Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Francis releases a dove as a sign of peace outside the Basilica of St. Nicholas after meeting with the leaders of Christian churches in Bari, Italy, July 7, 2018. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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A few years ago, La Croix International reported how three French peace activists met with Pope Francis and asked him for advice. "Start a revolution!" he said. "Shake things up! The world is deaf; you have to open its ears." That's what Francis did — he started a nonviolent revolution and invited us all to join.

On this week's episode of "The Nonviolent Jesus Podcast," I'll reflect on Pope Francis, whom I think was the most radical, most progressive, most nonviolent, most prophetic, most peace-activist-oriented pope in history.

I give thanks that he spoke out so boldly, so prophetically in word and deed for justice, the poor, disarmament, peace, creation, mercy, nonviolence and the nonviolent Jesus; that we had him for 12 years; that Francis did not resign and retire, but kept at it till the last day, Easter Sunday; and that we got to live during his time. I think he's one of our greatest saints, and I hope he will be named a doctor of the church.

Francis sent me encouraging messages, saying he liked my books on Jesus, peace and nonviolence. When I started the Beatitudes Center, I received a letter of support. I asked him for many things, mainly for an encyclical on Jesus and nonviolence.

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I loved and followed his commitment to the poor and the marginalized, his call to defend Mother Earth, his global pursuit of diversity, equality and inclusion, his struggles to reform the church, and most of all his commitment to Gospel peacemaking.

Like Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr. and St. Francis, he was against war, all wars, no matter what the reason, and that's the leap that few people, few bishops, few priests make. There was hardly any mention in all the tributes about his consistent stand against war, his condemnation of nuclear weapons, or his efforts to end the wars in Africa and the Russian war on Ukraine. When Russia invaded Ukraine, Francis went to the Russian embassy, and begged for an end to the war.

Most of all, he denounced the horrific Hamas attack and kidnappings, and from then on, denounced Israel's attacks, which the Gaza Health Ministry says have killed more than 51,000 people in Gaza. Nearly every night since the war began, at 7 p.m., he called the one Catholic church in Gaza, right up through Holy Saturday, to see how they were holding up.

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Francis' last words on Easter Sunday were a call for a lasting ceasefire in Gaza. I hope we can all speak out publicly as he did until the day we die calling for an end to all wars and all nuclear weapons.

He traveled to many places on pilgrimages of peace, including Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar and the Central African Republic. In Hiroshima, Japan, he made it clear that the mere possession of nuclear weapons, the threat to use them as a deterrent, was immoral and sinful. No Catholic can build, threaten, support or profit from nuclear weapons, he said.

But perhaps his most dramatic peacemaking act came in April 2019 when he brought the president of South Sudan and the rebel leaders together at the Vatican for a two-day retreat. Then, after pleading for negotiations and an end to the killing, he went around the room, got down on his knees, and begged each one of them for peace, and then kissed each person's feet.



Pope Francis kisses the feet of South Sudan President Salva Kiir April 11, 2019, at the conclusion of a two-day retreat at the Vatican for African nation's political leaders. The pope begged the leaders to give peace a chance. At right is Vice President Riek Machar. (CNS/Vatican Media via Reuters)

It was his growing commitment to nonviolence that gave me most hope. Francis learned, as we all have to learn, that the only way forward, our only hope, is if every human being tries to practice, teach and promote the total nonviolence of Jesus, and work together for a new culture of nonviolence.

My friends and I went to the Vatican many times asking for an encyclical on Jesus and nonviolence, that nonviolence would be the official teaching, position and law of the church. We never got that, but he did much to turn the church back to its roots in Gospel nonviolence.

In April 2016, he welcomed the first-ever conference on nonviolence at the Vatican. At the end of it, we issued a strong joint statement saying there was no such thing as a just war and calling everyone to practice nonviolence.

It was there that Cardinal Peter Turkson asked me to draft the pope's next World Day of Peace message, called "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace" and officially released on Jan. 1, 2017. I call it the first-ever statement on nonviolence in the history of the church since the Sermon on the Mount.

"To be true followers of Jesus today," Francis writes, "includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence. ... In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms. ... Make active nonviolence our way of life."

A good way to honor Francis' peacemaking life and his death at Easter is to rise to the occasion, speak out, march in the streets, and resist war, injustice, poverty, racism, corporate greed, fascism, authoritarianism, genocide, nuclear weapons and environmental destruction. I hope we can all carry on where he left off, and do what we can publicly as Gospel peacemakers to welcome God's reign of peace on earth.

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This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** and **The Nonviolent Jesus Podcast** feature series.