

THE CLINTON FRANCISCAN JOURNEY INTO ACTIVE NONVIOLENCE

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In the past two years, the Clinton Franciscans have been seriously engaged in fulfilling our 1992 General Chapter commitment to deepen our understanding of active nonviolence. Frequently we are asked how we came to this point in our journey. In this article, I will summarize the events that led us on our journey into active nonviolence.

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In May, 1989, one of our sisters participated in a Faith and Resistance Retreat. The focus of the retreat was the gospel call to active nonviolent resistance, and it included an opportunity to participate in faith-centered, nonviolent, direct action. As I read her three-page reflection on the experience, I paused over the following lines:

In preparing for the witness of civil resistance, we discussed how the principle of nonviolence called us not to think of the military as our enemy, nor of ourselves as somehow morally superior to them. Consequently, there was an atmosphere of respect. We began to talk with each other, and as the afternoon passed, the atmosphere began to change. The military personnel began to change...began to loosen up, and we saw them more and more as the persons they are.

As Franciscans, we say that our ministry needs to be relational and collaborative. For me, the words above are a description of relational ministry. I lingered over those words, because I was wondering how we, as a congregation, could bring this kind of relational attitude to our daily living and to all of our ministry: this attitude of respect; of having no enemies; of not being morally superior to anyone; of readiness to dialogue: this opening of our hearts to conversion.

Jesus said: "Do you know that a little yeast has its effect all through the dough?" (Cor. 5:6). Saul Alinsky concretized those Gospel words by telling us that 2% of any group totally committed to an idea or a way of life can change the whole group. At that time, two percent of our whole congregation was three sisters.

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In the spring of 1990, I invited three sisters to participate in the Franciscan Lenten Weekend sponsored by the Nevada Desert Experience (NDE) in Las Vegas. NDE is described as a voice in the desert calling people of faith to nonviolence in the face of violence; to truth in the face of illusion; to hope in the face of despair; to love in the face of fear. One sister went to the Lenten Weekend. She said that it was a turning point in her life.

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In the fall of 1990, an invitation was extended to all Clinton Franciscan sisters and associates to participate in the 1991 Corpus Christi Desert Experience which also was held in Las Vegas, Nevada. This was a five-day, faith and resistance retreat sponsored by over 100 religious congregations and organizations. As a congregation, we helped finance the retreat, and we offered to sponsor the participation of six of our sisters. In preparation for the Desert Experience, all sisters and associates were invited to share in a series of group reflections, to pray and to fast to help transform the hearts of all of us including the six sisters who had asked to participate in the Corpus Christ Experience.

On their return, those six sisters and two others who had previously participated in similar retreats were invited to give witness during the annual congregational retreat. Some of the concepts they shared about nonviolence were:

- * One who practices nonviolence can have no enemies, only opponents, that is, persons who have opposing values, ideas, actions. Even opponents are our brothers and sisters.

- * Our nonviolent efforts, energy and actions are always to be directed toward a system or an issue, and not at persons. There is to be no judging or blaming of others.
- * If we are to act nonviolently, we need to be aware of our inner selves and our own inner violence.
- * Everyone has part of the truth. Openness to the truth in others is essential to active nonviolence. It creates a climate of trust.
- * Acting out of truth, love, and justice frees or engages a force that is greater than any other force.

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A short time after this witnessing, the Nevada Desert Experience beckoned again, and four of our sisters and one of our associates went together to Las Vegas for an eight-day journey into a deeper experience and awareness of nonviolence intended to help them grow in nonviolent spirituality and develop the skills of active nonviolence.

Saul Alinsky's theory seemed to be proving true for us. In surfacing issues for our 1992 General Chapter, active nonviolence appeared as one of the main concerns of our congregation along with care of the earth, nurturing the feminine, and action on behalf of the poor and marginalized. We decided that active nonviolence encompassed the other three concerns and was a new way of understanding them. Our prayers during Chapter reflected this perception -

*God of truth and justice, we ask you for the honesty and openness to look
at our own violence: toward the earth,
toward the poor and marginalized,
toward the feminine.*

And this realization also directed our reflections. We searched for how -

We could respond nonviolently to the earth by

We could respond nonviolently to the feminine by

We could respond nonviolently to the poor and marginalized by

We concluded our 1992 General Chapter by making the following commitment -

We choose to

nurture our Franciscan spirituality of compassion, courage and connectedness with all creation by committing ourselves to a deeper understanding of active nonviolence.

The General Council decided that the best way to fulfill the chapter commitment would be to take immediate action as a group. All five council members, along with one other sister and two associates, participated with the Western Shoshone Nation in the "Global Anti-Nuclear Alliance Call to Healing Global Wounds" at the Nevada Test Site in October, 1992, the fifth centenary of the Columbian expedition. During the three-day ritual, we prayed and celebrated, listened to Native American stories, participated in civil resistance, were arrested and released.

Being five among two thousand people from very diverse backgrounds gave us some feeling of what it is to be a minority. We experienced overwhelming fear in the presence of physical violence. We soon understood the great need for training in nonviolence. We discovered that we had enormous trust in each other. That trust helped us to remain at least physically nonviolent in a violent situation.

Before leaving the desert, we met with the staff of Pace e Bene, a Franciscan service in active nonviolence based in Las Vegas. Pace e Bene is an outgrowth of NDE organized and operated by NDE founders Rosemary Lynch, OSF, Father Louis Vitale, OFM, and Alain Richard, OFM.

Seated in a circle on the desert floor under a tent, buffeted by a strong wind, we asked the guidance of the Spirit and of the Pace e Bene staff to help us formulate a four year congregational plan that would guide our journey into active nonviolence.

We are now two years into living that plan which has meant:

- * Establishing an ongoing lecture series at our College which has included an address and campus visit by Dr. Robert Muller, retired Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations and current Chancellor of the UN University for Peace in Costa Rica.
- * Making a video of six of our sisters sharing their experiences and struggles with active violence and active nonviolence.
- * Two series of regional meetings during which discussion, role playing, reflection on that video, and prayer were used to help us develop physical, psychological and spiritual skills for living active nonviolence.
- * A PeaceRites Workshop, "Disarming the Self" - a movement workshop about creating peace by reflecting on scripture and prayer and shaped through the medium of dance.
- * Small groups using the booklet "Love Beyond Measure: A Spirituality of Nonviolence" (Pax Christi Publication).
- * A congregational retreat directed by Rosemary Lynch, OSF, and Louis Vitale, OFM, staff members of Pace e Bene.
- * Congregational participation in the INFACT campaign to eliminate the marketing and sale of cigarettes to children.
- * Sponsorship of the Corpus Christi Desert Experience II. Three of our sisters who had not participated in a Desert Experience before attended.
- * Sharing our belief in and understanding of active nonviolence with other groups, particularly within our city, which has resulted in the establishment of a local Chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. and of an ecumenical study group on active nonviolence.

The yeast of nonviolence is raising consciousness worldwide as well as in the minds and hearts of Clinton Franciscans. We realize that our journey as a congregation has barely begun. We also realize that each one of us is at a different place on this journey.

As I write this article my heart is filled with gratitude for the disciples of active nonviolence - the yeast people - who have gone before us to bring us to this point: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, the Quakers, and so very many more, most especially our dear friends at Pace e Bene, Rosemary, Louis and Alain.

My heart is also filled with hope for all those disciples yet to come.

Do you recognize yeast in your midst?

Do you feel the dough rising?

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