

## Summary of Roundtable Conversation

Responses to William Werpehowski's and Aurelie Hagstrom's papers distinguished four levels of questions about nonviolence. First, there was awareness of the personal level: the question of what is going on inside of persons as they wrestle with how to live in an authentically nonviolent way. The second level was about the various ways that institutions—colleges and universities—manifest a concern for, or commitment to, nonviolence. Third, there was attention to the Church's response to violence, as developed in Werpehowski's paper. The fourth level attended to the global questions of war and peace.

The conversation began with the second level, and the practical question of how complex institutions—some of which include, for example, Reserve Officers' Training Corps units—manifest a commitment to nonviolence. Werpehowski's comment on this point was that at a personal level, a commitment to nonviolence means a willingness to "go forth from ourselves to others," citing Pope Francis's *Joy of the Gospel*.<sup>1</sup> He went on to raise questions about how Catholic colleges and universities understand their purpose, and how conversations about purpose even happen in the first place. Another participant called to mind a more fundamental question, namely, what nonviolence actually is. Pointing to the way that Pope St. John Paul II suggested that war is always a failure for humanity,<sup>2</sup> he wondered whether the various scholarly efforts at a college or university—even those ostensibly about the place of war in statecraft—might be understood in a pragmatic sense as necessary for a full understanding of the human condition.

Another participant turned to recent history, observing that in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly with the influence of John Paul II, there was a strong countercultural turn in the Church toward peacemaking and peace-building. Key figures such as Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, and the Berrigan brothers, together with the U.S. bishops in their 1983 pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace*,<sup>3</sup> led a movement of

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1 Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* 20 (2013): "Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel." Online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

2 Pope John Paul II, "Address to the Diplomatic Corps," Monday, 13 January 2003, online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

3 National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace*, online at [www.usccb.org/upload/challenge-peace-gods-promise-our-response-1983.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/upload/challenge-peace-gods-promise-our-response-1983.pdf).

nonviolence. Yet after the events of September 11, 2001, there developed an opposing movement. Interestingly, he observed, during this same period there has been a growing comfort level of Muslim students on Catholic campuses.<sup>4</sup> The trajectory of reflection on the theme of nonviolence has changed over the past 40 or 50 years.

Returning to the second level of questions noted above, those dealing with institutional responses to violence, several participants observed tensions within colleges and universities themselves. One asked whether, for example, it was right for Catholic campuses to have football or hockey teams, given the violent nature of those sports. Another pointed to various forms of microaggression on campus, and the attendant questions of how to discipline students who perform them. Others raised related issues related to alcohol consumption and other behaviors that manifest various forms of self-inflicted violence. Several participants observed a basic tension: on the one hand, the need for Catholic institutions to proclaim and even model a nonviolence oriented toward reverence for the other; on the other hand, the recognition of human weakness and the developmental freedom of students who sometimes make choices rooted in violence toward self and others.

In light of this tension, one participant called for a “preferential option for love,” a parallel to the “preferential option for the poor” now common in Church documents.<sup>5</sup> Manifesting that preferential option is difficult, though, since it cannot be simply imposed from above. There must be a willingness to surface tensions within the community: those prejudices or misunderstandings that give rise to violent actions. It amounts to a willingness to challenge the *laissez-faire* attitudes underneath which there are simmering conflicts. Yet as another participant noted, such an option raises the question of how actual conflicts are handled. Professors themselves do not generally step into the fray of student life. Another participant called to mind Saint Paul’s analogy of the body, suggesting that while professors aren’t in charge of disciplinary issues or student life policies, they can nevertheless raise important neuralgic questions in the classroom that might impact student life. They can, to use the participant’s example, call students to understand the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines on alcohol consumption. The role of the professor is but one of many on campus, all of which can work together in self-conscious ways to promote a culture of nonviolence. Such a cooperative, collegial approach is itself a manifestation of care of the person (*cura personalis*).

On our pluralistic campuses, care of the person can be a unifying force even when

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4 See Sami K. Martin, “Muslim Students Enrolling at Catholic Universities at Highest Rate Ever,” *The Christian Post*, September 4, 2012, at [www.christianpost.com/news/muslim-students-enrolling-at-catholic-universities-at-highest-rate-ever-81061/](http://www.christianpost.com/news/muslim-students-enrolling-at-catholic-universities-at-highest-rate-ever-81061/). [Ed.]

5 The term probably originates in Jesuit Superior General Pedro Arrupe’s 1968 letter to Jesuits in Central America and was used in the Latin American bishops’ conference (CELAM) gatherings in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979). It also appears in John Paul II’s *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 42 (1987) and *Centesimus Annus* 11 and 57 (1991), as well as the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 182-184 (2005). [Ed.]

the gospel—narrowly understood as something reserved for Christians—might not be. One participant noted that his colleagues “embrace the gospel when they don’t even know they are embracing the gospel.” Care for the poor and marginalized—so much at the heart of Jesus’ kerygma—are not unique to his followers. The process of discerning how to be a nonviolent community may be more persuasive than the content of teaching about nonviolence. Another participant pointed to a recent panel discussion on campus as an example of this persuasiveness: it was responding to an uncharitable social networking conversation that maligned a certain group on campus. Faculty and students used the opportunity to create a teaching moment.

Three final observations rounded out the conversation following Werpehowski’s and Hagstrom’s papers. One was that the conversation would be rather different if the draft were in effect, since it would surface significant questions about conscientious objection and war. The second was that a recent study highlighted a significant divide between students and faculty on the development of a spiritual life, with students hungry for guidance in an era when faculty are uninterested or ill-equipped to offer it. The concluding observation was that there is something striking about imagining how liturgical theology might influence thinking about nonviolence in light of the fact that the central iconography on Catholic campuses is that of the violent death of Christ, and how that violent death yields the central liturgical practice of a meal of love.

