These experiences illuminate a Gospel-centered approach to conflict: not passive resignation, but active resistance rooted in truth, dignity, and the refusal to mirror violence with violence.

A Gospel Call Renewed

Drawing on Scripture and recent papal teaching, the document reinforces the Christian call to confront evil “not with violence nor with passivity, but with the force of good.”

It situates this call within a broader synodal vision of the Church, marked by:

- listening to lived realities, especially in contexts of conflict,
- learning collectively across disciplines and cultures, and
- discerning the action of the Holy Spirit in history.

The report also echoes Pope Leo XIV’s emphasis on a peace that is “disarmed and disarming,” framing nonviolence not as an abstract ideal but as a concrete path for the Church’s mission today.

An Invitation to the Whole Church

Rather than resolving the question of nonviolence, the Synod invites local Churches worldwide to engage in deeper discernment, asking:

- How can Christian communities respond to violence in ways more faithful to the Gospel?
- Where have nonviolent approaches already proven effective?
- What practices can help root out violence and its underlying causes?

These questions signal a broader shift in the Church’s approach: from applying pre-formed answers to walking together in discernment, attentive to both tradition and present realities.

Continuing the Work of Discernment

As the Church moves forward in this synodal process, the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative continues to support communities, theologians, and Church leaders in deepening the understanding and practice of Gospel nonviolence.

Building on its contribution to the Synod, CNI is actively engaged in:

- advancing theological reflection on nonviolence and just peace,
- supporting formation and education within Catholic institutions, and
- accompanying communities in conflict through practical, nonviolent strategies rooted in faith.

In alignment with the Synod’s call to discern “emerging issues” through lived experience, CNI’s global network offers concrete examples of how nonviolence is already being embodied across diverse contexts—from grassroots peacebuilding to pastoral accompaniment in regions affected by violence.

“The Synod’s recognition of active nonviolence affirms what many communities are already living,” said Nicolas Paz, Director of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative. “Our task now is to continue walking with the Church as it discerns how the Gospel call to nonviolence can be lived more fully in today’s world.

Our Catholic Institute for Nonviolence was established for precisely that purpose.”

As the report makes clear, the path forward will not be defined by abstract solutions, but by a Church that listens, learns, and walks together. CNI remains committed to contributing to that journey.

The full “Final Report of Synod Study Group No. 9” is available through the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops.

From Just War to “Unarmed and Disarming Peace”: The Gospel Nonviolence Response

Catholic Institute for Nonviolence

June 23, 2026

As the Consistory [reflects on](#) “how the Church can reaffirm today the overcoming of the theory of the ‘just war,’ too often invoked to justify any war,” [*Magnifica Humanitas* 192], and “what practical paths might help peoples and Christian communities preserve and build peace,” we respectfully offer the following reflections.

Overcoming the Just War Theory

In its final report, Synodal Study Group 9 said, “Since war can no longer be confined to military targets but overflows into civilian life, taking on new forms (hybrid, asymmetrical, etc.), the recourse to frameworks used in the past for legitimate defence – and even more so for ‘just war’ – appears increasingly inadequate.”

For centuries, “just war” theory served an important role in Catholic moral teaching by seeking to limit violence and protect human dignity. Yet contemporary warfare has profoundly altered the conditions under which these criteria were developed. Nuclear weapons, drones, cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence, and hybrid conflicts blur the distinction between combatants and civilians, while generating immense human suffering, mass displacement, environmental destruction, and the constant risk of escalation and even human annihilation.

Even on the rare occasions when a violent conflict appears to satisfy the criterion of *just cause*, the remaining criteria are often unmet, including legitimate authority, right intention, proportionality, reasonable chance of success, public declaration, respect for international law, discrimination between combatants and non-combatants, and accountability for war crimes. They are frequently ignored or rendered ineffective in practice and are, in fact, outside of the real scope, intention, and even cultural framework of most of today's armed conflicts. Success is typically measured without reference to ethical, human, or transcendent values and allusions to the “just war” theory are little more than rhetorical tools used to validate forms of destruction that could never meet criteria for legitimate self defense.

The “just war” theory is grounded in the widespread assumption that effective defense is always militarized. Yet empirical evidence is lacking that war achieves sustainable peace or that military force accomplishes political goals beyond military ones, even though this is the main *a priori* bias of current international decisions on war and peace.

“Far more effective and capable tools” (*Magnifica Humanitas* 192)

The Church has long maintained “the right to self-defense in the strictest sense.” At the same time, recent research demonstrates that many nonviolent practices are effective for prevention of, protection from, and resistance to violence. Examples include nonviolent civil resistance, unarmed peacekeeping, unarmed civilian protection, mediation, trauma healing, restorative justice, civilian-based defence, international

law, war-crimes accountability, humanitarian corridors, sanctuary for refugees, public protest, truth-telling, economic pressure, and interreligious dialogue.

Education about, research on, and investment in a spectrum of nonviolent practices at humanity's disposal have become increasingly urgent. The Catholic Church can play a crucial role in fostering the paradigm shift needed to address current global challenges by overcoming the "just war" theory and reaffirming the centrality of Gospel nonviolence and just peace. (See the recent [National Catholic Reporter](#) editorial on just war.)

Gospel Nonviolence

The Gospel offers the roots for this paradigm shift, presenting the vision of nonviolence centered on the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. As Pope Leo indicates in the [2026 World Day of Peace message](#), the Gospels themselves acknowledge that this path was difficult even for the disciples, yet it remained the path Jesus asked them to follow "[to the end.](#)" In his Urbi et Orbi message on Easter, the Holy Father stressed, "The power with which Christ rose is entirely nonviolent."

Catholic theologians, pastors, and church leaders around the world are calling for Gospel nonviolence to move from the margins to the center of Catholic teaching on war and peace. The XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops affirmed the need for "more reflection and formation in order that we can manage conflicts in a nonviolent way." (See [Managing Conflict in a Nonviolent Way and Nonviolence and Legitimate Self-Defense](#))

Current research and practice demonstrate that active nonviolence is not passive resignation but an effective and realistic strategy for addressing violent conflict at every level of society, including situations where the protection of human dignity requires organized resistance. Synodal Study Group 9, for example, received testimonies from practitioners of active nonviolence and recognized "the fruitfulness of practices such as these, lived out in multiple scenarios."

By recentring Gospel nonviolence at the core of Catholic Social Thought, the Church can offer a credible, hopeful, and prophetic witness. Jesus did not teach his followers how to wage a just war; he taught them how to love their enemies, forgive without limits, and become peacemakers.

In a world scarred by war, violence, and division, Gospel nonviolence offers a powerful witness to Christ's message of love, mercy, reconciliation, and just peace.

At the service of the Church, Pax Christi International's Catholic Institute for Nonviolence exists to make nonviolence research, publications, resources, and experience more accessible to Catholic church leaders, communities, and institutions. It was launched in 2024, with the blessing of Pope Francis. Contact: institute@paxchristi.net.

Catholic Institute for Nonviolence Seminar, June 25, 2026, Rome:

“Answering Pope Leo’s Nonviolent Appeal”: As the Vatican Reconsiders ‘Just War’, International Experts Present Proven Nonviolent Alternatives

As Pope Leo XIV prepares to convene an extraordinary Consistory on overcoming the “just war” framework, leading scholars present evidence that strategic nonviolence and unarmed civilian protection already offer practical alternatives to armed conflict.

(Rome, June 25, 2026) - Against a backdrop of increasing conflict and democratic instability, a panel of leading international scholars convened in Rome today under the direction of the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence (CNI) to present new research showing how nonviolent action can effectively address violence, protect civil liberties, and build sustainable peace.

Hosted at the Regina Mundi Conference Room of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), the seminar “*Answering Pope Leo’s Nonviolent Appeal*,” serves as a direct response to the Holy Father’s urgent call for credible alternatives to the use of armed force. The gathering echoes his mandate that “nonviolence, as a method and a style, must distinguish our decisions, our relationships and our actions” to fundamentally shape global decision-making and human relationships.

The event arrives at a critical moment for the global Church. Tomorrow, Pope Leo XIV will convene an extraordinary Consistory of Cardinals in Rome to deliberate on updating Catholic teaching, specifically focusing on overcoming the traditional framework of “just war” and exploring practical paths to preserve and build peace. The research and expertise presented at today’s seminar are aimed directly at serving this discernment process by providing the concrete, effective proposals currently sought by church leadership.

At a time when armed conflicts have reached their highest levels in decades, and democratic institutions face mounting pressure worldwide, the seminar sought to answer one of the defining questions facing both the Church and the international community: if war is increasingly incapable of delivering lasting peace, what works instead? Moving past abstract theory, the event showcased real-world strategies and rigorous research from three globally recognized peacebuilding and conflict experts:

Dr. Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham from the University of Maryland examined how nonviolence is a sophisticated strategic toolkit with its own logic of power, analyzing the specific conditions under which nonviolent tactics operate effectively in conflict.

“Nonviolent tactics are a powerful tool for social change, especially when they create solidarity across communities,” stated Dr. Cunningham.

Following her presentation, Dr. Jonathan Pinckney from the University of Texas at Dallas introduced new research showing how the inclusive, decentralized practices of nonviolent citizen movements translate into stronger, more resilient post-campaign democratic institutions.

“The data is clear. Nonviolence is by far the best path to build, advance, and protect democracy,” noted Dr. Pinckney.

Concluding the expert panels, Dr. Cécile Dubernet from the Catholic University of Paris provided concrete evidence on Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP), illustrating how local and international civilian-led defense networks offer practical, cost-effective ways to maintain human security in fragile, conflict-affected zones.

“Unarmed civilian peacekeeping works in many difficult circumstances, and this fact alone should compel us to rethink security,” emphasized Dr. Dubernet.

“As democratic institutions face unprecedented strain, we must recognize that people power and nonviolent action are vital to building durable peace,” said Marie Dennis, Co-Director of the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence. “By bringing this research to the heart of Rome, we are showing that a commitment to nonviolence –as urged by Pope Leo XIV– is both a profound moral imperative and an eminently practical strategy for global stability.”

As cardinals gather in Rome in the coming days, the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence hopes that the evidence presented at today's seminar will help shape one of the most consequential conversations in contemporary Catholic social teaching: how the Church can move from limiting war to actively cultivating effective, nonviolent pathways to peace.