Opinion
Guest Voices



Tank crew members of the U.S. Marines 3rd Battalion, 4th Regiment, are silhouetted at sunrise on the road to Baghdad near the city of Ad Diwaniyah, central Iraq, March 28, 2003. The U.S.-led war in Iraq began March 19, 2003. (AP Photo/Laurent Rebours)



by Art Laffin

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Humanity is at a critical crossroads.

The omnipresent nuclear danger. The climate crisis. Perpetual wars. Worsening tensions between the U.S. and Russia and China. Countless people worldwide continue to experience the effects of the pandemic and suffer and die daily from war, poverty and economic exploitation, environmental devastation, racial injustice, mass shootings and other acts of violence.

Today, Pope Francis asserts, we are living through a "Third World War" – one that is being fought piecemeal. More than 110 armed conflicts are currently taking place across the globe.

In calling for an end to the arms trade that help fuel these conflicts and in which the U.S. plays a leading role, Francis stated in his 2015 speech to the U.S. Congress: "Why are deadly weapons sold to those who would inflict untold suffering on individuals and society? Sadly, the answer, as we all know, is simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood."

On Jan. 24, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists set the iconic Doomsday Clock to 90 seconds before midnight, the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been. This is due to the existential threats of nuclear war and the climate crisis, the mounting dangers of the Ukraine war, bio-threats and nuclear proliferation.

Woman speaks at lectern with sign that reads, "VoteNoWar.org."

Activist Elizabeth McAlister, widow of Philip Berrigan, speaks at a rally Jan. 18, 2003, in Washington condemning possible military action against Iraq. Tens of thousands of people from across the nation marched from the U.S. Capitol to the Washington Navy Yard to protest imminent war. (CNS/Martin Lueders)

Regarding the climate crisis, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres asserted in February: "We must act decisively ... we must end the merciless, relentless, senseless war on nature ... 2023 is a year of reckoning. It must be a year of game-changing climate action."

Regarding the nuclear crisis, humanity is on the brink of nuclear catastrophe due to deteriorating relations between the U.S. and Russia. Tension between those nations have been exacerbated by NATO expansion in eastern Europe, the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in five European countries and U.S./NATO missile defense systems that ring Russia, and the tragic Russian invasion of Ukraine.

While the U.S. has always maintained a "first-use" nuclear weapons policy, Russia has said it would consider using nuclear weapons if it feels endangered by increased U.S. and NATO intervention in the Ukraine war. The U.N.'s Guterres has stated that "humanity is just one misunderstanding, one miscalculation away from nuclear annihilation.

Let us never forget that the U.S. is the only country ever to have used nuclear weapons. The U.S. has never repented for and apologized to Japan for the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, criminal acts that ushered in the nuclear age.

Jesus commands His followers for all time to love, put away the sword and never to kill. On the cross, as Jesus is undergoing the most excruciating form of death imaginable, He gives witness to a new way to live and respond to unspeakable violence. He embodies what it means to love one's enemies by asking God to forgive those who were killing him.

His nonviolent example on the cross marks a turning point in human history. Through his cross and resurrection, Jesus has forever overcome the forces of violence, sin and death and inaugurated a new nonviolent era for humanity. Jesus' self-emptying unconditional love is the cornerstone of Gospel nonviolence.

While growing numbers of followers of Jesus pursue the way of Gospel nonviolence, many Catholics and Christians are either directly or indirectly involved in military conflicts, support political and economic systems of domination and oppression, or endorse the existence and threatened use of nuclear weapons purportedly to protect national security interests.

A Ukrainian woman kisses cross atop husband's grave.

A woman kisses a portrait of her husband at a cemetery in Bucha, Ukraine, Feb. 24, 2023, on the first anniversary of Russia's attack on Ukraine. Her husband was shot and killed by a Russian soldier. (OSV News photo/Reuters/Anna Voitenko)

Many justify the existence of nuclear weapons despite the fact that Francis has stated that the possession of nuclear weapons is immoral and that the U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons , or TPNW, deems nuclear weapons illegal.

In our society and world, war, killing and violence have tragically become the norm.

In the 20th century, at least 108 million people were killed in wars.

Since then, countless people have been killed and injured in wars and conflicts. And so many more have suffered and died early deaths because of money and resources that were wasted on weapons and war instead of meeting urgent human needs.

How many more people will suffer and die because of war, systemic oppression and other acts of violence?

What would happen if all followers of Jesus were totally committed to living out His command to love their neighbor and their enemies? What if they practiced Gospel nonviolence?

As I have pondered and prayerfully reflected on this question, I acknowledge my own shortcomings and complicity in the culture of violence. I recognize what more I need to do to practice Jesus' way of nonviolence.

Many people, past and present, have powerfully exemplified the meaning of Gospel nonviolence and can be important guides for us now. Among them are St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi, Ben Salmon, Franz Jagerstatter, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Phil and Dan Berrigan.

Numerous national and global organizations also actively promote nonviolence and are involved in nonviolent campaigns for social, racial and environmental justice, upholding human rights, and abolishing nuclear weapons and war.

If followers of Jesus totally subscribed to Gospel nonviolence, these are just some of the things that would occur, and in fact, already are being practiced today by many of Jesus' followers:

They would not kill, exploit, oppress or harm one another.

They would renounce white supremacy, racial profiling, police violence against African Americans and people of color and declare that Black Lives Matter.

They would not make, use or sell any weapons, including handguns, killer drones and nuclear weapons.



A young woman holds a sign that reads "We are against war" during a protest in Moscow Feb. 27, 2022, after Russia attacked Ukraine. (CNS/Reuters/Evgenia Novozhenina)

They would refuse to be part of any military, or follow a government law or decree that would require them to kill, torture, oppress and wage war.

They would renounce the just war doctrine and embrace the way of just peace.

They would practice the works of mercy, welcome the immigrant and actively work to create a social order based on respect for human rights and the common good,

proclaim a jubilee where all debts are canceled, and establish social, economic, racial and environmental justice.

They would call for the U.S. government to make just reparations to American Indians, African Americans and to all its victims of violence, war-making and occupation, including in Iraq (March 19 marks the 20th anniversary of the start of the U.S.-led invasion) and Afghanistan.

They would adopt a simple lifestyle, actively work to end greenhouse gas emissions, keep fossil fuels and carbon in the ground, promote renewable energy and sustainable transportation, and develop an equitable low-carbon economy.

They would actively work to stop exorbitant military spending (the U.S. government will spend $858 billion on the 2023 defense budget and proceed with an estimated $1.7 trillion nuclear modernization program over the next several decades), and demand the transfer of these funds to provide health care, meaningful work, affordable housing, food, clean water, education for all the world's poor.

They would advocate for the economic conversion of all weapons plants and facilities to make products that serve life and protect the environment.

They would actively work to get the U.S. and the other eight nuclear nations and 32 nuclear weapons endorsing nations to ratify the TPNW, already ratified by 68 nations.

They would actively work, without considering the cost, to be, as Francis states, "the conscience of peace," to make God's reign of love, justice and peace a reality and to create the beloved community.

The hibakusha (Japanese nuclear bombing survivors) plead to the world: "Humanity and nuclear weapons cannot coexist."

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Dorothy Day declares: "Love is not the starving of whole populations. Love is not the bombardment of open cities. Love is not killing; it is the laying down of one's life for one's friends."

Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan asserts: "Our plight is very primitive from a Christian point of view. We are back where we started. Thou shalt not kill. Everything today comes down to that — everything."

Martin Luther King Jr. exhorts: "Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes-hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism." He says: "Love even for enemies is the key to the solution to the problems of our world."

Pope Francis states: "Abolish war now, before war erases humanity from history."

To help foster a deeper commitment to Gospel nonviolence, peace and justice during this holy season of Lent and beyond, one can consider a range of actions, including taking the vow of nonviolence; becoming actively involved in one or more of the organizations listed here; and, together with others from your church and area, engaging in regular acts of nonviolent public witness and resistance.

Global catastrophe can be averted if enough people act to prevent it. Social transformation can occur and, in fact, is happening, little by little, in many places. The victims and people worldwide cry out for justice and peace!

For followers of Jesus, Lent is a time for personal and societal repentance, radical conversion, renewal and transformation. It is an opportunity, as St. Oscar Romero reminds us, to be "transfigured" into people of God.

Inspired by the Holy Cloud of Witnesses, let us strive to live and act in the biblical hope that "all things can be done for the one who believes" (Mark 9:23) and that "nothing will be impossible with God!" (Luke 1:37)