

**Speech in response at the Launch of the
Australian Catholic Bishops’
Social Justice Sunday Statement 2010**

*Violence in Australia
A message of peace*

Given by

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The Statement opens with some of the most central, yet confronting, words attributed to Jesus:

... But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you
(Mt 5:43–44)

We are faced with the reality of this challenge on a daily basis – within ourselves, in our interpersonal relationships, in our workplaces and communities and in our global interactions.

But what does the message of ‘loving your enemies’ really mean for us today? What is the peace we are speaking of here – and how do we how can we do this better, in a way that contributes towards what Christians refer to as the ‘reign of God’ on earth?

From my own perspective, working for many years in the area of nonviolence and peacebuilding, I would like to respond with three dimensions of the ‘message of peace’ that permeate this Statement:

Intention – Inspiration – Transformation

1 Intention

Violent and nonviolent behaviours emerge from the intention of the heart ...

... the path to violence and the deeper path to peacemaking begins in the human heart

(Statement, p. 4)

Various forms of violence are enacted in our daily relationships – physical, verbal, emotional, spiritual and economic. These can be caused by emotional and spiritual immaturity or lack of opportunities for human development. This is the reality of the world in which we live. As part of this world, I need to declare that, just because I stand here before you this morning speaking about nonviolence, does not mean that I am nonviolent! I am a man still capable of many forms of violence in my life ... my task is to try to become more nonviolent each day.

The Statement proposes that peace is not the absence of conflict (p. 7). Conflict, from a positive perspective, indicates expression of individual freedom and diversity within communities. Conflict can be healthy, constructive, creative and can stimulate wonderfully rich and innovative transformation and growth. Conflict can also be unhealthy, destructive, abusive and lead to violence and harm.

There is a need to provide people at all levels with the skills to engage creatively and constructively with conflict, to see it as an opportunity to welcome many points of view and embrace the rich diversity of life in community as in our complex, evolving eco-systems.

Colman McCarthy, a former Washington Post journalist turned peace teacher, points to the glaringly obvious lack of intention that pervades many of our social institutions even today:

A student wrote a 13-word paper that for both brevity and breadth – the rarest of combinations – has stayed with me:

Question: why are we violent but not illiterate?

Answer: Because we are taught to read”

(Engage: Exploring Nonviolent Living, p. 92)

The power of intention, well resourced with commitment and visionary leadership for the long-haul, will assist the journey towards peace on earth. Will we be able to follow up our statements of intention with action to ensure that members of our Church institutions, schools, agencies and communities will be taught nonviolence...?

If the United Nations declared an International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World (2000-2010) and the World Council of Churches invited us into a Decade to Overcome Violence, can we use what we've learned about nonviolence thus far to become the foundation for our actions in this next decade?

Is it unreasonable to ask, and expect, that every community and organization in Australia that claims a connection to the founder of the Christian religion, commit themselves and their members to becoming more peaceful and nonviolent in everyday life ... and create formational opportunities and structures to reflect such commitment?

2 Inspiration

The application of the skills learned to engage creatively with conflict emanate from our intentions and are sustained by our inspiration... which emerge from the source of our spiritual meaning for followers of Jesus, the ‘people of the way’ (as the early Christians were called), this means a radical commitment to the rejection of violence and the embrace of a nonviolent way of living ...

We do not consider nonviolence simply as a tool or strategy to win over the enemy to our way of thinking, but rather as a way of life that permeates our whole being ... Pope Benedict, in sending New Year greetings to the Chinese people in 2007, remarked that nonviolence is not merely tactical behaviour but “the attitude of one who is so convinced of the love and strength of God and is not afraid to face evil armed with just the weapons of love and truth” (Asia News, 18/2/07)

In terms of the ‘dominant culture’ of his day, Jesus was rather unsuccessful at this – violence seemed to triumph over nonviolence as the crucifixion ‘proved’ – the whistle-blower was silenced, the problem was exterminated, the inconvenience buried and the world goes back to ‘business as usual’.

So what was his point? I conclude that the call to be faithful was more important than the call to be successful ... Jesus lived his life true to his calling, connecting deeply to the in-dwelling presence of God that prompted his responses to the interpersonal, structural, economic, military and spiritual violence that he and so many others experienced.

Contrary to the accepted and validated wisdom of his culture – which was to justify and legitimise the destruction of the enemy, those who were different, those who were a threat to the established order, those who were outcasts, frighteningly different from mainstream conventional citizenship – Jesus advocated, and ultimately died for, his commitment to nonviolence.

His intentional, strategic challenges and confrontational resistance to the powers that dominated, diminished or dehumanised others, brought him many enemies within the dominant structures – religious, economic, military and even the revolutionary rebels.

Jesus taught and lived nonviolence – Gandhi learned much of his strategic wisdom from studying Jesus whom he referred to as the greatest nonviolent practitioner he knew.

For example, in Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 5:38), Jesus gave his followers many ways to challenge the violence of the system – taking one illustration: turning the other cheek ... this was about challenging the inequality of the very patriarchal system by

confronting the ‘violator/insulter’ with an invitation to strike the ‘victim’ as an equal ... by turning the other cheek, the oppressed victim of the insult or dismissal was inviting the perpetrator to hit them in public, not in an inferior master-servant relationship, but now as an equal in the eyes of God and of the world. By turning the other cheek, the oppressed person is saying that she refuses to submit to further humiliation. This is not passive submission – this is defiance and nonviolent resistance to domination. (Wink, W, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, Fortress Press, 2003)

Most significantly, Jesus challenged the very heart of the populist Jewish mythology around the belief that God was on their side and would ultimately strike down their ‘enemies’ by calling on his followers to ‘love your enemies and to pray for those who persecute you’ (Mt 5: 38–44). Jesus knew that the dominance of an ‘enemy culture’ was legitimising and perpetuating the cycles of violence within his community. He was fully aware of the deeply embedded concept of the scapegoat in Jewish culture and ritual – there were enemies within the tribe to enhance the external threat of those other tribes who were attacking the borders of acquired wealth, privilege and power. At a deeper level, Jesus also knew that having an enemy to hate would also provide a convenient excuse from having to go deeper in the human psyche to deal with the demons that exist within each of us. Similarly Gandhi became aware that, for him to continue his own commitment to nonviolence, he needed to accept that the evil he saw in his enemy also existed within himself and the good that he recognised within himself, also existed in his enemy.

So, for the follower of the ‘Jesus way’, this requires a journey to engage with the enemy, to listen to understand the fears and longings of ‘the other’ that lead to such violent behaviours, to create ‘sacred spaces’ where grace can find room to enter a relationship influenced by fear and suspicion, pain and mistrust, where something new can emerge (p. 8). Such intentional nonviolent activity may require suffering, pain and even a certain dying onto the self, the ego, the old ways of seeing others as enemies, demons or monsters and leading to, as Jesus modelled for us, a resurrection into a new way of seeing and being.

Who are the inspirational figures that shape and sustain our commitment to a nonviolent way of life...?

In my own life, growing up in ‘The Troubles’ of Northern Ireland, I have witnessed and heard about many such acts of courageous nonviolent interventions ... one memory provides me with inspiration and sustenance for my soul on my own journey towards nonviolence. Michael was a student with me at my Irish Catholic boarding school – an ordinary young boy, bright, wide smile, sparkling eyes, game for a laugh, quiet and unassuming, active in sports, a background social-dweller, with occasional front-of-house appearances. I never saw him after leaving school in 1969, he was a couple of years younger than me, and we went to different universities. I heard about his death though. He was standing at a bus-stop in Belfast going up to university to sit an exam when he was picked up and bundled into a car by three men, taken to a hide-away in the mountains outside the city, tortured horrifically for three days and when he wouldn’t give any information – because he didn’t know anything, it was a case of mistaken identity – the men told him they couldn’t let him live and were going to kill him. We heard all these details years later when one of the men confessed to his

murder. Michael managed to ask if he could have some time to say his prayers to which they replied that it wouldn't do any good as they were going to kill him for sure – but go ahead, pray away for yourself if you like.

Michael replied: 'No, you don't understand, I don't want to pray for me, I want to pray for you'

My work to grow and expand the spirituality and practice of nonviolence into mainstream culture is dedicated to Michael, a young man who inspires me daily with the presence of the eternal sacred through his memory.

3 Transformation

The late Elise Boulding, life-time practitioner of nonviolent peacemaking, reminded us of a helpful way of expanding our view of presence on the planet ... “we live in a 200 year present”, (quoted in Lederach, J.P., *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, Oxford University Press, 2005) – a cycle of influence dating back to our earliest memories of the oldest ‘elder’ who touched us – my grandfather was born in the 1880's – to the lifespan of the youngest who will touch us – my granddaughter is 4 years old and may well live until 2080. It is a helpful relief to know that we don't need to do everything this week!

We need to contribute to the emerging paradigm of peace by continuing our own journey of commitment to transforming the violence within us and around us by practicing the skills of nonviolent living – nonviolent communication, restorative justice practices, conflict transformation, sustainable peace-building, deconstructing the ‘enemy culture’ ...

There are five simple skill-sets that we can use right now

Notice your body – pay attention to the signals provided by your own internally-patterned prompts to prepare for fight, flight or pre-emptive strike ...

Centre yourself in the deepest truth you know and feel – that love will transform hate, that nonviolence will overcome violence, that God is present in all things (or not at all) – breathe in the spirit of your two hundred year presence.

Be open to the truth of your enemy – the one you despise, hate or are frightened of – listen to understand why they chose to behave the way they do – and convey this understanding, not necessarily agreement, to them.

Declare your own truth, honestly and transparently, speaking with loving intention and respect – without seeking to diminish the truth of the other.

Seek to build a bigger truth than that which you and your enemy/opponent are able to see from your limited vision of how things seem to be ...

We can also pray that something new will emerge from this journey to the centre of the Christian narrative – where contradictions, the collision of oppositional forces, the often paradoxical nature of human good and evil converge and where the Spirit has been gifted with space to transform smaller truths into an ever-expanding, larger truth. We give witness to the ongoing process of co-creation that we share with each other on our planet.

Jesus modelled this journey, showing us that if we truly commit to nonviolence, we will likely face sufferings and deaths on a daily basis, letting go of the old comfortable ways of being safe within our comfort zones of ‘us and them’ attitudes, tribal loyalties and patterns of demonizing or scapegoating others. We are called to witness this cycle of death and resurrection, this ‘Christing’ in our everyday lives.

4 Conclusion

I wish to commend the Bishops for making this statement at this time in history. We need to open up the discussion on the role and expression of violence in our country. Each of us is challenged to honestly acknowledge our part in the violence in our own relationships and structures. We cannot avoid the cultural air that we breathe, impregnated as it is with the mythology that, ultimately, violence can be justified as a necessary action to convert the unwilling, or to maintain the existing structures that we value, or even as a redemptive act in order to save others and show them how to gain salvation.

Paralleling the rhythm of our Eucharistic celebration, we confess our complicity, express remorse and ask for mercy, we surrender to the will of God, we take courage and strength from the broken body and blood of Jesus and we go in peace to love and serve all of humanity and this beautiful, yet fragile garden we call earth...

I will finish with the words of John Paul Lederach (p. 177) ...

*Reach out to those you fear
Touch the heart of complexity
Imagine beyond what is seen
Risk vulnerability one step at a time*