NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Pray for conversion: converting military might to peaceful means

Art Laffin | Oct. 4, 2013 NCR Today

The Catholic Worker in Washington has maintained a weekly peace vigil at the Pentagon since 1987. This morning I was alone there and had an opportunity to be present to hundreds of civilian and military Pentagon workers, a number of whom acknowledged my "Good Morning" greeting.

During the vigil I prayed in repentance for my own complicity in our culture of violence and for a conversion of my own heart to the Gospel. I prayed, too, that all who work at the Pentagon as well as in the larger military-industrial complex, and who are responsible for directing, planning, and implementing overt and covert military interventions throughout the world have a conversion of heart away from war, weapons, killing and torture, and towards God's way of nonviolence, justice and peace.

I also prayed for and remembered the victims of U.S. warmaking and poverty, past and present. And I prayed for all those seeking peace and reconciliation in war zones, all peace prisoners and all who are held captive, including those detained in Guantanamo, some of whom are still on a hunger strike.

I finally prayed that the Pentagon would one day be converted and that each of the five sides of the building be transformed into: a center for nonviolent conflict resolution training; a center for developing and providing alternative and renewable energy sources; a medical treatment center; a daycare center; and a bakery.

During the vigil I also pondered the political and financial crisis presently gripping the nation. When addressing budget deficits, the national debt and other economic woes, why is it seldom, if ever, mentioned by politicians or pundits or ordinary citizens that the trillions of dollars which have been squandered on U.S. wars and weapons, including over $7 trillion on nuclear weapons alone since the Manhattan Project, is what has nearly bankrupted the economy. [1] It should be noted that the Obama Administration and Congress have budgeted some $85 billion through 2020 to upgrade and modernize the existing U.S. nuclear arsenal. [2]

I also thought about those weapons contractors who are literally making a killing producing killer drones and other weapons of death. From Sept. 16-18 the Air Force Association (AFA) sponsored its annual Air & Space Conference and Technology Expo (referred to by activists as an "Arms Bazaar") that was attended by some 150 weapons contractors at a convention center and resort outside of D.C. While more and more urgent social services are cut, profits are increasing for arms merchants like Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics and Northrup Grumman. [3] As members of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker, Pax Christi Metro D.C.- Baltimore and other peacemakers held a prayer service of repentance and peace outside the convention center Sept. 18, those gathered at the AFA Arms Bazaar sat down to a $330 per plate banquet.

Living in a warmaking empire and a culture of violence, and faced with a political and economic order that places power, domination, profit and self-interest over the common good, what should our faith response be as followers of Jesus? Jesus commands us: to love God, neighbor and enemy; to reject mammon and share our possessions; to have our debts forgiven as we forgive our debtors; to feed the hungry and clothe the naked; to do to others whatever we would have them due to us; to proclaim liberty to the captives and let the oppressed go free; and to put away the sword and to be merciful as God as merciful!

For followers of Jesus these Gospel mandates should instruct and guide our response to the empire's political, economic and military folly. Working to establish God's reign of love, justice and peace in our own lives and in our society and world should be our main priority. If we take to these biblical admonitions seriously, we should call for a total redistribution of all wealth and resources that begins with an end to all funding for the military.

Redirecting misplaced wealth and resources would go a long way to eradicating poverty and ensuring that everyone has access to affordable housing, universal health care coverage, nutritious food, meaningful work at a living wage and a quality education.

Applying these Gospel imperatives would also lead us to simplify our life-style and work to reverse climate change and save our environment. It would lead us to respect the human rights of everyone, enact comprehensive immigration reform, prohibit torture, indefinite detention and executions, dismantle the mass incarceration complex and practice restorative justice. And, most crucially, it would require us to practice nonviolent conflict resolution, abolish war, eliminate all weapons, close all U.S. military bases worldwide and convert all of our weapons factories into places that make products for the enhancement of life.

But is it really possible to convert our war-based economy? I believe it is. We need only to have the courage and will to make it happen. I am not alone in this conviction. As Dorothy Day wrote: "All our talks about peace and the weapons of the spirit are meaningless unless we try in every way to embrace voluntary poverty and not work in any position, any job that contributes to war, not take any job whose pay comes from the fear of war, of the atom bomb." [4]

Pope Paul VI declared that "the conversion of military manufacturing plants and military markets for civilian purposes is equally possible, if trouble is taken to plan ahead. It is all the more feasible in that it would create jobs by making it possible to undertake the large-scale projects which prove necessary for the protection of the environment and the satisfaction of human needs ... Refusal to undertake this conversion is completely incompatible with the spirit of humanity and still more with the spirit of Christianity" because "it is unthinkable that no other work can be found for hundreds of thousands of workers than the production of instruments of death." [5]

As we heed the words of Pope Paul VI and Dorothy Day, we should also consider the example of the late Bishop Leroy T. Matthiesen who in the 1980s told Catholics in his diocese who worked at the Pantex nuclear weapons plant in Amarillo, Texas: ?in the name of the God of peace, quit your jobs,? at the same time as he promised to offer financial assistance to any defense worker who would quit.

Conversion and transformation are possible, for nothing is impossible with God.

Today, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, I along with Bill Frankel-Streit and Nancy Gowen will be in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Va., for a trial resulting from a nonviolent witness at the Pentagon on Aug. 6 that commemorated the 68th anniversary of the U.S. nuclear bombing of Hiroshima. May the spirit of St. Francis intercede for us, for our church and our world as we seek to transform our society and be that change we want to see in all the world.

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Notes:

1. See Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, "The Costs of Nuclear Weapons," by David Kriger, October 28, 2011.

2. See National Nuclear Security Administration Plan 2010-2020; New York Times Editorial, "The Bloated Nuclear Weapons Budget, Published October 29, 2011.

3. Washington Post, July 25, 2013, "Defense Contractors Buck Expectations," By Marjorie Censer.

4. Meditations: Dorothy Day, selected and arranged by Stanley Vishnewski. N.Y.: Newman Press, 1970. pg. 42.

5. Speech to Diplomatic Corps, February 10, 1972.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/02/2016 - 03:34*): http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pray-conversion-converting-military-might-peaceful-means