

# **The Spirituality of Nonviolence as Prophetic Witness for Universal Communion: Mission in Conflict Zones and Healing**

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## **Introduction**

The time is now for cultivating a vibrant spiritual path of nonviolence for the sake of the world. Jesus accompanies us on the way to discovering and deepening our understanding of who we are. On this journey we are guided by a compass that helps us recognize and experience where God's grace and mercy is with us. We acknowledge the importance of being persons of integrity, as we become aware of the practice of nonviolence. Such a connection to our interior is evident in our conscious prayer, contemplative spirit, and sacred actions. Each of us has a unique purpose for being here and who we are is formed in our relationship to God, ourselves, in solidarity with our brothers and sisters and all of creation.

A compass is a vital image that helps us navigate the path for searching this way. For more than twenty-five years, the compass has been a symbol for a process which I have developed called Integrity for Nonviolence® (IFN). I began to develop this initiative when I was a counselor for victims/survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse. It was important to support and sustain their confidence that nonviolence can counter the violence in their lives. A compass provides a viable guide for the right direction when it is firmly oriented to a true North of ethical sensibility. The process of IFN contains four values like the directional points of a compass: creating respect, practicing honesty, promoting justice, and nurturing wholesome relationships.

In Pope Francis's [\*Catechesis on Discernment: October 12, 2022\*](#), he wrote of desire as a longing within our hearts to follow the path of Jesus and to bring grace and healing into our own lives and the lives of others. He chose the compass as a metaphor for this deep spiritual longing present within all of us as we seek God's grace. The compass guides us, shows us where we are, where we have been, and where we are going. It keeps us true to the righteous path to mercy and fulfillment. Our desire to understand is based on our longing for that spiritual light that shines deeply into the core of our being. It cannot be extinguished in the face of difficulties or setbacks, but continues to shine within us, leading us on our path to God.

The conscious practice of nonviolence through integrity prepares us to be open to the movement of the Spirit wherever we have the opportunity to confront the devastating effects of violence in the woundedness found in creation. It offers an alternative spiritual path instead of the existing unhealthy patterns that have led to violence. This direction provides balance, centering us in prayer and discernment while also moving us to engage others. In the long-term, work on issues related to violence, we attend to healing and a better way forward. We come to our social justice and peace actions with a receptive and prayerful spirit for a dialogue that nourishes the choice of social justice actions based on nonviolence, mercy, and cooperation. By turning away from conflict and greed and attending to compassionate responses, we develop a discerning heart of what is ours to do.

We are exploring the Spirituality of Nonviolence within the context of being a Prophetic witness for universal communion, as a *Mission in conflict zones and healing*. On this path we have signposts for reflective pauses to consider the challenges of prophetic witness, the importance of our personal background, significance of our religious communities and services, and our outreach work in the world, and finally a time to engage in the personal stories of the experience of God. With Jesus, the process of IFN will be a guiding compass in our work.

## Context: Prophetic witness

In [\*Laudato Si'\*](#), Pope Francis reminds us of the importance to have a world view in which *"...creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into a universal communion."* (LS 76). We are responsible to take these words into our heart and determine how to live by them. Pope Francis describes the prophets as being attuned to the needs of the times and reminds us to recognize when political agendas and passage of policies need *"suitable mechanisms for oversight, periodic review and penalties in cases of non-compliance"*. (LS 167)

In his deeply moving message subtitled "Nonviolence – A Style of Politics for Peace", Pope Francis made an important statement on nonviolence. *"I would like to reflect on nonviolence as a style of politics for peace. I ask God to help all of us to cultivate nonviolence in our most personal thoughts and values. May charity and nonviolence govern how we treat each other as individuals, within society and in international life."* ([Fiftieth World Day of Peace, January 2017](#))

In his message, Pope Francis calls us to follow our path in *Laudato Si'*: *"By developing our individual, God-given capacities an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world's problems and in offering ourselves to God"* (LS 220).

We are called to protect God's handiwork and to accept the serious, but loving, responsibility for the care of all of creation. We are to be prophets who realize that *"Christ's message must truly penetrate and possess the preacher, not just intellectually but in his entire being."* ([Evangelii Gaudium](#) 151). To be authentic we need to be persons of prayer to reflect and to be enriched by the biblical spiritual tradition. We can find guidance in the "Little Way" of St. Therese who shows how to do ordinary things with extraordinary love.

St. Thérèse embraced her limitations: *"I must bear with myself such as I am with all my imperfections."* (Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, C IX). She knew that God did not want grand gestures and so committed herself with confidence and the full service of her heart because: *"God requires you only to demonstrate your good will"* (St. Thérèse of Lisieux, The Little Way). We can follow her example of humility and devotion by setting aside unrealistic notions. Pope Francis repeats her request of us: *"...to practice the little way of love, not to miss out on a kind word, a smile or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship. An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation, and selfishness."* (LS 230)

Nonviolence is a spirituality, a way of life, that calls for the conversion at the core of the Gospel and thus at the heart of the life and mission, and Church. Grounded in this foundation of Christian faith and in light of the global crisis of violence confronting our planet, through integrating all of these aspects, our integrity becomes a compelling witness to the authenticity of our message to build peace.

## The Importance of Personal Background

Reflecting on our stories provides insights as to who we are and what we are called to do. It also helps us see the interconnectivity of our actions rather than disconnected things we do. I am sharing my background to hopefully stimulate relevant memories for you as well. It is said that St. Teresa of Ávila wrote her autobiography on her knees because she realized that God was as active in her life as in the lives of the people in the scripture stories. In journaling we have the opportunity of reinterpreting our stories and weaving interconnections.

Where does my story begin? *When I was 4 years old, I was out walking with my dad when a father of a friend of mine approached us. He was gripping a four-inch razor strap and was looking for his son. I told him that I didn't know where he was. When he left, I told my dad he was going to beat my friend and asked if he could live with us. That would be impossible, my dad said, we cannot interfere with families. When I said this was not fair, my dad encouraged me to become educated and do something about this type of problem. I said that I would do so. My friend was beaten, and I only saw him just before the family moved. I was deeply saddened by this experience, and I was determined to do something about abuse when I was older.*

As a religious I became a teacher in the United States when we were mandated reporters of child abuse. A young victim of incest confided in me about an incident, which I reported. But since there were no safeguards for the child, she did not feel safe enough and declined to pursue the report. I was deeply troubled by this. Later, when I was working as a school principal, I helped the Public Aid Office, which was designated to handle such cases, develop a very simple reporting format for abuse.

I went on to become involved in the areas of domestic violence and sexual assault in both emergency and long-term shelter services. My responsibilities included rescuing victims on street corners, meeting them in hospitals, and counseling, as well as public presentations and developing training programs for police officers, health care personnel, counselors, and our volunteers. I was involved in several collaborative efforts to change civil and criminal laws to better promote the safety and well-being of victims and families.

When I was in a diocesan department of religious education, I was called to two abuse situations regarding a parish school and a high school of a religious congregation. Both persons, in trusted positions, were convicted of their offences. Even though I assisted with communications, had the legal information shared from the States Attorney, and solicited counseling services, I felt a deep lingering pain. I only helped bring a brief resolution to these devastating experiences. The religious community was also questioning themselves as to how this could have happened to people in their care: *"What could we have done to prevent this?"*

It was during this experience that I realized the importance of dealing with the spiritual issues of abuse. I went on to further study and to write my doctoral dissertation *Truth and Compassion: Faith Sharing Groups for Victims of Domestic Violence*. Since this was a ministry program, I also involved the counselors and survivors of the domestic violence program. The agreed upon topics were explored through a storytelling format. These areas included: Experience of God, Spirituality, Meaning in our Lives, Suffering, Freedom, and Wholeness. The image of wisdom was very prevalent in this work as a strong feminine image for the experience of compassion and development of truth.

Because of my diocesan background and religious studies, I was asked to teach the doctrine section of the lay ministry program. Using the topics mentioned above, this was a way of reflectively integrating their personal experience with the themes of the program. Everyone has had experiences of abuse, either personally or have known of others in their lives.

At the public presentations concerning the recognition and needs of victims of abuse, the participants also asked for guidance themselves because of the violence in our society. This moved me to work on developing applications based upon the experiences of the shelter for the general audiences. IFN was then created to develop the skills to maintain a nonviolent place

focused on the four directional values, which would help support a healthy life and provide coping skills for vulnerable people impacted by abuse.

### **Nonviolence Applications: Religious communities and ministries**

In the synodal summary report it was recognized that *“There is a need to develop a more profound understanding of how consecrated life, as well as lay associations, ecclesial movements, and new communities, place their charisms at the service of communion and mission in local churches, augmenting existing paths towards holiness with a presence that is prophetic.”* (S.10 Consecrated Life and Lay Associations and Movements: A Charismatic Sign Matters for Consideration)

Our charisms are reflected in the spirituality of our founders and foundresses. For my order, our foundress developed our way of life following the spirituality of St. Francis. Drawing on the spirit of our charisms and the missions of our organizations we are able to promote important changes. Through the articulation and reflection on our charism we become centered in the way we act.

These values of nonviolence are transversal for cultivating our spiritual journeys and for our workplaces. Our Sisters and associates committed to the establishment of a Nonviolent Zone. A sign calling for peace to all who entered was placed at the entrance to the campus, blessing all who entered and left the motherhouse property. The values of nonviolence were included in employment expectations for everyone, and behaviors are posted on the website. Our healthcare and affordable housing services won more than 30 awards recognizing their care of creation. Our campus has responded to the call of the Laudato Si’ Action Platform and is alive with beehives, a migratory stop for monarch butterflies, native prairie grasses, a reflective garden, and a peace path.

The practice of nonviolence is a path of spirituality that shows us a way to put God’s love into action. This path allows us to create a way of life guided by sound judgements based on a practice of contemplation. Following this way we inspire by example, showing the way to others. This practice develops through the fruitfulness of contemplative prayer. In Tomas Halik’s book, *Touch the Wounds*, he quotes Hans Urs von Balthasar with this remarkable sentence: *“Whoever does not come to know the face of God in contemplation will not recognize it in action, even when it reveals itself to him in the face of the oppressed and humiliated.”* Halik states: *“There is one fundamental characteristic of actions that grow out of contemplation, and that is nonviolence.”*

It is through our efforts in prayer and meditation where we strive to be open to God’s gift of contemplation. Contemplative prayer, according to St. Teresa of Ávila, *“is nothing else then a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.”* Contemplation is an act of love. It is not a difficult journey, because we desire God and God desires us. To prepare ourselves for this gift from God, we must be open and ready. We must create a place within ourselves so that we may hear and accept the quiet strength which only comes in the receptive stillness of a state of contemplation.

As a Franciscan, I recognize how St. Francis was exceptionally creative and visionary in his ways of looking at everyday life. Walking in his footsteps, we can approach the great challenges of our age. We bring his creative vision to our reality to Earth, to the chaos around us, to our reverence for life and our struggle for justice and peace.

St. Francis understood the power of words to help create peace. As he later testified, he learned a greeting of this sort by the Lord's revelation: *"May the Lord give you peace!"* In all his preaching he greeted people at the beginning of his sermon with a proclamation of peace. The peace desired for Assisi could be found in the hearts of the citizens. They were asked to receive this peace and have it dwell in their hearts and share it with others.

### **Integrity for Nonviolence: Applications for our Outreach Mission to The World**

IFN can be used with many programs and events for integral development of individual and group capabilities and experiences, resulting in personal and systemic change. This was especially evident in USG-UISG JPIC programs and in [Sowing Hope for the Planet](#) which has promoted the Laudato Si' Action Platform. In this IFN process we become conscious of *what* we say and *how* we live in a way that supports, builds up and challenges each other to be our authentic selves and to work with care and confidence. Our concern extends to all of creation. In our integrity we are in touch with the purpose for which we are here and, in that place, where we are alone with God. The voice of God echoes here calling us to love and to do what is right. ([Gaudium et spes](#) 16)

We can look to the insightful work of [Mary Lippitt, Ph.D.](#), on the aspects of conscious change. For conscious change it is important to substantiate, correlate, and integrate five areas: vision, skills, incentives, resources, and action. All of these areas need to be addressed so we may act from a place of integrity. When one element is missing, the results are imbalanced. Without a clear vision, the result is confusion. Without the necessary skills, we create anxiety. If there is no incentive to change, then the change will be slow and not necessarily the change wanted. If there are inadequate resources to support change, then we become frustrated. Without a well thought out plan of action, there will be false starts and constructive change will not occur. We need to be who we are in relation to the truth of ourselves.

Halik also wrote that *"The perfection that we are called on to seek in the Old and New Testaments is a matter not of flawlessness but of integrity, wholeness"* and that *"The first thing that God wants of us when he grants us the grace to see our wounds... is to accept them and be capable of saying "yes"."* Pope Francis reiterates this concept in *Laudato Si'* when he reminds us that *"Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it."* (LS 19) They are calling us to find God's strength within us and to act upon it as we work towards healing ourselves and those we encounter.

### **Dialogue in the Spirit of Integrity for Nonviolence**

IFN has a deep and practical understanding of the strength of dialogue. Integrity means that we build on the dignity of the human person. Nonviolence requires such a reverence that first seeks to do no harm in the dialogue. We seek to build up others in a way that challenges them to be their best self with caring confidence.

In our efforts to accept a role in healing and reconciliation we-remember the wisdom of Pope Francis: *"Reconciliation is a personal act, and no one can impose it upon an entire society, however great the need to foster it."* ([Fratelli Tutti](#) 246) and that *"Authentic reconciliation does not flee from conflict, but is achieved in conflict, resolving it through dialogue and open, honest, and patient negotiation."* (FT 244)

The IFN process engages compassionate communication to overcome the barriers to healthy dialogue, sharing of ideas, and collaborating on solutions. As a systemic process it includes four values with inherent actions: Creating respect, practicing honesty, promoting justice, and nurturing wholesome relationships.

**Creating respect** recognizes the dignity of each of us and sustains a non-threatening place. Honoring the dignity begins by listening to understand where we are in the given situation. Non-threatening indicates establishing a protected place and space where we are enabled to let go of fears that are physical and personal. Such an environment is safe and sustainable.

**Practicing honesty** entails truthful communication and the freedom to discover our true self. Accurate and meaningful information is available without deceptive consequences. By walking in the truth, we are free to discover our skills, talents, and unique gifts of who we are. We are encouraged to know our reason for being and our purpose in this life.

**Promoting justice** interconnects accountability and responsibility, negotiation, and fairness. Accountability considers the specific actions for which we have general responsibility. Whereas we can have overall responsibility and management where accountability areas are delegated. Negotiation and fairness engage dialogue with others in the essential areas that need to be accomplished. In so doing the meetings are on a level playing field, there is agreement on the areas to be discussed, actions to be accomplished, effective follow-up and timely evaluations take place.

**Nurturing wholesome relationships** concerns demonstrating trust and support and having adequate resources. It is important to determine observable ways to build the trust necessary to move forward with the agreement. To carry out the agreement the necessary resources and capabilities need to be in place for the plan to be accomplished.

The practice of nonviolence involves a personal and practical commitment to develop spirituality in everyday life. It is important to take time to process our experiences and to practice our skills of nonviolence and to make correlations to personal and work ways of acting. We become conscious about integrating the values into our words and actions, living in a way that supports and challenges one another to be our most authentic selves with caring confidence.

Some important successful advocacy efforts using this method have included issues related to housing rents, country debt cancellations, and employment rights. We highlight the advocacy for HIV/AIDS in which my community was listed in the congressional record as helping to craft the legislation. The international involvement to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic respectfully included many influential advocates on many levels. Advocates in the US were in a position to promote what became the United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003. This established a comprehensive, integrated strategy to combat the global spread of HIV and AIDS. The advocates involved a wide variety of constituents and worked with both political parties to make this a united effort to pass and fund the legislation.

### **The Use of Story to understand our experience of God**

Another way of working with the power of nonviolence is respectfully reflecting on the stories of our experiences of God. The format for telling the story was developed through my doctoral work. Essential features are shared in such a way that an image captures the significance of the experience. There is a pause in the group setting in which other members share the image they

have of the same story which enhances the meaning of experience described. Finally, there is the impact of the experience in which the wisdom received from the story continues to influence the daily life of the storyteller.

Recently, this process was adapted in Uganda and South Sudan with women and men religious who were pastoral workers in areas of conflict. I worked with two professional psychologists to update and adapt the program. The deep sharing included stories of being abducted by rebels, losing members, and never losing hope.

These were some of the comments regarding these journeys: *“it was a kind of empowerment to manage difficult situations in life”* and *“everyone has gone through unique experiences which has shown and revealed God’s power and goodness to us”*. They saw themselves doing things differently: *“developing a more compassionate heart and positive attitude towards various complex challenges,”* and *“started to develop a more productive attitude to suffering.”* The process of sharing in a safe space helped this insight and healing happen. To keep the spirit of their sharing alive the participants decided upon actions to reflect the experience. They continue to hold themselves accountable for these commitments.

Now is the time for personal stories here. As a way to encourage your storytelling, I share my own experience of God. *I can vividly remember the incident; I was in my room alone, feeling a sense of pain and dismay. I had just received the news that my biopsy showed that I had cancer. Here I was at 43 and what did I have to say about what I had done with my life—had I been too preoccupied with my work, had I neglected others? I was reviewing my life and wondering how much longer I would have to get my life together. Suddenly, I heard from the depths of my being that I was a beloved daughter of God. No, I didn’t do everything right, but my heart was in the right place. A sense of peace came over me and stayed with me throughout the surgery, recovery, and therapy. I felt that who I was at the deepest level was loved by God and no one could take that validation away from me. I experienced the loving embrace of God and knew God was with me.*

Reflecting on the experience, I realized that my true self, the deepest part of me abides in God. My deepest desires and God’s deepest desires are one. Becoming who I am is nurtured and validated in a loving, compassionate relationship with God. A sense of identity (who I am and what I am about) often comes in the midst of life and death or conflict situations.

As my spiritual life and philosophy has developed, I have learned to nurture ways to be attentive to God’s revelations in my experience. I have realized God’s value of me. I am uniquely valued for who I am. The inner authority that I attend to is nurtured by a life of prayer, a striving after truth and a life lived in compassionate love. My faith has been an enriching resource for my life. Consciously grounding myself as a beloved daughter is an essential part of knowing myself. Even for Jesus, this was the case. Before he could begin his public ministry, he had to hear the words: *“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased”* (Mt 3:17). For me I realize that it is important to accept people for who they are and where they are in their lives. God is both the spirit of truth and love. It is important for me to accept my role in building a community of compassionate believers whose lives are centered upon the search for truth and wisdom. The ideas and spirit of nonviolence are crucial in creating this community.

This open and honest sharing of insights in a safe nonthreatening space is important. The use of story is vital to the healing process. This happens when we are able to speak the truth about our experience and be heard. Respectful attention begins the healing process. It is also

necessary to look at values beyond ourselves, see ourselves in the ordinary, and to look for parables in the stories. Speaking the truth is a way to encounter the revelation of God within our own stories. I have noted that the discovery of ourselves is also the discovery of God within our lives.

### **The Journey's Path**

We all have peak experiences in which we come to a grounding in ourselves as a unique experience of God. Continuing to reflect on this, we can see how we continue to grow and benefit from such insights. We become more responsive to opportunities to promote healing and reconciliation when we are alive in our ways of receiving and responding to those we meet.

The opportunity for sharing our stories with one another will engage us in a personal process for the integration of conflicts in our lives. This is a journey that we may share, travelling together, trusting each other, and guided by our compass to seek God through the path of nonviolence. We are encouraged to continue our paths of nonviolence to make this world a better place. For we know that in Christ *"we live and move and have our being."* (Acts 17: 28). In this shared journey, we will find the contemplative stillness within ourselves that leads us to God's love.