

Seminar on Nonviolent Defence: Beyond War and Cycles of Violence

*Remarks by Hardy Merriman
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I want to thank Marie Dennis and Pax Christi International for inviting me here today. I am thrilled by the launch of the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence, and want to express my gratitude to Marie, Ken Butigan, Eli McCarthy, Sister Sheila Kinsey, and so many other people who have had the vision and persistence to make this Institute a reality.

The timing for this Institute could also not be more urgent. As Dr. Maria Stephan said at the Institute's launch event several weeks ago, the world is in a *kairos* moment for this kind of work.

Humanity currently faces multiple crises—including rising authoritarianism, climate change, and escalating violent conflict. These crises can reinforce each other, and each is going to require multiple approaches to address.

The first place we often look for leadership on these matters is governments, which tend to rely on what I call a “top-down” toolbox for handling these international crises. This toolbox consists of five methods that governments can control, which are: diplomacy, trade, aid, sanctions, and military engagement.

Each of these five top-down approaches is an important aspect of engaging in a world of uncertainty. But by themselves, these tools are inadequate to solve any of the three crises I mentioned. If they were able to solve them, they would have done so by now.

So while recognizing that these tools have a role to play, it's critical that we also look for leadership and power in other places. The greatest opportunity in this regard is in

engaging with populations in countries around the world.¹ There are billions of “ordinary” people who want to live in peace, with freedom and dignity, and with a sustainable relationship with the planet. These people are our allies, and they live in every country. They are an enormous source of power.

Research and experience strongly supports the view that the active participation of these populations is essential to advance just peace, human rights and dignity, and ecological balance.²

Now, what can these populations do? In democracies, people have enough freedom to be able to vote, exercise their human rights, access information freely, and use the legal system. This is a great start.

Yet most people don’t live under functioning democratic governments anymore. The world is amidst a well-documented autocratic wave, which has lasted for 18 years so far. During this time, many democracies have backslid or broken down fully into autocracy. In addition, many long-standing autocratic governments such as those in Russia, China, and Iran have become stronger and more coordinated.

To give a sense of the scope of this autocratic wave, the organization Freedom House ranks every country and territory globally on an annual basis. According to Freedom House, in 2005, the percentage of the global population living under democracy was 46%. By 2023, it was only 20%.³

¹ Merriman, Hardy, Patrick Quirk, and Ash Jain. *Fostering a Fourth Democratic Wave: A Playbook for Countering the Authoritarian Threat*. The Atlantic Council and International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. 2023.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Fostering-a-Fourth-Democratic-Wave-A-Playbook-for-Countering-the-Authoritarian-Threat.pdf>

² Merriman, Hardy. *We Need People Power to Address a World in Peril*. ICNC Press. 2023.

<https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/People-Power-to-Address-a-World-in-Peril.pdf>

³ Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict*, Freedom House. 2024.

https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/FIW_2024_DigitalBooklet.pdf

Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2006: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*, Freedom House. 2006.

https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Freedom_in_the_World_2006_complete_book.pdf

Consistent with this finding, the Varieties of Democracy project at University of Gothenburg recently concluded that the average level of freedom experienced by a global citizen in the year 2023 was at the same level it was in the year 1985.⁴

This decline in democracy and resurgence of autocracy portends very badly for humanity. Research provides extensive evidence of the negative effects of autocracy on peace and security, economic and human development, gender equality, climate change, corruption, human rights, international stability, and international migration and refugees.⁵ In contrast, a more democratic world offers a promising path forward on all of these issues. Democracies have flaws, and they are no guarantee against violence and suffering, but autocracies on average are far worse on virtually every measure.

Focusing specifically on peace and security, for example, we know that autocracies are more likely to wage interstate warfare against each other. Autocracies and hybrid regimes are also more likely to devolve into civil war than democracies.⁶ And violent conflict of any kind significantly heightens the risk of atrocities and humanitarian crises.

In the last decade, we're already seeing direct evidence of the relationship of growing autocracy and heightened violent conflict. For example, state-based conflicts have increased considerably. The number of these conflicts worldwide (59 conflicts, affecting

⁴ Nord, Marina, Martin Lundstedt, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Cecilia Borella, Tiago Fernandes, Lisa Gastaldi, Ana Good God, Natalia Natsika, and Staffan I. Lindberg. *Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot*. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute. 2024. p. 6.
https://v-dem.net/documents/44/v-dem_dr2024_highres.pdf

⁵ Albright, Madeleine, Mehdi Jomaa, Ted Piccone, and Cheryl Frank. *Liberal Democracy and the Path to Peace and Security*, Community of Democracies, Institute for Security Studies, and Brookings Institution. 2017.
https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/fp_20170912_liberal_democracy_peace_security.pdf

Papada, Evie, Martin Lundstedt, and Staffan I. Lindberg (2023), *Case for Democracy*, University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute. https://v-dem.net/documents/34/C4DReport_230421.pdf

⁶ Bartusevičius, Henrikas, and Svend Erik Skanning. "Revisiting democratic civil peace: Electoral regimes and civil conflict". *Journal of Peace Research*, 55(5), 2018. pp. 626, 638.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343318765607>

Gleditsch, Kristian Skrede, and Andrea Ruggeri. "Political opportunity structures, democracy, and civil war". *Journal of Peace Research*, 47(3). 2010. p. 300. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310362293>

Hegre, Håvard. (2014). "Democracy and armed conflict". *Journal of Peace Research*, 51(2), p. 160.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343313512852>

Hegre, Håvard, Tanja Ellingsen, Scott Gates, and Nils Petter Gleditsch. (2001, March). "Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816-1992." *American Political Science Review*, 95(1), p. 44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3117627>

34 countries) is now at its highest point since 1946.⁷ And the death tolls are rising. The years 2021, 2022, and 2023 each saw more battlefield deaths than any other year over the previous three decades.⁸

In addition, worldwide violent conflict among *non-state actors*—such as criminal groups, terrorist groups, and paramilitaries—has also increased over the last decade, and now seems to be establishing a new baseline at a far higher level than in the previous decade.⁹ Furthermore, one-sided violence against defenseless civilians has also increased in the current decade, relative to the previous one.¹⁰

The implications of this for peace and security are clear. If we want to defend against armed conflict, and move “beyond war and cycles of violence,” as the title of this panel indicates, we have to organize and take a stand firmly against autocracy. And we have to work in solidarity with people who are demanding democracy and rights against autocrats. As Pope Paul VI advised so clearly: “If you want peace, work for justice.”

But how can we powerfully counter authoritarianism? Fortunately, we have a strong body of research to draw from to answer this question:

The first place we can look is at research about democratic transitions. And here, numerous groundbreaking studies find that popular nonviolent movements are one of the most powerful ways that dictatorship transforms to democracy. Prof. Erica Chenoweth and Dr. Maria Stephan’s groundbreaking research set the standard for this claim, when they evaluated 323 violent and nonviolent movements seeking political transitions between 1900-2006.¹¹ They found that the nonviolent movements achieved their goals 53% of the time, and violent insurgencies achieved their goals only 26% of the time. They also found that this result could not be explained merely by looking at structural factors. For example, nonviolent movements challenged governments that

⁷ Rustad, Siri Aas. “Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2023.” *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO). 2024. p. 8.

https://cdn.cloud.prio.org/files/92a7aad5-3572-4886-9e9c-8aa155f1d0f4/Conflict_Trends-2024_DIGITAL.pdf

⁸ A **state-based conflict** is defined as: “A contested incompatibility over government and/or territory, where at least one party is a state and the use of armed force results in at least 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year.” Some state-based conflicts remain low-intensity, but others can devolve into war, defined as “a conflict or dyad which reaches at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in a calendar year.” Rustad, Siri Aas. “Conflict Trends: A Global Overview”. p. 7.

⁹ Rustad, Siri Aas (2024) “Conflict Trends: A Global Overview”. p. 16.

¹⁰ Rustad, Siri Aas (2024) “Conflict Trends: A Global Overview”. p. 18.

¹¹ Chenoweth, Erica, and Maria J, Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. Columbia University Press. 2011. p. 73.

were just as brutal and powerful as armed insurgencies, and the fact remains that the nonviolent movements achieved their goals twice as often.¹²

In addition, research tells us that political transitions driven by nonviolent movements are much more likely to *consolidate* into democracy than transition driven by other means. This relationship between bottom-up nonviolent pressure and democratic change is one of the strongest and most consistent findings in the field. For example, Chenoweth and Stephan find that five years after a nonviolent movement succeeds, there is a 57% chance of a democratic outcome, compared to only a 6% chance of a democratic outcome when a violent insurgency succeeds in changing a government.¹³

Another study by Adrian Karatnycky and Peter Ackerman finds that transitions driven by nonviolent movements also vastly outperform top down transitions that are driven by elites, and that lack any bottom up pressure.¹⁴

Scholar Jonathan Pinckney launched a broader analysis of this question and found that transitions driven by nonviolent movements result in democracy 74% of the time, compared to only 29% of the time in transitions where there is no nonviolent nonviolent movement.¹⁵

A study by Bayer, Bethke, and Lambach finds that democratic governments resulting from nonviolent movements are also more stable too, and have a median lifespan of 47 years. In contrast, in the rare case that a violent insurgency even results in a democratic government, that democratic government tends to have a median lifespan of only 5 years. Meanwhile, democratic transitions that involve no popular resistance campaign at all (i.e., top-down-driven transitions) yield governments with a median lifespan of 9 years.¹⁶

¹² Chenoweth and Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works*. pp. 62, 66-67.

¹³ Chenoweth and Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works*. pp. 213-5.

¹⁴ Karatnycky, Adrian., and Peter Ackerman. *How freedom is won: From civic resistance to durable democracy*. Freedom House. 2005

<https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/How%20Freedom%20is%20Won.pdf>

¹⁵ Pinckney, Jonathan. *When Civil Resistance Succeeds: Building Democracy After Popular Nonviolent Uprisings*. ICNC Press. 2018. pp. 37, 39.

<https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/When-Civil-Resistance-Succeeds-Pinckney-monograph.pdf>

¹⁶ Bayer, Markus, Felix S. Bethke, and Daniel Lambach. "The democratic dividend of nonviolent resistance". *Journal of Peace Research*, 53(6), 2016. pp. 758–771.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343316658090>

And there's still more to say: Studies find that transitions driven by nonviolent movements are also more likely to increase economic growth, and to result in rebounds in a population's life expectancy.¹⁷

Lastly, transitions driven by nonviolent movements are less likely to result in civil war. Any political transition can heighten civil war risk, but it is documented that the highest risk for civil war is in the ten years following an armed struggle.¹⁸

So the research is quite clear that nonviolent movements are essential drivers of democratic transitions. And when democratic transitions consolidate, they are highly likely to also result in a more just peace, a reduction in violent conflict, lower human suffering, and a better relationship with the planet. Again, democracy by itself is not sufficient to achieve those goals, but it is a necessary precondition for doing so.

What does this mean for today? If nonviolent movements can drive democracy, advance just peace, and reduce violence in the world, we need to figure out how to support them. So what are some practices that the Catholic Church might consider incorporating into their work on nonviolence?

To answer this, we can draw from studies about movements, as well as some history from the Catholic Church itself.

First, there is a lot of experience and research to build from about what works in supporting movements that are advocating for rights, freedom, and justice. It's beyond my time to cite most of it, but let me share a key finding with you. Chenoweth and Stephan did a great study of external support to nonviolent movements that looked at many different kinds of assistance—including funding, public statements of support, training, sanctions against a movement's opponent, and other actions. Their evidence strongly suggests that the most consistently positive form of external support to movements is training on nonviolent action and related topics.¹⁹

¹⁷ Johnstad, Petter Grahl. "Nonviolent democratization: A sensitivity analysis of how transition mode and violence impact the durability of democracy". *Peace & Change*. 2010. pp. 35, 464–482.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2010.00643.x>

Stoddard, Judith. "How do major, violent and nonviolent opposition campaigns, impact predicted life expectancy at birth?" *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 2(2), Art. 37. 2013. pp. 1–11. <http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.bx>

¹⁸ Chenoweth and Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works*. p. 216.

¹⁹ Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. *The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?*. ICNC Press. 2021. pp. 65-7.

In particular, they found that training correlated with movements mobilizing more people. Movements that received training also tended to suffer lower casualties. In addition, training positively correlated with a movement's ability to remain nonviolent, even when the movement faced violent repression. Movements that got training were also more likely to elicit defections from a regime's security forces. And reinforcing all of this, training correlated with higher movement success rates overall.²⁰

These and other findings point to the fact that organizing communities and waging nonviolent action is a skill-based endeavor. And this is good news, because we can take intentional actions to increase people's skills and knowledge on this topic. There can also be a potential role for entities like the Catholic Church in these kinds of efforts.

And if I may take a brief aside, when you think about it, this emphasis on the importance of skills and knowledge is pretty logical. People in virtually every other vocation—such as lawyers, teachers, doctors, engineers, and soldiers—go through a structured process of learning knowledge, which often lasts for years. During this process, people study, have access to educational materials, spend time in class, learn from the latest research, receive mentorship and expert guidance, have opportunities to practice skills, and ultimately they get paid to do their work.

Now, when we look at activists, they have one of the toughest, and most important, jobs in the world. Yet we offer them so little in terms of guidance or structured education to support them in becoming better at what they do.²¹

For this reason, I'm a big advocate for investing in educational infrastructure related to nonviolent action. For example, I think we need more research on topics that are useful to activists. I think there should be much more support for short and long-term educational opportunities on nonviolent action, from trainings, to reading groups, to seminars, to secondary school courses and university programs. And I think there should be more support for producing educational materials—like books, films, podcasts, handbooks, and others. We also need to make sure these educational materials are

https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ICNC_Monograph_External_Support_Poisoned_Chalice_or_Holy_Grail.pdf

²⁰ Chenoweth and Stephan, *The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns*. pp. 65-7.

²¹ Merriman, Hardy. "Sustaining the Field of Civil Resistance". *Minds of the Movement*. June 7, 2023. https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/sustaining-field-of-civil-resistance/

freely available in local languages. My organization has undertaken these kinds of activities for years, and I have seen firsthand the impacts that they have made.²²

Now, as my closing point, I want to mention another source of insights about how to help movements, which directly relates to the Catholic Church. And here, I want to focus on the years from 1974-2006, which was a time of major expansion of democracy around the world. This period has been referred to as the Third Democratic Wave, and during this time, the number of countries that transitioned to democracy was enormous. By 2006, 58% of countries worldwide with populations over 1 million had some form of democratic government.²³

A major analyst of the third democratic wave was the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington. Huntington's writings on this topic are a foundation of democracy scholarship. Huntington identified five major factors that contributed to the first half of the third wave, which was when the majority of countries transitioned to democracy. Huntington identified big factors—like the failure of dictatorships to deliver for their people, and the foreign policy decisions of the United States and other powerful countries.²⁴ But do you know what Huntington lists as his third factor driving this democratic wave? He lists the actions of the Catholic Church.

And I know I don't have a lot of time left to speak right now, so let me just quote Huntington directly here about this. Here he is in 1991, writing about the third wave of democracy:

*The third wave of the 1970s and 1980s was overwhelmingly a Catholic Wave.... Catholic countries were in the lead in every region of the world, and the most Catholic region, Latin America, was the region that democratized most fully. Overall, roughly three-quarters of the countries that transited to democracy between 1974-1989 were Catholic countries.*²⁵

Significantly, Huntington attributes this in part to the Catholic Church itself, stating:

²² International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), <https://nonviolent-conflict.org>

²³ Diamond, Larry. *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency*. Penguin Press. 2019. p. 54.

²⁴ Huntington, Samuel P. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press. 1991. pp. 31-108

²⁵ Huntington, *The Third Wave*. p 76.

In the 1960s, the Church changed. The changes within the Church brought a powerful social institution into opposition to dictatorial regimes, deprived those regimes of whatever legitimacy they might claim from religion, and provided protection, support, resources, and leadership to prodemocratic opposition movements.

Before the mid-1960s, the Catholic Church usually accommodated itself to authoritarian regimes and frequently legitimated them. After the mid-1960s, the Church almost invariably opposed authoritarian regimes; and in some countries, such as Brazil, Chile, the Philippines, Poland, and Central American countries, it played a central role in the efforts to change such regimes.²⁶

Why does Huntington refer to changes in the Catholic Church in the mid-1960s? Because that's the time of the Second Vatican Council, which, among other things, emphasized the responsibility to *"pass moral judgments, even on matters of the political order whenever basic personal rights... make such judgment necessary."*²⁷

Vatican II coincided with changes in attitudes and behavior among priests and laity at the base of the church as well.²⁸ They become more open to activism demanding human rights, mobilizing to advocate for human integrity, and critiquing the status quo, particularly under dictatorships such as in the Philippines, Chile, Argentina, Central America, and Eastern Europe. The church used its structures, local presence, and international reach to legitimate nonviolent action, to provide space for organizing and strategizing, and to help people build skills and knowledge about how to practice nonviolence in pursuit of just peace.

Now let me close with this. The multiple crises of our era—including authoritarianism, climate change, and violent conflict—can feel overwhelming. The weight of these can be downright depressing. And it can feel confusing—where do we even start to address these complex crises?

But there are grounds for hope. The practice of nonviolence—particularly in the form of nonviolent campaigns where people challenge oppression and demand change—have a proven record of success. We also understand these campaigns, and why they and

²⁶ Huntington, *The Third Wave*. p. 77.

²⁷ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* Promulgated by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI, December 7, 1965, as quoted in Huntington, *The Third Wave*. p. 78

²⁸ Huntington, *The Third Wave*. pp. 78-9.

how they succeed, much more now than ever before. I think people like Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. would be amazed today at how far our understanding of this phenomenon has come. It is up to us to take that knowledge and put it into practice. We have to make sure it is available and accessible to people, and we need to seriously consider options to support people around the world as they demand rights, freedom, just peace, and a sustainable relationship with our planet.