

# Nonviolence and Hope for the Future

By Bonnie Wasniewski

Is our world getting more violent?

Do we really understand the meaning of nonviolence?

Wikipedia — the online, user-edited encyclopedia that enjoys wide use in the United States — tells us that nonviolence is “...a philosophy and strategy for social change that rejects the use of violence.”

I found it interesting that Wikipedia further explained that “a person may advocate nonviolence in a specific context while advocating violence in other contexts.”

Let’s look at that for a minute or two.

Statistics report that various types of violence are on the rise, while the age groups perpetuating the violence are getting younger. According to the United States Centers for Disease Control, persons under the age of twenty-five accounted for fifty percent of those arrested for murder and sixty-five percent of those arrested for robbery in 2006.

So what does this mean for us personally?



I’m sure that “violence” and “nonviolence” mean something different to each and every person living in the world today. You could ask twenty people what nonviolence means to them and you may well get twenty different answers, depending on each person’s encounter with violence.

We live in a world almost saturated with violence of varying degrees: school violence, bullying, prison and domestic violence, child abuse, rape, road rage, bombings and war to name a few.

What do we do about it? What are we doing about it? What is the answer to end violence?

Perhaps we also need to ask ourselves a more basic question: Is it even possible to end violence?

I, for one, remain convinced that we need to work for peace and that violence can be lessened. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, “It isn’t enough to talk about peace. One must believe it. And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it.”

When I was growing up, my parents often told my brother, sisters and me that if there was something worth doing, we should do it well and keep working at it. The work for nonviolence is important. It is worth working at it.

Being aware of how we speak to each other is an important part of working toward nonviolence and putting it into practice. Words can hurt. The words we speak should be of compassion, understanding and caring. Obviously, this can be very difficult under certain circumstances, but it’s certainly not impossible. It takes effort to use “nonviolent-speak,” but it’s definitely worth the trouble.



There are many opportunities available to learn more about nonviolence, no matter where we live. It is up to us to take advantage of those opportunities. Especially in today's world — the world of Internet, email and social networking — we are exposed to a wide variety of programs, events and resources that can help us along the path toward decreasing (and one day, perhaps, eliminating) the violence in our world.

One opportunity toward this end is the annual Season for Nonviolence. The Season for Nonviolence is an international observance spanning 64 days, beginning January 30 and concluding April 4. The dates are significant as they mark the anniversaries of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The Season for Nonviolence is a grassroots campaign dedicated to demonstrating that nonviolence is a powerful way to heal, transform and empower our lives and our communities. It is observed

in various places — and in various ways — across the country and throughout the world.

Due to its very nature, the Season for Nonviolence has strong resonance with the character and charism of the Franciscan movement. The Franciscans have long been advocates of peace and nonviolence. Their founder, St. Francis of Assisi, lived in a turbulent age marked by civil unrest and fighting for money and power. The nobles and merchants of Francis's day engaged in bitter struggles against each other to gain prominence and wealth. Serfs were the servants of the noble class and treated horribly.

Francis, being the son of a wealthy merchant, was able to see both sides clearly. Much to the dismay of his father and mother, he renounced his standing in society, gave away his possessions and took up the plight of the minores, the powerless and destitute of society. He both joined their ranks and became their champion, receiving the nickname *Il Poverello*, "the little poor man of Assisi."

Eight centuries later, Franciscan institutions and ministries still strive to embody the peacemaking character of *Il Poverello*. The Franciscan Renewal Center of Scottsdale, Arizona, is one ministry. For the past several years, the center, known locally as "the Casa," has been actively involved in the promotion of the Season for Nonviolence.

"Francis believed that he and his brothers needed to be mediators of conflict, working to bring peace to individuals, communities and nations," says Patti Sills-Trausch, director of Faith in Action Ministry at the Casa. "Being faithful to this...the Franciscan Renewal Center participates in the Season for Nonviolence. The Faith in Action ministry offers retreats, workshops and prayer experiences so all can learn more about the practice of nonviolence in order to grow God's peace in ourselves and share it with the wider community."

The Franciscan Renewal Center's involvement in this "season" is somewhat unusual, however. The center observes the sixty-four days devoted to the International Season for Nonviolence, but recognizes that its message and goals extend beyond those two months. Consequently, the Casa also offers many events and programs throughout the year that focus specifically on nonviolence and peace. In this way, the Franciscan Renewal Center tries to provide multiple opportunities for both the local community and those visiting from other states to learn about nonviolence from a broad range of experts in the field.

The Casa begins its observance of the upcoming 2011 Season for Nonviolence with a one-day retreat on January 29 with Terry Rynne, author of *Gandhi and Jesus*. On February 11, the center will show the film *Monseñor: The Last Three Years of Oscar Romero*, with a special guided discussion session featuring the filmmaker, Father Robert Pelton, CSC, a Holy Cross priest from Notre Dame, Indiana. Later that month, on February 19, Sister Kathy Warren, OSF, will explore the implications of St. Francis's historic dialogue with the Sultan Malek al-Kamil in "The Saint and The Sultan: A 21st Century Message of Peace and Possibility."

The Franciscan Renewal Center offers a four-part workshop series on compassionate communication beginning March 2, and will take part in a peace walk on March 19. Extending beyond the "defined" Season for Nonviolence are programs on peaceable anger (May 14), "Popcorn, Pizza and a Peace Movie" (June 3) and the World Day of Peace and special Festival of Peace (September 21), which will celebrate peace Franciscan-style. Details of all programs and workshops will be posted on the Franciscan Renewal Center's website: [www.thecasa.org](http://www.thecasa.org).

Obviously, these events and programs are just some of the resources available at one location. As someone committed to the Franciscan

vision of peacemaking, I encourage you to look for programs that will meet your own individual needs. Whether you know a little or a lot about peace and nonviolence, there truly is something out there for everyone. You — and the knowledge you have about peace and nonviolence — are our hope for the future.

In closing, I recognize that during this time of economic struggle, with high unemployment and heightened anxiety about the future, it is not easy to be at peace. Even so, we can hope that by living in God's presence we stay focused and find the peace within to live, love and work with nonviolence.

I wish you peace and joy!



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