

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 29, 2009 at 2:10pm

Unclenching our fists: From protest to collaboration

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Young Voices
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The day before I started college

I met a Sister of Providence who was just weeks away from serving her prison sentence for "crossing the line" at the School of the Americas protest. Just barely 18 and wide-eyed, I was taken aback by this vowed woman religious, her story and the egregious crimes that our country had helped to commit. So, that year in November, I traveled to Fort Benning, Ga., with 11 Sisters of Providence.

That trip to Georgia, as it is for many, was the dawn of my commitment to activism. Since then, I have attended protests, signed petitions, lobbied members of Congress, joined Facebook groups and prayed at vigils. In the face of the Bush administration, there was plenty to protest - from the Global Gag Rule to the war in Iraq to torture to justice for immigrants and so on. Indeed, we had reason to protest. The past administration broke our trust, starting with the election in 2000.

When Barack Obama was elected president last November, there was much to celebrate for those who have spent the past eight years protesting. However, this joy has been met with the slightest hint of hesitancy. And from what I have seen, we might be having a hard time coming down from protest mode.

Take, for example, when President Obama chose Pastor Rick Warren to give the invocation at his inauguration. Within seconds that his choice was announced, I was invited to join a Facebook group and boycott the inauguration. Certainly, I was dismayed -- to put it lightly -- that President Obama would select a speaker who was so outspoken in his heterosexism. On the other hand, I couldn't help but think that our jump to protest was too hasty, too familiar. Couldn't there be another way to engage this issue?

Without doubt, it is easier for people to come together *against* someone or something. And, I must admit, that it was almost as stirring when the crowds at the inauguration booed the past president as when they cheered President Obama. However, perhaps this new beginning in our country provides us with the opportunity to come together *for* a cause. Perhaps this is the time to learn how to collaborate instead of protest.

In Pace e Bene's *Engage: Exploring Nonviolent Living*, there is an exercise called "The Two Hands of Nonviolence." They explain that there are four responses to violence: avoiding violence -- depicted by bending over and covering your ears; accommodating violence -- depicted by extending your arms in front of you with your palms facing up; counter-violence -- depicted by extending your arms straight in front of you with your palms facing out; and active nonviolence -- depicted by extending one arm with an open hand and the other arm in front of you with your palm out. The guide explains:

"Active nonviolence is like saying to a person: On the one hand (symbolized by the hand that is our in front of me), I will not cooperate with your violence of injustice? On the other hand (symbolized by the hand that is open), I am open to you as a human being."

For a good part of the past eight years, in order to cope and survive, we have too often stood with both of our arms in front of us, palms facing out. The day before the inauguration, several groups held a rally at Dupont Circle in which one had the opportunity to throw a shoe at an inflatable caricature of former President George W. Bush. We have been on the defense; and at times, we have forgotten to be open to the humanity of our elected officials.



This is all not to say that the Obama administration will be perfect, will not give us reason to question and will not present us with opportunities to hold our government accountable. Still, my hope is that during this time of change, we can learn how to collaborate and how to respond with active nonviolence.

As President Obama imparted to those viewed as America's adversaries during his inaugural address, "we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." Perhaps that goes for us activists as well. Perhaps we need to unclench our proverbial fist and discover new ways to engage our government. Certainly, it will not be the easiest road -- nonviolence never is -- but it will be the most sustaining path to take on our journey to change.

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