

Christian Peacemaking: Eliminating the Nuclear Scandal
The Deacon in the Nuclear Age: The Challenge of the Non-violent Christ
Part III



New Start Treaty Signing 2010

"...Faith does not insulate us from the daily challenges of life but intensifies our desire to address them precisely in the light of the gospel which has come to us in the person of the risen Christ. Through the resources of faith and reason we desire in this letter to provide hope for people in our day and direction toward a world freed of the nuclear threat."

U.S. Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace*, 1983

In the Spring of 1990, I attended a conference at the United Nations in New York City. The conference was about U.S.-Soviet relations in the new era of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) that began with the arrival of M. Gorbachev in 1984-5 as the Secretary-General of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev recognized that the superpower nuclear competition was just too dangerous and costly to continue. He also recognized the need for open and public discussion and dissent on the great issues facing humanity. During the conference in 1990 I had the opportunity to speak with one of the Soviet SALT II treaty negotiators, General Yuri Lebedev. He told me that he believed that the United Nations, arms control treaties, cultural exchanges, and the like would buy us time. He then went on to say, "What we really need is a spiritual revolution in humanity." I agreed and noted that is what Christianity has been selling for two thousand years, even if we forget that from time to time.

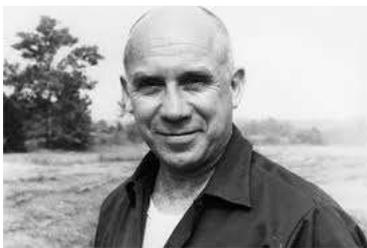


How do we as deacons put into concrete action this spiritual revolution launched in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? This is the question at the heart of the ministry of the deacon and all the baptized. The deacon is to be *an icon of the servant Jesus Christ* in his

witness to charity, justice, and peace. And yet, how many deacons are really trained to be peacemakers? How many formation programs for priests, deacons, religious and laity actually address the most essential element of Christian praxis—to be peacemakers! The Lord Jesus blesses the peacemakers as God's children as one of the beatitudes; why are so few Christians good at it (Matt: 5:7-9)?

That is a long and complicated answer. It includes the challenge to evaluate the praxis of Christ and his disciples, and the praxis of one's own nation and culture in a critical manner. The immensity of the nuclear question provokes many to simply believe they are powerless to change things because that is what they have been told or believe. And if they believe that then they are right! If we feel powerless then that is what we are. But we have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to be transformers of our world not victims of the *isness* of things (Acts 2:42-44). In a very real way we have been called to be *maladjusted* to those things and cultural expressions that denigrate humanity, creation, and God. Some people would claim that anyone who believes that the world can and must be changed is insane. The revered Catholic Trappist Monk and social commentator, Fr. Thomas Merton, addressed this concern himself in his famous essay, *A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann*:

I am beginning to realize that sanity is no longer a value or an end in itself. The sanity of modern man is about as useful to him as the huge bulk and muscles of the dinosaur. If he were a little less sane and a little more doubtful, a little more aware of his absurdities and contradictions, perhaps there might be a possibility of his survival. But if he is sane, too sane...perhaps we must say in a society like our own the worst insanity is to be totally without anxiety, totally sane.¹

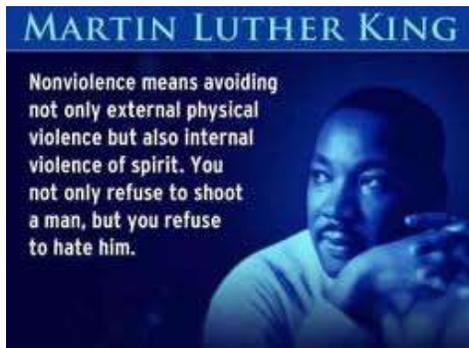


Fr. Thomas Merton

Dr. Martin Luther King, jr., addressed this same concern in a slightly different fashion in his *Letter From a Birmingham Jail, 1963*. His concern was that many modern people believe that progress in human affairs will simply come through an evolutionary process. However, a close reading of history tells us that human beings have to make choices to shape their history for a desired outcome, and so will always exist in a somewhat critical relationship with the culture as it is.

Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men (and women) willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now

*is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.*²



In Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God has broken into the world and continues to do so until the time of the Parousia, or the Second Coming of Christ with the fullness of the Kingdom of God. It is manifest in a particular way in the People of God and their cooperation with God's grace in transforming the world into what God desires it should be—a world of justice, compassion, and peace grounded in the absolute and irrevocable love of God. Hence, the disciple is called to follow the Lord in our time, place, and circumstances to help transform this world, that is, to give *flesh and bones* to the *new evangelization*.

The *new evangelization* will, in the words of *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, engage the *signs of the times*. That is, given concrete manifestation of the Gospel in the context of the issues confronting people in the 21st century. Among these issues is the issue of war and peace in the nuclear age, and the war on terrorism. Of course, many will want to shy away from this issue because it seems so complicated. It is to be sure, and I sympathize with those who resist engaging this issue. It can be frustrating and discouraging work at times and one tires from looking too long into the abyss of nuclear war. However, one is also strengthened in prayer, worship, study, and action guided by the gentle and not so gentle promptings of the Holy Spirit. Also, I have drawn inspiration from saints and modern Catholic martyrs and others who work for peace, and the picture of my family that sits in my office. They are Christ incarnate, as are all people, what we do to them, with them, and for them, we do to Christ (Matt 25:31-41). But one must also remember that the power of the risen Christ holds us up and gives us the courage and strength to continue the work knowing that, in the end, life and love have the last word.



So what is the problem? Why are so many deacons not involved in such work? Honestly, because I believe they have so many responsibilities in their parishes as it is, and they may not have ever studied the issue. Perhaps, formation programs and continuing formation

programs for deacons may not have pointed out this issue to them since they last studied *Gaudium et Spes*, i.e., that this is a critical issue for ministry and the world. Also, they have a job and a family that they must attend to, and often are so bereft of any down time that they are doing the best that they can. I imagine that many deacons simply would not know where to begin in this issue. But what if only five deacons in every diocese were committed to this issue as a way to evangelize their world concerned and dedicated to making the non-violent Lord Jesus more visible in his ministers? That would be a great start! It does not matter what political party a deacons belongs to since both major parties are in favor of making the world a safer place. Obviously such an undertaking would require those deacons to avail themselves of study and training for effective evangelizing strategies and pastoral planning. This would be done with the approval of the local bishop which would require regular consultation with the bishop.

I believe that a case could be made that the effective use of the Diaconate has not been adequately tapped for areas where deacons have access to those in business and policymaking positions. This was not deliberate but more a consequence of the Church coming to a growing appreciation and understanding of how the Diaconate could function in the Church and the world. But imagine if the Diaconate was better utilized in this manner? We now have had over forty years to reflect on and observe the Diaconate in action. I believe we are now at that juncture to help the Diaconate to come to a greater maturity and flowering of the way it can give flesh to its mission to serve in the various dioceses and the world community as *icons of the servant Jesus Christ*. How the Diaconate can be important and useful for addressing the issue of nuclear weapons will be discussed in the next article.

Notes

1 Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative* (New York; Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1971), p. 162

2 Martin Luther King, jr. *Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963*.