

For Now We See in a Mirror, Dimly

An Anti-Racist Critique of
Pax Christi USA's Theology & Practice of Nonviolence

by Tom Cordaro
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a Pax Christi USA resource for small group discussion

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Dear friends,

The following critique was written by Tom Cordaro, a member of the Pax Christi Anti-Racism Team and a Pax Christi USA Ambassador of Peace. Tom has served as the chair of Pax Christi USA's National Council, as a staff member, and as a local group and regional leader. This critique was originally divided into five sections and serialized weekly for the Bread for the Journey blog on the Pax Christi USA website during the summer of 2012. This version has been reformatted to serve as a resource for small groups.

Reflection questions have been designed for small group discussion by the Pax Christi Anti-Racism Team and are posted at the end of each section. The material in the article should make for interesting and provocative discussion with Pax Christi groups around the nation. Local group leaders might want to consider using the article for reflection and study as part of their regular meeting. Regional leaders may want to incorporate the article into their newsletters, for discussion at a regional event, or for commenting over regional email lists and blogs/websites.

We're interested in hearing your responses to Tom's article. Please consider posting comments on the website in the comments area after each section of the article. Additionally, Tom welcomes direct feedback and can be reached at cordarotom@gmail.com.

In peace.

*Johnny Zokovitch
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PART ONE: Introduction, Reexamining Assumptions, and Acknowledging Our Social Location

“For we know only in part and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.” (1 Corinthians 13: 9-12)

Introduction

I have been involved in faith-based nonviolent peace and justice work for over 33 years, and I have been active in Pax Christi USA for 23 of those years. I have participated in and organized nonviolent direct action campaigns at the local, regional, national and international levels, and I have spoken and written about nonviolent direct action on behalf of peace with justice throughout this time. I have done all of these things as a white, male, middle-class, well-educated, U.S. citizen with all of the privileges and entitlements that this social location confers upon me—including my sense of racial superiority. (Most of which were unacknowledged for the majority of my life and all of which I still struggle mightily to remain aware of in my peace and justice work.)

As a member of Pax Christi USA, the predominantly white faith-based peace and justice movement in the Catholic Church, I am thankful for the consciousness-raising we have accomplished by emphasizing the important role of nonviolent peacemaking in Catholic social teaching. In many ways we have succeeded in moving nonviolent peacemaking into the mainstream of Catholic social thought and have made concepts like Catholic conscientious objection a legitimate expression of our Catholic faith. Catholics are well represented in all fields of nonviolent peacemaking and conflict resolution, and some Catholic colleges and universities now offer degrees in nonviolent peacemaking. Catholics in predominantly white parishes and in religious communities have received religious formation in the ways of peace because of the work of the Catholic peace movement, and some Catholics increasingly feel called to participate in nonviolent direct action as a part of their religious calling. In short, the impact of the white faith-based peace and justice movement in the Catholic Church of the United States has been impressive.

At the same time, predominantly white peace groups, like Pax Christi USA, have come to the realization that many important voices have been left out of the conversation about what it means to engage in the nonviolent struggle for peace with justice as part of the peace movement. The stories and wisdom of our brothers and sisters of color have not always been heard—this is especially true for communities of color here in the United States.

Unfortunately many in the white peace movement have become comfortable with speaking and acting on behalf of people of color without always being accountable to people of color. This is often done when white peace activists assume that the way they frame issues of violence and injustice are supported by people of color. And we have so thoroughly colonized the language, theology, spirituality and praxis of nonviolent peacemaking in the U.S. Catholic Church that most of the struggles for peace with justice in this country being led by people of color are not even considered to be a part of the peace movement. This perception is not only held by many white members of the peace movement but

is often held by many people of color who tirelessly work to end violence and who struggle for justice in their local communities but do not identify with the peace agenda of groups like Pax Christi USA.

In an effort to change this dynamic, Pax Christi USA, through its national leadership, began a 20-year initiative to dismantle all institutional, cultural and theological barriers to achieving the goal of transforming Pax Christi USA into an anti-racist, multi-cultural Catholic movement for peace with justice. One important aspect of this work is uncovering the way unacknowledged white power and privilege impacts the way Pax Christi lives out its core charisms and values.

The anti-racism challenge facing Pax Christi USA is this: in the coming decades, the Catholic Church in the United States will become predominantly people of color. How can an organization that is more than 90% white call itself a national Catholic organization? How can Pax Christi give witness to the “Peace of Christ” if it does not look like the Body of Christ? Can a predominantly white middle class organization *accurately* read the signs of the times; *prophetically* speak on behalf of the poor and oppressed; and *effectively* engage in the struggle for peace with justice? Can any organization that is over 90% white transform itself into an anti-racist, multi-cultural organization? Pax Christi’s anti-racism initiative is an attempt to address these questions and I believe the answers given will determine the future viability of the movement.

The Need to Reexamine Assumptions

Pax Christi has already begun to make some changes in its institutional policies and procedures that have excluded or marginalized people of color in the organization. In many respects these kinds of changes are easier to address because they are easy to identify and progress can be measured. The much more difficult challenge is identifying the way white Pax Christi culture excludes and marginalizes people of color. And the difficulty with examining white Pax Christi culture, like any dominant culture, is that we often don’t view this culture as a white way of thinking, believing or doing peace work; we think of it as normative—“This is just the way peace work is done.”

White Pax Christi culture includes many different aspects that need to be reexamined in light of its anti-racism commitment. But for the purpose of this paper, I want to focus on some of the theology and praxis of nonviolence contained in white Pax Christi culture. In doing so, I do not mean to suggest that the theological contributions and praxis of nonviolence articulated by white Catholic peacemakers is of no value; on the contrary, these contributions have been of enormous value. What I am saying is that these are particular contributions and beliefs about nonviolence but they do not represent the totality of what it means to be a nonviolent peace activist. And if Pax Christi truly wishes to create an anti-racist, multi-cultural Catholic movement for peace with justice, the organization will need to become more conscious of how this particular way of thinking and doing nonviolent peace and justice work marginalizes the unique gifts and perspectives that people of color can bring to Pax Christi’s understanding and practice of nonviolent peacemaking.

It is my hope that this paper might serve as a starting point in an ongoing conversation about these issues. As a white, male, middle class peace activist, I understand how white power and privilege can cloud my thinking about nonviolent peace and justice work. Because of this limitation, I have availed

myself of the analysis done by Miguel A. De La Torre in his book, *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking*.^[i] While his book is directed to social ethicists, I believe that De La Torre's work provides useful insights that have helped challenge and clarify some of my own thinking. There are other voices that also need to be added to this conversation (especially the voices of women and other people of color.)

Acknowledgement of Social Location

In reviewing my own writing on nonviolence and some of the resources produced by Pax Christi over the years, I find that in many cases there is little or no attention by the authors of their social location or the social location of their intended audience. In other words, we often think, pray, study and act without inviting our members to be clear about their own social context, i.e. their religion, class, race, nationality, education, age, gender and sexual orientation. I emphasize this not as an attempt to enforce some kind of political correctness on white people; nor am I attempting to play the "race card" or the "gender card" or any other card. I believe that attention to social location is a crucial discipline that can mitigate the temptation of asserting our white understanding of nonviolent peacemaking as being normative (applicable and true in every context), instead of being a particular understanding (a product of our own social context).

Being attentive to our social location can also keep us more humble in our sweeping declarations about nonviolence. Our willingness to acknowledge our social location when engaging in nonviolent peacemaking can deepen our awareness of the way social, political and economic power and privilege impacts the way we see, judge and act. As writers like De La Torre point out, "The view of the ethical landscape from the pedestal of privilege is radically different than the view from the depths of disenfranchisement."^[ii]

The lack of attention to social location by many white Pax Christi folks makes it easier to assume solidarity with the poor and oppressed based on superficial markers like political ideology or attitudes about the institutional Church. At the same time our failure to fully acknowledge our social location makes it much harder to engage in critical self-evaluation of our work and makes it more likely that we will fall into the trap of speaking and acting on behalf of the poor and oppressed without being accountable to them.

We often talk about nonviolence without referencing how we live at the heart of empire and benefit daily from the systemic and institutional violence against the poor who are primarily people of color. For instance, our principle resource on nonviolent peacemaking, *The Way of Peace: Exploring Nonviolence for the 21st Century*^[iii], does not invite participants to explore or acknowledge their own social location as they learn about nonviolent peacemaking. As De La Torre points out, regarding to Euroamerican ethicists, "True, they may have challenged the empire, critiqued the empire and even called for profound reform, but in the final analysis, they contributed to the undergirding racial and ethnic assumptions that provided justification for the empire because they failed to recognize their complicity with the overarching power structures that make empire possible."^[iv]

Without a clear acknowledgement of our social location, we might be tempted to embrace an analysis of oppression that focuses exclusively on the violence, marginalization and disenfranchisement inflicted upon the oppressed without adequately addressing how these various forms of oppression benefit most Pax Christi USA members. This kind of limited power analysis often leads to the kinds of “solutions” offered by the dominant culture; solutions that focus primarily on “fixing” the victims of oppression while requiring little or nothing from those who benefit from oppressive systems. As De La Torre points out in his critique of Eurocentric social ethicists, “The ultimate failure of these ethicists, as well as those ethicists or scholars who uncritically subscribe to the dominant culture’s worldview, is that they have refused to do a serious power analysis and to locate themselves within the prevailing power structures.”^[v]

We white faith-based peace and justice activists are keenly aware of being “outsiders” in the institutional Church and of being “marginalized” within the dominant political discourse. But if we are not clear about the ways we are still privileged in the social order, it can become easy to conflate the marginalization we feel as white middle class peace activists with the lethal marginalization experienced every day by the economically poor and politically and socially oppressed.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR PART ONE

1. Why do you think it is important that Pax Christi USA transform itself into an anti-racist, multi-cultural Catholic movement for peace with justice? What gives you hope that this is possible? What are some of your doubts? How do you think Pax Christi USA might go about transforming itself into an anti-racist, multi-cultural peace movement for peace with justice?
2. It has been said that trying to understand how our social location impacts the way we pray, study and act for peace is like trying to explain water to a fish. Why do you think it is important to always be attentive to the way our race, class, gender and sexual orientation influence our understanding of important principles like nonviolence, justice and peace?
3. Do you think there is such a thing as “white Pax Christi culture?” If so, how would you describe it?

^[i] *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking*, by Miguel A. De La Torre, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas, 2010

^[ii] *ibid*, Preface, p. X

^[iii] *The Way of Peace: Exploring Nonviolence for the 21st Century*, by Shannon McManimon, et al, Pax Christi USA, Erie, PA, 2003

^[iv] *ibid*, page 5

^[v] *ibid*, page 31

PART TWO: Nonviolence as Individual Inner Disposition

Most of the “suffering” of white, liberal, middle-class activists is in the form of emotional frustration, alienation, spiritual despair, hopelessness, and a sense of political marginalization. This limited experience of suffering sometimes impacts the way we frame our thinking about nonviolence—emphasizing the “spirituality” of nonviolence over the political, social, and economic praxis of nonviolence. Is there a danger that this internalized spirituality of nonviolence, in the hands of those privileged by race, class, gender and sexual orientation, might easily become disconnected from the revolutionary struggle for justice and social transformation? Does this lack of clarity regarding our own social location, along with the temptation to conflate our own internal sense of marginalization with the lethal forms of oppression experienced by the poor and people of color, lead to a theology of nonviolence that centers primarily on our individual inner disposition? While Pax Christi publications clearly point out the importance of active and politically-engaged nonviolence, the starting point is always the individual’s inner disposition: “To understand how nonviolence can play out in our lives, it may help to envision ourselves at the center of several concentric circles. First, we encounter violence within ourselves: our desires, self-image, attitudes (some created by our surroundings and culture).”^[ii]

As the Pax Christi USA Statement of Purpose describes its peacemaking efforts: “This work begins in personal life and extends to communities of reflection and action to transform structures of society.”^[iii] A look at the Table of Contents of one of Pax Christi’s most popular publications, *A New Moment: An Invitation to Nonviolence*, reveals the following nine chapter titles (out of a total of twelve):

- Three: To Strive for Peace Within Myself
- Four: To Seek to Be a Peacemaker in My Daily Life
- Five: To Accept Suffering Rather Than Inflict It
- Six: To Refuse to Retaliate
- Seven: To Persevere in Nonviolence of Tongue and Heart
- Eight: To Live Conscientiously and Simply
- Nine: To Actively Resist Evil
- Ten: To Work Nonviolently to Abolish War and the Causes of War from my Heart and from the Face of the Earth
- Eleven: Disarming the Heart – Personal Testimonies.”^[iiii]

If the starting point is an individual’s internal attitudes, disposition and vision, then one’s moral reflection on nonviolent peacemaking will often begin with abstract concepts, ideas and/or theology. As author Miguel De La Torre points out, “Generally speaking, Euroamerican ethicists usually begin with some type of ‘truth’ claim based on some doctrine, biblical passage, church teaching, spiritual revelation or rational analysis. From this ‘truth’ they determine that an action is required, usually an individual act of piety. The emphasis is on possessing the ‘truth’, having the right doctrine.”^[iv]

The presupposition embodied in this kind of approach is that good actions will flow from the individual’s internalized commitment to the virtue of nonviolence. But as De La Torre points out, “For Hispanics ethics can never be reduced to individual traits, for no matter how personal we wish to make ethics; it

always has a collective dimension. ... the practice of virtue by an individual creates a false sense of righteousness.”¹⁴ Can starting from an abstract moral principle of nonviolence also create a feedback loop, making it easier to internalize the principle primarily as an expression of individual virtue or personal character?

Another problem with starting from an abstract principle or “truth,” like nonviolence, is that it can produce nonviolent practitioners who are more concerned with defending the right way of thinking than with trying to do the right thing. It can also lead to embracing abstract absolutes regarding our beliefs about nonviolence which often get expressed in dualistic “either/or” language with little room for the “both/and” ambiguity that is common to the messiness of life.

One example from my own experience when I worked at the Pax Christi USA National Office was our struggle to respond to the 1992 U.S. military intervention in Somalia. During the Cold War, Pax Christi always rejected the use of military force under any circumstance. But in 1992, with the Cold War over, a new concept began to take shape in foreign affairs—humanitarian military intervention.

At that time, deteriorating security prevented the UN mission from delivering food and supplies to starving Somalis as warlords fought each other for control of the country and the central government was unable to function. Relief flights were looted upon landing, food convoys were hijacked, and aid workers assaulted. The UN appealed to its members to provide military forces to assist the humanitarian operation. With only weeks left in his term as president, President George H.W. Bush responded to the UN request, proposing that U.S. combat troops secure the environment for relief operations. On December 5, 1992 the UN accepted his offer, and Bush ordered 25,000 U.S. troops into Somalia.

At this time our National Coordinator was out of the country and I was given the task of serving as the point person to address any issues that might come up in her absence. In the days leading up to the the U.S. military intervention in Somalia, our office was contacted by a number of Catholic and secular media outlets asking for our position. In addition many of our members were also asking for guidance. In response, I called the staff together to get input on a draft press statement addressing the crisis in Somalia. The discussion was animated and the staff was fully engaged in the complexities and nuances of all the issues involved. Points and counter-points were offered but there was no clear consensus about what we should say.

In an effort to refocus the discussion, I described our task in this way: “I want us to draft a statement that any of us would feel comfortable reading to a Somali mother holding her starving child at one of these UN feeding centers.” That reframing of the task changed the dynamics of our discussion. Within hours we were able to draft a statement that was later edited and approved by the National Council Chairperson and Bishop President.

The statement began with an admission that in spite of our efforts to create nonviolent international mechanisms to address humanitarian crises like the one occurring in Somalia, no viable nonviolent peace force currently existed to intervene in Somalia. Given this failure we proposed a short-term response (that a UN-led military force—not led by the U.S.—be used to insure food gets to the Somali people); we proposed a mid-term response (that a UN-sponsored peace process in Somalia be established using

traditional tribal structures as a way of bypassing the warlords who were responsible for most of the violence); and we proposed a long-term response (that the UN, with U.S. leadership, take up then Secretary General Boutros-Ghali's proposals calling for Preventative Diplomacy as a way of addressing conflicts between nations and inside nations before they became violent.)

I don't think anyone on the staff was thrilled with this statement. It lacked all the clarity of vision and strong moral certitude that characterized our past statements on U.S. military intervention. This statement was much more modest and morally messy. But what surprised me more than anything was the strong reaction we got from some of our pacifist members. They let us know how frustrated and disappointed they were that we did not condemn this military intervention on principle. They felt we had damaged the nonviolent witness of our movement by not rejecting all military intervention. The teachings of Jesus and the principles of nonviolence were clear: violence and the threat of violence are always wrong, and violent means (military force) can never be justified by humanitarian ends (feeding starving people.)

Although I cannot know for certain, it seemed to me then, as it does now, that my pacifist friends who objected to our statement and the staff who developed this statement had different starting points and goals. The starting point for our staff was the Somali mother trying to comfort her starving child and our primary goal was to address her needs. I believe my pacifist brothers' and sisters' starting point was an abstract moral principle about nonviolence and their primary goal was defending this principle in the public arena.

De La Torre points out that for the Latina/o community the starting point is always the lived experience of the community. The emphasis is on orthopraxy (right doing) over orthodoxy (right thinking). The challenge De La Torre poses to social ethicists is the same for Pax Christi in its articulation and praxis of nonviolence, "How can we best capture the ambiguity of a Latina/o moral agency that recognizes the need at times to dispense with personal piety for the sake of the greater good of survival—survival of not just the individual Hispanic, but more importantly, *la comunidad*?"^[vii]

Should military interventions to stop humanitarian crises in places like Somalia, Rwanda, Kosovo, Darfur, the Congo and other places around the world move us beyond either/or thinking in our advocacy and practice of nonviolent peacemaking? While it is important to stress that military intervention is no solution to the many conflicts raging around the world, isn't it also important to make sure we speak and act in a way that responds to and is accountable to the most vulnerable and weakest victims of the violence we oppose? And that we put their needs above our own desire to defend abstract doctrines and dogmas about nonviolence?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR PART TWO

1. When considering the appropriate nonviolent response to the suffering of the oppressed, where do you start your discernment: with a clear commitment to principle, with the specific circumstances of those who are suffering, or with some combination of factors? What are the essential values that need to be embraced in our efforts to nonviolently respond to the suffering of the oppressed?

2. How did you come to embrace your commitment to nonviolence? Did it come about through reflection on personal experiences of violence in your life? Or was it the result of theological reflection and social analysis of violence you observed or read about? How might these different starting points produce different understandings of nonviolence?

[i] [ibid](#), page 48

[ii] [Pax Christi USA Membership Brochure](#)

[iii] [A New Moment: An Invitation to Nonviolence](#), compiled by Erie Benedictines for Peace, Pax Christi USA, Erie, PA 1986

[iv] [Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking](#), by Miguel A. De La Torre, Baylor University Press, WacoTexas, 2010, page 83

[v] [ibid](#), pages 28-29

[vi] [ibid](#), page 23

PART THREE: Nonviolence and the Language of Disempowerment

This internalized spirituality expounded by white middle class peacemakers often gets expressed in the language of relinquishment; giving up or abandoning a position of advantage or power. This is an important virtue for those who are the beneficiaries of social, political and economic power and privilege, but very problematic for those who are marginalized, oppressed and disenfranchised.

If we look at the language used in the [Pax Christi USA Vow of Nonviolence](#), the first thing we notice is that it is written for individuals acting apart from any community. There is no commitment or vow to be engaged in nonviolence as a community nor are there any promises to be accountable to any community. This is one characteristic of white power and privilege: white people do not have to be accountable to community in order to thrive; alternately people of color have to be accountable to their community in order to survive.

The other thing we notice about the language of this vow is the emphasis on being non-confrontational. The vow talks about “striving for peace within myself,” “accepting suffering rather than inflicting it,” “refusing to retaliate” and “persevering in nonviolent tongue and heart.” Even though the vow includes “actively resisting evil” the focus is first “from my own heart” and vaguely “from the face of the earth.”

Many oppressed people and people of color embrace nonviolent struggle as a means of empowerment, not simply as a palliative to ease their internal moral struggles or to avoid conflict. For a people suffering racism, sexism and oppression of every kind, there is little appetite for “accepting suffering.” For those who are marginalized and silenced by the institutions of power and privilege, the call of a predominantly white organization to persevere in nonviolent tongue and heart can easily be interpreted as a call to keep quiet and don’t make waves. And a white peace movement’s call to refuse to retaliate in the face of provocation can be interpreted by those who face discrimination every day of their lives as a call to stay in their place.

For people who are already marginalized and oppressed, this language of disempowerment and individualism is not often received as good news. And when it comes from a white organization that speaks and acts without acknowledging its own position of power and privilege and can choose when to suffer indignity and when it will not, it can easily be interpreted as just another tool of control. It is hard to imagine that a vow like this would become widely used in communities of color who are actively engaged in the struggle for peace with justice.

What if, instead of a “Vow of Nonviolence,” Pax Christi propagated a “Vow of Nonviolent Struggle for Peace with Justice”? What if the vow called on people to first commit themselves to nonviolently struggle for justice as members of a community that is accountable to the poor and oppressed—starting where they live? What if instead of vowing to accept suffering we vowed to nonviolently resist all violence and oppression even at personal cost? What if instead of refusing to retaliate in the face of provocation we vowed to speak and act nonviolently in defense of the powerless in the face of any and all provocation? What if instead of vowing to strive for peace within ourselves, we vowed to never become complacent in the face of injustice, that we pledge to always acknowledge and repent of our

own complicity in injustice, that we always keep our hearts open to the suffering of others, and that we always be ready to comfort the afflicted and nonviolently afflict the comfortable?

The truth is that as white, middle class, well-educated Americans, most Pax Christi members have little “skin” in the game. This makes most of our peace work an optional extra-curricular activity. At anytime we choose, we can opt out of the struggle and retreat to the comforts afforded us because of our social location. For the poor, the truly marginalized and for people of color, the struggle for justice and peace is not an optional activity—it is critical to their survival.

De La Torre talks about how important the concept of struggle, *la lucha*, is for the Latina/o Community. La lucha for survival not only describes their social location, “it also provides the means by which Latina/os develop their world view, learn to maneuver among the consequences of ethnic discrimination and begin to construct a more liberative understanding of themselves. ... la lucha becomes a struggle toward a revolutionary restructuring of how power is presently distributed and how knowledge is constructed.”

Can the nonviolence articulated by Pax Christi ever be attractive to the Latina/o community if it is not expressed in the language of struggle, survival and liberation in the context of community? Again, De La Torre argues, “It is crucial to note that la lucha for survival is not an individual quest. ... Contrary to the salient individualistic motif among Euroamericans, Hispanic religious thought attempts to be communal.”

Along with the calls to accept suffering, not to retaliate with violence and to live more simply, the popular Pax Christi prayer card, *Disarm the Heart, Disarm the Nations*, asks God to “Disarm my heart and I shall be your instrument to disarm other hearts.” But if the primary source of violence for Pax Christi members and others is in their hearts, how can liberation be anything other than freedom from personal sin? De La Torre insists that Christ as liberator moves the Latina/o community beyond the narrow constructs of liberation from personal sin. “The Christ of Hispanics is just as concerned with the sins of the entire community, specifically of those within the dominant culture, whose sins wreak chaos and havoc upon the lives of those forced to reside on the margins.”

As part of this dominant culture, Pax Christi’s call for disarming the heart may not be embraced by communities of color unless it is explicitly tied to a commitment to be in accountable relationships with marginalized and oppressed communities struggling for survival, dignity, justice and liberation. Accountable relationships are distinct from many of the coalitions and collaborations between white progressive organizations and organizations of color. Sometimes in mixed-race coalitions and collaborations, people of color are treated as junior partners or window-dressing while the real power and decision-making remains in the hands of the white folks.

Accountable relationships, on the other hand, signify a different kind of dynamic. More than just treating people of color as equals in our work, being in accountable relationships means that, because of the persistent legacy of white supremacy and privilege in our culture (even in our white peace movement culture), we create mechanisms that allow people of color to exercise a preferential option in our decision-making process.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR PART THREE

1. Do you think the refusal to accept suffering is contrary to the principle of nonviolence? Why might the call to accept suffering be problematic for people who suffer injustice, humiliation or marginalization?
2. What do you think of the author's alternative "Vow of Nonviolent Struggle for Peace with Justice?" Would you be willing to take such a pledge? Why or why not?
3. In order to insure that our peace and justice work truly serves those who are oppressed, the author emphasizes the need to be in accountable relationships with communities of color, especially where we live. Do you think this is necessary in order to be faithful to the Gospel call to nonviolence? What are some of the challenges facing local Pax Christi groups in forging these kinds of accountable relationships?

PART FOUR: Nonviolent Civil Disobedience and the Theology of Unaccountability

Probably one of the most unacknowledged forms of power and privilege in white faith-based peace and justice groups like Pax Christi is the perpetuation of a theology of unaccountability under the guise of being “faithful.” Far too often we use one-liners like, “We are called to be faithful not effective,” as a mechanism to excuse ourselves from being accountable for what we do.

There is an important truth in the idea that faithfulness to the gospel should not be measured by the dominant culture’s idea of “success.” It is also true that in justice work we do not often see any immediate positive results from our work. However, far too often white liberal peace activists use this simple truth to shield themselves from having to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. It is a way of acting in the world that makes it easy to cultivate spiritual individualism (I decide/my group decides what it means to be faithful) and autonomy (I act/my group acts out of my/our personal call from God) over the needs of those who suffer the violence we oppose and without accountability to those for whom we seek to speak and act. It is a form of being in control while feigning a commitment to following God’s call. It is a luxury afforded to those who want to be taken seriously as a follower of the nonviolent Jesus without having to answer to anyone.

This is especially a problem in relationship to the practice of nonviolent civil disobedience in the white peace movement. Although few would openly admit it, there is a hierarchy of authenticity and commitment in the white peace movement that is based on one’s arrest record and time served on behalf of peace with justice. These resumes of courage separate those who are serious about peace from those who are just spectators, second stringers and/or members of the chorus. And this makes perfect sense within a culture of white power and privilege that prizes the heroic action of the individual over the more mundane work of community.

It is not true that every white person who engages in nonviolent civil disobedience is seeking glory or individual recognition; in fact most do not. It is more likely that the reinforcement of this hierarchy of authenticity is driven by those who admire and raise up these heroic individuals for recognition and adulation. For a white community that has little or no direct experience of oppression or violence, the witness of fellow members putting themselves at risk of arrest, police abuse and prison would seem to demonstrate the highest forms of solidarity with the poor and oppressed.

But of course, in most circumstances, the experience of white middle class peace activists in the criminal justice system is not the same as the experience of people of color who encounter this same system. I have spent less than 3 months total time in jails and prisons for my own nonviolent civil disobedience, but I can say that in each and every experience my white power and privilege gave me protection, benefits and special treatment in the criminal justice system that were not available to my brothers and sisters of color.

Because of this special treatment by the criminal justice system and because most white peace activists engage in nonviolent civil disobedience to make injustice visible and to demonstrate their solidarity with the victims of injustice, their nonviolent tactics may differ from people of color. As De La Torre explains, “Because Hispanics realize that direct challenges to existing social structures (although necessary at

times) will usually lead to violence against them, if not their demise, they employ forms of deceptive and cunning resistance, whereby their chances of success could be improved.”

These forms of deception and cunning might include seeking to avoid arrest for their civil resistance. White nonviolent activists want to get arrested in order to use the court system (and accompanying press coverage) to shed more light on the injustice they oppose. People of color are much more interested in continuing the struggle of resistance (live to fight another day) because they know the court system is stacked against them and no one in the media will care about another person of color going to jail. White nonviolent activists are often content with making a symbolic statement with their nonviolent civil disobedience. People of color often engage in nonviolent direct action as part of a wider struggle to protect the rights and human dignity of their communities. Effectiveness is optional for the white nonviolent resister, but it is crucial for the survival of the nonviolent resister of color and their community.

Can the white peace movement make allowances for nonviolent acts of resistance that are “deceptive and cunning” towards the institutions and systems of oppression? De La Torre talks about the importance of civil initiative as opposed to civil disobedience. Civil initiative is the legal right and moral responsibility to protect the community from violations of human rights by the government or institutions protected by the government. It is grounded in an ethics of communal liberation. As De La Torre writes, “Euroamericans enjoy the privilege of driving to a march. To get arrested for some movement earns them a badge of honor. But for disenfranchised communities, arrest is a frequent risk of living as a person of color. There is no need to go out and seek direct confrontation with the authorities just for the sake of seeking confrontation, to prove how liberal we are. Confrontation is the possible consequence of engaging in liberative ethics, but we do not seek it. Why? Because confrontation takes the focus and resources away from the disenfranchised and places them with those seeking to prove their activism.”

If the primary focus and goal of nonviolent civil initiative is the liberation of oppressed communities, then the crucial test of authenticity for those engaged in nonviolent direct action (including civil disobedience) is whether they are accountable to the oppressed communities with whom they seek to be in solidarity. In my own experiences of discerning, planning and participating in nonviolent civil disobedience, I confess that I made little effort to be accountable to any community outside of my own collective of co-conspirators. In almost every circumstance the entire process was a matter of individual choice.

How can we insure that our nonviolent actions are genuinely focused on the liberation of oppressed communities and not just a reflection of our individualistic culture or a manifestation of liberal white power and privilege? Is it enough to simply ask for the approval of the folks who visit our soup kitchens or who stay at our shelters and houses of hospitality? (Can people over whom we have such power really feel free to be honest with us?) Have we established the kind of honest and open relationships with the leaders of oppressed, marginalized and disenfranchised communities where we live to be truly accountable to them? When we do seek input from these community leaders do we genuinely invite them to participate in our discernment process or do we just seek their blessing?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR PART FOUR

1. Make a list of individuals your peace and justice work is meant to help (i.e. Name a person on death row you hope to save by your efforts to end the death penalty; name an Afghan child, family or village that motivates your work to end the war in Afghanistan , etc.) How might these individuals respond if you were to tell them that it is more important for you to be faithful than to be effective?
2. How can we make sure that our nonviolent direct action for the sake of peace with justice is directly tied to the liberation of oppression communities where we live? Why is this so important?

PART FIVE: Solidarity without Giving Up Control, and a Conclusion

Sometimes white folks can give the appearance of following the lead of communities of color while still remaining in control. One way this can be done is by selectively working with communities that are not in a position to hold us accountable. One of the biggest ironies in the U.S. white peace movement over the past 30 years is that often more time and resources were spent building relationships of solidarity with communities of color in the Third World than were invested in fostering solidarity with communities of color in the cities where we live.

In some ways the distance provided by these Third World solidarity campaigns allowed white activists to stay in control of their level of accountability, commitment and most importantly to stay in control of the shaping of the agenda for the solidarity work once they returned home. Could it be that one reason why white peace activists preferred Third World communities of color is that many of these communities were so grateful for the attention and concern from white American activists, that they were careful not to challenge their white allies too much?

De La Torre also points out that there is a strong temptation, common among white peace activists, of confusing the Latin American social location with the U.S. Latino/a social location. This can lead some Latin American solidarity activists to conflate the experiences of Latin American communities with the experiences of the various Latina/o communities inside the United States. As De La Torre points out, “To look to Latin America to be the voice of U.S. Hispanics is to contribute to the continuing invisibility of the latter.”^[1]

The safety of distance and the assumption of good intentions afforded to white activists who participate in solidarity campaigns with Third World communities of color may be difficult to duplicate when white activists move into accountable relationships with communities of color where they live. In many of these communities, there is a long history of well-intentioned white folks who say they will stay in the struggle but in fact were only passing through. Part of white privilege and entitlement is having the option of taking up the cause of oppressed communities when it is in our interest (or for as long as we are interested) and then move on to something else when it is not. People of color do not have this luxury. White folks can walk away from the struggle, people of color cannot. Because of this there is a lot of distrust to overcome and good intentions will not always be assumed. And for those oppressed and marginalized communities living on the wrong side of our hometowns, it is much easier to see how the institutions and systems that oppress them also afford privileges and entitlements to their white liberal peace movement neighbors. (For instance, can they travel to the neighborhoods where their white allies live without being stopped by the local police?)

Building accountable relationships with communities of color can deepen and challenge the way we think about nonviolence. But the fruitfulness of these relationships will, to a great extent, depend on whether they will be based on more than a common political agenda and whether they can move beyond a provider-client power dynamic. If our relationships with communities of color are driven solely by an agenda of issues or by a desire to serve “the less fortunate,” it will become easier to shield

ourselves from any challenges to our abstract concepts and absolute moral principles regarding nonviolence.

Indigenous Australian artist and activist Lila Watson advises, “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time; but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”^[ii] As an alternative to an issues-driven relationship with communities of color, De La Torre writes about an ethics of *lo cotidiano*, which can be understood as the everyday—the daily relationships that become the basis of social relationships. As he points out, “The trials and tribulations of Hispanics struggling for their humanity and dignity become the starting point for any type of indigenous Latino/a ethical framework. ... Ethics for Hispanics can be done only with one’s feet firmly planted on the concrete sidewalks of the barrios.”^[iii]

Genuine solidarity built on accountable relationships with communities of color is not only the morally right thing to do. It is also critical to the white peace movement’s ability to read the signs of the times—to understand our world and where God is at work within it. As Ched Myers reminds us in his book, *Who Will Roll Away the Stone? Discipleship Queries for First World Christians*^[iv], if the Gospel teaches us anything, it teaches that the truth of things is better perceived from the margins of power, not at the center. For white middle class liberal peace activists who reside at the center of privilege and power in the American Empire, it is almost impossible to see the truth of things on our own. Not only is it difficult to see the truth of things, it is also difficult to shape a nonviolent revolutionary struggle to dismantle this system of power and privilege on our own. As De La Torre makes clear, “An ethics that upsets the prevailing social order designed to maintain empire is an ethics that can arise only from the margins of society, from those who are disillusioned and frustrated with normative Eurocentric values and virtues.”^[v]

Conclusion

It is my hope that this reflection will serve as a useful contribution to the exploration of the ways white power and privilege influence the way the predominantly white faith-based peace movement prays, studies and acts on the call to nonviolence. Some may think my observations are over-stated or lack the proper nuance. Others might identify additional ways white power and privilege are exercised in the theology and practice of nonviolence. Still others might discount all or part of my analysis. All of these responses are welcomed and encouraged. Most importantly, the wisdom and experience of other people of color – particularly from the African-American, Asian-American, Native American and other communities of color, as well as from women of all races, are needed in order to produce a more complete and fruitful analysis of these issues.

To my white brothers and sisters:

For some of you, my words might seem harsh and judgmental. If so, please forgive me. It is not my intent to judge anyone; instead I am completely committed to do whatever I can to make the faith-based peace and justice movement more than any of us can imagine. In order to move from the center of power and privilege to the margins, I am convinced that there is much that will need to die in our

theology and praxis of nonviolence in order to make room for what is waiting to be born. This will take a great deal of courage but I believe that most white peacemakers are ready to make the journey.

Some of you might find my use of the adjective “white” in describing the peace movement and the theology and praxis of nonviolence as grating on your sensibilities. For some this may be the first time you have ever encountered terms like “white peace movement,” “white activists,” or “white nonviolence.” Some of you may feel frustrated, “Can’t we get beyond race? After all, aren’t we all after the same thing?” It might be tempting to take a non-racial approach to nonviolence, but for white people who often are unaware of the way white power and privilege limits our ability to see the truth of things, it is urgent that we embrace new identities by becoming anti-racist nonviolent peacemakers. It is critical that we break free of the delusion that our way of thinking, praying and acting for nonviolent change is normative. Without this fundamental understanding, we may see little value in what people of color can teach us about peacemaking and we may be unable to fully benefit from their unique wisdom and experience about the nonviolent struggle for justice and peace.

A reflection of the type I have offered is, by necessity, based on generalizations. This means that the observations I make are not true for every white person. The important thing is to identify those things that elicit the strongest reactions in you; these are the areas that will be most fruitful for you to think and pray about individually and collectively. But if you find that none of these observations applies to you, please let the rest of us know how you have been able to overcome the obstacles of white power and privilege in your theology and practice of nonviolence. You may have much to teach us.

To my brothers and sisters of color:

In my ten years as a member of the Pax Christi USA Anti-Racism Team^[vi] and through the many relationships I have forged through my involvement with Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing & Training,^[vii] I have benefited tremendously from the patient, confrontational, loving support of sisters and brothers of color who have opened my eyes, my heart and my mind to the ways that white power and privilege have hindered my work for peace with justice. I am eternally grateful for their willingness to work with me and teach me, even when, time after time, I continue to fall back into my old ways of thinking and doing peace work. I am often amazed they don’t just walk away and conclude that I am a hopeless cause.

There are a thousand legitimate reasons why people of color, who tirelessly struggle for justice and an end to violence, would have little interest in engaging in this effort to understand how white power and privilege in the faith-based peace movement gets expressed in the theology and practice of nonviolence. This is not a line of inquiry that will win you praise or support in much of the white peace movement. Why alienate potential allies by going to a place that is charged with so much emotion and that is so much a part of white peace movement identity? A cost-benefit analysis might lead you to believe that opening this Pandora’s Box is not worth the cost and, to be perfectly honest, you might be right.

But for those who are willing to take up this challenge, the potential pay-off could be enormous. If we could fulfill the vision of Dr. King to create a unified movement to end militarism, racism and poverty (and if King were alive today he might add environmental destruction), we could effectively challenge

the power of the corporate elites and their handmaidens in government, the media and on Wall Street. It is clear that working separately in our own narrowly defined areas of concern will not get us to the Promised Land. Moving out of our designated political space comes with risks but it was a risk that Dr. King was willing to take when he opposed the war in Vietnam (some civil rights leaders felt that the anti-war and civil rights movements should be kept separate) and when he began organizing the Poor People's Campaign before he was murdered (some civil rights supporters wanted to limit the struggle to political rights and not talk about the concept of economic rights).

And finally, to my Catholic sisters and brothers of color who have struggled for justice, dignity and an end to violence, I want to offer my sincere apologies for the many ways I discounted your work by declaring that your struggle for the sake of the gospel was really not a part of the Catholic peace movement; that because your focus and methods didn't conform to my understanding of what it means to do peace work, you were not a part of the peace movement. Looking back now on what I used to say ("People of color are too busy with their own issues to work on peace") and how I used to think ("Only people like us, who have the economic security to move beyond the daily struggle for survival, can do the work of international peacemaking and opposing U.S. military interventions"), I confess to an appalling sense of arrogance and presumption.

And it is in this spirit that I urge you to think of Pax Christi USA as an organization that belongs as much to you as it does to any white Catholic peace activist. Pax Christi USA claims a national Catholic identity and any Catholic who can embrace our statement of purpose is entitled to not only become a member but to form their own local groups and work on issues of justice and peace that are important to their local community. You don't have to ask for permission to become a registered member; you don't need to be approved or even welcomed. As you know from your own tireless efforts to make the Catholic Church in the United States more accountable to people of color, your involvement with Pax Christi will not be easy. But this Catholic movement for peace with justice is your birthright as a baptized Catholic; claim it as your own, make it your own and know that there are white allies in Pax Christi who stand ready to walk with you and to learn from you.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR PART FIVE

1. Do you agree that it is often easier to do solidarity work with poor communities of color in other countries than it is to do solidarity work with poor communities of color where we live? Why or why not? How much of your resources (time and money) is spent on advocacy and solidarity with communities of color in foreign countries versus your resource commitment to communities of color where you live? What does your resource commitment say about your understanding of solidarity and the option for the poor?

2. What do you think of the author's assertion that "For white middle class liberal peace activists who reside at the center of privilege and power in the American Empire, it is almost impossible to see the truth of things on our own. Not only is it difficult to see the truth of things, it is also difficult to shape a nonviolent revolutionary struggle to dismantle this system of power and privilege on our own."

3. In the author's concluding words "To my white brothers and sisters," and "To my brothers and sisters of color" what do you find most challenging?

[i] [ibid](#), page 60

[ii] This quote has served as a motto for many activist groups in Australia and elsewhere, including [United Students Against Sweatshops](#). A possible origin for the quote is a speech given by Watson at the 1985 [United Nations](#) Decade for Women Conference in [Nairobi](#). Watson has said of this quote that she was "not comfortable being credited for something that had been born of a collective process" and prefers that it be credited to "Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, 1970s"

[iii] *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking*, by Miguel A. De La Torre, Baylor University Press, WacoTexas, 2010, pages 70-71

[iv] *Who Will Roll Away the Stone? Discipleship Queries for First World Christians*, by Ched Myers, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 1994

[v] *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking*, by Miguel A. De La Torre, Baylor University Press, WacoTexas, 2010, page 94

[vi] Pax Christi USA Anti-Racism Team is a racially diverse group of people committed to seeing the transformation of Pax Christi USA into an anti-racist, multicultural movement for peace and justice. It provides workshops for Pax Christi regions and groups throughout the nation, helping the movement to develop a common analysis of racism that will help Pax Christi USA to move forward in dismantling racism in our movement and in our world. www.paxchristiusa.org/about/pax-christi-anti-racism-team

[vii] Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing & Training organizes to dismantle institutional racism by identifying structures that maintain systemic racism and inequality, and replacing them with new structures that are liberating, life giving and just. www.crossroadsantiracism.org