

booklets

DISMANTLING THE HELLS

**Practicing the nonviolence
of Jesus today**



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PRACTICING THE NONVIOLENCE OF JESUS TODAY

Joan Morera Perich

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INTRODUCTION: A RESPONSE TO THE HELLS

“Is it really true that the only responses are
‘action-reaction’ or silent submission?
In this booklet I explore the third way of Jesus.”

It is nice to talk about the beauty of a kiss or the exuberant delight of people who are happy. They represent fulfilling moments that make life shine bright with joy. In contrast, speaking about hell is very disagreeable language. Why do we begin this way?

I confess that I feel a need to speak this way, but I have never inhabited the deepest hell. I feel compelled to speak, all the same, because I have seen such a hell. Many times. Hell is an interior reality. The most probing questions never occur to us in comfortable situations; they arise above all from dreadful depths, some very difficult to penetrate. I remember the young drug addict in the middle of Madrid, completely crazed by withdrawal, ready to attack any passerby to get money. We called his mother, but she, wailing and shouting, kept saying that he should disappear from the face of the earth –she never wanted to see him again. Or I recall that friend of mine, happily in love with his girlfriend, on the verge of making a definitive commitment –but one night, a sudden wrench of the steering wheel unjustly extinguished an existence, and there followed an unbearable silence. And even that Jesuit friend, so generous and enthusiastic, spreading hope and consolation wherever he went, struck down by a merciless cancer.

In this booklet I will not be treating of these hells, which resemble those of the biblical Job. They are sacred places which one approaches with sandals removed. They would require a different approach.

As I contemplate the everyday instances of violence, I feel a need to respond to the oppression of persons and communities and to aggressions of every type –economic, political, structural, and physical– but to do so in a manner almost totally contrary to what is customary.

I offer two significant examples. The first is the atrocious slaughter the Islamic State has been carrying out in countries like Iraq and Syria. The only imaginable reaction to such crimes, even in Christian circles, is violent repression: the most powerful countries should be convinced that they are “justified” in using their arsenals against this raging monster, without asking too many questions about why such terrorism exists, who has fomented it, what its roots are, where it gets its financing. This is the “action-reaction” which receives great popular support against such extreme cases, like that of the Holocaust. But would that really be the option of Jesus –destroying some people in order to save others?

Another example is on a smaller scale. I am horrified when I hear some interpretations of the biblical counsel of “turning the other cheek” (Matt 5:39), explained in terms of religious submission. I think of how outraged a woman must feel who is frequently beaten by her husband. I still have a vivid memory of a woman friend who was driven into deep depression by the bullying inflicted on her, day in and day out, by a colleague at work.

In such situations, where the victim of oppression finds no way to escape, is it true that the only two alternatives are “action-reaction” or silent submission –fight or flight?

In this booklet I explore the third way of Jesus, which moves beyond the logic of those two alternatives. It is a way that requires lucidity and creativity, faith and constancy. Certainly it is more difficult than pulling a trigger (whatever that may mean), and it demands more commitment than silence, suffering, and flight. Christian audacity readily detects that God is ceaselessly trying to rescue the wayward, not destroy them, even if it means dying in the attempt.

My argument will be based on a biblical reading I developed while writing a licentiate thesis on this topic.¹ I have divided the exposition into three sections. First, I will consider a scriptural figure who played a key part in helping Jesus understand his mission: the Suffering Servant of YHWH.² Second, I will develop a little known but well-grounded interpretation of the counsels of nonviolence that Jesus proposes in Matt 5:38-48. Finally, I will propose for further personal or group reflection some basic precepts that will allow us to practice the nonviolence of Jesus in the everyday context of our own times.

1. THE CONVICTION OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

The death of Jesus condenses the radicality of his life. His response to persecution, defamation, torture, and crucifixion was invariably truth, dignity, forgiveness, his own life.

The extraordinary nonviolence of Jesus³ went as far as earnestly desiring to save the dignity of his executioners by his words. “If I said something wrong, tell me what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?” (John 18:23). Also: “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). It is a nonviolence that responds not only to attacks against himself but also to the violence done to others. Consider, for instance, the famous text of the woman caught in adultery and on the point of being stoned (John 8). This account seems to me to give clear evidence of Jesus’ opposition to the death penalty: that is the new divine law that Jesus writes “with his finger” in the sand. By acting thus Jesus surpasses the authority of Moses, mentioned in verse 5, and recalls the God of Sinai who wrote the tablets of the Law “with

his finger” (cf. Exod 31:18; Deut 9:10). The new law of love (John 13:34) seeks to rescue the sinner and also the accuser, appealing to their human condition, which is fragile but capable of rising above mere action-reaction. “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7).

We do not know how Jesus came to take such a radical stand in the face of violence. Was it exclusively the fruit of his intimate relation with the Father, or was it perhaps also inspired by the Hebrew Scriptures? The evangelists often associate Jesus with the figure of the Suffering Servant described in Isaiah, prudently combining it with other titles, such as the Messiah or the Son of Man. To get a better understanding of this probable source of Jesus’ inspiration, we will first delve into the theology of the Suffering Servant of YHWH.

2. SATYAGRAHI'S MIRROR: ONE WHO SACRIFICES SELF FOR OTHERS

If Jesus was truly inspired by this figure in Isaiah, we need to ask: which tradition of the “Servant of YHWH” reached his hands? I suggest to carefully read and reflect on the four songs of the Servant (Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) or even on the whole second part of the book of Isaiah (chapters 40-55).

2.1. The Suffering Servant in Jewish revelation

The figure of the Suffering Servant emerges after 587 BC, when the Jewish people were exiled in Mesopotamia. The king of the Babylonian empire, Nebuchadnezzar, after conquering and destroying Jerusalem, deported a large number of skilled Israelites to his capital, Babylon. With the disappearance of the sacrifices in the Temple of Jerusalem, the exiled community felt totally destroyed; they began to believe that the Babylonian gods were more powerful than YHWH, or that YHWH

himself had rejected his people because of their sins.

The author of chapters 40 to 55 of the book of Isaiah was addressing a dispirited people and giving them a message of consolation: YHWH would deliver them through Cyrus, the king of Persia, a personage who would become progressively more collective in the figure of the Suffering Servant.

However, the promise defining the mission of the Servant broke with all previous paradigms: “YHWH says: ‘It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have

kept. I will also make you a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6). In other words, the mission of the Servant was not only to reassemble the scattered Jewish people, as might have been historically desirable after the exile. The Servant, though suffering great distress because of extreme oppression, received from YHWH an unsettling command: he was told not to be concerned about his own situation but to understand that he was being sent on a greater mission: he was to be “light for the nations.” As in every human community, the “we” needs to be inclusive, without excluding others.

The following chapters of Isaiah (50-55) explained to the coming generations the path to be followed. The reflective mirror of the Servant would spur the development of a theology of absolute self-donation, which would go to the extreme of giving one’s life in order to include in the people of YHWH all those who have excluded themselves by opting for evil. And to include them without prior repentance! The sages of the people of Israel, after experiencing the most traumatic hell of their history, understood that this was precisely the truth that YHWH was revealing to them throughout their ordeal.

We can easily imagine the young apprentice Jesus, some centuries later, reading with passion those same texts, meditating and reflecting on the passages about the Servant, wondering how the Father would make them come true then and there. Or we can imagine the evangelists, a few years later, discovering the Servant powerfully present in Jesus, who died and was raised up. The Servant figure is most definite-

ly an invitation to the Israel of all ages: by being the Servant for others for the sake of redemption, they would allow God to reign in their lives. Incarnating the Servant is the core of the four gospels and the omnipresent keystone in the preaching of Jesus; it means letting God reign so that his Kingdom comes into our lives.

2.2. Suffering scandal and barbarity in silence: the third and fourth songs

2.2.1. Jesus chose the Servant as a response

The Servant was an inhabitant of hell. The third and fourth songs relate the details of suffering that was outrageous and unjust. And the response of YHWH was to make the Servant nothing less than the agent of liberation for the other inhabitants of hell. God’s affirmation of the Servant is spelled out clearly in the first song: “I will keep you, and I will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, and to release from dungeon those who sit in darkness” (42:6-7). The Hebrew phrase “those who sit in darkness” expresses a relation of possession, not of place. A more literal translation would be: “to release from dungeon those who have darkness as a permanent residence,” that is, those who have inherited hell as a possession.

Jesus of Nazareth certainly saw many hells around him: family dramas and tragedies, oppression and domination at the hands of the Roman au-

thorities, economic exploitation, and other forms of misery. In the parables we find many examples of such distress, such as people indebted to the point of desperation (Matt 18:21-35; 5:40) and others committing savage acts (Matt 21:33-46; 13:24-30). But the presence of Jesus in Israel was not that of liberator or political Messiah. He was among his disciples as one who placed God at the center of every decision and kept God's Kingdom as his top priority. What could he do with these hells? To dismantle them, he would have to suffer them. Thus, the life of Jesus, like that of the Servant, ended up being passion and death ... in order to be regenerative resurrection.

2.2.2. Fourth poem: the root and the fruit of sacrifice for love

The fourth song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12) begins with a promise: the Servant will understand and will be exalted. We should suppose, then, that he has first been utterly debased without understanding the reason why; he has learned how to preserve human dignity in the face of hell, without any other explanation than "Trust in me." But this is the very same situation of distress that we find every day in our own world. Suffering without apparent meaning or explanation is very hard to digest! No reasons are given that might justify the sweat, the tears, the painful sacrifice for others. It is hard to walk blindly. But the biblical author is here telling men and women of all times that the knowledge of YHWH goes far beyond our own limited vision. The prophet makes this promise: "All you

who have struggled so hard to support your families, you who have suffered so much misery, infirmity, outrage, and incomprehension: all this has meaning; it is not in vain. Every Servant has a special mission as an instrument of YHWH, and the day will come when the oppressors will understand this reality (Isaiah 52:15) and they will stand in awe." And as the conclusion of the fourth song makes clear, the reward for going through all that suffering will not be insignificant.

No matter what the historical context in which the poems are read, the author urges the reader to follow God's plan for hells like the one he is in: the Babylonian exile. The plan consists in giving ourselves fully over to being inclusive God's instruments for saving (rescuing) even those who have gone furthest astray (the malefactors!).

The Ugandan peace activist Victor Ochen (winner of the 'Mundo Negro' Fraternity Prize in 2015 and candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016) grew up in the difficult conditions of a refugee camp, where he witnessed abuses, massacres, kidnappings, suicides, hunger, and nakedness. Despite the horrible circumstances, he wanted to keep studying in school, and he rejected the constant efforts of the Lord's Resistance Army to recruit him as a child-soldier, even though that would have brought him many benefits. It seems to me that Victor understood the saving dynamic of God in the Servant, who was trained never to return violence for violence, but to act always with due diligence, convinced that peace is the only way. Perhaps the atrocities committed by the Babylonians in the sixth century before Christ

are not very different from those committed in our own times by the LRA, the Islamic State, Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, or any other gang of cruel extremists. If a person like Victor Ochen decides to dedicate his life to transforming the perpetrators of such awful barbarities (even those who kidnapped his brother, still missing) and to working to give them a future, can it be that the God who inspires him is any less generous or any less desirous of rescuing the wicked instead of crushing them? For us believers, these reflections are critical for the international geopolitical decisions being made today. How can we dismantle the hells around us with effective nonviolent strategies? How can we undo the intolerable, infernal dynamics of even the small-scale relationships in our homes, our workplaces, our social circles?

The Servant here presents an initial proposal, which Richard B. Gregg, drawing on the experience of the *satyagrahis*, calls a “mirror”. *Satyagrahi* is a Hindu term that refers any person who firmly believes that the sheer power of Love and Innocence is capable of transforming hells by means of self-sacrifice. Gregg considers the suffering of the *satyagrahis* to be a mirror held up before the eyes of the violent, a mirror in which the aggressors gradually come to see themselves as violating the humanity of their victims. The innocent, voluntary suffering of the *satyagrahis* is unusual and provocative; it progressively disarms the adversaries because the “screen” or “mirror” provided by those practicing nonviolence constantly reflects back to the aggressors a monstrous image of which they are still not conscious. The killer of the

Catalonian priest Joan Alsina Hurtós, who was gunned down in Chile on 19 September 1973, beheld the mirror of Joan, who pardoned him with great sincerity: “Please don’t blindfold me. Kill me face to face because I want to see you so that I can forgive you.” Tormented by that torturous memory, the executioner experienced profound repentance, and years later he asked pardon of the Joan’s family, who also forgave him. He was, however, unable to bear the remorse of his crime; he committed suicide in June 1999. The mirror of Joan had transformed his conscience and saved him from killing anyone else, but sadly, like Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus, he was unable to discover the pardon of God. Without that discovery, the two malefactors could not forgive themselves, raise themselves up, and start over again.

Contemplating one’s own monstrous image in the mirror of the “active nonviolence” of the Servant can never leave one indifferent. When Isaiah 52:14 bluntly states that “his appearance was disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred more than the sons of men,” or when Isaiah 53:2 declares, “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him,” what is actually being described, unwittingly, is the terrifying image of the torturers themselves—it is they who are devoid of human beauty and therefore utterly undesirable.

The fourth song seeks to capture the surprise of those who see the paradoxical contrast between the Servant’s exterior behavior and what was really going on within him. The “sprout” (or literally, the “infant at the breast,”

53:2a) is a tender shoot that no one imagines will turn into a robust plant; the arid, infertile soil seems to make its thriving impossible, but the root that the shoot sinks deep into the earth is extraordinarily resistant. The outward appearance of the Servant, disfigured and sickly, stands in sharp contrast with the mission which surges forth from him and penetrates the heart of his tormentors. This useless, bloodied wretch is God's instrument for changing and saving the world, for removing our own infirmities.

When the outrages against the oppressed are constantly repeated, they become truly intolerable; they fill us with rage. We express our indignation with the popular refrain: "It doesn't rain, but it pours." We ask why the Syrians, who were already desperately poor, have been so horribly maltreated, robbed, killed, and exiled by rebels, by government troops, and by the Islamic State. They have had to flee for their lives, trying to find some country that will give them refuge. Meanwhile, Europe has refused humane treatment, preferring to gas them or shoot them, building strong walls, and abandoning them again to hunger or obligatory return.

The fourth song conveys the reality of this "repetition" with the graphic image of infirmity. The sickness is not caused by a microbial infection. When the poem speaks of "familiarity with suffering" (53:3a), it is referring to the natural consequences of undergoing severe suffering over a long period of time (Jer 10:19). This particular infirmity produces disgust and is unpleasant to contemplate; people hide their faces and look away (53:3b). It is similar to what happens when the TV news

programs report on our earthly hells: it's supper time, so we change the channel because we've had "enough of such tragedies." Or it's similar to what happens when cities are welcoming famous presidents or celebrating important events: they feel the need to "clean" homeless persons off the streets so that they can't be seen. That is how we hide the living faces of those repeating the excruciating history of the Passion. We are dealing with the paradigm of the excluded, as we see in the tragic conclusion of Isaiah 53:3d: "He was despised, and we esteemed him not." In other words, when we were welcoming somebody or preparing an event or making political decisions, we planned our affairs without taking him into account: we wrote him off.

The poem begins by describing the external appearance of the afflicted Servant: he is the sprout or the shoot seen on the surface (verse 2a). But then a visual descent begins in verse 4, and we see the "roots" (verse 2b) that are causing the Servant's suffering: the extraordinary efforts required to bear with our infirmities, our transgressions, our crimes (verses 4-6). What becomes manifest is the divine self-discipline involved in being constantly subject to violence, and responding not with violence but with serenity and tenderness. Such self-discipline made the Servant appear externally helpless and sickly due to the great battle that was going on within him. Starting from that point of inflection in verse 4, which begins to go "underground," all the language about external sickness (image, pain, disease) becomes a vocabulary about sin and interior healing (piercing, transgression, crime, punishment, wounds).

But it is not only that. When the poet tries to descend in search of the causes of such a desperate situation, he finds that “we” are involved, and in verses 4-6 he stubbornly repeats the pronoun nine times (in three sets of three, signifying totality). Who is this “we”? The “we” are not identified as the persons responsible for killing the Servant. Nowhere does the text say, “We led him to his death.” Rather, a careful reading of verses 8-9 reveals that the Servant has been “cut off from the land of the living” (a Hebrew phrase applied also to those excluded by reason of leprosy) because of the “wicked” and the “rich,” that is, those who have the power to manipulate the economy and enforce their decisions by the use of arms. This interesting expression leads us to recognize what we call “structural sin”: it may be that “we” have not physically killed him, but “he” has died because of our transgressions and all the bad choices we make when we elect corrupt politicians, when we pollute the environment a little more, when we react with indifference to cruel decisions, when we join the crowds in heaping ridicule on “him.” ... We were the ones who should have received the punishment, declared bankruptcy, consumed foul drinking water, suffered because of a close relative’s problem. ... But he took all the afflictions on himself and freed us from them. Certainly our comfortable passivity is lethal. In our homes we have clean water and an easy life; we live far from the armed conflicts—we therefore have no need to behold the Servant, the One who bears all our transgressions, the One who faints under the weight of our crimes.

2.2.3. The defective one is the chosen one

But the poem goes further still: verse 4 moves beyond this exclusion by “voluntary amnesia”: not only did we fail to consider him in our calculations, but we actually gave him a negative value, considering him “stricken [by contagion], smitten by God, and afflicted.” Here the poem’s meaning takes on an exponential force: the Hebrew verb for “stricken” refers strictly to leprosy; it is a technical term indicating that anyone diagnosed with the disease is to be immediately subject to the most radical social exclusion. In Israel lepers were excluded from worship (Num 5:2) and from society in general: they were forced to wear ragged clothing, live far from the villages, and cover their faces while crying out “impure, impure” (Lev 13:45-46). Moreover, their disease was considered a curse inflicted on them by God for some good reason (Num 12:10; 2 Chr 26:19). The use of the term “stricken [by leprosy]” appropriately links the Servant to the physical violence he suffers: severe beating results in the formation of bruises, sores, and rashes on the body of the victim, giving him the appearance of a leper.

The Servant is portrayed as suffering from leprosy, the most impure, frightful, and isolating condition conceivable in the Jewish world of that time. It is therefore shocking that the fourth song proclaims that precisely this rejected man is the one chosen by God to be the instrument of salvation for all peoples (52:15; 53:11).

In order to understand the meaning of this statement, we have to exam-

ine the Jewish calendar. During the feast of the Expiation –Yom Kippur, the most important feast of the Jewish year– two male goats were used to expiate the sins of the whole people. One goat was sacrificed to YHWH, and its blood was sprinkled on the people and the Temple. It was believed that the blood, being life itself and so coming from YHWH, was the only thing capable of cleansing the impure state in which the people found themselves because of their sins. With the sprinkling of the blood of this first goat, friendship with YHWH was restored. Onto the other goat, however, were loaded all the sins of the people, and he was sent out into the desert to die, as a symbol of the people’s will to eliminate every evil. Given this background, we find details in the poem that seem to point to this conclusion: the Servant was not only first goat killed (being holy and so worthy of YHWH and able to purify with his blood), but he paradoxically was also the second goat, who bore the people’s sins (being abominable, dedicated to Azazel, and worthy of destruction). The words of Isaiah 52:15, “So he shall sprinkle [with his blood] many nations,” make us think of the first goat: the Servant will purify even the Gentiles with his blood. Verbs like “bear” and “lift” which are found throughout the poem (Isa 53:4.5.6.8.11.12), refer clearly to the second goat (cf. Lev. 16:22): the Servant bears the sins of the people. It is the part that is most difficult, most inward. The verb “lift [sins]” has a meaning in Hebrew similar to our “lift the penalty”: he is willing to lift our transgressions so that they can be forgiven.

We can honestly wonder why the fourth song, if it refers to the sacrifice of the goat on Yom Kippur and if the key word is “lift,” insists so strongly on the impurity or “defectiveness” of the Servant, for any impurity and deformity would certainly have disqualified him as a sacrificial victim. It was essential that no animal with any defect could be sacrificed, lest that wrath of YHWH be stirred up (Deut 17:1)! Historically, the Servant afflicted with leprosy was probably a symbol that the Israelites exiled in Babylon used to describe their situation. After they returned to their homeland, the symbol helped them explain why it was that they, excluded from their homeland like lepers, had all the same been chosen by YHWH to be a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6), a model people called to open the doors of salvation to all peoples.

Even apart from this historical context, these passages are the living Word of God, and so they send a challenging message to generations of every age: those who are most punished in our group or community, those who seem excluded from all ability, those who bear with so much unjust suffering –they are precisely the ones chosen by YHWH to reunite those who are scattered, to open the community up to include everybody, to be shining stars that orient “all nations.” Those who are utterly excluded, lying impotently in their sickbeds; those who live miserably because of the decisions of the powerful; those who are subject to constant contempt and violence–they all have an incomparable mission, one that gives meaning to their unspeakable suffering⁴: “to give light” to the nations

by their testimony and by the innocence of their lives, to “include,” which is the most genuine expression of the maternal care of YHWH for his creatures; to “save” the executioners by not returning evil for evil, but by practicing the internal nonviolent discipline of the third song so that the executioners experience superabundant mercy precisely where they are wounded; and to “justify” (make practitioners of justice) not a few but “*the many*” (Isaiah 53:11), which in Hebrew means “as many as possible,” excluding only those who close off their hearts to the end. Isaiah proclaims that those who are the least and the last, the world’s rejects, are the blazing torches summoned to demonstrate the power of YHWH: those who have been totally *excluded* are the instruments that allow God to *include* the totality that is missing.

To proclaim that this mission was being carried out by means of a leper, the supreme symbol of abandonment by YHWH (2Chr 26:21), was to declare that NOBODY would be excluded from his Kingdom. Moreover, it would be precisely those most oppressed, those most weighed down

with the transgressions of others, who would be the agents of a salvation capable of welcoming, integrating, and including one and all. Thus, the Servant songs show that YHWH chooses to save humankind by means of what human beings consider most vile and repulsive, what is totally useless: the sick instead of the healthy, the poor instead of the rich, the disabled instead of the abled, the unlettered instead of the scholar, the unknown instead of the famous, the “public sinner” instead of the devout and the righteous. With whose eyes do we contemplate all these groups today?

The inclusive mission of the Servant by inhabiting even the deepest realms is aimed precisely at attracting every tribe of humankind and inviting them to set out as pilgrims and descend to their vital place, where they will commune with one another at the humblest level, without some setting themselves above others. This is the dream of God, the mission of the Servant, who will “prolong his days” (Isaiah 53:10) in the many generations who will accept to continue practicing his mission.

3. THE PROPOSAL OF NONVIOLENCE: NAÏVE OR INTREPID?

When, in conversations with acquaintances, I propose active nonviolence as a way to resolve conflicts characterized by irrational brutality and sadism, the response I often hear is: “You’re too naïve.” They assure me that “those fanatical extremists who dismember and murder their countless victims won’t change; they don’t have the heart needed to be disarmed solely by contemplating the faith of the *satyagrahi*.”

According to these acquaintances of mine, the extremists in question will never be able to understand what humanity is. They are a lost cause. The executioners of Jesus must have been a lost cause as well, but he acted as a perfect *satyagrahi* right up to the cross. So what is “active nonviolence”? Is it only a question of interior struggle, an effort to maintain an exterior aspect of “peaceful passivity” in the face of aggression? Is the mirror of the *satyagrahi* too passive to help in the resolution of many injustices? The following chapters will be dedicated to answering these questions from the perspective of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels,

specifically in the examples he gives in Matthew 5:38-42.

Before treating this matter, however, I would like to touch again on the three ways of dealing with a conflict that I mentioned earlier. The first way is fighting, that is, forcefully returning violence for violence until the conflict comes to an end. The second way is flight, something very different from the Servant’s interior struggle, which seeks to confront the oppressor with a mirror of innocence. Flight means simply avoiding the conflict by escaping, yielding, accepting the oppression. It is the most passive attitude possible. The third way is the active nonviolence

practiced by Jesus and so many others, and this is the way I want to offer you in these pages: an active method of resistance and of nonviolent strategies for dismantling the hells.

Everyone can understand that the second option, flight or yielding to the injustice, is a possible reaction, but it will never resolve the conflict. However, there is less clarity about the first option, fighting or violent struggle. Therefore, before describing in more detail the third option of active nonviolence, I want to explain why fighting can never be a solution to conflict. Jesus says as much himself: “Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt 26:52). I actually find so few people who reject using violent action against extremists and great cruelties that I feel obliged to develop this point further. I want to make evident the fallacy in resorting to force and explain why violence can never produce true peace, not even as a temporary measure to stop the enemy.

3.1. The myth of redemptive violence

I invite you for a moment to recall the cartoons you watched as a child. Remember the films you saw, the novels you read, and the other types of entertainment you enjoyed. I am sure that in many of them the same pattern appeared: a cruel, treacherous tyrant threatens the peaceful existence of a community with which we identify, but then suddenly a hero appears who is able to fight against the oppressor. By the end of the story, the hero has

punished the enemy and wiped him off the map, thus restoring peace to the world. Happy ending. The conclusion of this logic is clear: violence against the wicked “redeems” or “saves” us from their wickedness. This conclusion has been constantly instilled in us since infancy through the mass media, the arts, literature, and popular culture. We simply take it for granted.

If we had to put a name on this way of thinking, we could call it the “myth of redemptive violence.” Its most ancient roots can be found in the Babylonian myth of creation, the *Enuma Elish*, composed around the year 1250 B.C. In the *Enuma Elish* the basic pattern is this: the father God, Apsu, and the mother goddess, Tiamat, produce many lesser gods, who live in the body of Tiamat. The lesser gods make so much noise that Apsu decides to kill them so that he sleep in peace, but Tiamat resists. Before Apsu can carry his plan into action, one of the younger gods kills Apsu, and Tiamat swears that she will exact vengeance. From that moment on the gods live in terror of the goddess Tiamat. Here we can recognize the well-known story pattern of a menace that requires a hero to oppose it. To avoid being destroyed and to establish peace, the gods commission one of their number, Marduk, to take action. Marduk murders and dismembers his mother Tiamat, thus causing the cosmic explosion which gives birth to the Universe we know. This myth serves to justify violence as something that has been necessary for survival in this world since the dawn of creation. Creation is not an act of love but the result of a murder. While there may now be love and goodness in the

world, evil came first, preceding whatever good may now exist. This vision of creation is contrary to that of the Bible, which places the first humans in an idyllic paradise where everything is good—until evil, in a second moment, enters the scene.

The myth of *Enuma Elish* and all the stories that repeat its pattern today assume that in the midst of chaos there cannot be order without violence, for the universe originated in violence. It is also the case with domestic violence, or the ubiquitous video games, or many political strategies. A majority of the Hollywood films we watch portray police officers or soldiers wielding their weapons to destroy the malevolent forces menacing American cities. They are the “agents of order,” heroes to whom we delegate our violence to insure that we are protected from criminals. We need to feel that it is possible to defeat great injustice; we need to believe that there is somebody, a hero, who is powerful enough to wipe out evil at its root and to destroy all who resort to it. Peace through war, security through violence—such is the creed of societies armed to the teeth against threats, societies founded on fear. And every so often a terrorist attack will sadly confirm the fact that this type of peace and security, attained by means of violent repression, has still not resolved the conflict with the enemy. The myth of redemptive violence is nowadays the dominant religion; questioning it is nigh unto blasphemy.

But this myth derives from a simplistic vision of reality, one that divides the world into the absolutely good and the absolutely evil. The powers of this world have a great interest in by using

this myth to produce fascination, gratification, and entertainment because it renders societies uncritical and keeps them immature. By dominating people through this dualistic vision of reality, the powerful insure that their own decisions (wars, corruption, pollution, poverty, etc.) will be approved by the people who vote for them; they convince the people that such decisions are essential for maintaining the country’s security. The myth effectively nullifies every means for empowering society and advancing interiorly. It makes people into brutish animals acting only on instinct: action-reaction. Mercy for those who have caused evil does not exist; the death penalty is justified. According to the myth, the wayward person cannot change; the thief and the murderer are not criminals who can still rehabilitate their lives; rather, they are enemies of the human race who must be destroyed or isolated forever so that the rest of us can remain “pure and in peace.” The myth takes for granted that we are flat characters, always the same, not human.

Why do the victims of these systems of redemptive violence submit so readily to this mentality? The first step for dismantling these hells forcefully established by every powerful authority is realizing that the myth of redemptive violence is based on a fallacy: that the world is made orderly and freed of evil by the destruction of enemies. In reality, it becomes orderly and free of evil only when the enemies are integrated back into society. This awareness provides an extraordinary interior liberation: we are now free to ponder the decisions of the powerful critically, and we are free to disobey. The

oppressive system can be maintained only when supported by the majority.

The Finnish program KiVa against bullying in schools has been a great success: 98% of the victims feel that their situation has improved. The secret of the program is that it does not work only with the victims and the bullies; it also invests much time in imparting formation to the rest of the class in order to progressively weaken the ties that give power to the aggressor. It cultivates generalized disobedience to the oppressive system.

The first principle of active nonviolence is non-cooperation with evil. This stance has its consequences: the *satyagrahis* know that they will suffer much more acting as such than submissively accepting the myth of redemptive violence. They will be swimming against the current and will often be misunderstood and persecuted. However, in some cases, nonviolence as a mirror, after the manner of the Servant, may not be sufficient: the audacity of disobedience will be required. It may be necessary to practice active nonviolence to the point of risking one's own skin and paying the ultimate price.

The fourth Servant's Song describes for us how redemption, salvation, and right order will be reestab-

lished by YHWH through a dynamic process that is completely contrary to the myth of redemptive violence. If we truly want YHWH to reign, if we want God's kingdom to come, then we must disobey the myth and perform the Servant. This is what so many biblical narratives affirm: the process YHWH uses time and again to correct his people is the *rīb* or "contention." The *rīb* is different from ordinary courtroom justice, in which a judge inevitably condemns either the accused or the accuser. In the *rīb* there is no judge: the victim (often YHWH himself in the Bible) constantly goads the accused (in the Bible, usually the people, often under threats of misfortunes or destruction) for the sole purpose of having them change their attitude and saving themselves. This is the big difference: myth does not distinguish between "evil" and "evildoer": everything gets crushed. And since this happens by force, the dynamic of violence expands and multiplies: the friends and relatives of the victim now want to take vengeance. Such are the diabolical vicious circles of the many wars still being waged today on our planet. They continue because we lack the courage to disobey the myth and enter into a third way of resolving conflicts, the way of Jesus of Nazareth.

4. DISOBEYING BY EXCESS

Disobeying the myth of redemptive violence is equivalent to disobeying the dynamics that maintain oppressive bonds in situations of conflict. But those who disobey tyrants or encourage others to do so often risk their lives: sowing terror is a weapon that the powerful readily wield to prevent their victims from making free decisions. That is what happened to Óscar Arnulfo Romero, archbishop of San Salvador, during the civil war, when in a homily he dared to challenge the orders that had been given to soldiers: “Do not kill. ... No soldier is obliged to obey an order that is against God’s Law. No one has to comply with a law that is immoral. Now is the time for you to recover your conscience and to obey first your conscience rather than a sinful order.” One day later, on 24 March 1980, Archbishop Romero was assassinated while celebrating the Eucharist.

4.1. Introduction

If disobeying tyranny is such a dangerous endeavor, we have to analyze whether it is really possible to dismantle the hells. The boldness of nonviolent activists will consist precisely in being creative: they will seek effective strategies for breaking the bonds which make people obey unjust laws. Doing so en masse will inevitably weaken the tyrant: this lesson has been learned by

many presidents and other leaders who fear—or even prohibit—social networks like Facebook and Twitter, which are able to facilitate massive disobedience.

While simply disobeying the myth releases the victim from its control, the *satyagrahi* practices a more radical type of disobedience, disobedience by excess, in order to attain a more radical transformation of reality. Such disobedience comes at the high cost of personal sacrifice, and it provokes

confusion and amazement even in the aggressors. Simple disobedience places aggressors in an uncomfortable situation of surprise and disarray: they cease to have power, and they begin to realize that their victims have human dignity for they are making decisions on their own. However, disobedience by excess goes beyond the surprise factor, forcefully grabbing the oppressors' attention and stirring their emotions. The *satyagrahis*, by showing themselves ready for self-sacrifice and generosity, earnestly seek to win over the hearts of the malefactors. The tyrants can react in one of two ways: they can pigheadedly take advantage of the *satyagrahi* and treat them even more cruelly and perversely, or they can be truly dismayed and begin to retreat, realizing that they do not want to go that far. The *satyagrahis* send them a clear message: despite their despotic ways, they still consider them to be worthy human beings, and they are more than willing to help them. This type of response, with a superabundance of goodwill and kindness, can move the oppressors to remorse and open their eyes to the contrast between the utter innocence of the *satyagrahi* and their own twisted perversity. Thus are the oppressors disarmed and the hells they have created dismantled. But it is not easy –there is always risk. One needs only enough faith to resist.

4.2. Matthew 5:38-42: three points, an infinite plan

Jesus decided to perform the Servant so as to let the Father enter into the heart of History and transform reality.

But Jesus' proposal for resolving conflicts did not include only the powerful nonviolent mirror of the *satyagrahi*, which the Passion narratives brilliantly portray. Both the larger and the smaller conflicts that surrounded Jesus and worried him had specific names, such as the abusive power of the wealthy, the contempt of masters for their slaves, and the exploitation and humiliating demands of Roman soldiers. That is to say, these were hells that consisted not only in the wicked brutalities of enemies but above all in the creation of bonds of enslavement: forcing dependency and control on individuals, dominating them through instruments of oppression. How could such cruel forms of domination be dismantled?

The Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew's gospel, preserves the memory of a precious statement that Jesus once made, offering three concrete examples for dismantling the hells founded on bonds of enslavement. In the face of such hells, the nonviolent mirror is necessary but not sufficient for undoing the armor and curing the blindness of the oppressors. I invite you to enter into and understand well the depths of this third way of Jesus. Far from resorting to fight or flight, this third way inspires us to practice authentic active nonviolence as a way of turning around the most difficult situations of oppression.

4.2.1. The statement of Jesus about revenge

The text we propose to discuss, Matt 5:38-41, is found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). It is the fifth of a

series of statements Jesus made in explaining his interpretation of the heart of the Mosaic Law. Contrary to the way they are usually interpreted, verses 39c-41 are not examples of passive non-resistance to adversaries (Matt 5:39); rather, they are very active, creative responses. Verse 42, on the other hand, treats of a different matter. Since it does not appear to fit into the context, I will not consider it here. Suffice it to say that, while verses 38-41 treat of the way one should behave with a malefactor, verse 42 treats only of dealing with a simple debtor; not only does it have a different syntactical structure, but it breaks with the main thrust of Jesus's answer and Matthew's theology.

First of all, we should interpret correctly the main topic of this fifth section of the Sermon (vv. 38ff.). Its premise is the *lex talionis* (Exod 21:23; Lev 24:18-20; Deut 19:21). This was the traditional norm which dictated the proper response to those who perversely inflicted evil on others. The *lex talionis* (from the Latin *talis*, which means "such") set a limit to the amount of retaliation allowable, thus reducing the amount of irrational vengeance (cf. Gen 4:24). Retribution was to be proportionate to the harm that was inflicted ("an eye for an eye, and tooth for tooth") without increasing it.

Desiring to reinterpret the Law and not change it (Matt 5:17), Jesus cited some polemical passages but then interpreted them according to the heart of God. According to Jesus, we have to know what God's will is regarding the evildoers, and whether God wants us to respond to evil with the same evil. If we trace a "mental line" from the outsized vengeance of pre-Mosa-

ic times to the precisely proportioned vengeance of the Law, we will see that the ultimate intention of the Word of God was not to respond to evil with evil but to reduce evil as much as possible. Matthew 5:39 introduces us into a different universe: if we trace that mental line to its end, then we see that the most sublime and most divine response is "not to resist evildoers." This phrase is difficult and open to mistaken interpretation. The word "resist" in the phrase (in Greek, *antisténai*) should be understood as "armed resistance"⁵ The command of Jesus would therefore mean: "Do not resist evildoers [violently]." But given a situation of aggression, the logical question of any disciple would be: "What, then, do we do with aggressors?"

The response of Jesus would be by way of inspirational example. Just as the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-27) presents an example that responds to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29), so the counterexamples in Matt 5:38-41 are not normative but inspirational in character: they are meant to suggest other similar, creative actions. They demonstrate how a radical change of coordinates is possible in responding to those who enslave us. All the counter-examples creatively explore concrete new situations whose aim is to provoke in the malefactors a concern for human dignity. These novel tactics seek to help the tyrants by putting them under nonviolent pressure so that they make decisions that they never would have made on their own. In fact, this type of strategy treats the malefactors as sick persons who are in need of treatment (active nonviolence); its goal is to

achieve the healing that their interior dynamic could not achieve by itself. In contrast to the harmful effect of resisting [violently], active nonviolence is a harmless treatment that agrees to bear with suffering without being ensnared by it; it uses “prophetic” gestures to help the aggressors recognize that they have before them not mere objects but human beings possessed of freedom and dignity.

If these counter-examples in Matthew are actually rooted in the oral traditions that come directly from Jesus, as seems to be the case, then there is great significance in the specific situations he chose as a way of illustrating the behavior he considered appropriate in the face of oppressors. When the offenders are close-minded and cannot be changed by reasoning, it is necessary to resort to active nonviolence. Jesus insists on speaking directly to the oppressed for it is they who, acting from below, from their apparent suffocation, have the power to transform the situation.

4.2.2. First counterexample: turning the other cheek

The first of these counterexamples (Matt 5:39cd) cites the instance when someone strikes the cheek of another person: “If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other [cheek] also.” The interpretations we most frequently hear appear to counsel stupidity: they encourage a docile offering of the other cheek, thus advocating a form of passivity that will only perpetuate the aggression. Are we to think that Jesus of Nazareth, who wit-

nessed so many cases of unjust suffering, would have suggested to his disciples that they simply continue to wear the same chains of oppression for the indefinite future? The question itself appears senseless, but that is what we hear in countless homilies. Are we able to look into the eyes of a woman experiencing domestic violence and give her that interpretation of Jesus’ words?

We should note, though, that in the scene pictured by Matthew (which seems true to the original one), the blow is not an ordinary one. It seems rather to indicate a relationship of radical inequality between the two persons. The text states that it is the right cheek that is struck. Since the left hand (which is the one that would normally strike the right cheek) was considered impure and so was never used,⁶ the text must be referring to a blow with the back of the right hand. Such a blow would have been intended not simply to cause physical pain, but to humiliate and demean the victim: it was a gesture used by masters against their slaves. Legally, receiving such a blow could bring the victim compensation worth 400 days of labor!

Given such a severe penalty, we must suppose that the aggressor would never deliver such a blow if the victim had access to any kind of legal protection. Quite probably the victim could not even imagine having such a right to such protection, even less so if no other persons were present, for Deut 19:15 allowed legal recourse only if two reliable witnesses could testify. The victim Jesus chooses for his first example suffers oppression and is totally defenseless. The relationship between the two persons would be a vertical one,

such as that between master and slave, father and child, or husband and wife—remember that Semitic society was strictly patriarchal. The intention of the oppressor would not be to cause a physical wound but to disgrace the victim as much as possible. What recourse could there be in such a case, given the inequality in the relationship?

In essence, what Jesus proposes is carrying this perverse practice of the Law to its limit, thus turning this way of controlling people by means of ill-treatment into its opposite. By turning one's head and offering the left cheek, one makes the second blow easier for the aggressor, but the aggressor finds himself in a quandary: he cannot strike again with the back of the right hand because he would be hitting the victim's nose, nor can he strike with the back of the left hand because of the above-cited customs that render the left hand unusable. The aggressor would therefore be obliged to punch the victim with his right fist, or at least slap the victim with his right palm. But a punch was used only in a combat between equals, and a slap with the palm of the hand was considered much less humiliating than a blow with the back of the hand. Consequently, the gesture of turning one's head to offer the other cheek, far from being an instance of stoic submission to oppression, would have been a movement that deprived the violent person of power and control. It would also have defiantly condemned the violent behavior as inhuman. Surprise and violence are psychologically incompatible. When the oppressor ends up surprised, there is a sacred instant when something can pass through his mind: on the one

hand, he might think that the victim has gone mad, but on the other, he might realize that the victim is affirming his dignity nonviolently and decide to go no further.⁷ As in every case of active nonviolence, the decision assumes the victim's willingness to undergo more self-sacrifice, for the tyrant can take advantage of the occasion and strike again. The disciple of Jesus accepts the risk of more suffering because, even though the nonviolent gesture seems to have failed, it will leave the aggressor emotionally disoriented. Great faith and great creativity will be needed to keep coming up with new nonviolent actions, and to persist in them until the victim's stubborn dignity succeeds in dismantling this particular hell.

4.2.3. Second counterexample: a dispute over a garment

The second counter example (Matt 5:40) presents a court case in which the victim is deprived of his garment: "And if anyone wants to sue you and take your tunic, hand over your cloak as well." To understand this statement, we need to know its context, which is the socioeconomic reality of first-century Palestine.

Most likely Matt 5:40 was referring to the situation of small farmers who became so indebted that they were unable to repay what they owed. They were consequently taken to court to make them pay off their debts, even with their garments. The small farmers' inability to cancel their debts was due not to their irresponsibility but to real economic abuses. They could not hope for receive genuine justice from those who were much more powerful.

One detail in Matthew's version is certainly unusual: the order of the garments is reversed as compared to Luke's version, which reads: "If someone takes your cloak, do not withhold your tunic from them" (Luke 6:29). Luke's version certainly seems more logical: in a robbery, the first garment to be taken would be the exterior one, the coat. In Luke's theology, the excess of generosity consists in offering even one's shirt, but Matthew inverts the terms: "If anyone wants to sue you and take your tunic, hand over your cloak as well" (Matt 5:40). Even in the context of a legal proceeding, it seems very strange to require the defendant to turn over his tunic (inner garment) and leave him with only the outer garment. Could it be that the evangelist made a mistake?

Although Wink thinks that such is the case,⁸ my own opinion is that that Matthew's order might better reflect what might happen in this type of case. The laws enunciated in Exod 22:25-26 and Deut 24:12-13 explained clearly what was allowed: "If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset" (Exod 22:25). Even so, the exploiters could interpret the law in a way that allowed them some benefit: if they could not keep the *cloak* indefinitely because of the laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy, they could at least keep the *tunic* for as long as they liked (as Matthew's text states). In this way they would inflict even greater humiliation on the victim, who would have to turn over his interior garment. How would it have been possible to respond to such a flagrant injustice?

The proposal of Jesus consists, again, in taking to the extreme of ab-

surdity this manipulation of the Law. The act of handing over the cloak is not to be understood as an angry gesture, as when the crowd threw down their cloaks in Acts 22:23. Rather, the Greek word means simply to "leave" or "deposit" the garment with the malefactor. What is Jesus' intention, then, in proposing that the debtor hand over his last piece of clothing, and indeed the most costly piece? Clearly, at that point the debtor will be left completely naked before the court!

To understand better what nakedness meant in Semitic culture, we should study an apocryphal text from the *Gospel of Thomas*: "Mary said to Jesus, 'Whom are your disciples like?' He said, 'They are like children who have settled in a field which is not theirs. When the owners of the field come, they will say, Let us have back our field.' They (the children) will undress in the presence of the owners, and they will give the field back to them." This strange text shows that stripping naked, in conditions of inequality, was an act designed to make the adversaries feel ashamed of what they were doing. In the Semitic culture, moreover, the aberration of being naked in public was considered scandalous because it violated the system by which persons could be socially recognized by the clothing they wore. The elimination of any type of social rank was thought intolerable, but at the same time it was a way of demanding to have one's humanity recognized.⁹

In conclusion, then, the provocative counterexample offered by Jesus shows, first, how very rigid interpretation of the Law leaves poor people naked, impotent, and outcast; but it also

shows how that very nakedness could provoke shame in the creditors who contemplated it. Moreover, because it was the oppressed debtor himself who took the initiative in voluntarily handing over his most valuable garment and being left naked, his shocking action constituted a direct accusation against the inhumanity of the established system: it was the cry of one who was oppressed but still free and able to choose; it was a cry denouncing the creditor, the judge, and the whole system of shameful practices –but without ever losing one’s human dignity. As a prophetic act, it forced the creditor to reconsider what he was doing; it gave him scruples of conscience. This, then, is the first step that nonviolent persons should take in the difficult task of rescuing the malefactors. It is the only way to dis-mantle the hells once and for all.

4.2.4. Third counterexample: going the extra mile

The third counterexample offered by Jesus is found in Matt 5:41: “If anyone forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two miles.” Actually, the original Greek does not talk about carrying a pack; it simply uses the verb *angaréuo*, which means “to do *angaria*.” But what is this *angaria*?

This practice seems to have had its origin in the communications system used by the ancient Persians and Greeks when transporting goods or sending messages. Traveling from one place to another with horses was very slow since the animals got tired; precious hours were lost at night while the horses rested. The *angaria* system was

developed to remedy this problem; it consisted in distributing a number of different horses all along the route so that travel could continue day and night without being interrupted. This method was used also in Israel and was finally adopted by the Romans, who later modified it for their own needs. Roman law allowed Roman officials, military or otherwise, to expropriate beasts of burden which belonged to others (and which they were supposed to return but almost never did). The law also allowed them to recruit individuals and force them to transport materials. It seems that there was a limit of one mile (1.6 kilometers) for this practice, but no specific Roman law has been found which states that. Also, Matt 27:32 gives evidence of a case of *angaria*, when Simon of Cyrene carried the cross of Jesus to Golgotha, a trajectory of about one mile.

Because of the maltreatment involved in using human beings and animals to carry heavy loads, the practice of *angaria* was detested and feared by the local populations. The threats and the abuse used in recruiting people were such that in later centuries it was necessary to regulate the practice by imperial decree in order to lessen the people’s resentment. Wink’s article¹⁰ cites many testimonies comparing this practice to death itself; there are accounts of whole villages fleeing their homes to avoid being recruited by the Roman soldiers. On the other hand, the rich were able to pay a sum of money in order to be exempted from this obligation.

Jesus’ response to this abusive practice seems quite bold: as in the other cases, he wants to carry this perverse law to a ridiculous extreme. When the

victim, after going one mile, decides to continue for another mile, the official not only loses control over his load but also violates the legal rubric which gave him the right to draft this “senseless” person. The resulting uncertainty disconcerts the exploiter and diminishes his power; on the next occasion, he might well think twice about submitting another person to *angaria*. Moreover, the Jewish citizen succeeds in affirming his own dignity as a human being by boldly asserting his freedom to choose: he shows that he is not a beast of burden. Even if the soldier wants to, he cannot report this disobedience by excess because he might well be punished himself. We have no detailed information about the punishment imposed on soldiers who exceeded the legal limits of *angaria*, but the truth is that almost any penalty –whether fines¹¹ or even death¹²– is imaginable.

In conclusion, these three counterexamples of how to respond to oppressors without violence (verses 39c-41) follow a similar pattern. The victims respond to a cruel and selfish imposition of the Law by appealing to their human dignity through bold acts of nonviolence. Instead of responding aggressively, the victims try to provoke a troubling sense of uncertainty in the malefactors, who are forced to rethink their attitudes toward the victims. It is very different from passive submission: it is the active nonviolence of Jesus.

4.2.5. Conclusion: how to help the oppressors by disobeying them

To conclude this analysis of Matt 5:38-42, let us review what we have consid-

ered up to this point. We have discovered that the malefactors who oppress others as a way of life produce so many victims and such an anti-Kingdom ambience that something more than the *satyagrahi's* “mirror” of humanity is needed: in order to recover that reflective force, strategies of distraction and transformation must be employed. Active nonviolence appears here as a moral imperative; its aim is to disorient the exploiters and shake their certainties, which are based on oppression; and the final goal is helping them realize that they have before them persons with dignity who are free to decide. To accomplish this the victims, by conquering other's heart through pains, will brazenly decide to exceed what was demanded of them (in blows, in garments, in miles); they are willing to undergo more suffering, if necessary, in order to disarm the malefactors. None of these scenes, therefore, smacks of passivity or submissiveness. They are not examples of non-resistance, such as might conform to the imperative, “Do not resist the evildoer” (5:39b); rather, they are counterexamples of nonviolent resistance, and they are completely coherent if we understand that verse to mean “Do not resist the evildoer [violently].”

It is very interesting that Jesus, in both the fifth and sixth sayings of the discourse, counsels behavior that is independent of the adversaries' reaction and even of its own effectiveness. The response of active nonviolence that Jesus recommends is not casuistic (if they react this way, do this; if they do the contrary, do that). He does not even demand the prior cessation of the violence being committed by the

adversaries. The attitude of Christians depends not on the reactions of others but on their relation to the Father who is in Heaven (5:35). Novakovic¹³ ventures to describe a twofold possibility that would realistically follow from the proposed circumstances. Either (A) the adversaries decide to ignore the dignity-affirming stance of the victim and redouble their maltreatment—striking again, taking the cloak as well, mockingly accepting the extra mile—or (B) they reject the “idiotic” offer after perceiving in the gesture an affirmation of the victims’ humanity. In the latter case (B), the victims’ disobedience by excess—which paradoxically *helps* the malefactors—will again constitute a mirror of humanity in which the wrongdoers can contemplate their own monstrous behavior. As they become sufficiently aware of the injustices committed, their own image will cause them disgust, and they will retreat. Even if still unmoved by the victims’ nonviolent ways, they will at least begin to have pangs of conscience.

If the victims’ remonstrative act seems to have failed, as in case (A), the very same type of nonviolent act may

lose its surprise effect in the future, so that it will be necessary to devise a new gesture of active nonviolence. The aggressors will counter with tactics of their own: accepting more blows will not give them pause; the authorities will decree that being naked in court merits a prison sentence; or the Roman Empire will promulgate a new law declaring that any citizen who extends the *angaria* for more than a mile will be detained and flogged. The apparent defeat is not important because the way of Jesus does not depend on the reaction of the oppressors. The three counterexamples are inspirational in character, not normative. Nonviolent persons, drawing on their deep faith and creativity, will devise new gestures of provocation that will allow them to deliver the same message of human dignity. With these three points in “space” (the counterexamples of Matt 5:39c-41), Jesus marks out the coordinates for an infinite plane of nonviolent actions capable of cutting short any conflict and dismantling any hell, not by “defeating” the oppressors but by “rescuing” them, in imitation of the Father.

5. CONCLUSION: FOUNDATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN NONVIOLENCE TODAY

As newscasts bring us countless reports of massacres in unending wars, of armies attacking or defending positions, of terrorist acts of every type, of millions of migrants fleeing from bombings, it might appear utopian and even naïve to think that nonviolence, the third way of Jesus, is capable of resolving any type of conflict in our day. We Christians might incline to be pessimistic regarding our principles; discouraged, we might turn away from a type of combat for which we have not even been trained.

For many years I have heard a great variety of skeptical reactions to the proposal of nonviolence: “Jesus was very radical, and he held up ideals toward which we must advance, but in our day and age nonviolence is unviable.” This is the opinion of many profoundly committed believers. But it hardly seems plausible that Jesus would have chosen such explicit examples of creative provocation as a way of dealing with conflict if he thought that in very serious cases we could no longer rely on nonviolence but would have to swing 180° and rely in violent repression. Or the objection may put

it another way: “Active nonviolence is very idealistic and principled, but it has never been perfectly practiced in history. ... It is not feasible, especially on a large scale.” In response, it might be that we don’t know history well enough. In his book Bartkowski¹⁴ gives detailed accounts of more than 300 large-scale nonviolent actions in 15 countries on different continents. He clearly demonstrates that active nonviolence has been and continues to be an effective means of combat for many communities. In fact, active nonviolence brought about a definitive resolution of the conflict in many of the

cited cases. In contrast, violence makes it nearly impossible for warring groups to come together, heal the wounds and repudiate vengeance. In conflicts like those in Iraq and Syria we have so far beheld much *flight* (hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing from the terror) and terrible *fighting* (not only the bombings and the campaigns against terrorists, but also Christian groups forming armed militias to wage their own wars). But sadly, we have not seen examples of the third way of Jesus. We cannot know whether such strategies are impractical and ineffective because they still have not been tried.

No doubt there are persons who do not respond to humanity; their brains have been washed. Blinded by hatred and fundamentalism, they behave as if they were machines. Nevertheless, many fighters have deserted even the ranks of the Islamic State because they could not stomach such cruelty and extremism. If we look closely, each side uses similar arguments for excluding the other: the terrorists state that their adversaries are like animals (“cock-roaches” was the term used to incite the genocide in Rwanda in 1994) and need to be exterminated. If, for our part, we as Christians also assume that terrorists are beasts or machines, incapable of human feelings, then we have to ask ourselves whether we are truly incarnating the will of God or are rather following the same blind logic of exclusion.

If we can learn anything from the book of Revelation, written during times of persecution, it is that even the most terrifying and tyrannical empires do not last forever; they shatter and fall apart. I admit that the present situation is certainly difficult; no con-

flict is ever resolved easily. The degree and the quality of active nonviolence needed to deal with a conflict depend on the gravity of the situation. When a bloody war suddenly breaks out, trying to transform the situation by means of active nonviolence might present a tremendous challenge, but we need to ask: when the times were peaceful, were the communities sufficiently prepared and trained to practice this very demanding level of nonviolence? It happens to be exactly the same as trying to send an army to battle without training it. As Church, we have a choice: we can keep the faithful docile and submissive, or we can empower them and inspire them with the active nonviolence of Jesus so that they can resolve every type of conflict, both internal and external. But without training, who can run this race?

If we are true followers of Jesus, we will try to imitate him also in our everyday decisions, both major ones and minor ones. Probably some of the cases mentioned here are not relevant for many readers. Our hells may be particular persons: people who ruin our reputations, people who make life impossible in our neighborhood or community, people who never listen to anybody in our group. But the nonviolent dynamic of the Kingdom is the same. If I have used these particular examples, it is precisely because they present the most extreme cases, which include all the others. Jesus shows himself to be closely connected to the nonviolent tradition of the Servant of YHWH and also with the tradition of the biblical *rib*, the dynamic of insistently provoking the malefactors’ to get them to change their behavior. If any

of us are experiencing a hell, whether small or great, we need interior training so that we can deal with it (Isaiah 50:4-9) by becoming human mirrors and practicing nonviolent actions that unsettle our tormentors.

To help Christian communities integrate into their daily lives Jesus' proposal for resolving conflicts that derive from oppression, I make bold to offer a concluding synthesis of some of the key elements I have discovered in these texts. My desire is that every community take advantage of times of peace to prepare and train itself for the daily practice of active nonviolence. Such nonviolence cannot be improvised. At the same time nonviolence is essential for creating spaces of redemption and rehabilitation in all types of conflict, even for the malefactors.

The teachings of Jesus have revealed to us an important intuition, namely, that the root of violence is the perpetrators' belief that they have the incontestable power to impose their will on others through violence. The way to dismantle this hell, therefore, is to help the perpetrators discover what they are incapable of discovering on their own: namely that this principle is false, and that violence will never allow them to control the situation definitively.

Drawing on this intuition that we find in the biblical texts, I offer the following basic criteria for actively practicing Christian nonviolence:

1. Sustained contact with the Father who is in heaven (Matt 5:45.48) is absolutely necessary in order to be able to imitate him in the face of conflict. Prayer is the main source of energy of the nonviolent, who learns to contemplate the malefactor in the same way God does.
2. Every instance of active nonviolence should seek to rescue the offending persons and include them (Matt 5:44).
3. We must reject all cooperation with evil or humiliating actions, even when such rejection means greater suffering (Matt 5:39c-41).
4. We must not let the concrete results of nonviolent actions (whether they succeed or fail) influence our faith in the direction we have taken: the outcome will be positive if we persist vigorously and creatively (Matt 5:45).
5. We should pursue actions which will help the oppressors understand that their violence will not gain for them our obedience or submission (Matt 5:39c-41). Such actions must be:
 - a) Unexpected and surprising, so that the resulting bewilderment creates a vulnerable spot in their conscience.
 - b) Non-punitive, so that the wrongdoers are not harmed but rather are rescued by having their hearts touched.
 - c) Ever new and creative.
 - d) Born of the initiative of the victims so that they give evidence of their human dignity and their ability to make decisions (they are not passive objects).
 - e) Demonstrative of the futility of using violence against the victims and of their willingness to suffer more, if necessary.
6. In the face of enemies who are aggressive but do not enslave those around them, the *satyagrahis'* mirror of innocence will constantly re-

flect back to them their insufferable image until they agree to change (Isaiah 52:13-53:12).

This short road map, based on the revelations of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and

Matthew 5:38-48, hopefully will illuminate for us a divine road through stormy nights of violence, a road by which the Heavenly Father can lead to his Kingdom, by means of us, even the most reprobate of malefactors.

1. MORERA PERICH, Joan (2014-2015). *La No-violencia como lugar activo de redención. Diálogo comunicativo-pragmático del Cuarto Canto del Siervo con Mt 5:38-48*. Thesis for licentiate in Biblical Theology. Rome: Gregorian Pontifical University.
2. Throughout the text I will refer to the divine name YHWH with the four letters revealed in the biblical books.
3. Treatments of Jesus' nonviolence often manipulate the episode of the expulsion of the merchants from the Temple (Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:27-33; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:14-22), claiming that Jesus used violence to drive them out. This conclusion is completely false: the Greek text gives no evidence that Jesus attacked people with a whip; the whip appears only in John 2:15 and refers to a goad used to make animals move. Jesus' action was a prophetic gesture against the abuses committed by the merchants; it may be considered a provocative prophetic action called in the Hebrew Bible a *rīb*, which I will explain further below. A thorough study of this topic may be found in ALEXIS-BAKER, Andy (2012), "Violence, Nonviolence and the Temple Incident in John 2:13-15." *BI* 20/1-2, pp. 73-96.
4. For a better understanding of the meaning of suffering, I highly recommend MESTERS, Carlos (1983), *La misión del pueblo que sufre*, Madrid: Ed. Paulinas. It is an interpretation of the Servant poems from the perspective of the suffering of the people.
5. WINK, Walter (1992), "Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Jesus' Nonviolent Way." Louisville: *Review & Expositor*, vol. 89, no. 2, pp. 197-214. This study shows how in the Septuagint Bible this verb refers primarily to armed resistance (Joshua 7:13) or military attacks (Deut 25:18) against enemy troops.
6. Generally the left hand was considered impure or cursed (Gen 48:13-26; Judges 3:15-21; 2Samuel 20:7-10). Using the left (impure) hand would therefore have meant recognizing that the action committed was a crime.
7. In this regard, some of the concrete examples mentioned by Wink are interesting: WINK, Walter (1999), *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, New York: Doubleday, pp. 145-160.
8. WINK, Walter (1992), "Beyond Just War....," *Op. cit.*, p. 211, note 15.
9. An example of this is the nakedness of the man lying half-dead in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30).
10. Concretely in WINK, Walter (1992), "Beyond Just War....," *Op. cit.*, pp. 202-205.
11. MAURICE, Maurice's *Strategikon*, I.7.13.
12. FLAVIUS, Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum*, 3.102-103.
13. NOVAKOVIC, Lidija (2006), "Turning the Other Cheek to a Perpetrator: Denunciation or Upholding of Justice?" Annual SBL Meeting, Matthew Section: Reading Matthew in a Time of War. Washington D.C., p. 13.
14. BARTKOWSKI, Maciej J. (2013), *Recovering Nonviolent History: Civil Resistance in Liberation Struggles*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

This booklet examines two biblical proposals for confronting violence: the first is *THE MIRROR OF THE SATYAGRAHI*, which shows a person's readiness to sacrifice self for the sake of transforming the malefactor's heart, following the example of the Suffering Servant; the second is the *ACTIVE NONVIOLENCE* of Jesus, which models itself on the three examples he offers for responding to those who oppress systemically. Both proposals seek to move beyond the visceral logic of the myth of redemptive violence. We offer below some question for individual or group reflection:

THE MYTH OF REDEMPTIVE VIOLENCE

1. Am I aware of how the *myth of redemptive violence* is present in my milieu? Do I understand how its presence has affected me? Have I read books, seen films, or heard stories in which tyrants must be destroyed in order to save the world? Think of examples.
2. Have I let these ideas become consolidated in my mind? What is my opinion of the death penalty? How do I view the arms race and the various wars against terrorist groups, considering the disastrous consequences in the countries where these wars are waged? Are there some conflicts in which I distinguish clearly between the good and the bad, or rather, am I able to comprehend the suffering that both sides undergo? Am I concerned about life sentences for prisoners? Do I want to help ex-convicts become reintegrated back into society?

THE MIRROR OF THE SATYAGRAHI

3. In a prayerful, meditative state, let me read the second and third poems of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12). Am I able to interiorize the blind faith of the Servant of God, willing to suffer despite being unable to understand the reasons? Is God the protagonist and the model for my responses to the violence inflicted on me? Does my contact with God help me to learn from his manner of acting? Does it train my senses, as the Servant's senses were trained?
4. How do I view my group's attitude toward those who are "defective" (the sick, the disabled, the poor, the rebellious, etc.). Am I able to value them as instruments of God and help integrate them into my group? Do I make other more sensitive to them?

5. Let me recall some personal experience in which I have suffered violence from an adversary, one who has not managed to impose oppressive bonds on me but who has despised and sought to injure me. Did I respond in the manner of God? What do I need so that this divine manner arises spontaneously in me? Am I able to sustain greater suffering in order to take action to change the situation? Would I be capable of a creative response like that of the woman trained in nonviolence, as described by Walter Wink in the following paragraph?

Carrying heavy bags, a woman was coming from the supermarket and returning to her home. As she walked along a deserted street, she noticed that she was being followed. When she sensed that the footsteps were getting closer, she turned around suddenly and smiled at the stranger who was advancing toward her. She gave him the bags saying, "Thank heavens you've come! I hate walking alone along these streets, and these bags are really heavy!" The disoriented stranger accompanied the woman safely to her home.

(Excerpted from Walter Wink,
The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millenium, 145-160)

THE ACTIVE NONVIOLENCE OF JESUS

6. Apart from legal or institutional actions to safeguard children who experience bullying, what should we recommend for day-to-day happenings: flight? or fight? or the nonviolent action of Jesus? Are we able to confront a hellish situation with some ingenious response that succeeds in dismantling the hell?
7. Let me recall some personal experience –or some experience I know about from work, friends, family, neighborhood– in which someone has oppressed me by weaving about me a web of submission, either by using threats, bullying, blackmail, abuse, or by persecuting me for not committing abusive and immoral actions. Apart from taking possible legal or institutional action to bring an end to the hell I am suffering:
- a) ¿Do I strive to discover God's manner for dealing with this situation so that both my adversary and I gain something, and so that I don't end up winning at any price?
 - b) Am I able to humanize my oppressor, or do I consider him/her an irredeemable animal?
 - c) How can I stop cooperating with these oppressive bonds and with any immorality involved in them?
 - d) What creative, unexpected action might I take to reclaim my dignity without punishing my oppressor? In what ways can I take the initiative and show that I am not afraid?
 - e) Can I make some decision that will help me not to be discouraged by negative results and to persevere in my determination to keeping trying new actions? (In support groups, testimonies about similar actions could be read.)

8. Let me call to mind some hell in which oppressors are at work on a global scale (a political conflict, some social group, some communities or movements in the Church...), and let me try to pose the same questions. How might I involve myself in a way that will promote and practice the nonviolence recommended by Jesus?

Cristianisme i Justícia (Lluís Espinal Foundation) is a Study Centre under the initiative of the Society of Jesus in Catalonia. It consists of a team of university professors and experts in theology and different social and human sciences, who are concerned with the increasingly important cultural interrelations between faith and justice.

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