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People in Brasilia, Brazil, protest racism and police violence May 13, 2021. (CNS photo/Ueslei

People in Brasilia, Brazil, protest racism and police violence May 13, 2021. (CNS photo/Ueslei Marcelino, Reuters)



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Mary Jo Greil had it all, as they say, in the early 1990s, working in a successful career at a Fortune 50 corporation in Memphis, Tennessee, helping the company grow and build its profile.

The more success she had, the more hard-driving she became. Along the way her management style became more and more aggressive.

Her forcefulness reached outside of work as well, especially behind the wheel of a car: speeding past slower drivers, cutting off others and likely offending more than a few people on the road.

It was about 1992, Greil told Catholic News Service, when things began to change.

Greil, today a member of Christ the King Parish in Nashville, Tennessee, was introduced to the work of Father Emmanuel Charles McCarthy during a retreat. The Melkite Catholic priest, now 81, has devoted more than 50 years of his life to teaching, speaking and leading retreats exploring the nonviolent Jesus of the Gospels.

Father McCarthy helped Greil "realize that I could be operating my life from a state of violence." The more she studied the nonviolence of Jesus, the more she began to adapt its principles. "It took a long time to release the ego and to focus on loving," Greil said.

Now more at peace in her life, Greil uses her management expertise as a leadership development consultant to companies and nonprofits. She embraces nonviolent principles in daily life and at her parish.

Greil's experience illustrates what veteran teachers of nonviolence see as a broadening interest in the nonviolent practices of Jesus as told in the Gospels. They are finding more people — young and old alike — seeking alternatives in a world beset by violence whether through war, domestic abuse, rising crime and shootings, income inequality, racism, or disrespectful rhetoric in politics and social media.

Ken Butigan, senior lecturer in the Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies Program at DePaul University in Chicago, has seen the rising interest throughout the three decades he has taught about nonviolence. He described the practice as "a paradigm for the fullness of life."

"It's not just a reaction to a specific situation. It's God calling us to live this way," said Butigan, who also works with Campaign Nonviolence of Pace e Bene Nonviolence Service.

More recently, Butigan noted, Pope Francis has extended invitations to the church and the world to embrace nonviolence.

The pope has decried violence in its many forms, inviting people to step to the margins of society to serve, meet and understand others.

It's a message that has been included in encyclicals on the environment and human fellowship, statements rebuking the possession of nuclear weapons, and his 2017

World Day of Peace address seeking to "make active nonviolence our way of life."

While the world is prone to responding to violence with violence at the expense of lives, livelihoods and the earth itself, Butigan and other teachers of nonviolence are encouraging the world to seek alternatives when a threat is present.

Citing Marshall Rosenberg, longtime educator of nonviolent communication, Butigan described violence as "the tragic expression of unmet needs," suggesting that it is prudent to address the grievances that lead to hostile acts.

"It does not mean it will always have a satisfactory solution, but the more we try this way, the nonviolent path that Jesus calls us to, the more likely we will create options for a more just and satisfying solution," Butigan said.

For Bishop John E. Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, bishop president of Pax Christi USA, Pope Francis' invitation to active nonviolence stresses how Jesus prioritized human dignity when confronting injustice.

"Nonviolence does require toughness," he said. "You have to control the impulses just to react."

Bishop Stowe pointed to Jesus as someone who showed that love is more powerful than violence, so much so that he was "willing to suffer the consequence of a violent society without giving in to it."

Marie Dennis, senior adviser to the secretary-general of Pax Christi International, based in Brussels, describes nonviolence as "a way of life, a spirituality" that is rooted in the life of Jesus.

"The fundamental message of the Gospel is about nonviolence. It was about how Jesus lived, about what he called us to do and how he called us to be," Dennis said. "My understand of the life of Jesus is that he consistently invited us to engage in creative thinking that enabled powerful nonviolent responses to injustice and exclusion."

She called the tendency to automatically resort to violence during any conflict a "failure of imagination" to see a different way forward.

"Committing to live a nonviolent life is committing to engage in the creative process of shaping nonviolent ways to do justice in the world, to protect the earth, to care for

each other when we're told over and over the only way we can protect people is with more violence," Dennis said.

Dennis' efforts these days are largely focused on the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, which was introduced in 2016 following a Vatican conference convened by the former Pontifical Academy for Justice and Peace, the precursor to the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

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In its five years of existence, the initiative has worked around the world to teach nonviolence in the hope that Pope Francis will broadly embrace nonviolence and declare that modern warfare is so deadly and sophisticated that the traditional "just war" theories cannot apply.

The Christian just-war theory, first addressed by St. Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century, holds that military combat can align with the Gospel as long warfare protects noncombatants and the response is restrained.

An example of the work being carried out recently found Pax Christi International collaborating with the Kenya Association of Sisterhood to train 400 people, including 200 young adults, in active nonviolence and peacebuilding ahead of the country's August general elections.

Previous elections have been marred by violence among factions in some parts of the country.

Father John Dear, who has been teaching and preaching about nonviolence for 40 years, credited Pope Francis for some of his pronouncement related to Catholic participation in executions and nuclear war.

Now a priest in the Diocese of Monterey, California, Father Dear founded the Beatitudes Center for the Nonviolent Jesus, rooting it in the pope's 2017 World Day of Peace Message. He called for widespread adoption of the teaching of nonviolence in Catholic schools and parishes.

"God asks us to be nonviolent people and to work for a new culture of nonviolence. But we'll never do that if we keep worshipping the false god of violence," Father

Dear said.

"We have to be teaching it," he continued, "and show that nonviolence is not passivity at all. It's active, creative, mobilizing and organizing for a new culture of justice and peace."

Dennis and Father Dear will bookend a seven-part online Lenten series starting March 2 looking at how ordinary people can embrace Gospel nonviolence principles in daily life.

The series is presented by Casa Esther Catholic Worker in Omro, Wisconsin, in conjunction with campus ministry programs at three upper Midwest Catholic colleges and a public institution, the Archdiocese of New York Young Adult Outreach, Pax Christi USA, the Catholic social justice lobby Network and the Dorothy Day Canonization Support Network.

In between, presentations will feature young speakers who will explore topics related to the environment, faith and social enterprise, and grassroots applications of nonviolent alternatives.

Christina Leaño, associate director of the Laudato Si' Movement, is one of the presenters. She told CNS that through her work with faith-based activists worldwide she has come to realize that Jesus' creative nonviolent actions in response to injustice alternated with times of prayer and contemplation.

She admitted finding time to contemplate creation and God's will, as Jesus did is difficult, especially because climate change poses a danger to all life on Earth.

"We're also called to be contemplative, to take time to praise God, to receive the message from creation and to reflect and remember that we're not machines. As Pope Francis says in 'Laudato Si',' the earth is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be celebrated and we're called to give back," Leaño said.

Back at Christ the King Parish in Nashville, it is Greil who said she wants to give back.

She was part of a team that organized an eight-part series on nonviolence last fall. It included speakers on domestic violence as well as the work being done globally by the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative.

Greil said living nonviolence day in and day out is a challenge and an unending commitment to follow the Gospel.

"Nonviolence opens new opportunities. We have new connections," she said. "There is a growth through our soul that results in changes that we don't even know how to describe."