

**Pax Christi International’s “Catholic Nonviolence Initiative” (“CNI”)
Gathering in Rome in December, 2022 Brought Together Global Peacebuilders
to Share Insights, Learnings, Stories, Strategies, and Solidarity**

by Mary T. Yelenick¹

I am deeply fortunate and grateful to have participated in the December, 2022 conference in Rome, “Pope Francis, Nonviolence and the Fullness of Pacem in Terris,”² co-sponsored by Pax Christi International’s “Catholic Nonviolence Initiative (“CNI”).³ An impetus for the Rome conference was the conviction that were Pope Francis to issue an encyclical focusing specifically on the power and imperative of nonviolence (a subject addressed to some degree in his earlier encyclicals, including *Laudato Si*⁴ and *Fratelli Tutti*⁵), the impact on global attitudes, beliefs, and practices would be significant. If each of the 1.3 billion Catholics in the world were to become familiar with; persuaded of the critical importance of; and regularly engage in, active nonviolence, our world would be transformed.

Other attendees and reporters have already reported extensively about the Rome conference; I recommend those articles.⁶ The focus of the global gathering was, among other things, to learn more about the nature and impact of nonviolent practices and policies; to share participants’ own experiences with active nonviolence; and to become better educated practitioners and advocates for nonviolence.

Conference attendees hailed from around the globe:⁷ Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Cameroon, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, France, Germany, Guatemala, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria, Palestine, Peru, the Philippines, Romania, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, South Sudan, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States. While participants’ experiences

¹ Pax Christi International’s Main NGO Representative to the United Nations, and member of the International Board of Pax Christi International. Mary was one of the panelists at the December, 2022 Rome Conference (panel photo at https://twitter.com/jasnariogalace/status/1600079934151606272?s=61&t=PjdcnrAy6BJGsOs5iqZQ4w&fbclid=IwAR23cr_3_nhXM9m1Mx46jesRelcTCMvm5pelxILlc7UxFaRkKy4uEgJN5M).

² <https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/pope-francis-nonviolence-and-the-fullness-of-pacem-in-terris>

³ <https://nonviolencejustpeace.net>

⁴ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

⁵ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

⁶ See, e.g., https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/46058?fbclid=IwAR20kJ7pnzM-VMqk0BOACS68OJ6DF6EAE7BRJxM3qEtt7_9jM8OM1E7PuOw (“Independent Catholic News” article); <https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/pope-francis-nonviolence-and-the-fullness-of-pacem-in-terris/> (Catholic Nonviolence Initiative article); <https://paceebene.org/blog/2022/12/14/rome-conference-advances-nonviolence> (Pace e Bene article by Ken Butigan); <https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/guest-voices/new-rome-conference-gospel-nonviolence-could-serve-push-papal-encyclical> (conference attendee Terrence Rhyne’s article in the “National Catholic Reporter”).

⁷ See, e.g., <https://www.aciafrica.org/news/7262/africa-well-represented-in-catholic-non-violence-initiative-on-just-peace-in-rome>

differed, our messages were consistent: active nonviolence is key to the survival of our communities, and of our planet.

Violence is invoked all too readily, by individuals and governments alike, as a quick, unexamined, first response to threatening situations. Yet while such violence may appear initially to cause a cessation of the activity triggering the violent response, it simply lays the groundwork, and creates a justification, for further violence, consigning communities and generations to cycles of retribution and revenge.

By contrast, while active, resolute, creative nonviolence is neither quick nor easy (instead requiring significant time, discipline, fortitude, and patience), research shows that nonviolence is significantly more likely than is violence to lead to a lasting resolution of conflict.⁸

The formal presentations by conference attendees were stimulating and consciousness-raising. Examples of this, for me, included Sr. Nathalie Becquart's⁹ description of Pope Francis's recent process of Synodality as itself representing an exercise in nonviolence. I also found particularly insightful the model presented by nonviolence trainer Kai Brand-Jacobsen:¹⁰ When a society wishes to tackle the problem of illness, it invests significant resources to train doctors to cure and prevent illness. So too, if a society wishes to address the problem of violence, it must similarly invest significant resources to train people in the practice of nonviolence to cure and prevent violence.

The most instructive part of the conference for me occurred in quiet conversations, over meals, with other conference attendees. I heard countless stories about the serious challenges that others confront daily. Yolanda Flores, an Aymara member of Derechos Humanos Y Medio Ambiente ("DHUMA") of Puno, Peru¹¹ detailed the courageous opposition by her community to the mining companies responsible for the poisoning of her Andes community's essential water resources. Fr. Matthew Pagan of South Sudan told stories about his village, where large animals, including lions and elephants, had freely roamed when he was young. In recent years, the stream that had been the source of water for his childhood village had dried up. As a consequence, people from the village now have to walk quite far, to a river, to secure water. So, too, do the animals. Sadly, though, when the animals now seek to drink, the river's steep banks and deeper waters often prevent the larger animals from climbing back up – and so they drown.

One haunting and unforgettable moment for me occurred during the presentation of Sr. Maudilia ("Maudi") Lopez of Ixtahuacan, Guatemala, a leader of Pastoral Defensoras de la Madre Tierra, who described the many ways in which not only extractive industry, but the Catholic Church itself, had violently harmed her community.

⁸ See, e.g., Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan (with whom Pax Christi New York members are familiar) "Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict" (<https://cup.columbia.edu/book/why-civil-resistance-works/9780231156820>).

⁹ Holy See Synod Office, Rome; Under-Secretary of the Synod of Bishops (and the first woman to hold that position).

¹⁰ Senior Researcher, Peace Action, Training and Research Institute of Romania ("PATRIR").

¹¹ <https://terra-justa.org/article/dhuma-receives-letelier-moffitt-international-human-rights-award/>

The land, water, language, bodies, dress, culture, spiritual beliefs, and psyches of the people of her region had been cruelly violated. As she shared with us the pain of the suppression and oppression to which her community has long been subjected, she held gently in her hand a simple clay vase from her community. Suddenly, she threw the graceful vase to the floor, whereupon it shattered into hundreds of pieces. I will never forget the shock of witnessing that act. For the first time, I had a visceral understanding of the violence of the treatment to which so much of the world has been subjected, as a consequence of my own religion, my own nation, and my own consumption patterns.

Sr. Maudi then proceeded to kneel upon the floor and gently and patiently pick up the broken pieces, shard by shard. This, too, we must do, if we are truly to live consistent with our beliefs. We must not only embrace nonviolence in response to others' violence; we must also take affirmative steps to restore the relationships, communities, lives, psyches, resources, and futures of those who, through our own historic violence (both of commission and omission), we have deeply wounded.