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**Jean Lasserre and Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Two witnesses to the message of peace**

Two "Fathers in the faith" we present here, one French and one German. They met in the 1930s when both were scholarship students at Union Theological Seminary, a Protestant divinity school in New York City. One of the main themes of their dialogue was how Christianity faced the issue of violence. It is enlightening to compare their thoughts from way back then with the now-dominant Christian positions.¹

I. Biographical notes

(B) John, my friend, what a joy to see you again today at L'Arche de Saint-Antoine!² We went through a lot of interesting things in the thirties. I think here of unforgettable conversations late into the night in New York. I felt a deep unity among the two of us who were both European theologians. The novel by Erich Maria Remarque "All Quiet on the Western Front," written in 1929, inspired these conversations, and the film based on the book was so harrowing. We watched it together and came out of it very shaken. I remember trying to console you on the way home...

(L) At that time, our pacifist convictions deepened. We were led to recognize that faith should have more authority than the old patriotism, more authority than the words of the Marseillaise: "Allons enfants de la patrie ..."

(B) And more authority than what we were singing "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles", because we should rather sing "guide our feet on the way of peace" (Richte unsere Füße auf dem Weg des Friedens, Mennonitisches Gesangbuch Nr. 481)

(L) Apart from these discussions, we also experienced some beautiful moments together. Do you remember our adventures en route to Mexico in that rickety car? And the surprise of students in Victoria, when they heard a German and a Frenchman speaking with one voice?

(B) You guided me in furthering my Lutheran theology into a more practical one by making me aware of the importance of a radical obedience to the commandment of love. It was for me like a conversion that went deeper in me than I originally thought. Later, when I was in prison I saw you as a true saint! It is you who inspired my book "The Cost of Discipleship." I learned to take a fresh look at the Sermon on the Mount from you. Yes, you have awakened in me the desire to grasp the actuality of divine grace.

(L) I was definitely inspired by my teachers in Paris - for instance, by Wilfred Monod - who taught me to love the Beatitudes and to consider them the foundation of the Gospel. At that time, I was rather shy and reserved, but you encouraged me to come with you in 1934 to the World Youth Conference in Fanö, Denmark, where you delivered your speech on peace. You said: "There is no peace on the path to security, because peace is audacious, it's an adventure that is not without risks. Peace is the opposite of security. Giving priority to 'security' means mistrust which in turn leads to war." But, at that time, there were few people who understood this truth! For my part, what mattered was the idea that the body of Christ, and even the entire human family, is not destroyed by nationalist ideologies. We were committed to conscientious objection, which at that time was still a shocking idea. We also affirmed that no war should ever be called "holy".

(B) The same year, I visited you at a mining area in the North of France, Bruay en Artois. You lived there as a pastor among the workers. That visit led me to a deepening of the social justice question and confirmed my desire to be on the side of the workers and the poor in my pastoral work.

(L) And finally there was your visit to our family chalet in Les Houches in the Chamonix valley where I was spending my vacation. This was our last meeting. For the dates of August 17th and 18th 1932, you wrote in our guestbook: "Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Berlin, thank you from the bottom of my heart for two beautiful and unforgettable days with the family of my friend Jean, in which I felt what might be called an atmosphere of profound communion".³ Then the war broke out and we never saw each other again. With the help of a German soldier named Heinrich Gellermann, I tried, during the war, to send you a letter ... through him, I received twenty letters before your execution. It is with gratitude, my dear friend, that I remember our various meetings!

II. Our discussions on the topic of the peace testimony

(B) We both are proponents of a political ethics based on Christianity. Yes, the Sermon on the Mount must be normative for our lives. That's what I tried to emphasize in my book on discipleship. Not only should we take seriously the "last things", but also the penultimate. In my book on ethics I write also of my belief that we Christians should practice the politics of the Gospel, even if in so doing we create something extraordinary, something that the world does not really understand.

(L) We can not make a distinction between private life and political life. Christ wants us whole and it is only in this unity that we are credible. It must be seen especially in our strict rejection of violence, war and revenge. We believe in Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, even if, precisely in this area, we have too often been unfaithful. The Church can not suppress violence, but it can cease to legitimize violence and war.

(B) You have presented to us the image of Jesus in his passion, "Ecce Homo", so vividly and you have compared him with our ideal of manliness and heroism

(L) Jesus gave us the example of absolute non-violence. In the New Testament, there is no single message that contradicts this assertion, not even John 2:15 which refers to the cleansing of the temple. Jesus chased the animals out of the temple, but he did not hurt the people. And when, before he was arrested, he recommended buying swords, it was not a call to violence. We must understand that order figuratively. Jesus wants to say: the crisis is imminent! No, Jesus' obedience to the commandment of love was absolute! And neither are we allowed to defy this commandment.

(B) You have demonstrated that in the first three centuries Christians took non-violence very seriously. I was very struck by the list of occupations that were not allowed for those who sought baptism, such as military service and prostitution.⁴ You speak also of the "Constantinian heresy" from the fourth century when Christianity became the state religion. That's where you located the decline of the Church. Neither you nor I are historians, but it seems that on this subject your position is too black and white. As the Roman Empire became influenced by Christianity, there were certainly those who put their faith into practice while assuming responsibilities in various areas of public life.

(L) I don't call this into question. My radical interpretation applies only to the issue of violence. And in this regard, the order of Jesus was betrayed because humans have adapted to the prevailing culture, which is what happens even today. Our churches, do they not need conversion on this particular point, in order to rediscover that the kingdom of Christ is one and indivisible?

(B) Yes, here is the part that decides if we are faithful to the first commandment of God, if we follow the pagan god Mars or if we follow the Father of our Lord Jesus. I agree with you on this point. It is not only a question of ideology, of the so called "holy" wars, but also economic interests and profits, abuses against civilians, psy-

chological trauma and the drift into barbarism. It is not only about the loss of a moral compass in the military, it is about the fundamental impossibility, for a disciple of the crucified, to kill.

(L) Our generation has reflected deeply on the question of the relationship between Church and State. We must guard against adopting an attitude of false servility, but neither should we adopt an attitude of withdrawal from public life. What does "let everyone be subject to the governing authorities" mean according to Romans 13? We want to respect the law, work for the good of the city and commit ourselves without abandoning our critical faculties. But there are situations where we need to follow our conscience, in which we must resist against injustice, in these situations, vis-à-vis the state, we have an obligation to act as prophetic sentinels. It is then that the phrase "We must obey God rather than human beings." (Acts 5:29) applies.

(B) There needed to be opposition to the immeasurable suffering inflicted on so many human beings by Hitler's evil regime. I was ideologically close to your pacifism, as you know, but I saw that I had to intervene, to prevent him from harming more people. That's why I joined the resistance group for the July 20th attack. At that time I did not pursue the option of nonviolent resistance. Yet there were examples in countries occupied by the German army and even in Germany, such as the protests of women in the Rosenstraße in Berlin. I joined the resistance group of officers - it was a personal decision that I made and I realize that I can not generalize for everyone. I dared to pursue violent action and I accepted the idea of killing the tyrant. As you know, it did not succeed. I consciously put my life at risk ... Those who did nothing had blood on their hands. Those who engaged in resistance as did my Christian friends, were also guilty. Was I unfaithful to the Gospel? I do not know ... perhaps I should have asked more specifically what Jesus would have done under such circumstances.

(L) Dear Dietrich, I respect your decision. You did not want to remain passive in the face of evil. Yet, even if the goal was to defend and protect the neighbour, the nation or other threatened persons, the end does not justify the means. I must know what actions, what strategies correspond to the commandment of love. I know very well that many people think that pacifism is a narrow, rigid, legalistic attitude. But Jesus and the apostles did not hesitate to give very concrete ethical guidelines that, in addition to what is culturally appropriate for our situation, apply to us today. We found in the Gospel that Jesus is the "yes" from God to us. So we can thank him by obeying his word. Violence and murder can not be any expression of this recognition!

(B) I am very touched by your unconditional commitment and straightforward path in following Jesus it gives me food for thought. Maybe I might have made another decision if I had been a student of Gandhi. You remember he invited me and I wanted to go visit him in India, but I did not go since I was given another task.

(L) Yes, at the time it would have helped all of us. But let us try to define nonviolence again. It is certainly neither passive nor cowardly, nor an escape from suffering. We do not want to capitulate to violence, but we do not want to be complicit in it. We need to implement other means than those of the opponent who is willing to use violence. Should we in this case suggest a boycott, a strike, sabotage?

(B) What is important is not to comply with the opponent's laws, yet to respect the oppressor as a human being, not to undermine their dignity. We should be an example, seeking dialogue with them publicly, calling on their conscience. Such civil disobedience should put the oppressors to shame, and should put pressure on them without causing suffering to them and those who advocate violence. It is I who must be prepared to accept suffering, as Jesus accepted the cross. Nonviolence is not a strategy but a spiritual attitude, a lifestyle that best reflects the Gospel. But this lifestyle too we must learn and we must exercise. At the time I did not have the oppor-

tunity to go all the way in my thinking. It was you who fleshed that out as editor of the *Cahiers de la Réconciliation* in post-war years and in publishing your book "War and the Gospel" in 1953. I thank you for this.

(L) What has remained incomplete in our lives , our spiritual descendants will continue and deepen. To work for peace, we must try many approaches, there are still many discoveries ahead of us. We have reached the end of our conversation. Can you give us one last word?

(B) My life was too short. I was beginning to comprehend the radical nature of Jesus' commandment to love. In 1934 at Fanö I had a moment of prophetic clarity, a year after the seizure of power by Hitler that led to World War II and the death of 50 to 60 million. I was 28 then and I said something which I had not yet grasped the full weight of: "so that the world, though it gnash its teeth, will have to hear, so that the peoples will rejoice because the church of Christ in the name of Christ has taken the weapons from the hands of their sons, forbidden war, proclaimed the peace of Christ against the raging world." We had to learn that the pain of conscientious objection and non-violence is really the path on which we can credibly attest to the peace of God and the commandment of love of neighbour.

(L) Yes, we must take seriously the entire Gospel, no matter if we become unpopular, if we upset the old equilibrium between the Church and the world. We all feel the need for a new Reformation. The first reform focused on the first commandment and stressed the authority of scripture, justification by faith, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit and the priesthood of every believer. The new reform is expected to give authority to the command to love and finally seek means other than the military for necessary protection. Our churches, are they capable of such a change in direction? Could they testify publicly to such a deep repentance? We can do nothing else but to kneel and pray that the Holy Spirit touches all of Christendom. That could create a whole new Reformation. It's not too late, but it is urgent!

1. For further reading; *War and the Gospel*, Jean Lassere, 1962 (English. James Clark & Co Ltd ISBN:978-0227676356)
2. This dialogue was presented for the International Conference of Church and Peace at L'Arche de Lanza del Vasto, St Antoine L'Abbaye, France. The conference was held parallel with the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation of the *Decade to Overcome Violence* in Kingston, Jamaica.
3. From correspondence with Christiane Lassere, Jean Lassere's daughter.
4. Hippolytus of Rome, in the Didache