News



A girl walks past the rubble of war in Damascus, Syria, July 19. (CNS/Bassam Khabieh, Reuters)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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The umbrella group of the leaders of U.S. Catholic men's religious orders has committed to working to persuade Pope Francis to write a new encyclical letter focused on shifting church teaching away from just war theory towards Gospel nonviolence.

In a resolution adopted Aug. 3 at its annual assembly, The Conference of Major Superiors of Men declared it would "use both our individual charisms and experience as religious leaders to ... invite Pope Francis to offer an encyclical on nonviolence, which would include a shift to a just peace approach for transforming conflict."

"We recognize that violence is too often pervasive in our societies, including in the form of structural and cultural violence," states a rationale listed under the resolution. "For example, we must change economic structures and investments that perpetuate preparations for war and the proliferation of weapons in our society."

"We need a deeper understanding of Gospel nonviolence to better live out our faith, transform our societies, and 'build bridges' as well as cultures of just peace," the rationale continues.

In calling for a new papal encyclical on nonviolence, the men religious are echoing a similar call made last year by a landmark Vatican conference that was held to re-evaluate the church's long-held teachings on just war theory.

After a three-day event hosted by the former Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the international Catholic peace organization Pax Christi, members of the April 2016 conference asked Francis to consider writing an encyclical letter, or some other "major teaching document," reorienting the church's teachings on violence.

"There is no 'just war,'" the some 80 participants of the conference said in their appeal at the time.

Just war theory is a tradition that uses a series of criteria to evaluate whether use of violence can be considered morally justifiable. First referred to by fourth-century bishop St. Augustine of Hippo, it was later articulated in depth by 13th-century theologian St. Thomas Aquinas and is today outlined by four conditions in the formal *Catechism of the Catholic Church.*

A number of theologians have criticized continued use of the theory in modern times, saying that both the powerful capabilities of modern weapons and evidence of the effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns make it outdated.

The Conference of Major Superiors of Men was founded in 1956 and is the canonically recognized conference of Catholic religious brothers, priests and candidates in the U.S. According to figures from Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, there are about 16,000 religious brothers and priests in the U.S.

This year's CMSM assembly was held in Scottsdale, Arizona from Aug. 1-4.

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