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[About MID](#)
[Bulletins](#)
[News](#)
[Events](#)
[Glossary](#)
[Links](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Support MID](#)
[Benedict's Dharma](#)
[Gethsemani I](#)
[Gethsemani II](#)
[Gethsemani III](#)
[Abhishiktananda Society Bulletins](#)

[Help](#)

Geshe Lobsang Tenzin: Discussion Suffering Caused by Personal and Structural Violence

Rev. Thomas Baima, Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, Professor Ewert Cousins, Dr. Janet Cousins, Joseph Goldstein, Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, Archbishop Felix Machado, Eric Marcoux, Ven. Chuen Phangcham, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Geshe Lobsang Tenzin, Danielle Witt, SSND

from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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Page 1 of 2

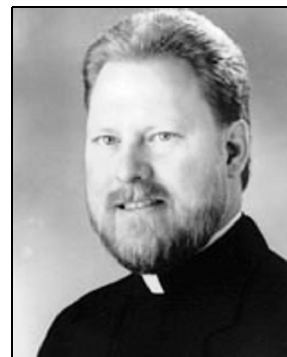
Dialogue after Geshe Lobsang Tenzin's Presentation

Chuen Phangcham: Currently, we are experiencing many types of violence, disturbing all beings individually, monastically, and worldwide. As we learn from the Buddhist standpoint, the main causes of violence are hatred and selfish desire, the latter which builds onto the unclear mind. In our meditation practice, we become aware that whatever harm or violence occurs the problem is that we are careless at that moment. So mindfulness and awareness should be our first priority. If we have very strong awareness and mindfulness at every moment, we can be aware of what has happened to our mind and feelings, and can observe anger or fear appearing in the mind. If we are mindful enough we know what will happen if we follow the path of hatred. So awareness and the mindfulness is the key.

Thubten Chodron: I was thinking about the quote from His Holiness that violence is any action done by hatred, and that's definitely true. I would like to propose that we consider expanding the definition, because one of the things that's made it difficult for us to identify or watch over violence is that sometimes the mind that perpetrates it isn't one of hatred. It's one of arrogance or greed. I would like to talk about the elephant in the room that we've all been ignoring. I say this as a Buddhist, and our tradition has had a number of scandals, too, and

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Rev. Thomas Baima is Vice President and Provost the University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary in Chicago and Associate Professor in the Department of Systematic Theology. He served as Director of the Office for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Archdiocese of Chicago. He is an advisor to the board of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue.

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people being abused. It seems to me that when our own religious institutions become abusive, it's because of arrogance, self-complacency, or attachment to protecting the institution or the individual in a certain position. I think it's something that as monastics we have to look at, because it's going to be difficult to come up with a response for the problems of others when we can't heal our own houses. I say this with respect and compassion: In the Catholic communities now, are people discussing what's been happening in the Church? Is there a forum in your individual communities to discuss this, or have people been discussing it just two on two because there is no public forum? Is it something that people avoid discussing? How are you handling this as individuals and as communities?

Thomas Baima: Let me just talk about the institution I serve in, Mundelein Seminary. Seminaries have been somewhat at the forefront of the story because we are the ones who train priests. We've done four things in response to the sexual abuse scandals, the first of which was that the rector of the seminary, that's the head of the school, called the entire seminary community together for an open forum. It was unprogrammed in the sense that there was an open microphone and people could raise any question they had. The principal concern was for the students, who are feeling the brunt of this scandal because they are in the process of discerning their vocation to the priesthood. This places a tremendous burden on them, both as members of the church, but also as young men who are preparing to assume this role within the church. They had many questions: What is the church doing? What is happening?

We had the advantage in that the rector of our seminary was previously the vicar for priests in the archdiocese in Chicago. This is an office in many dioceses, a priest who is especially appointed by the bishop to handle problem cases in personnel. As it happened, our rector was the vicar for priests at the time in the early 1990s when the archdiocese of Chicago went through its own struggles with some scandals, out of which came a whole new approach led by Cardinal Bernadin, a set of policies that tried to break the institutional impasse and first of all protect children, secondly respect the victims and to minister to them, and to minister to the clergy who had been involved. The rector was able to explain those policies, their genesis and how they had been played out in Chicago. There was a somewhat lively



Bhikshuni Thubten

Chodron received novice vows in 1977 and full ordination in 1986. A student of H. H. the Dalai Lama, Tsenzhab Serkong Rinpoche, and Zopa Rinpoche, she has been resident teacher at Amitabha Buddhist Centre in Singapore and Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle. She is active in Jewish-Buddhist and Catholic-Buddhist dialogue, including the MID-sponsored Gethseman... [\[Read full biography\]](#)

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discussion from the students afterwards.

We quickly found out that while we had invited the faculty and the students, we had forgotten the staff of the university. These are the secretaries, professional workers, the grounds crew—who we learned, to our surprise, were suddenly official spokespersons of the Church, because their friends would come up to them and say: “You work for the seminary. What’s this all about?” They were feeling an enormous pressure. So we repeated the open forum with the full body of staff. The third thing we did right after September 11 was to gather the staff for a monthly mass to pray. Originally it was to pray for September 11, but it gradually became a time of intercession for whatever burdens people were carrying. We continued that event all year, and it became a place where we could come together and pray about the situation as the daily liturgies for the seminarians also provide.

Another thing we did that we felt was important was somehow to speak to the wider community. We had received enormous numbers of requests from the news media to talk about how seminaries had changed since thirty years ago, just as the news media was trying to develop that story. Father Canary made the determination that it would probably be of benefit to the wider community if we did a comprehensive piece on seminary formation, particularly on how it has changed, to look at the selection, recruitment, training, and evaluation of candidates preparing for the priesthood. We allowed the *New York Times* to send a reporter, set up approximately twenty-five interviews, and gave her pretty much unrestricted access to the faculty, administration, and the seminarians as a way of saying that the situation was radically different than it was thirty years ago and that we have become a learning institution in that regard.

Many of you have spoken to me about the article that appeared in the *New York Times* the following Monday. The remarkable thing were the phone calls that came from people across the country who had seen it and called to thank us for offering a good word. This is at least what we have tried to do proactively at one institution within the Catholic Church, and I really can’t speak for others. The short answer is that, yes, people are talking about it. We are dealing with our anger over the situation, our sorrow, and our deep sense of embarrassment that this has happened. Speaking for myself I am confident that we will work

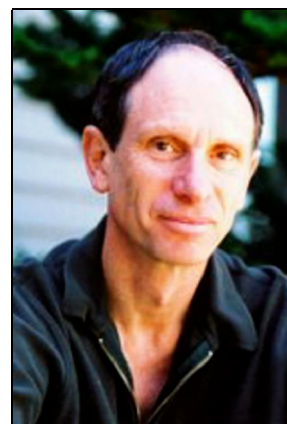
Ewert Cousins, Professor Emeritus of Fordham University, died on May 30, 2009, in Bethlehem CT.

Dr. Cousins served for many years as an advisor to Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. He was the chief editorial consultant for the 100 volume Paulist Press series, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* and was also General Editor of the 25-volume series, *World Spirituality...* [[Read full biography](#)]

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Dr. Janet Cousins is a writer and editor who works with her husband, Professor Ewert Cousins.

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Joseph Goldstein is the co-founder of Insight Meditation Society and The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre,

through this, provided we continue to talk about it and not throw the cloak of invisibility over the elephant.

Danielle Witt: Although this topic needs more discussion, I think Dan Ward is going to develop this in the next presentation. So, Thubten, when you said, "Let's talk about the elephant that's in the room," I wasn't sure which elephant, because there are several. The one that I find really disturbing is the violence of our own country and our political policies and how we are necessarily complicit in that because we are members of this nation. I find myself of in waves of discouragement, frustration, and not knowing how to respond to what our nation is doing.

Ewert Cousins: I don't know whether it's better to bring this up now or this afternoon, but I'd like to share something with you. My wife Janet and I spent about a month creating an extensive letter, which we submitted to the Nobel Peace Prize Center in Oslo, nominating Robert Muller for the Nobel Peace Prize, one of the members of our advisory board. He has been nominated over twenty times, and some people have a hundred nominations before something happens or doesn't. We learned a lot about the process, but we also learned a lot about the way in which our culture, increasingly global, has been looking upon the process of peace and violence and nonviolence.

Janet Cousins: We read a book, *The Nobel Peace Prize and the Laureates*, by a man named Irwin Abrams who has written several books on the Nobel Prize. This covers the laureates from 1901 at the beginning to 2001, including Kofi Annan. It's wonderful because it has biographies of each of these peacemakers, and it doesn't cover up the controversies about people, like Henry Kissinger. It's straightforward, humorous, and well written.

Ewert Cousins: We have in the United Nations a global institution to look upon these matters and look upon them globally—although often very concrete situations are dealt with that don't have immediate ramifications clearly in the line of structural violence. What I want to point out is that the Nobel Peace Prize also honored great spiritual personalities. The well-known ones are His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Mother Teresa. There are others, Martin Luther King, etc. These spiritual leaders of our time who evoke spiritual energies also emerged

Massachusetts. He was involved in both Gethsemani Encounters.

All articles by or about Joseph Goldstein



Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, is professor of theology at Conception Seminary College and a member of Conception Abbey, Conception, Missouri. He contributed to both Gethsemani Encounters.

All articles by or about Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB



Archbishop Felix Machado served as under-secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue prior to his appointment as

as leaders of the structures of peace. I think it's valuable for us to look upon that. It's very interesting, too, that much of the thinking on this by the Nobel Peace Prize has to do with building the structures of peace. These are people who worked and work for the United Nations, the development of the League of Nations, and other organizations, like the International Red Cross. The book gives guidelines for what we might do. I think that these spiritual leaders and those who build the structures of peace have to collaborate. One of the reasons why we thought that Robert Muller deserved the Prize is that he combined those two things in his own life and in the very center of the development of structures for peace in our era; namely, the United Nations.

Heng Sure: There is certainly a lot in the room, and I want to be brief. There are many statements that deserve responses, including, not least, Venerable Geshe's first presentation. I want to respond to Danielle's challenge. People come up and say to me, "You're a pacifist. What do you do when a suicide bomber blows up a bus, and your mother is on it, or your sister? What do Buddhists do?" The answer goes back to conditioned arising, I think, and that first thought we talked about, mindfulness. My answer is to watch your mind. If you're wanting bodhidharma or Jesus' turning the other cheek to apply when the bomb goes off, it's too late. That's the leaf on the branch tip. At that point you are not free. At that point it's the fruition. Where bodhidharma applies and is effective, where turning the other cheek works, is at the root or causal stage. At that point you still have freedom, and that's my own mind. When I am insulted or beaten, etc, when violence has been done to me and to mine, if at that point I can see the hatred arise and see that first fire move from the belly to the limbs—urge me to retaliate with a hand, a weapon, a word, or a curse—if at that point I say, "It has to stop here. I do not move in anger to return the violence," then I have choice. Then I have freedom. Then Jesus' spirit of self-sacrifice is alive and bright. That is heroic and very difficult to do. But that is where you have freedom, and that is the Buddha Dharma and Jesus' answer at that point. Once it goes out to the branch tip, you are no longer free to choose at that point to retaliate to the violence or not.

bishop of Nashik (India) on January 16, 2008.

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[Next Page >>](#)

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