A Virtue-Based Just Peace Ethic

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There has been a lot of excellent ecumenical work on a just peace approach to conflict. Yet Glen Stassen’s just peacemaking practices and Maryann Cusimano Love’s just peace principles, as well as most of the just peace literature, would be enhanced by more adequate attention to the role of virtue. Being virtuous means having a set of related virtues and participating in virtuous relationships that enable a person to live and act morally well, not simply to do a morally good act. Following Aquinas and Spohn, I understand virtue as a disposition to act, desire, and feel that involves an exercise of judgment and leads to a recognizable instance of human excellence.

Oriented by the Gospels, a virtue-based approach can help us to focus on developing the character habits of a just peace ethic. Thus, we will be better motivated and prepared to creatively imagine nonviolent ways to transform conflict, to choose, and to sustain those ways through difficult situations. When refined by a virtue-based approach, Stassen’s practices would cultivate the people and society to prevent and transform violence and so strengthen the prevention of war and the capacity to defuse active wars. A virtue-based approach would also prepare us better to orient, apply and develop the just peace principles.

Further, a virtue-based approach will better equip us to transform not only direct violence but also cultural violence. By cultural violence, I mean those aspects of culture that can be used to justify or perpetuate structural or direct violence. In addition, by including Jesus’s virtues we would act more consistently with the call from the

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3 See William Spohn, Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics (New York: Continuum, 2003), 28 and Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, I-II, q. 49, a. 4 and q. 55.
World Council of Churches to “commit to the way of just peace….with our lives” and the call from Vatican II “to strain every muscle as we work for the time when all war can be completely outlawed” (Gaudium et Spes, no. 81).

The importance of virtue is illuminated by the scriptural witness as well. Just peace is rooted in our creation as sacred gifts with immense dignity, in the biblical notion of Shalom: “justice and peace shall embrace” (Psalm 85:10), the Sermon on the Mount, and Catholic social teaching. Shalom and Psalm 85:10 remind us that peace requires justice-making, but also peacemaking is the way to justice, as Pope Francis implied, saying “justice never comes from killing.” This just peace approach is consistent with Gospel nonviolence, and, as Pope Francis said, “True discipleship must embrace Jesus’s teaching about nonviolence.”

The Sermon on the Mount contains the Beatitudes and the transforming initiatives of active nonviolence, such as asserting our dignity and loving enemies. The Beatitudes call each of us to holiness and to a way of life. This includes the virtue of active nonviolence or nonviolent peacemaking, which realizes the goods of conciliatory love that draws enemies toward friendship and of the truth of our ultimate unity and equal dignity. Related virtues include mercy, compassion, empathy, humility, hospitality, solidarity, courage, and justice. Nonviolence helps specify courage as suffering out of reverence for our sacred dignity without killing, which distorts our dignity, and specifies justice as more precisely reflected in restorative justice with regard to conflict. Further, Pope Francis called the Sermon on the Mount the “manual” for peacemaking and challenged political and

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10 This shift of primary understanding of justice is key for better illuminating why killing and war are both inconsistent with and move us away from justice. See Christopher Marshall, Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) and Howard Zehr, The Little Book of Restorative Justice (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2002).
religious leaders to apply the beatitudes in the exercise of their responsibilities.\textsuperscript{11}

A just peace ethic also builds on the current \textit{trajectory} of Catholic social teaching.\textsuperscript{12} For example, Paul VI said the “Church cannot accept violence, especially the force of arms” (\textit{Evangelii Nuntiandi}, no. 37). John Paul II called us “not to follow those who train us in how to kill,”\textsuperscript{13} and, using his thought, the \textit{Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church} calls the church to “reject definitively the idea that justice can be sought through recourse to war” (no. 438). Benedict XVI called “love of enemies the nucleus of the Christian revolution”\textsuperscript{14} and said it is “impossible to interpret Jesus as violent.”\textsuperscript{15} Pope Francis focuses on mercy. He says, “The true force of the Christian is truth and love, which means rejecting all violence, so faith and violence are incompatible,”\textsuperscript{16} “war is the negation of all rights,”\textsuperscript{17} and “always does grave harm to the environment” (\textit{Laudato Si}, ’ no. 57), and “war is


\textsuperscript{13} Pope John Paul II, “Holy Mass in Drogheda: Homily of His Holiness John Paul II,” w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790929_irlanda-dublino-drogheda.html. Yet, in 1993, he did affirm the international “duty to disarm the aggressor” in situations where populations face unjust aggressors. See his “Address of His Holiness John Paul II to the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See,” no. 13, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1993/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19930116_corpo-diplomatico.html. How the aggressor is disarmed becomes the challenge and what role the Catholic Church has in that situation is being worked out.


\textsuperscript{15} Pope Benedict XVI, “Angelus, St. Peter’s Square, Sunday 11 March 2012,” w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20120311.html. Yet he does refer to the emerging principle of responsibility to protect; however, he calls for it to be implemented in “innovative ways.” See his \textit{Caritas in Veritate}, no. 67, and his “Meeting with the Members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization, Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI,” w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080418_un-visit.html.


never a necessity.”

He told us “not to bomb or make war on ISIS;” and “the door is always open to dialogue, even with ISIS.”

FOCUS AND METHOD

In light of this need for integrating virtue, a just peace ethic would offer norms which operate in three distinct, yet overlapping spheres: 1) develop the virtues and skills to engage conflict constructively (jus in conflitctione), 2) practices and transforming initiatives to break cycles of violence (jus ex bello), and 3) ongoing actions and policies to build more sustainable peace (jus ad pacem).

Sphere one, jus in conflitctione, operates at all stages of conflict. In this sphere, the key virtues of active nonviolence, mercy, compassion, empathy, humility, hospitality, solidarity, courage, and justice can help us to focus on developing the character necessary for the practices of a just peace ethic. The virtues help us to better integrate or keep consistent means and ends, what Sawatsky signals as the principle of reflexivity.

As a virtue approach, this goes beyond pacifism, which is often understood as a rule against violence, by challenging us to become better people and societies in engaging conflict. Further, this sphere would include sustaining spiritual disciplines, such as fasting, meditation, and prayer, including a Eucharistic prayer that explicitly names Jesus’s love of enemies and rejection of violence. Training and education in skillsets such as nonviolent communication and resistance, social analysis of root causes, gender and racial analysis, and participatory processes would also be key to develop. Forming nonviolent peacemaking communities, institutions, and cultures would be another norm in this sphere.

Sphere two, jus ex bellum, includes practices and transformative initiatives that would entail both peacebuilding, which is more constructive, and nonviolent resistance, which is more obstructive or

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non-cooperative with injustice. The norms of reflexivity and participation would be particularly important in this sphere. Further, one set of normative practices includes nonviolent direct action such as creative nonviolent resistance to injustice, unarmed civilian protection, and nonviolent civilian-based defense. Nonviolent resistance has worked against ruthless dictators. Research of 320 cases over the last hundred years has proven that nonviolent resistance has been over two times more effective than violent resistance and at least ten times more likely to yield durable democracy. In large part, this is due to nonviolence better humanizing each party, diminishing key sources of power in a regime, and getting broader, more diverse participation.

Another set of normative practices would include conflict transformation which draws adversaries toward partnership and addresses root causes. Conflict transformation includes practices such as acknowledging responsibility for harm, independent initiatives to build trust, identifying the human needs of all actors, trauma-healing, restorative justice, and rebuilding of infrastructure. An additional set of normative practices focuses on significantly reducing weapons and the arms trade toward what Pope Francis called “integral disarmament.”

One particular practice to elaborate on is unarmed civilian protection. This practice is offered by about 43 organizations such as Nonviolent Peaceforce, Christian Peacemaker Teams, Cure Violence, and a Catholic version called Operation Dove. In South Sudan, Nonviolent Peaceforce’s protection, which engages all armed actors, has reduced sexual assaults and rape by armed actors from regularity to zero and has directly saved fourteen people from an armed militia.

24 Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, Why Civilian Resistance Works (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 7 and 213-214. This research focused on cases with political objectives to end a regime, end an occupation, or gain self-determination. Of the three cases given as “successful” violent revolutions that led to basic “durable democracies,” at least two are quite questionable and certainly not promising models. The Bangali campaign in 1971 has had major political corruption, coups, military leaders, etc., for twenty years afterwards. The Jewish resistance in 1948 has certainly still maintained significant habits of violence, both direct and structural (e.g. the occupation of Palestine). The Costa Rica campaign ending in 1948 was quite short and mixed with significant nonviolent action, but, ultimately, they decided to disband their entire military, which still holds today. Thus, “ten times” more likely appears to be an understatement. If we use their data and take out these first two, then it’s more like thirty times more likely.


26 Jim Fair, “Pope Stresses Need to Halt Nuclear Arms,” Zenit, www.zenit.org/articles/pope-stresses-need-to-halt-nuclear-arms/. By “inte-gral disarmament,” the Pope refers to the need for a preceding or simultaneous reduction of “weapons” or a disarming of the heart to enable the reduction of concrete weapons in our world.
attack. When an attack was occurring in a UN protection site and as people were running and being shot, fourteen women and children rushed into a mud hut with two Nonviolent Peaceforce officers. Three different times the armed militia came in demanding the Nonviolent Peaceforce officers leave, but, each time, they refused, saying they were unarmed and non-partisan. Amazingly, these fourteen people survived the attack. Further, both in the U.S. and in other countries, Cure Violence has hired credible neighborhood messengers and interrupters, who have lowered shootings and homicides by 40-70%. In Honduras, they lowered it by 88% in the neighborhoods they work in.

Sphere three, *jus ad pacem*, operates at all stages of conflict. Ongoing actions and policies that would serve as normative guidelines to help build sustainable peace include relationality and reconciliation, sustainability and environmental justice, robust civil society and just governance with a commitment to outlaw war at the UN, dignity and human rights, and an economy with a focus on the marginalized and vulnerable. To implement this ethic, some guiding questions would be: What are the root causes of the conflict? What habits (virtues/vices) are at stake and skillsets needed to transform the conflict? What practices and transforming initiatives could be scaled up to break cycles of violence? What ongoing actions and policies could help build sustainable peace? This ethic calls us to choose actions that enhance or at least do not obstruct the various just peace norms.

By way of example, if we look at Syria, a just peace approach would clarify the root causes of the conflict and suggest some of the following transformative initiatives. Being attentive to the virtue of active nonviolence which calls us to humanize all parties, we would exercise humanizing rhetoric towards all and reduce cultural marginalization to defuse the violence and see more clearly the path toward just peace. In accord with participation, we would focus on

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27 One of the NP officers said, “If we had a gun, we would’ve been shot immediately; so without arms we can find other ways,” www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=9&v=_WcFwpcIMcE.


29 Relationality and reconciliation refers to actions that invite, create, strengthen and heal relationships in ever-wider (horizontal) and deeper (vertical) directions across social spaces.

30 This would call us to action that contributes to the long-term well-being of people, non-human animals, and the environment.

31 Human dignity calls for action that is consistent with and improves appreciation for the equal dignity of all people, including adversaries, by ensuring human rights and cultivating empathy for all actors.
inclusive diplomacy which attempts to include all, not just some key stake holders, both armed and unarmed, both elite and civil society.

We would increase funding for peacebuilding, such as building up local, nonviolent civil society organizations, particularly led by women, and offer creative forms of trauma-healing and nonviolent civil resistance. For example, Jesuit Refugee Services offers trauma-healing, which prevents young men from joining the civil war.\(^{32}\) Trauma-healing is not just vital for youth, but especially for those who influence persons in political negotiations or those directly involved in such negotiations, as well as armed actors. Examples of nonviolent resistance against ISIS include: Muslim leaders encircled a sacred site in Mosul which prevented ISIS from destroying it; a Muslim woman marched to ISIS headquarters thirty straight days demanding release of political prisoners as they put a gun to her head and spit on her, yet many joined her and they got some prisoners released in Raqqa; local

businesses went on strike in Aleppo, slowed down the operations of ISIS and got electricity restored.  

Economic pressure would be applied on all armed actors fueling the flames of war, such as those buying oil from ISIS. Rather than ad hoc attempts, a coordinated strategy would be developed for using credible messengers to entice defections from armed groups, such as ISIS. Further, we would promote a significant reduction in the flow of arms. It is notable that 92% of civilians in Syria who lived in ISIS territory opposed the U.S.-led bombing and 56% opposed it in Iraq. Reportedly, we killed at least 9,000 civilians in our “liberation” bombing of Mosul.

In such violent situations, particularly those of mass atrocities, what might be the role of the Church? To answer this, we should recall the mission of the Church is to draw people to a loving relationship with God by illuminating God’s way in the person of Jesus. This calls the Church to be a sacrament of our ultimate unity as children of God and with all creation. Hence, Cardinal Turkson said “all killing is fratricide” or the killing of a close family member, and said that no war was “morally good.” Using a pastoral approach, the Church would focus on the responsibility to accompany, especially those in danger, and to support creative nonviolent resistance initiatives. If governments or the UN decide, based on international law, for military action in such genuine atrocity cases, the Church’s role is to insist that the answer is not war or killing but protection and transformation. Any protection effort must be consistent with the norms and the larger goal of just peace, must address key human needs of all actors, including

34 Srdja Popovic and Raphael Mimoun, “How to Beat the Islamic State through Nonviolence,” Foreign Policy, foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/14/how-to-beat-the-islamic-state-through-non-violence/.
adversaries, and must promote the welfare of the entire human community, including those in adversary nations. Focusing on a just peace moral framework and drawing the broader society and governments toward that framework will likely better enable these commitments.

Further, the Church would name the atrocities and the violent response of military action as a tragedy or, as the World Council of Churches stated, “a failure and obstacle on the way of just peace.” The Church would also signal that it is inconsistent with human dignity and a culture of human rights for all as Pope John Paul said “violence is evil” and it “violates our dignity.” The Church does not need to and should not provide explicit justification or signal legitimation for violent responses, including lethal force, either before or during hostilities. Yet, when the level of dehumanization is so high, what is necessary is ultimately more creativity and willingness to risk one’s life, without killing, for the sake of the dignity of all people. The Church’s role is to keep a just peace ethic front and center. Thus, the Church would not be abandoning the responsibility to protect. It is shifting the focus on how we might protect communities and to methods that better ensure sustainable transformation of the conflict. The just peace ethic would likely better enable us to protect all life but even more so illuminate the sacred dignity of all persons and creation.

Overall, a virtue-based just peace ethic better enables us to transform conflict by addressing the personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions. In turn, it enables us to not only address direct violence, such as killing, but also structural violence and cultural violence. This ethic is less likely to cultivate the structural violence of massive preparations for war, which also divert needed resources. It would better prevent the unhealthy habits formed by preparing and engaging in war. We may know that soldiers are intentionally trained to de-humanize their adversary, that thirty-three percent of U.S. soldiers have developed mental health issues, and compared to the civilian population that they are two to three times more likely to commit sexual assault, domestic violence, and suicide. Further, this

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39 For some of these needs, see Center for Nonviolent Communication, “Needs Inventory,” www.cnvc.org/Training/needs-inventory.

40 World Council of Churches, Ecumenical Call to Just Peace. Acknowledging the authority of the UN and international law, they say “as Christians we feel obliged to go further” and “challenge any theological or other justifications for use of military power and to consider reliance on the concept of ‘just war’ and its customary use to be obsolete.”


43 Matthew Hoh, “13,000 More Names to the List,” Huffington Post, www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-hoh/13000-more-names-to-the-
ethic has less risk of abuse compared to other predominant frameworks and is less likely to get us stuck in vicious cycles of violence.

The just peace ethic will better help us to imagine, develop, and commit to nonviolent practices, while cultivating just peace consistently throughout all stages of conflict. Thus, it will better form us as peacemakers. For example, we spend little if any time trying to imagine how to humanize or illuminate the dignity of our enemies. Also, we rarely hear U.S. religious and political leaders speak about or promote nonviolent resistance, especially boycotts, strikes, and civil disobedience. Therefore, a just peace ethic is more likely to actually prevent, limit, and move us toward outlawing war. Finally, the just peace ethic better builds sustainable peace and is more clearly consistent with Jesus’s call to love the way he loved us.45

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44 For example, see R. Delahunty, “From Just War to False Peace,” Chicago Journal of International Law 13, no. 1 (2012): 1-45. This article shows that consistent abuse can be traced from Cicero and the Roman Empire (7-10), through medieval times with the popes and Crusades (12-13), the years of conquest in the “New World” (14-15), and the modern period with the “sovereign state” logic of war (16-17). Even Hugo Grotius acknowledged that “just war theory contributes to the likelihood and ferocity of war” (19). For other resources to look at this issue during the twentieth century, see Johan Verstraeten, “The Just War Tradition and Peace Thinking 1914-1964,” in From Just War to Just Peace: Catholics between Militarism and Pacifism in Historical-Theological Perspective, ed. Roger Burggraef (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 1993), and Jonathan Glover, Humanity. A Moral History of the Twentieth Century (London: Pimlico, 2001).