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A light-skinned man with a white beard wearing glasses looks at the camera

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, is pictured during a meeting with the media at the Vatican, Sept 28, 2023. (OSV News photo/Remo Casilli, Reuters)

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Amid wars around the world, particularly in Ukraine and the Holy Land, the Catholic Church needs to speak out on nonviolence as a necessary option for any hope of peace, said a representative of Pax Christi International, urging the pope to write an encyclical on nonviolence and just peace.

"War, now in the Middle East, is one more example of why we have to find a different way to arrange our way of functioning together as an international community," said Marie Dennis, co-president of Pax Christi International and senior director of its Catholic Nonviolence Initiative.

Dennis told OSV News Oct. 20 that the movement sent an appeal to Pope Francis and participants of the Synod of Bishops to urge them "to raise the issue of nonviolence in their minds as they are thinking about the future of the church and

the reality we're facing now."

Meanwhile, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, in an Oct. 24 letter “to the entire diocese" said that the Holy Land is "going through one of the most difficult and painful periods in our recent times and history." "It is time to stop this war, this senseless violence," he said.

Founded in 1945, Pax Christi International is a Catholic nonviolent movement with 120 member organizations around the world that seeks to "promote peace, respect of human rights, justice and reconciliation throughout the world," according to its website.

The movement launched the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative in 2016 in the hope that the church could "educate Catholics and society at large about active nonviolence as a spirituality, a way of life, a universal ethic, and a practical and effective tool for building peace within families, local communities, nationally and globally."

"The violence and trauma being experienced in this harrowing moment by the people of Israel and Palestine -- as by so many others around the world -- underscore the critical need for humanity to make a dramatic shift from unending war, preparations forward and violence to a more just and nonviolent future," Pax Christi wrote to Francis and synod participants.

Dennis said that given the various global conflicts, if "we don't start investing in learning how to use nonviolent strategies, we will always be worse off than we are now; and we're in a pretty dangerous situation."

"War and violence almost never produces the kind of results that we really want," she said. "For example, in Israel and Palestine, all of the people living in that region yearn for security, for just a decent life where they don't have to be afraid all the time, whether it's an attack from outside or a bulldozer knocking down their houses. And so, the direction has to be toward a real negotiated solution."

If the church aided Catholics "to deepen our understanding of nonviolence and our commitment to try it out, we think it could make a really big difference in the world," she added.

Among the ways the initiative hopes the church can further develop Catholic social teaching on nonviolence is by urging "Pope Francis to share with the world an

encyclical on nonviolence and just peace."

Dennis told OSV News that while Francis "has a very deep commitment to peace," the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative hopes that there "would be an authoritative document," particularly due to the fact that the Catholic Church "has been on a journey, on a trajectory of moving its teaching on war for the last decades."

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the justification for going to war is "subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy."

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However, in his encyclical "Fratelli Tutti, on Fraternity and Social Friendship," Francis warned that "it is easy to fall into an overly broad interpretation of this potential right."

The pope also raised the question of "whether the development of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and the enormous and growing possibilities offered by new technologies, have granted war an uncontrollable destructive power over great numbers of innocent civilians."

"We can no longer think of war as a solution because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits," one of the main criteria of just-war theory, he wrote. "In view of this, it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a 'just war.' Never again war!"

Citing an address given in March at the University of Notre Dame by Cardinal Robert W. McElroy of San Diego, Dennis told OSV News that the just-war tradition is an inadequate teaching in this day and age.

"Nonviolence needs to be at the center of Catholic social teaching on war and peace, in comparison to the just war-tradition which served for a very long time, but is not -- as Pope Francis himself has said -- as useful as it might have been given the state of the world," she said.

In his letter, Pizzabella said, "For over two weeks now, we have been inundated with images of horrors, which have reawakened ancient traumas, opened new wounds,

and made pain, frustration and anger explode within all of us."

The patriarch condemned the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel, saying his "conscience and moral duty require me to state clearly that what happened … is in no way permissible and we cannot but condemn it." The cardinal said that "There is no reason for such an atrocity."

He also said that "the same conscience" led him to "state with equal clarity today that this new cycle of violence has brought to Gaza over five thousand deaths, including many women and children." "These are tragedies that cannot be understood and which we have a duty to denounce and condemn unreservedly," he added.

Dennis told OSV News that she hopes nonviolence will "become a part of the conversation" at the Synod of Bishops, especially since "so many of the issues, including the synodal process itself, is a shift toward nonviolence."

"We're hoping that if this appeal is heard, that those in the synod will think about it and integrate nonviolence thinking into their own thinking in the synodal process," she said. "We hope Pope Francis will receive our appeal and understand it as a gesture of strong support for his own efforts to achieve a more peaceful world and an invitation to even more explicitly include nonviolence into what he's saying about the need for peace."

Two hostages -- Yocheved Lifschitz, 85, and Nurit Cooper, 79 -- were released from Hamas captivity Oct. 23, with Lifshitz telling reporters in Tel Aviv on the same day she "went through hell," as she was kept in Hamas tunnels in Gaza for over two weeks. While her husband remains in Gaza, Lifschitz made a gesture that has since gone viral, shaking the hand of the Hamas gunman escorting her to freedom.

In his letter, Pizzaballa said, "It was on the cross that Jesus won: not with weapons, not with political power, not by great means, nor by imposing himself. The peace He speaks of has nothing to do with victory over others. He won the world by loving it." The patriarch urged the world "to accompany us, to comfort and encourage us. We need it like the air we breathe."