Opinion
Guest Voices



The U.S. Air Force's B-21 "Raider," the long-range stealth bomber that can be armed with nuclear weapons, rolls onto the runway at Northrop Grumman's site at Air Force Plant 42, during its first flight, in Palmdale, Calif., in this 2023 file photo. (OSV News/Reuters/David Swanson)



by Thomas C. Fox

View Author Profile
tfox@ncronline.org

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Just hours after President Donald Trump issued a directive for the United States to resume nuclear weapons testing — a move that threatens to shatter decades of international arms control and further fuel an already perilous nuclear arms race — theologian Terrence Rynne stood in Rome before Catholic leaders and peace advocates to present a radically different vision of global security and moral responsibility.

These two developments, unfolding nearly simultaneously on the world stage last week, spotlight a choice that could not be starker: Is the way forward to escalate nuclear arsenals and retreat into deterrence doctrines, or to embrace and institutionalize a Gospel-based ethic of nonviolence and de-nuclearization?

The United States, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom have all maintained moratoriums on nuclear testing since 1996, when the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty was adopted; India and Pakistan have maintained moratoriums since 1998. Only North Korea has conducted nuclear test explosions since then, beginning in 2006 and continuing sporadically up to 2017.

Trump's order on Oct. 30 to resume nuclear weapons testing was made just before a high-profile meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Busan, South Korea, during an Asia-Pacific summit.

The path chosen by Trump — and those urging renewed testing and military buildup — stands in sharp opposition to the one articulated by the Catholic Church's leading thinkers, policy advisers, and the Vatican itself. More warheads and more tests, or a concerted international movement toward creative, institutional nonviolence? This is the urgent tension at the heart of the current moment, and it frames not only the moral direction of the church but also the existential choice facing the global community.



U.S. soldiers and servicemen gather around a stage setup near fighter jets as they wait for U.S. President Donald Trump's visit to the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS George Washington at a U.S. naval base in Yokosuka, south of Tokyo, Oct. 28, 2025. (AP/Eugene Hoshiko)

Nonviolence has shifted from the margins of Catholic moral thought to the core of church teaching. This was highlighted in Rome on Oct. 30, as Rynne delivered an address titled "Gospel-Based Theology of Nonviolence" to a packed conference gathering. Speaking at the Istituto Maria Santissima Bambina, directly across from St. Peter's Square, Rynne outlined a theological framework for what many see as the church's clear move away from the just war tradition toward a Gospel-based ethic of active, creative nonviolence.

His talk was delivered during the second annual Rome seminar of the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence, a project of Pax Christi International's Catholic Nonviolence Initiative.

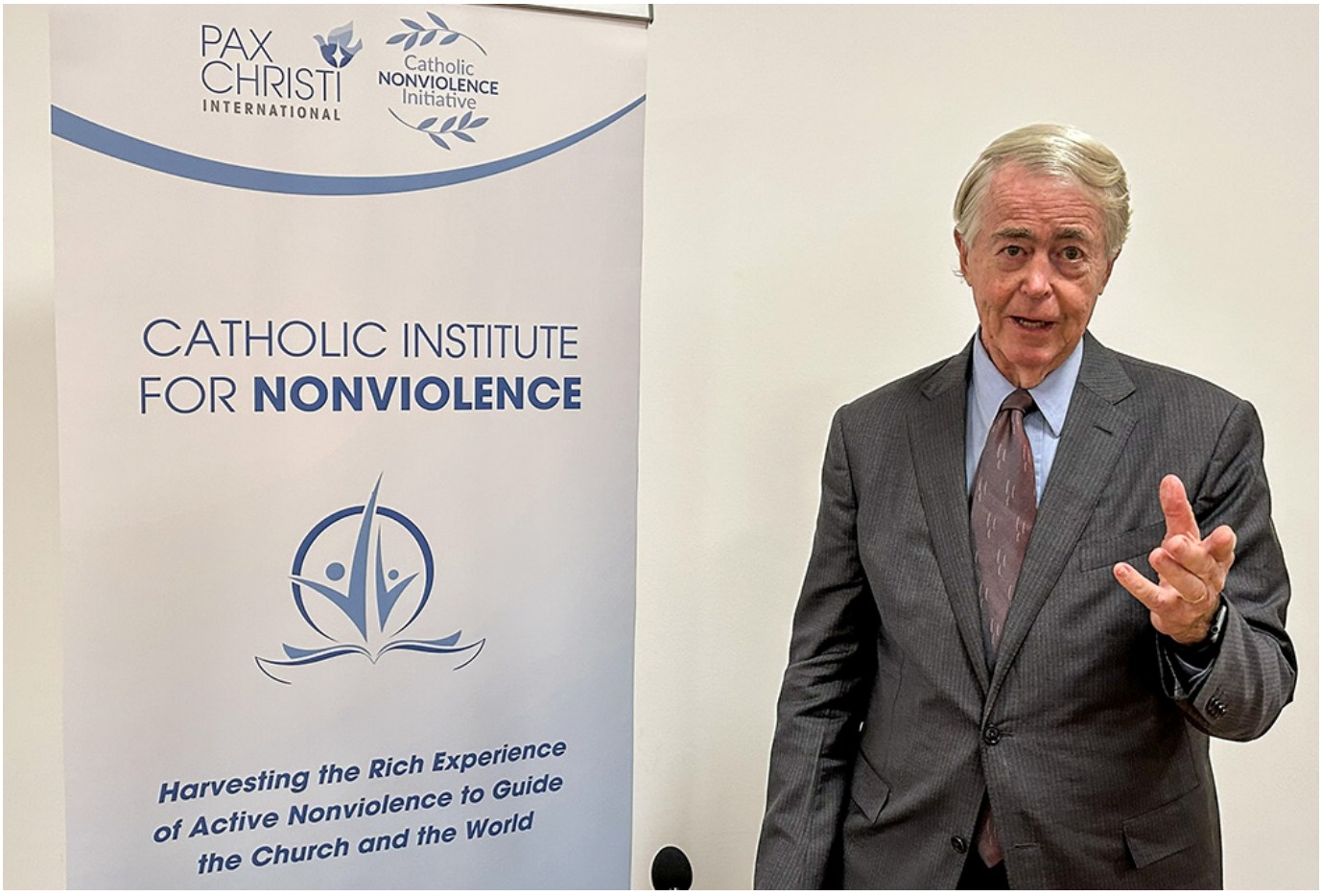
The just war theory, Rynne asserted, "has no scriptural foundation." Critics point out that for 15 centuries it served as a license, used more to justify than to limit war.

In an era of total warfare, the concept of just war has lost its moral foundation, Rynne said, explaining that when civilians make up 80-90% of war's casualties, "criteria like proportionality and discrimination are rendered meaningless."

The core of his argument centered on what he called "the missing years" of the Creed. Between "born of the Virgin Mary" and "suffered under Pontius Pilate" lies the ministry that shows how a peacemaker lives.

"A person's words and teaching are important," he said, "but even more important are their deeds, their praxis." Jesus' actions — healing, forgiving, confronting injustice — serve as the blueprint for genuine discipleship.

Rynne identified four key aspects of Jesus' approach to peace.



Theologian Terrence Rynne speaks at the second annual seminar of the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence in Rome Oct. 30, 2025. (Carlo Casaloni, SJ)

First, Jesus alleviated suffering and restored wholeness, defining peace as shalom and salaam — health, home, dignity and justice.

Second, Jesus challenged systems of violence. Rynne mentioned three examples: healing on the Sabbath and declaring it made for humanity; welcoming outcasts like Zacchaeus and overturning purity laws that excluded them; and cleansing the Temple, a peaceful protest against economic exploitation. Each act, Rynne explained, was disciplined, public and costly.

Third, Jesus transformed enemies into friends, demonstrating reconciliation as a sign of true strength. Rynne connected this to Gandhi's forgiveness of his attackers in South Africa, which turned hostility into respect.

Fourth, Jesus rejected the culture of war itself, telling Peter to put away his sword. Early Christians took this literally, refusing military service for three centuries until empire changed the church's moral outlook.

Rynne echoed the research of Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth that shows that nonviolent movements succeed more than twice as often as violent ones. Empirical evidence, he said, confirms what faith intuits: Nonviolence works.

Rynne recalled how Gandhi, "bowled over" by the Sermon on the Mount, read it weekly for the rest of his life and translated its ethic into satyagraha, or "truth-force."

"Gandhi grasped what the Gospel demands," Rynne said. "Truth has its own power when met with disciplined love."

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>
> —Terrence Rynne
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Rynne spoke both as a scholar and practitioner. With his wife, Sally, he founded the Marquette University Center for Peacemaking in 2008, incorporating conflict transformation studies into Jesuit education.

Its "Peace Works" program teaches nonviolent communication in Milwaukee schools and launched the Success Center, helping suspended students reintegrate through counseling, yoga and restorative practices. The Center for Peacemaking has become a national model for integrating nonviolence into Catholic education. Rynne also serves on the board of the National Catholic Reporter.

The theology expressed in Rome has developed over decades. The Second Vatican Council's 1965 constitution *Gaudium et Spes* stated that peace is "the work of justice" and called for war to be banned by international agreement. Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, had already shifted the emphasis from deterrence to human rights, describing peace as an order "founded on truth, built up on justice, nurtured and animated by charity."

After the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council, episcopal conferences continued to study and develop Catholic peace thinking. In the United States, the 1983 pastoral "The Challenge of Peace" questioned nuclear deterrence, highlighted conscience and selective nonparticipation, and described peacemaking as "a requirement of our faith." The document effectively brought the language of nonviolence into official Catholic social teaching.

Popes also built on that path. Paul VI created the annual World Day of Peace, held Jan. 1, and stated, "If you want peace, work for justice." John Paul II saw nonviolent revolutions in Eastern Europe as evidence that truth and love can defeat oppression. Benedict XVI connected peace to comprehensive human development, emphasizing that security should be based on justice, not weapons.



A priest and a woman stop at a news stand at St. Peter's Square, April 10, 1963, to look at the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano, with the Latin text of Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. (AP/Girolamo Di Majo)

Under Pope Francis, the moral stance became clearer. His 2017 World Day of Peace message, "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace," promoted nonviolence as a "way of life."

His 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* went even further: "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!" Many theologians, including Rynne, saw that statement as a key doctrinal shift — the moment when the church moved from cautious acceptance of war to a principled rejection.

The election of Pope Leo XIV in May 2025 appears to have accelerated the transition. From his first words as pope, Leo called for "the peace of the risen Christ ... unarmed

and disarming peace, humble and persevering." In a May 30 address, Leo stated, "Nonviolence, as a method and a style, must distinguish our decisions, our relationships and our actions." He added, "If you want peace, prepare institutions of peace."

The roots of the current moment trace back to a 2016 conference overseen by Pax Christi International and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Rynne led the working group on the New Testament foundation for nonviolence. That conference brought together 80 participants from around the world — bishops, theologians, and practitioners from conflict zones such as South Sudan and Colombia.

The conference concluded with a call to "recommit to the centrality of Gospel nonviolence" and to go beyond just war criteria. Its final statement urged the pope to issue an encyclical and clearly declared, "There is no 'just war.' "

Since then, follow-up dialogues in Manila, Philippines; Bogotá, Colombia; Nairobi, Kenya; and Bonn, Germany have sharpened the teaching and provided local case studies. Each meeting, Rynne told his audience in Rome, "makes the same discovery: Nonviolence is not the dream; violence is the illusion."

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He also spoke about internal resistance. "Some worry that abandoning just war means abandoning realism," he said. "But realism belongs to the Gospel. Violence has always failed to build peace; nonviolence has always been the way to build it. The question is whether the church will teach what history now proves."

Rynne's standing gives his argument weight. Friends describe him as methodical and steady, more teacher than polemicist. His center at Marquette continues to mentor students who now work in mediation and restorative justice programs across the country. His writing has provided the intellectual backbone for the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative. Those close to him say he views the movement's progress less as victory than as vocation — proof that persistence matters.

As his lecture ended, Rynne returned to discipleship. "To take up the cross," he said, "is to risk what Jesus risked—to confront suffering and oppression, to challenge the culture of violence, and to do so without hatred."

Rynne urged the church to move from theory to practice. "We have the theology," he said, "now we need the structures." He called for global collaboration among dioceses, seminaries and Catholic educators to embed Gospel nonviolence into all levels of church life.

"And let's figure out together how to get seminaries up to speed so they can start teaching and practicing nonviolence," he added. "Let's organize special workshops and seminars for priests worldwide to deeply study Jesus' life and teachings of nonviolence."

He suggested that Catholic schools draw inspiration from the Peace Works program in Milwaukee, which offers conflict resolution and nonviolence training for students in grades four through eight. "Imagine that kind of formation being multiplied across the globe," he said.

Rynne finished with a note of challenge and hope: "Perhaps, as a result, we can start a tsunami of nonviolent action from people in the pews."